



League of Women Voters of Minnesota Records

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JUL 8 1960

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.

Prepared by the League of Women Voters of
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Minutes of Consensus Committee Meeting
League of Women Voters of Minnesota
November 5, 1973

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Stone. Members present: J. Jenkins, M. Jacobsen, K. Siemers, B. Dols, H. Britton, D. Hastings, D. Stone.

No additions or corrections to the minutes were made.

D. Stone reported that her investigation showed that there are no national publications specifically on consensus; also, no state study such as ours.

J. Jenkins reported that Minnesota is very conservative in areas of procedure, that some Leagues refused to concur on the issue of alternating names on ballots. H. Britton reported that her group felt that concurrence was okay on small topics, but not on broad, large topics, such as land-use.

B. Dols felt that consensus must be handled very carefully on local items in order to allow action to happen.

Ch. Stone called for an in-depth discussion of the workshops attended:

DISCUSSION LEADERS WORKSHOP: St. Louis Park was enthusiastic, will send report.

Alexandria and Winona are to have unit discussions. Edina felt (1) speeding up of things was not always good; (2) method depends on subject matter; (3) report by numbers to assure minority report; (4) need for up-date on past Positions. Minneapolis has already set up a Consensus Committee to help deal with problems, which forces resource committees to complete goals and consensus questions well ahead of presentation. Hutchinson felt they were small enough to overcome any problems. Excelsior didn't like phone poll because lack of information of some members would tend to make an invalid response. Richfield was confused, didn't like the questions. No. Dakota Co. was unable to cope with the whole process.

Crystal-New Hope was anxious to get maximum number of people participating, not completely opposed to alternatives, have pre-consensus coffee parties for further discussion. White Bear Lake easily handled judiciary consensus, felt world trade was too deep, environmental quality was too complicated, questions were leading. Red Wing still working on new ideas.

Fridley felt questionnaires were too involved. Brooklyn Center - new girls coming in, should never drop an item but each fall have quick up-date on each item for new girls and refresher for old members, felt telephone could influence the response too much. Mid-Mesabi is still trying to understand old methods (new League). Cass Lake, too small to do as much as they would like. Bemidji likes verbal violence of discussion among the cross-section of City that League represents, that pre-conceived ideas could change during this discussion, and that telephoning doesn't allow this interplay. Generally, it was felt that if nothing else, our committee served to jolt the Leagues into doing something about the questionnaire before the deadline. Some of the League Boards were reluctant to bring the questionnaire to their membership. It was suggested that a reminder be sent in the next Board Memo.

LOCAL AGENDA WORKSHOP: Jerry discovered that part of the problem on the local level at least, is the need to read and re-read the Local League Handbook; another part is that local League programs do not fit under the criteria for selection; that sometimes local item study and consensus is the weakest part in the program when it should be the strongest. Local Leagues, because they don't want to hurt friends, choose not to take action and thus become a study group. The Local Agenda Workshop was well-done, and if local Leagues picked up some of the "How-to's", it will help. Moorhead suggested progressive questions related to consensus needs. Bemidji requested that when a call for action comes, that the position under which it is made be stated and when it was adopted. Discussion followed on Bemidji's methods for taking action on local items, and Brooklyn Center's broad topic of "Housing." Problems of taking action on national items at local level called for the suggestion that part of the adoption of an item for study should be, "What possible action might be taken?"

Seven reports have been returned so far - the balance will be evaluated for the next committee meeting, along with the seven.

Eventual goals would be: (1) having "How-to" workshop on alternatives to consensus with specific examples; (2) using local bulletin for dispensing information; (3) getting material to members in a meaningful way; (4) keeping in mind the action that might be possible. It might be called a Program Management Workshop.

Jerry reminded us that there would be time at State Council for such a workshop. Also that there will be Leadership Training workshops in May. Either of these ideas would have to go through the State Board.

Karen questioned the value of workshops on consensus that don't get to every member, that otherwise every member responsibility is lost too easily.

Dottie is interested in helping Board members to motivate members to participate.

Jerry is interested in the report to State Council and its form.

It was suggested that the form of the report to State Council might be planned after the reports have been turned in and compiled. It would be difficult to outguess the reports by trying to locate problem areas, and then not offer suggestions about how to solve the problems that they have, and if we don't do that what have we accomplished?

Jerry indicated that the State Board does have a structure for program-making that might apply here: (1) survey what you have; (2) what alternatives are there? (3) reach consensus on whatever changes might be determined; (4) reach consensus for position - or in this consensus for guidelines. She suggested that a structured discussion of alternatives and changes with some new ways of doing things might be appropriate at State Council, followed by small group discussion. She cautioned that people don't always hear you the same way.

B. Dols read the report from the Minneapolis Consensus Committee into the record.

Dottie asked for someone (1) to write a report on workshop results (Mary Lou Siems and Dolores Hastings); (2) to compile questionnaire responses (K. Siemers and M. Jacobsen). They should point out any significant trends.

B. Dols gave a partial report on other organizations: working primarily with other groups that lobby because they have the most influence on the government - P.T.A., A.M.A., N.E.A., A.B.A., B.P.W., A.A.U.W., and American Legion. She has the impression that the only other grass roots input into government are the political parties, and that is very weak on the precinct level. (Jerry: And there is many a slip from precinct caucus and state and national convention.)

Other items brought up - not necessarily having to do with consensus - that observers are needed more than ever at all levels of local government in their meetings because they will be making important decisions on how to spend the revenue sharing funds. Observers should provide written reports to be shared with the general membership of Leagues.

