



Majority or Supermajority? Of What?

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A recent question asked what was meant by saying that a measure passed by “a majority of those voting.” This provides an opportunity to discuss a variety of concerns about voting requirements.

First, we should understand that “majority” simply means more than half. We often hear it expressed as “one-half plus one” or “50% plus one.” These expressions can cause confusion when an uneven number of voters is involved. Although most of us regard a majority of 15 as eight, some have argued that if a majority is expressed as “half or 50% plus one,” then a majority of fifteen would be nine – half of 15 is seven and one-half, adding one gets you to eight and one-half and then you would round up to nine because you cannot have half a person. However, that’s not a majority as defined. The confusion is avoided when a majority is expressed simply as more than half.

A basic principle of parliamentary procedure provides that a body’s decisions are made with the consent of at least a majority of those voting, i.e., a measure passes if the affirmative votes outnumber the negative. Thus, on a given vote, once any absences and/or abstentions are taken into account, the measure could pass with the affirmative vote of a small minority of the body’s total membership. For most procedural issues, such as postponing or amending a motion, that threshold for passage is probably not a problem since such motions do not constitute final disposition of a matter. But when a more substantive action of the body is being decided, or when certain changes in procedure are involved, it’s usually desirable to require more than a majority of those voting to pass motions or take certain actions.

One possibility is to require a “supermajority.” The supermajority is often expressed as two-thirds but other percentages or proportions greater than a simple majority may be specified. Such proportions may be required by statutes or the body’s own rules when the body is making decisions that may be budgetary or involve other significant resolutions, ordinances, or contractual commitments. Robert’s Rules of Order requires two-thirds for passage of some procedural motions if the effect of the motion is to change a rule or expectation or somehow curtail the body’s ability to debate an issue. For example, the motions to Suspend the Rules or Extend the Limits of Debate both require two-thirds because they change expectations of how the body is to conduct business. Motions for the Previous Question (Close Debate), Object to Consideration, and Limit Debate all restrict the body’s ability to discuss and debate. In the Robert’s view, restricting discussion and debate may restrict the minority’s right to become the majority and therefore should not be done unless a supermajority deems it appropriate.

Another way to ensure that a minority of the body does not take actions for the entire body is to specify what portion of the entire body must be involved in the decision. Rather than requiring a majority of those voting, rules for passage sometimes specify a majority or two-thirds of those present or, more commonly when important substantive decisions are involved, a majority or two-thirds of the entire membership.

Members of local government bodies should be familiar with the voting thresholds required in statutes or their own rules for specific actions. Otherwise, there is a chance they may mistakenly think that an action has been taken when, in fact, the required number or proportion for passage has not been met.