



Handbook for Successful Consensus Meetings

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY PROCESS

Congratulations! Your League has decided to participate in a national study. A study would not be a study without the participation of state and local Leagues. This handbook is intended as a resource for local League committees. It is designed to help you be successful in sharing the materials with your League and conducting productive consensus meetings. Materials related to the specific topic of the study are provided in a separate publication.

Scope: Shortly after the adoption of a new study, the national board determines the scope for the study. A scope describes the limits of the study, the general areas to be explored and often includes focus areas. The culminating position will address only those issues delineated in the scope. After establishing the scope, the national board selects the national study committee members. Then the committee begins the study process.

Background materials: The committee conducts research, identifying relevant resource materials. These resources (articles, books, reports) may be posted on the website in their original form or they may be summarized for distribution to the local study committees or the general membership. The committee prepares written materials, consolidates information, and creates the consensus questions. The material and resources are posted at www.lwv.org.

ROLE OF THE LOCAL BOARD

The local League board plays several roles during the study process: appointing the committee, conducting the study, reaching consensus and reporting the results to LWVUS.

ROLE OF THE STUDY COMMITTEE

The material prepared by the national committee is designed to help members and local Leagues educate themselves and their communities about the study topic. The materials may include background information, briefing papers and reading resources to offer ways for Leagues to bring the issues to their communities.

First Steps

Assemble the local study committee

- Start with an enthusiastic member with an interest in the subject to chair the committee.
- A committee shares the work and introduces less experienced members to the League process on a short-term project.
- Sometimes the group divides the materials and each member reports on their assignment, rather than all members reading all the materials.
- It may also be an opportunity to engage a long time member who has broad League experience, but has not been active recently.
- Ideally, some of committee members have basic knowledge of the issues and some study experience, but others may just have an interest in learning more about the subject.
- In small Leagues it might be a good time to work collaboratively with a neighboring League.
- Alternatively, the state board may take the lead in creating a statewide program.
- Include the topic when planning the calendar for the coming year.
- Consider posting links to resource materials in your newsletter and other social media.
- Encourage members (and provide clear directions for log in) to sign up and participate in the relevant groups on the LWVUS web site.
- Take quotes from links and post to Facebook, including the link for full reading.

- Tweet links to resource materials using hashtag #LWV
- If you have questions while you are planning, feel free to approach a member of the national committee.

Community Education

The local League may decide to schedule and facilitate community meetings about issues in the study and bring in outside speakers (e.g., faculty from a nearby college). These meetings may be held any time in the process and often include outreach to other members of the community interested in the topics.

- Consider using the study topic as a yearlong theme, planning monthly meetings using readings, speakers, PowerPoint presentations and conversation culminating in discussion of the consensus questions.
- Choose one of the books from the reading list and hold a group discussion. This is a great opportunity to partner with your local library.
- If you have speakers or a panel discussion, consider videotaping and posting to your web site and/or share on local cable access TV.
- Consider expanding the groups invited to presentations. (Local Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lions, Masons, local business organizations, Kiwanis, faith communities, parent groups, high school classes)
- Select or develop handouts for community presentations that include links to background information.
- Engage the media to increase interest in your study. Community newspapers and social media are great opportunities to share tidbits of information that can become teasers for your study.
- As the time to reach consensus draws closer, it is important to engage the local membership in the study process. This may involve placing articles in the newsletter or having general information meetings about the topic.

PLANNING THE CONSENSUS MEETING

Before the consensus meeting, committee members should:

- Review the study materials on the LWVUS website
- Review the presentation materials
- Review the consensus questions
- Create a timed meeting agenda
- Assign roles for facilitators, presenters, and recorders.

Review state and local positions

Make sure committee members are familiar with any relevant positions your state or local League may have adopted. Consult *Impact on Issues: A Guide to Public Policy Positions*, which is available at www.lwv.org. Copies of the local, state and national positions should be available for reference at the meetings.

Understand the ingredients of a successful meeting

- There is a focus on both process and content.
- The facilitator maintains an open and balanced conversational flow.
- Ground rules protect individuals from personal attack.
- Everyone's roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.

Assign specific tasks to committee members. Decide:

- how much time to allot to each section of the discussion
- who will facilitate the meeting
- who will be the presenter for each part
- who will be the recorder, and
- who will make sure the results of your consensus get to the LWV board for approval
- who will complete the online form at www.lwv.org.

Decide how to present the study material

- Break the presentation into manageable chunks that the average member can understand.
- Be prepared to explain jargon and acronyms.
- Use a variety of voices and styles to help people stay focused.
- Be prepared to answer questions for clarification along the way.
- Check frequently for understanding.

Schedule a practice session

If you have the people resources to do it, it is good practice to schedule a planning session in advance of the meeting for facilitators, presenters, and recorders. Leagues with multiple units may want to hold a practice session for unit leaders, so that they understand the scope, are prepared for the discussion, and understand the reporting procedures.

GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

The use of the term facilitator reflects the interest in ‘making it easy’ for a group to have a discussion and reach agreement. Most studies contain more detailed information than you will want to present. The study committee is made up of individuals with an interest in the topic. That does not necessarily make them good presenters or facilitators. You may want to consider asking members outside the committee to actually facilitate the meetings, giving the committee members the role of presenters as subject matter experts. A prime responsibility of the facilitator is to keep the discussion focused on the consensus questions and avoid distracting side issues, however fascinating they may be.

TIPS FOR CONSENSUS MEETING

Schedule local consensus meetings. Be sure in planning consensus meetings to allow time for board approval before the reporting deadline. If you are holding more than one meeting to cover all the consensus questions, it is strongly suggested that you present and take consensus on each section at the same meeting.

REACHING CONSENSUS

The dictionary defines consensus as “collective opinion or concord, general agreement or accord.” The term is often used (1) interchangeably with the term “member agreement” to refer to the *overall decision-making* (2) to refer to a *specific technique* used to discuss and arrive at conclusions on issues.

Used as a technique for reaching agreement, consensus 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, but refers to the overall “sense of the group”. Member agreement emerges from the give and take that comes from group interaction and the exchange of viewpoints. Listening to and participating in discussion helps to shape the recommendations.

The goal of consensus is to incorporate the interests of all participants in building meaningful agreement. It does not mean that everyone is equally supportive of the agreement, but it does mean that all participants believe they have been heard and that the agreement reflects their concerns. People can consent without agreeing. One individual cannot simply declare a block to consensus. The group must agree that they have not reached consensus.

Sometimes a dissenter holds the keys to the wisdom of the group. Addressing the concerns and reservations of a dissenter often improves the quality of decision making for the entire group.

Some groups use a ranking system: “I wholeheartedly agree”; “I will support it”; “I can live with it”; “I have reservations about it—let’s talk more about it”; “I have serious concerns about it—we must talk more”; “I reject it and will block it”. This method is usually not necessary, but it can sometimes help a group that seems ‘stuck’ in making a decision.

Occasionally members will ask “can’t we just take a vote.” The answer is ‘no’. Voting is no substitute for the informal and meaningful give and take of discussion and agreement.

Explain the ground rules and meeting structure

The facilitator should begin by explaining the meeting ground rules, including how the meeting will be structured and how much time will be devoted to what subjects. Review the agenda to ensure that participants understand the flow of the meeting.

The role of the facilitator is to make sure that:

- everyone has a copy of the agenda/program and knows what to expect
- the meeting format and ground rules are understood up front
- members understand they have a role in the meeting/consensus
- everyone stays on track until the day’s goal is met
- a “parking lot” (a separate piece of chart paper) is used to post ideas not related to the study and noted for discussion at a later time.

The recorder’s role

The recorder should be at the front of the room in clear view of the members. It is best to record on large easel paper or electronic format that everyone can view. After each question, the recorder should check back with the participants to make sure the sense of the group is captured before moving on. After each section, the recorder should make notes to include in the comments section, if it is included in the reporting form. While it is tempting to have the recorder enter the responses directly on the computer, it is better to have the original responses on easel paper so that everyone can see what is being recorded. The notes can then be transcribed onto a computer.

Ask for the group’s help in keeping on topic

People will usually cooperate if they understand their role as participants in keeping the conversation on the consensus questions.

Make sure everyone understands the materials presented

Encourage people to ask questions when they do not understand something. The study material is often complicated and the language may be unfamiliar.

How to handle “breaking news”

Many of the issues may be in the news, both nationally and locally. If you are aware of these events, present them up front before starting the discussion. Acknowledge that these events, however interesting, are not a part of the consensus process and move them to the “parking lot” for discussion at another time.

If you have a “talkative group”

You know your League. If the members like to talk, have trouble keeping focused or have many opinions, it often helps to refer to the timed agenda and to use a timekeeper to assist the facilitator.

The end of the meeting review

The last ten or fifteen minutes at the end of the meeting should be used for the recorder to review the notes and reaffirm the sense of the meeting. This reassures everyone that their thoughts have been heard. It will also clarify where agreement has been reached.

AFTER THE MEETING

Schedule a committee debriefing

Schedule a meeting of your committee to compile the consensus report. **Do not** file the report electronically until after all groups have met, the reports have been consolidated, and the local Board has approved the consensus.

Filing the consensus report

Once the Board approved the report, one person goes to the website and files the online report. Each League submits only one report. It is helpful to have a person who is comfortable using the computer complete the online form. Full instructions are provided on the website.

The League’s new position

Once all the reports are received in the national office, they are compiled, comments collated, and a draft position developed. Once the LWVUS Board of Directors approves the position, it immediately becomes the League’s position and is the basis for action on the issue. Members have the opportunity at each Convention to decide whether or not to re-adopt these positions.

Afterthoughts

Widespread member understanding and agreement is a foundational value of the League of Women Voters. The participation of many Leagues in studies makes this possible. Your contribution is invaluable to the national study committee in continuing this legacy of thoughtful deliberation.