Meeting adjourned.

Report on results of consensus questionnaire

Tabulation: 40 Leagues responded. Deadline set at December 31, tabulation completed February 14. Each questionnaire was considered individually and each League's responses were noted along with their number of members. Results of the tabulation were noted to determine areas of greatest agreement.

One problem encountered in tabulating responses was that some questionnaires did not state the number of members. In these cases, the responses were tallied, but with no membership number attached.

Question #1. After study, what procedures does your League use to reach agreement (consensus)?

Meetings are held, and after discussion, consensus is reached and recorded. Sometimes hand counts are taken.

Several Leagues mentioned other methods which they had tried:

1. On a local item, a committee formulated a position after a general meeting. The position was published in the local bulletin and members were asked to agree or disagree at the next unit meetings. Some member resistance to the procedure was noted, though there was nearly unanimous agreement with the position.

2. On a local item, a League used the same format as the National Campaign Financing with mimeographed questions. A sheet was provided for each person with a place for comment.

3. One League mentioned a telephone consensus which they considered to be "numerically successful" (40 out of 58 members).

4. Two Leagues used the individual national VOTER page for vote on Campaign Financing consensus.

5. Mail and telephone answers were permitted on the National Campaign Financing consensus, but it was not used.

6. One League experimented with having each member fill in an individual form. The person reporting to the committee on consensus saw as an advantage the fact that a few vocal members cannot carry the group. She stated that the disadvantage was that rather than a meeting of the minds, it is just averaging a lot of individual opinions.

Question #2. What are some of the positive aspects of reaching consensus as you now do it in your League?

The general feeling is that unit discussion allows for grass roots participation, free discourse with exchange of ideas, and makes minority opinion possible. Other positive aspects of this method of reaching consensus most widely mentioned were:

1. It requires members to come to a decision.
2. It is a good educational process and stimulates member study.
3. Members must be present to participate.

Question #3. What facets of the consensus procedure (from study to action) give your League the most problems? Why?

The major problem areas are:

1. The consensus questions. There were varied opinions as to what has been wrong with the questions. They were described as being too broad, too specific, too complex, ambiguous and leading.

2. Many Leagues stated that there was not enough time or mentioned related problems:
 - a) Too many consensus deadlines back to back.
 - b) Too many consensus in one year.
 - c) Too much material covered in too short a time.
3. Member preparation and lack of sufficient background which would conceivably be related to time problems as stated above.
4. A sampling of other frequently noted problems:
 - a) Item too complex.
 - b) Material too leading.
 - c) Minority not comfortable.
 - d) Difficulty in compiling and interpreting.
 - e) Late material.
 - f) Problems with action following consensus.
 - g) Small numbers of members present at consensus meetings.

Question #4. Have you any suggestions for resolving the problems in the previous question?

1. Improving the questions was the most common suggestion. However the suggestions as to how to improve them were varied:
 - a) Better wording of questions.
 - b) Limit the number of questions.
 - c) Keep questions simple.
 - d) Keep questions more precise.
 - e) Keep questions more objective.
 - f) Keep questions more specific.
 - g) Keep questions more tallyable
 - h) Keep questions more philosophical and practical.
 - i) Keep questions general.
2. Trying new consensus procedures, utilization of suggestions in the national VOTER, pretesting questions and having the consensus meeting separate from the information-giving meeting received considerable support.
3. Other suggestions included:
 - a) Good resource committee
 - b) Good discussion leader
 - c) Having the questions available beforehand
 - d) Having more than one meeting for consensus if necessary
 - e) Program items should be less complex
 - f) A method for absent members to participate
 - g) Better background

Question #5. Ideally, how would you like to see the League reach agreement on Program items? (Be creative)

Many Leagues stated they like the discussion meeting way of reaching consensus and there was suggestion that this could be supplemented with other methods. There was support for retention of grass roots participation and for alternatives such as:

- a) concurrence - there was a feeling that items appropriate for concurrence should be considered on an individual case basis.
- b) there were conflicting opinions concerning the advisability of using VOTER tear-offs, telephone polls and questionnaires.

Many members felt that the consensus process used should depend on the issue - some need more study than others.

*Pre-testing
Concurrence guidelines
Share resource material
between leagues & other groups*

*Realism in adopting new study items
time lines*

Minutes of Consensus Committee Meeting
League of Women Voters of Minnesota
March 4, 1974

Meeting called to order by Chairman Stone. Members present: D. Stone, J. Jenkins, M. Jacobsen, K. Siemers, D. Hastings, J. Hove, H. Britton, guest from Winona

No minutes from previous meeting. To be completed before Council meeting.

Tabulation of questionnaires: It was reported that the biggest problem for compiling was the variety of answers, the next biggest was the lack of League names and number of persons participating. A report was printed and handed to committee members, and read into the record of the meeting. Forty Leagues responded. The most important points were: (1) most Leagues like the present method of arriving at consensus, some would like to see changes, but don't know just what; (3) many problems are internal, like vocal people dominating the meeting.

The contents of a letter from Hazel Shimmin from Bemidji was shared. She felt: there is a place for alternative methods of consensus, but consensus should not be replaced; concurrence with the State Board on rotation of names on ballots was proper; one problem with consensus is getting enough enthusiasm for the topic to get good discussion leaders; another problem was low attendance for various reasons; enthusiastic chairmen with a committee usually produce enthusiastic members. This adds up to careful selection of program items, careful wording of consensus questions, good leadership from state and national with committee guides and good local leadership, and allowing enough time to handle a study.

