

CONSENSUS

Consensus, or membership understanding and agreement, is the basis of the grassroots character and effectiveness of the League of Women Voters. The League is a study and action organization. Therefore it is important to have a clear expression of member views to determine what action to take. Consensus-taking is a complex procedure at the local, regional, state and national levels; it is puzzling to new members and challenging to experienced leaders.

What is Consensus?

As noted in *League Basics (In League)*, "The American Heritage Dictionary defines consensus as 'collective opinion or concord; general agreement or accord.' In the League 'consensus' is used (1) interchangeably with 'member agreement' to refer to the overall decision making process . . . by which a League board determines that there is substantial agreement among members on an issue, and (2) to refer to a specific technique used traditionally in the League to discuss and arrive at conclusions on issues . . ."

"Consensus/group discussion is the technique most often used in the League for reaching member agreement. It is a process whereby members participate in a group discussion of an issue. The 'consensus' reached by members through group discussion is not a simple majority, nor is it unanimity; rather it is the overall 'sense of the group' as expressed through the exchange of ideas and opinions."

Preparation for the Meeting

Extensive member participation at consensus meetings must be an overriding goal. It is also important that members be as well informed as possible. General information meetings during the course of the study, fact sheets and bulletin articles can interest members in the subject and increase their understanding of the issues involved.

The resource committee is responsible for preparing or adapting the discussion outline for the meeting. This outline will determine whether the meeting is interesting to those in attendance and whether consensus is, in fact, reached. In its preparation the resource committee should be guided by the advice of a discussion or unit leader who can view the outline from the members' point of view. The carefully planned agenda will have two unequal parts - a brief presentation of background material by the resource committee followed by the consensus discussion. An important objective is to limit the resource material that will be presented to what the group needs to know for informed decision-making. The bulk of the time must be reserved for discussion because it is the members who reach consensus, not the resource committee. Suggested time slots for all parts of the meeting are a valuable tool for the discussion leader.

Consensus questions and discussion questions are not identical nor do they serve the same purpose. Consensus questions are intended to identify specific areas of agreement among members as a basis for action; discussion questions provide the background which helps clarify member thinking on the subject. They may bring out philosophical differences or raise new implications. Discussion questions permit various points of view to be aired. The discussion outline for the consensus meeting should include both types of questions in order to develop and guide the discussion toward the intended goal: consensus.

The Discussion Leader

The most important prerequisite for a successful consensus meeting is a good discussion leader. Leaders must be trained to encourage all members to speak. They must welcome all points of view—even unpopular ones. They must be adept at making sure all the facts are presented and all pro and con arguments covered. They must make sure all sides of the issue are examined. Familiarity with the subject under discussion is a necessity in order to recognize the requirements for balance and the essential points to be covered. Leaders do not have to be members of the resource committee; a certain detachment can aid in carrying out the discussion-leading role but attendance at some resource committee meetings or special briefings is advisable so that the leaders can gain a basic understanding of the subject.

A discussion leader must pace the meeting so that all questions can be covered. Often, too much time is spent on the first question leaving inadequate time for the rest. Knowing how to move the group along without cutting off discussion is important. The leader should be attuned to repetition and recognize when arguments and opinions begin to be repetitive and nothing new is being said.

As areas of agreement become apparent, the discussion leader should announce them so that the group can agree or disagree with the interpretation. When a specific consensus question is answered, the leader should say, "We agree that" In this way, members have a feeling of participation in the decision-making.

The Recorder

Having a recorder at a consensus meeting is imperative. The recorder should also be familiar with the consensus process in advance. Discussion leaders should be free to concentrate on their job without having to take notes or trust their memories. They call upon the recorders to summarize the discussion and agreements periodically for purposes of clarification. Recorders should limit their note-taking to the consensus questions or other areas of agreement that emerge.

The Resource Committee

The role of the resource committee at the consensus meeting is probably the most challenging. Its basic function is to supply the facts, when asked, without taking over the discussion or forcing its opinions on others. Varying, and even opposite, opinions based on the same facts are possible and valid. Opinions based on fallacies, however, should be corrected. The resource committee should not only give needed information but bring in pro and con arguments not covered and make sure all viewpoints are expressed.

