

Florida State Association of PARLIAMENTARIANS



HOW ABSTENTIONS AFFECT THE VOTE

By Scott Whitney, RP

Voting “aye” or “no” to a question is a fundamental right of membership in a deliberative assembly. But members also have the right not to vote at all. Some members may wish to maintain a position of neutrality by abstaining from a vote on certain questions. Or when a position is to be filled by a number of members, a member may partially abstain by voting for less than the number required to fill the position. (RONR 45:3)

Although an abstention means no position is expressed, some members may not be aware that abstaining from the vote can still affect the outcome. In certain cases it can have the effect of a “no” vote.

PRESENT

The term “present” is sometimes used by elected officials when a vote is taken on a sensitive subject. The misconception is that the official is taking no position, but is still voting. This is incorrect. The term “present” is not formally used in parliamentary procedure, but it is in effect an abstention. The official is present, but not voting, and any votes marked “present” should be ignored in the counting.

A MAJORITY IS...

Unless an organization’s bylaws specify otherwise, determining the number required for a majority vote in a meeting is a matter of counting the number of members voting (“more than half of the members present and voting.”) (RONR 44:1)

It is incorrect to say “simple majority” (just as there is no “compound” majority). The term “majority” in parliamentary procedure always means “more than half.” Likewise there is no “two-thirds majority.” The correct language is a two-thirds vote.

The expression “50 percent plus one” is also not considered correct. In the case of an odd number of votes, the calculation yields a “half” vote which is not recognized in parliamentary procedure. For example, if 19 members cast ballots, “50 percent plus one” gives $10\frac{1}{2}$, whereas the smallest number to satisfy the requirement “more than half” is the correct count, 10.

WHEN ABSTENTIONS MEAN “NO”

An organization’s bylaws may prescribe specific requirements for the adoption of certain

Florida State Association of PARLIAMENTARIANS



motions such as “a majority of the members present,” or, “a majority of the membership.” In such cases a specific number is required for adoption. The failure to reach that number means the motion is lost, and abstentions have the effect of a “no” vote.

For example, an organization of 99 members requires bylaw amendments to be adopted by “two-thirds of the entire membership.” (an extreme requirement that is not unheard of, but is usually undesirable). At the annual meeting 66 members are present, exactly two-thirds of the entire membership. A ballot vote is taken on an important bylaw amendment and 66 ballots are received by the tellers. Sixty-five ballots are marked “yes” and one ballot is blank. The blank ballot, considered an abstention, means the motion to adopt the bylaw amendment is lost. That one “non-vote” thwarted the will of every other member in attendance!

WHEN THE CHAIR ABSTAINS

The chair has the same voting right as any other member, but normally does not vote in order to maintain a position of impartiality. (RONR 4:56, 44:12, 45:1,). In the case of a tie vote on a motion requiring a majority vote for adoption, the chair’s abstention has the effect of a “no” vote. In this case the chair simply announces the result, that the motion is lost, without mentioning the abstention.

Information for this article taken from Dr. John A. Cagle’s Parliamentary Procedure website found on the internet at: <http://www.csufresno.edu/comm/cagle-p3.htm>