

The Ayes Have It

Voting in INGO Governance decision making

Voting mechanisms are written into the statutes or other governing documents of most if not all federations and confederations I've worked with, but voting has been generally underused as a real tool for decision making. I am referring in particular to the international boards or general assemblies of federations or confederations; bodies that comprise representatives of member institutions rather than independently elected or appointed bodies (these bring different challenges!)

When dealing with purely technical or less controversial issues, governing bodies use voting systems but they are often then mostly used 'for the record' rather than being the outcome of extensive debate. However, when it comes to issues that touch upon institutional autonomy, interdependency or binding commitment, the political stakes are raised and consensus building is often preferred; in such settings voting simply seems to be viewed as too blunt a tool. However, some recent experience suggests that this may be changing with voting starting to be used to navigate more contentious decisions.

Consensus sounds very accommodating as it seeks the broadest possible agreement and is by definition highly inclusive. To be fair, consensus has also worked well for some, especially in confederations or loose alliances where there is less pressure to make unified decisions. However, for organisations needing sharper decisions on big issues (especially issues which imply a high degree of interdependence for successful implementation), consensus has also proven to be quite problematic. Firstly, consensus means different things to different people. For some it may mean that all present agree with the position, for others it means that most people agree and those that don't can accept a given position, for others silence means agreement, for others the opposite and so on. In short, poorly defined consensus means ambiguous outcomes and problematic implementation. Secondly, discussions to reach consensus can be painfully slow, with the chair or facilitator treading carefully through the opinions trying to find that tipping point where the issue can be closed and consensus declared. The end-game is often the lowest common denominator or a state of exhaustion where people lose the will to fight. Again, the end product it is often a weak outcome and seriously slipped agenda. Thirdly, although consensus discussions can be long, people are careful with words and there is often a lot left unsaid. The ambiguity reduces pressure to make positions clear and the politics is allowed to stay underground, in the corridors and at the coffee machine, rather than in the board room where it belongs. Fourthly and most importantly, the net effect of all the points mentioned is often weak decision making, poorly understood by both those in the room and those not in the room whose job it is to turn words into action. This in turn results in a weak foundation for implementation, frustration and issues returning for re-discussion at subsequent meetings ... and round and round it goes.

In order to get past some of the issues the trend I've been observing has been to make processes more explicit and transparent through the nuanced use of voting and/or polling mechanisms. The advantages of this approach include:

- All stakeholders know where they stand in relation to each other so that all issues are on the table 'in the room'
- All know the degree to which a decision is supported
- Processes are more efficient
- Outcomes are not based on the lowest common denominator
- Where outcomes/decisions taken are recommendations to a higher body (eg a General Assembly) it is much easier to explain the arguments for and against
- It is much easier to negotiate with those against a decision (eg in exploring the degree to which their disagreement is critical or not for implementation)
- Decisions are easier to communicate and better understood by impacted stakeholders not present at the meeting (eg employees ,members etc)

Notwithstanding these potential advantages, a clumsy or simplistic use of voting can be divisive and cause more harm than good, so preparation is important. Moving from a consensus approach to one more rooted in

voting is a cultural shift, not just a technical one and needs talking through in advance. The following points of reflection may help such discussions.

- Make sure the process, how and when voting will be used is clear before getting into the decisions themselves. Any binding conditions, penalties or sanctions that may apply should be covered. Adapting processes during discussions risks perceptions of manipulation.
- In preparing for decisions, consider not only the degree to which the body taking a decision is mandated, but also the individuals present. This is especially the case in federations or confederations where, even if a body is made up entirely of board chairs or executive directors, their individual mandates can vary greatly. This has to be dealt with via communication before meetings.
- Take straw poles (informal showing of positions) during discussions so that the chair/facilitator can establish the degree of agreement and disagreement and focus discussions. This can be done with just a show of hands or anonymously using easily available electronic systems (similar to those used for getting TV audience opinions).
- When doing straw poles consider seeking positions on 'Agreement'. 'Disagreement but can accept & support' and 'Disagreement and cannot accept and support'.
- Give time for offline discussions when issues are critical. Consider splitting sessions into two so that the first session is about getting issues on the table and straw poling and the second is the decisional discussion that will end in a vote. The space between the two (eg overnight) gives an opportunity for people to talk through differences informally.
- After taking a formal vote and in the event that a proposal is passed, invite those that have voted against to explain their views and concerns. Where they are directly impacted by the decision (eg in making financial contributions or providing other capacity) give space for them to make proposals for dealing with this.
- Communication and engagement after the meeting will be needed to ensure that all have understood the commitments made (especially those that have voted in favour) and to further negotiate how to deal with the consequences of those that have voted against.
- Leaders must walk-the-talk. While part of the communication is the formal record of the meeting or soundbite assembled, the more important part is what the people who were at the meeting say and do. The behaviour of leaders after the meeting is arguably the greatest deciding factor in whether outcomes are successful or not. No matter what the minutes say.

These are some of my thoughts and I am sure there is plenty to add. I would be very interested in the experience of others and so do feel free to comment here or to get in touch with me directly

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