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Snippet #120 Risky and Meaningless Votes

The fundamental responsibility of an assembly is to make “yes” or “no” choices; it’s a binary machine. The chair of the assembly is responsible for putting questions in such a way that the assembly can make that choice. Taking a vote on something when there isn’t a clear affirmative or negative option is a meaningless vote; there must be a reasonable outcome for both a “yes” and a “no” choice. Prior to putting a motion on the floor, the chair must ask: Is there a decision to be made? A motion that cannot pass this test produces a meaningless vote.

The most common meaningless vote is a motion to “accept” a report. Using our test, we first ask: what does a “yes” vote mean? Most people will answer that it means that the report was given. However, the reality is far different. *Robert’s Rules* defines “accept” “adopt” and “agree to” as synonymous terms. If an assembly votes to accept a report, it means that it has endorsed every word in the report as its own. Conversely, the vote to accept a report is meaningless if the intent is only to show that the report was given. That notation can be made in the minutes as a statement of fact it does not have to be the result of a motion.

Now for the other side of the test: what does a “no” vote mean? After a report is given, if the board votes against accepting the report does it mean that the report wasn’t given? (If a tree falls in the forest. . .)

Another meaningless vote is a vote to affirm a previously-adopted position. RONR says that main motions remain in effect until later rescinded, so there’s no logical reason for taking a vote that says “and we really meant this one.” A negative result on such a vote does *not* rescind the previous action so the only possible outcome is that nothing has changed.

Committees should file reports that give full information about the issues they address, and the report should end with a specific recommendation for action in the form of a motion. It is this motion that the assembly adopts or rejects, and not the opinions or observations described in the rest of the report. Alternatively, the report may conclude with a recommendation for the assembly to take no action.

A particularly risky vote is for a board to approve unaudited financial reports. Financial reports are regularly given as information, and to provide an opportunity for the group to ask questions and fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. Regular financial reports are filed for audit; no action is required. If a routine financial report is adopted, it means that the board has agreed to everything in the report – and has taken the responsibility for the integrity of the numbers. This is not only risky, it is irresponsible. The annual audit report, which verifies the starting and ending numbers and any adjustments, is adopted by the board, but only after their review.

Voting is a precious right and a serious responsibility. Make sure that, for every vote you take or participate in, a specific outcome is possible, whether the “yeas” or the “nays” prevail.