Under program, it was mentioned that Leagues do not have to study every item, that if you don't have the womanpower, you are better off not trying at all. There is a great deal of dissention on this point. It is not accepted either way, so it is best not to advocate this because more thinking needs to be done on it. Lobbyists in Washington and St. Paul work for LWV positions on the premise that consensus was reached by all the Leagues.

Computerized consensus forms are causing frustration in some Leagues because there is no opportunity to express minority reports. Minority opinions can be recorded by computer if questions are written properly, depending on the capacity of the computer available. The last two questionnaires had only yes or no answers, when we wanted to say, "Yes, if" or "Yes, but". Computerized consensus was a real source of anguish for some Leagues who did not have a strong majority and had to answer either yes or no. We can understand why National wants limited responses after our questionnaires were returned.

May Leadership Training Workshops will focus on membership, because statewide membership has dropped. A consensus workshop could be developed to be used at that time. New Brighton League is having a consensus workshop for its Board and study committees. A sample of the workshop was presented. It has been suggested that the State Board participate as a whole in a consensus question writing workshop. Just what are the needs? The needs of each League are still in the area of how to handle program, and this would fit in well with having the consensus part in a 2-hour session with another hour on how to handle committee work, how to develop committees and how to get enough people to get the work done and give ample time for illustrations. Getting and keeping members involves program.

It was suggested that this type of program be too much for the spring - better in the fall when local studies are fresh in the members' minds. The May workshop might be too crowded with its emphasis on action taken by National Convention, on non-partisanship, on possible every-member payment of \$4.75 to National, with counterpart meetings, and then a skit on some topic of general interest like how to make program interesting.

The possibility of counterpart meetings within County areas for cooperation between County Leagues was mentioned, with a decision to talk about that later.

Jerry answered the question of what guidelines exactly does the State use that are standardized for writing consensus questions and bringing consensus to local Leagues on a State item by saying that there were none. She explained that they don't follow any written procedure, but that the Board handles it through verbal instruction. The State study committee presents questions to the State Board before its meeting in written form, most member react to them at Board meeting, this is then given to the State Chairman, with some discussion and recommendations. Then, depending on the Chairman, they say, "Your comments are good, but the questions will have to stand. I can't call the committee together again!" And you do face a deadline, so you have to go along, but with other Chairmen you do get a lot of flexibility and a lot of State Board input is used, but that's never guaranteed. She was impressed by how much individual Chairmen determine what happens to a particular item. The

consensus process really begins with the wording of a program item. When material is collected, ideas for consensus questions come up, or they have something in mind when they start collecting materials. Some committees wait until the actual deadline to write them, others write them as they go along with their materials selection. It's not a very tied down process. Just like in your own committee, you thought the questions were clear, and they still confused some of the people.

The reason for asking was that the Minneapolis Consensus Committee seems to be functioning quite well, with all consensus questions submitted to them for screening and comment before they go to the membership. This Committee's sole purpose is to study the proposed consensus questions, edit, rephrase, and clarify to make sure they are understandable.

The State Board does this, but sometimes, with some Chairmen, it doesn't work.

Could this be made into a written policy showing these as the necessary steps that have to be taken? Could our committee recommend such a thing?

Yes, but it is a human problem that comes with grassroots input and volunteer help.

Could we have statements of clarification following the questions to signify intent?

Yes, but then we're leading to conclusion. No matter how you phrase the question, someone is going to give you trouble.

Dottie: Let's get on to Council, then. How much time will be allotted - $\frac{1}{2}$ hour? Okay. Then what form should the report take? What should be in it?

The questionnaire answers should be reviewed on one page with some oral highlights.

A report from what other states are doing. It was found that Minnesota was extremely conservative in regard to changing methods of reaching agreement. Massachusetts and Arizona both use concurrence with inter-League organizations where they do things jointly. Our Leagues should know that other states are doing this and still manage to retain their integrity and individuality as a League, yet the process expedites decision-making and perhaps makes better use of their woman power.

More and more state boards are servicing their individual Leagues by setting up teams who do the actual background research and then take it to the local Leagues instead of making each League do its own work. Other Leagues in the state felt that research should be shared by each other in some way, although this was not put in the questionnaire report.

The stater VOTER might have a box set aside for information on consensus-taking in every issue that is not exclusively on some particular topic.

Consensus-taking in other organizations revealed that League is one of the very few decision-making organizations who receive direction from grassroots. Strong lobbyists, like the Citizens League and the A.B.A., work with strong committees and strong boards, but no individual input. The previous consensus committee discovered that only the Society of Friends works for consensus in a manner similar to LWV. Half of the leadership of the organizations in Brooklyn Center didn't even know what consensus means, and the Jaycee's contact the local League if they are working on a similar subject and use their consensus as their own.

It was decided to include the above in the report to Council.

Recommendations: (Not necessarily in order of importance.) (1) Form a State League Consensus Committee similar to Minneapolis', with pre-testing of questions, definite procedures for pre-testing, and strict adherence to dates for questions coming out, etc. (2) Have varied process for an item depending on its length and scope. Perhaps an up-date would be sufficient with concurrence. (It was felt that one fear expressed against using concurrence is that mildly irrational items might be studied with a request for concurrence that could lead to a loss of our influence as a structure for informed action taking.)

Some sort of criteria for occasions to use concurrence, such as an off-shoot of some study on which consensus has already been reached, with guidelines to keep us from going too far afield.