The Absent Member

Can consensus be valid and representative when only, say, a quarter or even only a tenth of the membership participates?
Yes - when two conditions are met:

- (1) if all members are given the opportunity to participate, and
- (2) if the subject is discussed from all points of view with all pros and cons fully presented. The quality of the discussion is as important as the quantity.

Adequate notice should be given of an upcoming meeting and its purpose. An effort should be made to see that consensus meetings are held at convenient times and places. Leagues should consider encouraging members to communicate their opinions in advance when they cannot attend the meetings.

What About Polling?

Polling has serious drawbacks as a tool for reaching member agreement. Consensus includes a careful examination and discussion of all facts and opinions. It is a meeting of minds after considering all shades of opinion. A poll is a consensus based on individual opinion rather than group discussion. It deprives the members of the opportunity of interacting with others in the process of shaping their views. It has the further disadvantage of fixing previously-held ideas and polarizing positions. This eliminates an important part of the program process and undercuts one of the strengths of the League - educating and informing its members.

Reaching Consensus

Does the League ever take a vote at a consensus meeting? Preferably not, because consensus is not based upon a simple majority. Most of the time the sense of the meeting can be determined from the discussion, but this becomes difficult, if everyone does not participate. It becomes almost impossible if many are silent. The discussion leader may say "Are there others who feel this way?" or "Am I correct in saying that we agree that" This will usually produce a response. If there is uncertainty, a show of hands may clarify whether there is substantial minority opinion, and thus consensus is lacking.

Can It Be Done at One Meeting?

Yes, but before solutions can be agreed upon, a full understanding and discussion of the problems must be undertaken. As much background information as possible should be provided. Some subjects require more information than others and, therefore, require more time.

Consensus is never really reached at a single meeting; it is merely formalized there. Members at a consensus meeting bring with them a knowledge of government, their own basic philosophy, knowledge of past League studies on related subjects, and a backlog of information gathered from newspapers, TV and other mass media.

The Board

Determining whether there is consensus is the responsibility of the local board. The board should be presented with recommendations for a consensus report by the resource committee and/or unit and discussion leaders. It should also receive a full report of the meeting(s) in order to evaluate the recommended report. What were the answers to the consensus questions? Was there enthusiasm for these answers or opposition, doubt or hesitancy to come to a conclusion? What other areas of agreement were reached? The minority as well as the majority view must be considered. The board also considers the number of members participating and the effectiveness of the discussion.

There may be a problem when consensus is taken at several unit meetings within one League. How does the board reconcile the reports if they differ? To do this it considers membership as a whole, not the individual units. Substantial agreement must be found among the members. This may be arrived at by adding the minority opinion in some units to the majority in others. If there is still a question, the board may decide to call a general meeting to determine if there are areas of agreement. A fuller discussion of all the pros and cons and all divergent viewpoints may result in a broader understanding of the problem and a clearer agreement on solutions.

When a Consensus Concerns a Regional, State or National Matter

When participating in a regional, state or national League consensus, it is important that the local League communicate as much as possible about the local conclusion to the appropriate board. This includes not only describing the consensus but evaluating its strength and the degree to which it represents the membership.

Sometimes a consensus question may be answered with one word, but often additional comments are needed to clarify the position. The accuracy of the final consensus depends upon good reporting on the part of the local League. Responses should be concise and direct, but there should also be enough elaboration to guide the reader in determining precisely what views are being expressed.

It is also important to include conclusions which may have come up as a by-product of the discussion, not necessarily as a direct response to a question. If several Leagues arrive at the same spontaneous reaction, it is a strong indication of its significance to members and merits inclusion in a final position.

In the rush to meet a deadline take the time to remember that the information being provided forms the basis of League position and can make a real difference in its formulation.

Finally, it is important that Leagues refrain from announcing their local consensus results (in bulletins or press releases) since their conclusions will become an integral part of a carefully worded statement based on the reports of all participating Leagues. It is that statement which then becomes newsworthy. Also premature announcement of the local League's consensus results may confuse both the public and local members if the final statewide or national consensus differs from that of the local League.