

Consensus

In the late eighties, the American Ethical Union started using the consensus model rather than the more traditional voting methods to try to improve our decision making process. Striving for consensus is very much in consonance with our principle of respecting each other's worth and dignity, more so than the discussion/voting process to which we were more accustomed. The object is to reach common ground for agreement rather than trying to convince others to support one's position. The AEU Board has been using it regularly, and we recommend it highly for your consideration in your Societies' decision making process.

In the AEU Board meetings, we do not follow the formal procedures of motions and seconds before discussion. As discussion progresses, it often turns out that, even when a vote has to be held, the proposal as it evolved during discussion is more satisfactory to more participants than the motion originally presented.

In seeking consensus, the role of the presider is very important. It is sometimes necessary to have alternating speakers, for and against, until there are no more speakers for one side or the other, or until the presider believes that the same arguments are being presented again and again. In addition, we have the following underlying framework for the process:

- **Responsibility:** Participants are responsible for voicing their opinions by participating in the discussion, listening to others, and actively implementing the agreement.
- **Self-Discipline:** Blocking consensus should only be done for objections based on principle. Object clearly, to the point, and without putdowns or speeches. Participate in finding an alternative solution.
- **Respect:** Respect others and trust them to make responsible input.
- **Cooperation:** Look for areas of agreement and common ground and build on them. Avoid competitive, right/wrong, or win/lose thinking.
- **Struggle:** Use clear means of disagreement without putdowns. Work hard to build unity in the group, but not at the expense of the individuals who comprise the group.

In the CALL for CONSENSUS, we define THREE POSSIBLE POSITIONS for members to take:

- **In Consensus:** In favor of the proposal;
- **Out of Consensus (also known as Standing Aside):** Not in favor because of reservations, but not so opposed as to prevent the group from adopting the proposal;
- **Blocking Consensus:** So firmly opposed that even if the overwhelming sentiment of the group is in favor, one believes, for deeply held reasons, that it cannot be supported.

If just one person blocks consensus, then the proposal is not adopted. Further limited discussion is held and consensus is again sought. If one or more persons still block, then a traditional vote is held with the majority opinion prevailing.

Reporting the Results: If consensus was achieved, we report how many were standing aside. Those standing aside have the opportunity to write out their reservations, which become part of the record. If we failed to reach consensus, the number blocking is reported as well as the result of the subsequent vote, and their written reservations are part of the records.