It was decided that guidelines be made, without actually determining what they shall be at this time, or who should make them. One guideline suggested was that if anything comes up for action, and it has lain around for as long as two years, that it would be good to have an up-date and then concurrence to be sure that we still want to take action, if for no other reason than to up-date new members.

We were reminded that recommendations should meet the needs of the members as shown in their answers to question #3. Our recommendations should relate directly to their problems. Criteria for concurrence is going a little far afield at this time.

A discussion followed about how workshops could give Leaguers the opportunity to go through the process of drafting questions in the way that our committee says that it should

be done, with the hope that if they understood the process and the problems of writing questions they might understand why the question is written as it is. The question was raised as to whether there was a relationship between people who do not understand the questions and their lack of preparation, and the comment was made that sometimes the well-informed person still has trouble understanding the questions. The problem is to make people more comfortable with consensus questions by giving them some sort of knowledge of how they are developed. The suggestion of indicating where answers might be found has been strenuously objected to previously - and you are not supposed to rely entirely on League materials. Perhaps not using words in questions that have not been previously identified in the study materials, so that no new definitions could be used would be helpful, and maybe a guideline for question-makers would be to have the ability to refer to chapter and verse of the material to which the question refers.

A good workshop would show how to handle program, how to handle consensus, how to develop questions, etc.

One problem with talking about workshop in the fall is that we are negotiating with National for something in the fall from them. We asked for something on Program in Action from the National Field Services, but these plans are nebulous because they may want us to set up a regional meeting with Wisconsin, Iowa, North and South Dakota, or they may want something else. If we knew what National would be doing it would be easier to counsel you. If there were still workshops in the fall, couldn't there be a special section geared to consensus question writing which would appeal to a different group of people?

It was proposed tentatively, so that if other things work out, a workshop with guidelines from whomever, would be offered based on the needs of the Leagues as described in their questionnaire replies, either a 4-day traveling workshop or a metro area one, although it was felt that area workshops had advantages of reaching more League members than a metro workshop. It was suggested that with transportation the way it is, we could have a "trial run", then have it duplicated and sent to the Leagues to use.

For question writing recommendations then it was suggested that there should be a system of guidelines in combination with pre-testing and time lines to ensure sufficient time for the pre-testing process to work adequately, using a group outside the study committee to recommend any changes.

Judy: I'm prefacing all this with the statement that most of the members replying to the questionnaire like the process of consensus and that their problem is in handling it; that the concept is a valid one; that the process is admittedly imperfect, but basically sound; that there are some very real problems that people are having; and that we have some recommendations that we hope will address these problems. And then follow with the recommendations for guidelines, time lines, pre-testing, etc.

Another problem that the questionnaire brought out was the problem of time and the number of topics to be studied; we therefore recommend that great care be used when choosing programs, and watch our priorities so that League is able to handle the amount of program that is selected. (Further discussion.)

The question was raised as to whether we want to state that some of the problems seem to be related to program. No further discussion on that.

Run-down on recommendation: (1) Workshop in fall dealing with information; giving guidelines for consensus procedure; or have a "how-to" workshop during counterpart sessions in May; (2) Strong emphasis on pre-testing of consensus questions on selected units or outside groups; (3) Greater care in selection of program and priorities; (4) Criteria or guidelines for concurrence; (5) Sharing information with other states and National Board.

Other items for discussion included talking to delegates to National Convention during State Council and asking them to try to get feedback from other states.

It was generally felt that Leagues were not too happy with computerized answers to questions, but it was not a mandate from the questionnaire replies.

It was brought out that the year's work indicates that we are on the brink of something positive, and that response from 40 Leagues indicates interest and gives good credibility. Perhaps if Leagues know that other Leagues are having problems, even though they might not be the same ones, and that they are not alone might help them to decide to do something.

The committee was assured that its suggestions to the State Board would elicit some sort of response.

Meeting adjourned.

W

The League of Women Voters of Minnesota

ALL ABOUT CONSENSUS

a 1973-1975
LWVMN AD.HOC STUDY

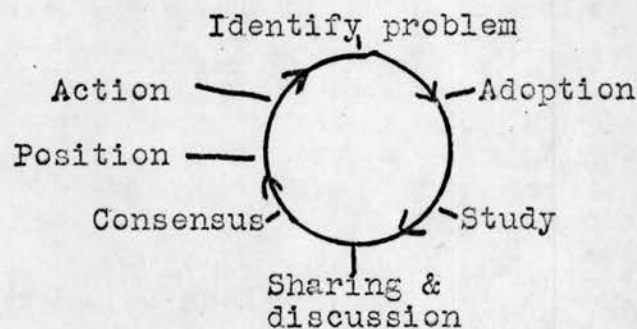
May 1975

Memo to: Local Leagues
From: Dottie Stone, Chairman, AD HOC COMMITTEE ON CONSENSUS
Re: Consensus Committee Mini-publication on Consensus

This booklet is a result of a two-year study of the consensus process which was conducted by the AD HOC COMMITTEE ON CONSENSUS of the League of Women Voters of Minnesota. It was created as an informational tool to help to help League members who are involved in Program development. In it, the committee has tried to define the role that consensus plays in the League, identify some of the problems in the process and propose possible solutions to them. The format has been designed so that Leagues can easily and economically reproduce all or parts of the booklet for their committees or general membership. The information can also be used as the basis for a consensus workshop, especially when combined with a consensus question drafting exercise.

? WHERE DOES CONSENSUS FIT INTO THE TOTAL LEAGUE PICTURE ?

