



What is Consensus?

It is easier to say what consensus is not, than what it is. Consensus is not a vote; rather, consensus is mutual agreement of League members arrived at through discussion. During discussion, everyone has an opportunity to express their viewpoints, and the issue is examined from all sides. Consensus questions, created by the study committee and approved by the board, provide structure for the meeting. Members discuss the pros and cons until it becomes apparent that consensus has or has not been reached on each question. A committee will analyze the consensus responses, look for areas of member understanding and agreement; and, using this information, will create a position statement.

How Consensus Works

Webster defines consensus as “agreement on matters of opinion.” For the League of Women Voters, however, consensus has a far broader meaning. In League parlance, it means agreement among a SUBSTANTIAL number of representative group of members (not just a simple majority) reached after sustained study and group discussion. Consensus is a prerequisite to the League taking any action on any national, state or local 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 at times be a disappointment to some members, it is essential that when a League position is announced, it means that members are not only informed, but are in basic agreement.

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 is encouraged to participate. The discussion leaders should seek to draw out opinions rather than to express them. When reaction to specific aspects of the item presented is indicated, 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; much opposition, doubt and uncertainty; or hesitation to come to a conclusion?

Once the board at the level of League conducting the study, 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 League newsletters. The national League reports consensus on national issues, the state League on state issues, and local League on local issues.