

CONSENSUS

WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT IS DETERMINED

BY THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

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WHAT IT IS

Webster defines "consensus" as "agreement, in matters of opinion." For the League of Women Voters, however, consensus has a far broader meaning. A household word in League parlance, it means **agreement among a substantial number of a representative group of members** - not just a simple majority - **reached after sustained study and group discussion**. Consensus is a prerequisite to the League's taking any-position on national, state, or local governmental issues. Consensus also determines what action, if any, is to be taken on the item after consideration. No action is taken where there is a lack of agreement, and although this may be a disappointment to some members at times, it is essential that when a League position is announced, the members are not only informed but are in basic agreement.

WHAT IT IS NOT

Since determination of consensus within a group is an interpretive process, **it is not decided through a vote of the membership**. Voting has an inherent rigidity that makes it difficult to reach essential agreement. **The State and National League, for instance, seek broad areas of agreement based on a good cross-section in size, type, and region as well as on substantial numbers**. This kind of evaluation is a more interpretive and therefore a more valuable way of reaching agreement than counting noses.

HOW IT IS DEVELOPED

It Begins With Program-Planning (in the League definition of "program planning"). ...

The first step of a consensus is taken at the program-planning level when members, either at annual meetings or through their delegates at state or national conventions, select a program that they believe warrants League study and action. At this time, each item must be chosen carefully and worded so clearly and precisely that the members and the board know exactly what they propose to study.

The respective board should then organize a study committee to produce a study presentation with discussion outlines and leaders' guides. The committee should furnish pamphlets, research reports, and bibliographies; and set deadlines for progress reports to the board. The board, through the study committee whose members will serve as resources when the units or Leagues discuss the topic, must lay out program plans and materials in a way that will help inform the members to be able to reach consensus. At the appropriate time, any questions that the board wants answered should accompany the discussion material. In short, the board should anticipate the need for consensus.

It Goes On Through Item Study. ...

League members are expected to examine all sides of an issue. The sources of information must be weighed; various factors considered, and facts established before opinions are formed. Minority opinions should be

listened to with open minds and included in reports to the board. Every member should be encouraged to participate. The discussion leader should seek to draw out opinions rather than to express them. When reaction to specific aspects of the item presented is indicated or when the time to consider the areas of agreement has come (as determined by the study committee), specific questions (consensus questions) will be asked of the membership and the answers reported to the respective board on a consensus report form. The board should also be informed about the tenor of the response, for example, was there enthusiastic approval; lots of opposition; doubt and uncertainty, or hesitation to reach a conclusion.

The Board Deliberates. . .

Based on these reports, the respective League board must consider whether a substantial and representative group supports or opposes a position. The appropriate board studies minority as well as majority views and evaluates the qualifications, reservations, and suggestions. In addition, it reviews the quality of the resource work, the effectiveness of the discussion, the number of members involved, and the degree of interest shown by the membership. When these reports come in to the board on a standard form, estimating the value of the presentation is facilitated.

While there can be no hard and fast rules for determining consensus, or the lack of it, some general factors can be considered:

1. If there is substantial agreement with minor disagreement, it is considered that consensus has been reached.
2. If a majority agrees but a substantial minority does not, in the League sense, consensus has not been reached.

This process takes place within units or small groups of members at a meeting of a large League or among all members at one meeting in a small League. In either case, reports of the consensus meeting(s) are sent to the appropriate League board.

When the consensus reports have been submitted, the appropriate League board examines consensus reports from all units, local Leagues or MAL Units

1. If all units are in complete agreement on all questions, there is consensus.
2. If there are scattered minority disagreements, a Board can still determine that there is consensus.
3. If some reports agree and a significant number of others disagree about certain questions, the board may wish to contact the units/ local Leagues to discuss possible areas of agreement. Alternatively, the board can decide to declare there is no consensus on a specific point without further discussion.
4. If after further discussion, significant disagreement still exists on some points, the board will determine the wording of the position using only the points of agreement (consensus). When there is no consensus on a point, the statement is "silent" on that point.

The Influence of the Absent Member. . . .

If only 60% or 50% or even 30% of the members participate in reaching consensus, is there consensus? Yes, if all members were given the opportunity to participate, and if the item was presented adequately from the aspects of content and procedure. **The absent cannot hold back the active in the League.** This is true also in political life. Those who stay at home on Election Day should not expect to control the wishes of those who go to the polls. **The real problem, however, is to stimulate member participation.**

The Board Reports to the Members. . . .

Once the board evaluates the thinking of its members and finds sufficient areas of agreement, the League board approves final wording of a consensus statement and now there is a "position" on the item under consideration. A substantial and representative number of its members now approve or disapprove certain policies and may want to take action. The general membership is informed at League meetings and through League newsletters. The national League reports consensus on national issues, the state League on state issues, and the local

League on local issues. **It is imperative that the board keep a record of the exact position taken by the League together with a summary of the preparation and procedures used in reaching that consensus.**

Now It Is Time For Action. . . .

If the membership is informed, its thinking crystallized, and its impulse to action ripe, legislative action may follow. In addition to legislative action, the board should also direct efforts to provide information and build public opinion in favor of its position.

The membership of the League of Women Voters, then, by its reflective examination, study, discussion, and evaluation of its program has reached that cherished position of consensus that is its discipline and its strength.

Prepared by the League of Women Voters of Virginia

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