League operates in a continuous, circular pattern, with consensus being one important link in that circle. After members have identified a problem, one which may need governmental action, they vote to adopt a study of the problem as part of League Program. They research it, share their findings, discuss and finally reach agreement. (Consensus) From that agreement, they draft a statement of position, and go on to action based on the position.



From League action come new ideas which lead to the adoption of another item and the circle begins again. Ultimately, the purpose of consensus is to enable action. In the League of Women Voters, the consensus meeting gives each member a share of the decision making and therefore, a reason to be committed to the resulting action.

? WHAT DOES CONSENSUS ACCOMPLISH ?

The scope of a study and the direction to the Board at the annual meeting or Convention provide a study committee with some guidelines. But, a committee must also set its goals, determining exactly what it needs to know and do. If a committee has not clearly defined its goals, chances are good that the resulting consensus will also be unclear. Some of the things that consensus can do are ---

1. Indicate agreement on general philosophy
2. Give more specific direction for action in an area where there is already agreement on general philosophy.

3. Encourage members to develop opinions on issues for which there is presently no consensus.
4. Elicit from members additional solutions to problems.
5. Define an existing position for use at another level of government, when necessary.

? HOW DOES A COMMITTEE DEFINE CONSENSUS AREAS ?

A committee has prepared a study, shared information and is now ready for agreement. How do they sort out issues for consensus? In thinking about this, they might ask ---

- What methods and time restrictions do we have for reaching consensus? (Have we been allotted one unit meeting for consensus, or could we use a tear-off in the bulletin?)
- What policies could most realistically be changed by League action?
- What issues fall within the scope of the study as adopted by the members?
- What issues do the members know about, care about and want to decide?
- What are the realistic alternatives for League action?
- What provisions should be made for alternative solutions to the problem -- ideas that have merit, but aren't being widely discussed at the present time?

? WHO DRAFTS THE CONSENSUS QUESTIONS ?

Committee is the key word, as drafting consensus questions should be a cooperative effort. Many Leagues make it a policy to call in some additional people to act as editors at consensus drafting time. These people have not been deeply involved in the study and therefore may be able to offer objectivity and new perspectives to the questions. Who should be asked to screen the questions? A committee could ...

- ... ask a new member if the questions are clear and easily understood,
- ... ask a League pro if they are biased or show the committee's preferences,
- ... ask an English major if the language is ambiguous or awkward.

Groups of Leagues cooperating on a study, such as ad hoc committees or Inter-League Organizations (ILOs), sometimes have special problems at consensus time. Most successful joint ventures have made a concerted effort to include representatives of all member Leagues in every step of the study. While a group may find it necessary to pare down the question drafting committee to a workable number, each League representative should have a meaningful opportunity to offer suggestions or changes.

Some Leagues, particularly those which adopt extensive local programs, have found it helpful to establish a consensus screening committee. This committee works with local study committees in reviewing, editing and clarifying proposed consensus questions. The committee is composed of members selected for their writing expertise and League experience. Use of this specialized committee lessens the workload for the Board, as the consensus questions are usually well-polished by the time they reach the Board review stage. This does add another step to the consensus process, however, and makes careful planning and scheduling very important.

? WHAT IS THE BOARD'S ROLE IN CONSENSUS ?

While the LWV depends on committees to plan and implement its Program and Action, the responsibility for the League as a whole rests with the Board of Directors. Its task is to consider matters from a total League perspective, while a committee concentrates on a specific area. At consensus time, the Board must review proposed consensus questions. (Local Boards review local study questions, state Boards review state study questions, etc.) Directors are not all experts in each study area, nor should they try to be. They can, however, determine if the questions will benefit the League, both in the way that they fulfill the goals of the study and in the way that they involve members in decision making.

If unsuitable questions come before the Board, it is more effective and efficient for the Board to briefly outline the problems, make a few suggestions and refer the questions back to the committee for revision. Naturally, the committee must have allowed sufficient time to make the needed changes and return the revised questions to the Board for approval.

After consensus results are tabulated, the Board again reviews the results to be sure that they accurately reflect the thinking of the League as a whole. When a new position statement is drafted, the Board must review it, considering whether it is true to the consensus, and if it will allow for effective action.

? HOW SHOULD CONSENSUS QUESTIONS BE STRUCTURED ?

There is no official "League" format for consensus questions. Leagues have used many different types, and each has some advantages and disadvantages. Listed are some examples, with a few positive and negative aspects of each.

Obvious

"Should the LWV support a comprehensive program of park development for our town?"

Yes _____ No _____

Plus - Elicits agreement on broad philosophical principles.

Minus - Few people ever object or say no, therefore these may seem loaded.

Good consensus questions do not necessarily make good discussion questions. They are designed to facilitate action. Sometimes it is necessary to ask a very obvious question in order to get a statement of member support on basic philosophy. Obvious questions may seem less loaded if they are followed by a more specific question on the same subject, such as:

"Should the LWV make park development a major goal when speaking and lobbying before city agencies?"

Yes _____ No _____ Comments:

or "What funding priority should park development be given in comparison to other city projects?"

1	2	3	4	5
Very high				Very low

Explain:

Paragraph

"Do you feel that the LWV should support the repeal of the present drunkenness statutes and ordinances?" (This would not affect the legal status of crimes committed when drunk. For example, drunken driving, assault, etc.)

Yes _____ no _____ Comments:

Plus - Provides consistent definitions and everyone has the same information and interpretation of the question.

Minus - Technique may be considered leading or "spoon feeding."

