Abstentions Where a Majority Vote is Required – A Parliamentary Explanation
March 9, 2022

The question of how to handle abstentions is of no concern when there is a wide vote margin on a motion. However, what happens when the vote is very close? A question was recently posed that I found most useful in working through how to deal with abstentions where the vote is very close, so I am sharing the question and the explanation in the hope that you will find it useful also. Please let me know if you have questions.

QUESTION POSED: If there is a vote of x number for a motion, x against, and an abstention, does that result count as a tie, or does the abstention get counted one way or the other?

BRIEF ANSWER: The abstention is not counted at all. Assuming the vote on the motion requires only a majority to pass (50% + 1), the example in the question posed produces a 50/50 split, which is a tie. Accordingly, the motion would fail.

DETAILED ANSWER: In order to conduct a vote of a board or committee it is first necessary to have a quorum. Once established, a quorum does not disappear just because of an abstention(s).

In order to have a majority there must be 50% + 1 "yes" votes for the motion to pass. (This analysis does not address votes requiring a ¾ or any other specific percentage vote requirement). If there is a tie the motion fails. Since an abstention is not a vote at all, any abstention(s) cannot be counted towards the "yes" <u>or</u> the "no" votes. Although the abstaining member's presence still counts towards a quorum, they are removed from the voting calculation, and the voting calculation is based upon the majority of **votes** actually cast.

Accordingly, in the example posed in the question, the abstention being no vote at all the motion fails because there is an equal number of "yes" and "no" votes. Note: A failure to cast a vote is the same as an abstention, so the calculation described above applies in such instances.

CITATIONS: The following are citations to excerpts from Robert's Rules of Order, 12th Edition (*RONR* 12th) in support of the above.

To "abstain" means not to vote at all, and a member who makes no response if "abstentions" are called for abstains just as much as one who responds to that effect…. [*RONR* 12th, Section **4:35**, p. 40].

As stated in 1:6, the basic requirement for approval of an action or choice by a deliberative assembly, except where a rule provides otherwise, is a *majority vote*. The word *majority* means "more than half"; and when the term *majority vote* is used without qualification – as in the case of the basic requirement – it means more than half of the votes cast by persons entitled to vote, **excluding blanks or abstentions**, at a regular or properly called meeting. For example… :

>If 19 votes are cast, a majority (more than 9.5) is 10.
>If 20 votes are cast, a majority (more than 10) is 11.
>I 21 votes are cast, a majority (more than 10.5) is 11.

[*RONR* 12th, Section 44:1, p. 379]

… Regardless of the basis required, a decision can be validly made only when a quorum is present….
[*RONR* 12th, 44:2, p. 380]

In a board or committee a quorum is a majority of the members eligible to vote, unless otherwise specified in the bylaws. [*See, RONR* 12th, 40:5, pp. 329-330]