

# CONSENSUS

## WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT IS DETERMINED BY THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS



### 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 under 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 poll or a vote of the membership**. Polling has an inherent rigidity which makes it difficult to reach essential agreement. A poll taken at a meeting, for example, does not reflect agreement or disagreement on the various facets of an issue. Polling by phone or mail tends to force premature crystallization of individual opinion instead of inviting deliberate group decision.

Should the national League conduct a poll of its members on an issue, one section of the country might well outweigh another, leaving the viewpoints of some regions unreflected. Instead, the national League keeps track of the number of reports sent in by local Leagues in support of or opposition to a point of view; but it also evaluates bulletin material, correspondence, and reports on field visits. **It is seeking 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 that of counting noses.

### HOW IT IS DEVELOPED

#### **It Begins With Program-Making . . . . .**

The first step in determining consensus is taken at the program-making level when members, either at annual meetings or through their delegates at state or national conventions, select a program which 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 board should then help organize the study presentation with discussion outlines and leaders' guides; it should furnish pamphlets, research reports, and bibliographies; and finally, set deadlines for progress reports. The board, with the resource chairmen, must lay out program plans and materials in a way which will help the members reach consensus when they are sufficiently informed. At the appropriate time, any questions which 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 be 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, specific questions may be asked of the membership and the answers reported to the board. The board should also be informed about the tenor of the meeting, for example, was there enthusiastic approval; lots of opposition; doubt and uncertainty, or hesitation to come to a conclusion.

#### **The Board Deliberates . . . . .**

On the basis of these reports, the 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 agree but a substantial minority does not, then, in the League sense, consensus has not been reached.

This is on the level of consensus within the unit or small group.

At the local League level, the board examines consensus reports from all units:

1. If all units are in complete agreement, a local League has consensus.
2. If there are scattered minority disagreements, a local board still feels that there is consensus.
3. If some units agree and others disagree, a local board should call all the units together to discuss possible areas of agreement.

It is important, in the latter case, for the pros and cons to meet, hear each other out, listen to divergent viewpoints, and, if possible, reach some area of opinion on which the League as a whole can arrive at consensus. The importance of such a meeting should be emphasized to insure good attendance.

#### **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 "has 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 the League bulletins. 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. The appropriate board must determine whether or not certain legislation will carry out the wishes of its members or if it reflects a position which they have opposed when reaching consensus, for by this consensus the appropriate board has been empowered to carry out a specified policy at the proper time and in the proper form to the proper governmental authority. 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 which is its discipline and its strength.

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## Facilitating a Discussion Group

### IN ADVANCE:

1. Understand the objectives of the workshop and the purpose of the discussion session. Know what you expect to cover and what you want to come out of the discussion. You do not need to be an expert on child sexual abuse to lead effectively a discussion.
2. Encourage discussion by establishing a friendly, receptive atmosphere. Be sure required materials are on hand.

### BEGIN THE DISCUSSION:

1. Introduce yourself to the group and see that everyone is acquainted and their roles are identified.
2. Be sure that a reporter has been designated. The group reporter will handle the newsprint and summarize the discussions. Be sure the reporter has guidelines for reporters and the report forms.
3. State the purpose and focus of the discussion session. e.g., "The purpose of the discussion is to give everybody a chance to talk about recommendations on what can be done to help Sandy. Thus, we can discover new and improved ways to help youth in our care."
4. Inform the group of the amount of time allotted for the discussion period.
5. Begin the discussion with the kick-off question.
6. Encourage each individual in the group to contribute; listen attentively and express appreciation for each contribution.
7. Project the discussion in a positive way. Direct negative statements into constructive channels.

### MOVE THE DISCUSSION AHEAD:

1. Establish a rule of brevity at the outset to prevent two or three members from monopolizing the discussion. Keeping to the time table is most important.
2. Be alert to draw in the more reticent members by asking those who have not spoken if they would care to comment or if further clarification is needed.
3. Throw questions back to the group whenever possible. If there is silence, rephrase the question.
4. Don't hesitate to use an expert in your group if the occasion arises.
5. Note differences and similarities in viewpoints, where they occur.

### SUMMARIZE:

1. Whenever a major point is finished before going to the next point.
2. Whenever the discussion has been fairly long or somewhat confused.
3. In your summaries, try to use the words of the participants rather than your own words.
4. If there is a sharp difference of opinion in your group, be sure to include the minority view in your report.



## CLOSE THE DISCUSSION:

1. Ask the reporter to summarize the group's work including the main points and the recommendations proposed by them.
2. Add any pertinent points overlooked in the summary.
3. Congratulate the group for their thoughtful contributions and thank them for their cooperation and courtesy.
4. Complete all other sheets or forms (e.g., interest forms).

## HELPFUL TECHNIQUES

1. To obtain new information ----- "Can anyone add anything to the information already given on this point?"
2. To call attention to a point ----- "Has anyone thought about this phase of the problem?"
3. To throw the discussion back ----- "That is a good question. I am glad that you raised it. Does anyone have an answer?"  
to the group when a question has been asked of the Discussion Leader
4. To draw the timid or silent person into discussion. ----- "\_\_\_\_\_ has had experience with this. I think (s) he may be able to help us."
5. To sum up agreement ----- "Am I correct in assuming that we all agree on this point?"
6. In case of disagreement ----- "The majority opinion seems to be \_\_\_\_\_, but some say \_\_\_\_\_."  
OR  
"The group seems equally divided."
7. To limit a speaker ----- "That is an interesting point. While we are on it, let's hear from some others."
8. To handle a question the Facilitator cannot answer. ----- "Does someone have an answer to this?"  
OR  
"Let me refer you to \_\_\_\_\_ (some other person who may have the answer or some pertinent resource materials)."
9. To maximize the experience, always end on an upbeat note!