Objections to this type of question can be modified by providing members with opportunities for lively discussion, considering all sides of the issue.

Multiple Choice

"What do you see as the major role of the Metropolitan Council?"

____ reviewing
____ coordinating
____ policy-making
____ operating
____ combination of the above
____ other (list) "

- Plus - Easy to control answers, easy to compile
 Minus - May limit choices, no space for qualifying answers.

These objections can be modified by encouraging members to list "other" options and by adding a space for comments.

Ranking

"What are your priorities for Corrections funding? Rank.

- ☐ community treatment centers
- ☐ probation programs
- ☐ personnel training
- ☐ research
- ☐ evaluation
- ☐ educational programs
- ☐ therapeutic programs
- ☐ specialized prisons"

- Plus - Shows strength of minorities, gives good direction for action.
 Minus - May limit choices; participant must choose one item over another, even if they consider them of equal importance.

These objections could be modified by including an "other" option, space for comments and by allowing participants to assign the same rank to several goals.

Branching

"Do you favor an evaluation system for the juvenile justice system in our county?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no, explain

If yes, who should do the evaluating?

- ☐ clients
- ☐ juvenile justice system personnel
- ☐ outside experts
- ☐ community representatives
- ☐ other (list)

What factors should be considered when evaluating?

- ☐ accomplishment of stated goals
- ☐ cost
- ☐ effect on individual
- ☐ impact on community
- ☐ cooperation with other agencies
- ☐ other (list)"

- Plus - Thorough, gets much information.
 Minus - Could be confusing or difficult to explain and handle in large groups.

This objection could be modified by providing each member with a copy of the question or displaying it on a large blackboard or poster.

? WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PROBLEM OF CONSENSUS QUESTIONS ?

Problem

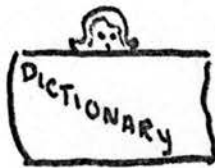
Fuzzy language

Example

"Do you favor the decentralization of the decision making process of city government to allow for more citizen participation and involvement?"

What exactly does "decentralization" mean, what is the "decision making process"? Does each member understand every word in the question?

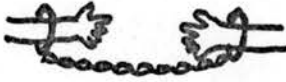




Problem

Shop talk

Does the question contain jargon or terms familiar to only those members well-versed in the subject?



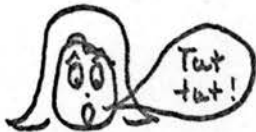
Leading

Does the question make assumptions for people and lead them to a conclusion?



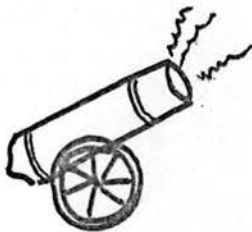
Two in one

Does the question contain two separate issues which should be presented in two separate questions?



Moral leper

Perhaps a member doesn't favor expanding assistance, believing that it is adequate now. But, what does a no vote imply? -- that the member is opposed to helping elderly people?



Loaded words

Words like clean, adequate, deserving, are often defined emotionally and therefore do not mean the same thing to each member. To avoid wrangles over the definition of such a word, it's best to avoid them entirely.

Example

"Do you favor increased use of LEAA funds to establish residential treatment centers for adjudicated delinquents?"

"Do you favor increased use of inter-racial study materials to improve education quality in our school district?"

"Do you support the establishment of a park and recreation department in our town with emphasis on the recreational needs of senior citizens?"

"Do you favor expanding welfare assistance payments to help the elderly in our community?"

"Do you favor urban renewal projects that provide clean, adequate housing for deserving residents in our community?"

Avoiding these problems can help keep members happy and can keep your consensus meeting running smoothly. Other mistakes in questions can cause troubles for a committee when it wants to compile consensus results or take action. For instance,

Problem

Open end

Compiling answers to this type of question could be a nightmare. It's very possible that the answers would be so varied that a committee would end up with no areas of agreement.

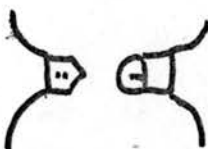
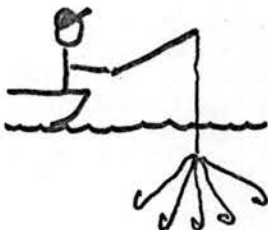
Too broad

This type of question really says or answers nothing. How could a Board ever interpret it in relation to a specific action proposal?

Example

"What changes would you favor in our school district's administration procedures?"

"Do you favor reforms in city government?"





Problem

Tunnel vision

Example

"Do you support the installation of lighted athletic fields at Freedom Park?"

Isn't this too restrictive? Couldn't it be restructured in a more flexible way to apply to related proposals or future projects?

Finally, one common problem that traps many study committees is including too many questions in a consensus. A long consensus may severely limit discussion time and increase member frustration. Committees should constantly be thinking about time limits and member needs when drafting their questions.

? HOW SHOULD A CONSENSUS MEETING BE ORGANIZED ?

Each League has its own way of doing things and techniques successful for one can fail miserably elsewhere. Nevertheless, the following ideas have proved themselves in many groups.

Setting and Keeping a Time Schedule.....

When beginning to plan for a consensus meeting, a committee should determine how much time is available. They should analyze the necessary parts of the meeting and set a realistic limit for each of them.

<u>A SAMPLE SCHEDULE</u>	9:15-9:30	Coffee and greetings
	9:30-9:45	Unit business and announcements
	9:45-10:15	Questions 1, 2, 3
	10:15-10:30	Break
	10:30-11:30	Questions 4,5
	11:30	Adjourn
	2 hrs. 15 min.	Total time

In looking at consensus questions, the committee considers where there is likely to be agreement and where extra discussion would be helpful. Most obvious questions can be answered in a very few minutes, while more complex issues could require a half hour. For example, a more detailed breakdown of the consensus portion of the sample schedule might look like this.

<u>Question</u>	<u>Allotted time</u>
1. Obvious	3 minutes
2. Secure institutions Yes/No	7 minutes
3. Rights of offenders	20 minutes
4. Goals of corrections	30 minutes
5. Community corrections	30 minutes
Total time	90 minutes

Sometimes, committees find it helpful to provide everyone with a copy of the time schedule. If members know that each question has a limit, they may be more concise in their comments and less apt to repeat what has already been said. A good discussion leader is really a necessity for a successful consensus meeting.

Answering the Questions.....

Some Leagues:

Give each member a sheet with printed questions and room for answers; discuss a question as a group, then have each member answer it on the sheet.

Split into small discussion groups headed by a discussion leader. Discuss questions and have recorder write "sense of the meeting" answers on blackboard or flip chart as discussion progresses.

A variation of the above--hold a general discussion on the entire consensus first, then go back and compile the discussion into specific answers. Record visually on a blackboard or flip chart.

Have individual members write answers to a few of the questions at the meeting or at home, then discuss the remaining questions at the meeting.

Occasionally there may be studies for which the consensus is too long or complex to be handled by any of the above methods. In those cases, Leagues have tried the following.

Splitting the questions among the units, each unit answering only part of the questions.

Designating some of the more technical questions to be answered by the committee and submitted to the members for approval. The more general questions would be handled in one of the conventional ways.

These methods do remove a part of the decision making from the individual members. Splitting the questions among the units may cause problems and skewed results if the units differ widely in their opinions. Leagues considering these methods should weigh their disadvantages against the disadvantages inherent in a long, complicated consensus.

Keeping Members Happy.....

To make consensus work, the members must believe in it, participate in it and support its results. Consensus represents "grass roots," the individual member's control over League policy. It's important, then, to consider the members when planning for consensus. How will a committee's decision affect them? How do they react to the process?

Are they saying.....



"It let's me be a part of things."

"I like to hear everyone else's opinions, then make up my own mind."

"It's more democratic than if the Board just made all the important decisions."

"I like to be given a choice."

"It's a learning experience and it stimulates my thinking."

"It helps me identify issues."

Or are they complaining.....



"The questions are cut and dried; there really is no choice."

"The consensus meetings are too long."

"My opinions don't really count."

"It's confusing; no one ever explains what we're doing."

"You have to be an expert to understand the questions."

"There's never enough time for a good discussion."

Many of these complaints could be eliminated if committees:

- Before the big day, pretest the consensus meeting with a small group of members to determine if the format and time schedule will work. Include the discussion leaders so they feel comfortable in their role.
- At the beginning of the consensus meeting, give a brief resume of the study and the consensus process. There may be new members or guests attending who would like to know what's going on.
- Make sure everyone understands exactly what procedures will be used for reaching agreement.
- Try to assure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion.

- Welcome comments by guests, even though their opinions are not recorded.
- Record both majority and minority opinions. Comments and minority views may be significant when combined with those from other units.
- Use resource people only when the group really needs them, or when information needs correcting or clarifying.
- Stick to the time schedule so people can leave on time.
- Think positive thoughts about consensus--this enthusiasm will be transmitted to others.

? HOW MUCH DO MEMBERS NEED TO KNOW ?

The LWV expects its members to answer consensus questions as well-informed citizens would, not experts. While many issues are difficult and few choices are clear-cut, members shouldn't feel that they're not qualified to express their opinion on an issue. Study committees can help members deal with complex issues by -

providing good background information,
referring to pertinent parts of the information when discussing consensus questions,
drafting thought-provoking discussion questions to stimulate lively discussion of the issues,
providing adequate time for member discussion,
and drafting clear, succinct consensus questions.

? IS IT POSSIBLE TO REACH "NO CONSENSUS" ?

Certainly. This can happen at any level--among members of a unit, among units in a League, etc. Sometimes there are true differences of opinion on a question and it's impossible to get a "sense of the meeting" or "sense of the League." The consensus process is really intended to see if consensus--in the sense of broad general agreement--exists among the members. If there is none, this is a perfectly valid outcome, and the committee has discovered that no consensus exists.

? WHO COMPILES CONSENSUS RESULTS? HOW ?

In many Leagues, the bulk of the compiling is done by the study committee, although efforts should be made to include a representative from each unit at some point. This helps insure that the units' answers are fairly represented in the compilation. This may be impossible in very large Leagues, but some additional unit representation should be encouraged.

It's helpful for committees to determine early in the study what criteria they will use in combining answers. Consensus, in the League of Women Voters, is generally considered to be more than a simple majority--at least 2/3 to 3/4. When applying this definition to specific situations, committees often ask,

"Should we have each member vote or just consider the sense of the meeting at each unit?"

It is usually necessary to know how many members are participating at each unit. Voting, however, except on individual ballots, can be very time-consuming and awkward. Many Leagues simply record the number of participants, list areas of strong agreement (consensus), and record comments and minority opinions, indicating their strength. When the study committee compiles the results of all units, they consider the number of participants at each unit, look for issues on which there is strong agreement, check for comments and minority opinions to see if they are significant. If a League or committee is more comfortable knowing actual percentages, it would probably be wise for them to use a written ballot.

"How do we handle graded answers?"

Ranking questions may seem more difficult to compile, as to be completely accurate, the answers should be computed statistically or on a graph or chart. Still, the results give a good indication of member preference. They may be worth the extra effort in light of the clear direction they provide for League action.

"What do we do with intense minority opinions?"

Realizing that effective League action needs broad member support, committees should be sure to include minority views in their report to the Board. If a strong minority exists, the Board will want to discuss whether or not there is enough agreement within the membership to include that issue in the support position.

After the committee has compiled all the questions and the results are clearly prepared, they're ready to submit to the Board for approval. Many Board members appreciate having a copy of the results, or seeing them recorded on a large visual aid for use at the Board meeting.

? HOW IS A POSITION STATEMENT DRAFTED ?

A position statement is a tool for action--it determines what League can and cannot do. It has been suggested that positions should be drafted as a joint effort; a group consisting of study committee members knowledgeable about the issues, unit or Board members concerned about accurately reflecting the consensus and action people with lobbying expertise.

Most position statements list the broad principles and general philosophy statements first, following them with more specific items and suggested ways of implementation. This latter part gives lobbyists clearer direction in determining priorities for action.

Position statements must go to the Board for approval. In the case of ad hoc committees or ILOs, requiring approval from each participating Board may be cumbersome and time-consuming. A more streamlined method, such as sending one or two representatives from each Board to a joint meeting, might prove more satisfactory. This process works when there has been good communication among participating Leagues and when there is broad member support for the study. If these conditions don't exist, however, the group might be wise to involve all of the Boards in order to build support for action.

? WHAT SHOULD A CONSENSUS TIMETABLE LOOK LIKE ?

Suggested timetable for a one-year local study item.

Month 1	Adoption of item Recruit study committee Define scope of study Set committee goals for the year Establish study timetable
Months 2-7	Further define scope Research Share information (Bulletin articles, general meetings, unit meetings, speakers, etc.)
Month 8	Determine consensus areas First draft of consensus questions Submit consensus questions to "editors" or consensus committee
Month 9	Final draft of consensus questions. Submit to Board. Plan consensus meeting Draft discussion outline
Month 10	Revise consensus questions, if necessary. Resubmit to Board. Brief discussion leaders Pretest consensus meeting. Revise if necessary.

- Month 11 Hold consensus meetings
 Compile consensus results. Submit to Board.
- Month 12 Draft position statement. Submit to Board.
 Evaluate the entire study.
-

Members of the AD HOC COMMITTEE ON CONSENSUS -

Dottie Stone (New Brighton), Chairman
Henrietta Britton (Bemidji)
Barb Dols (Minneapolis)
Dolores Hastings (Brooklyn Center)
Judy Hove (New Brighton)
Marge Jacobsen (Winona)
Dot Lilja (Minneapolis)
Jean Reeves (Northfield)
Hazel Shimmin (Bemidji)
Mary Lou Siems (Crystal-New Hope)
Karen Siemers (Winona)
Mabel Spear (Winona)

This mini-guide was developed as part of a two-year review of the consensus process initiated by delegates to the 1973 State Convention.



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MINNESOTA

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To: Local Leagues
From: Karen Anderson
Re: Consensus: Flexibility in reaching member agreement
Date: November 15, 1977

Various methods of reaching member agreement, or consensus, are detailed in In League, Guidelines for League Boards. While the term "consensus" refers to a "specific technique" used by League for determining member agreement, it is not the only technique which may be used.

It has been found, in many recent League studies, that Program items are not as simple as they may once have been and that they overlap into other Program areas. It is also true that the diversity of League membership supplies a diversity of individual philosophies and that members are concerned, in this time of increased citizen participation, that their individual viewpoints be heard. How, then, is it possible to reach member agreement on an issue and also be assured that members do, in fact, support a position and will stand behind subsequent action?

As In League states, "The Board chooses the approach to be used, recognizing that since issues are different in scope, they need not all be treated alike. The nature of an issue will bear on how it is studied and how decisions are reached." Some issues, of course, may be simple enough for agreement to be measured by a "Voter" questionnaire or a telephone poll. Other issues are more complex; they require further discussion by members and agreement determined in a group setting via the consensus technique. Some issues may be very complex, and a simple discussion and general agreement may not adequately reflect the views of the entire membership. Then it may be necessary to expand discussion, to be specific about the issues, and to ensure member agreement by allowing each member's voice to be heard.

A recent example of such a complex issue was the study/consensus on Financing State Government. When reaching member agreement, it was necessary to determine if members truly agreed on issues specific enough to allow the resulting position to be used for support or opposition of specific legislation. While a consensus technique may have reflected general agreement, it could not adequately reflect the diversity of membership opinion. Therefore, by using a method of membership voting, responses to the FSG questions showed the areas in which there was truly agreement, regardless of type, size or location of the League a person belonged to. On the other hand, it was possible to isolate responses to see if the type, size or location of a League influenced member agreement. Interestingly, responses showed these factors to be of minimal importance. Responses were overwhelmingly alike in many areas, regardless of size or location of League. But, only by using a voting method of consensus was this able to be determined. The voting method also made it possible to determine the one area of agreement in which location of the League played a part (that of support of local government aids). By isolating this issue, future action will be able to reflect how Leagues truly stand on the issue.

Reaching member agreement often sounds simpler than it is, as most Boards have discovered through local studies. A review of In League of the entire study-to-action process may help local Boards in understanding the flexibility offered in dealing with the process.