TOOL #22: Straw Vote Cards

Use red and green straw vote cards to discern if you have consensus or division on big and small issues—and save valuable time!

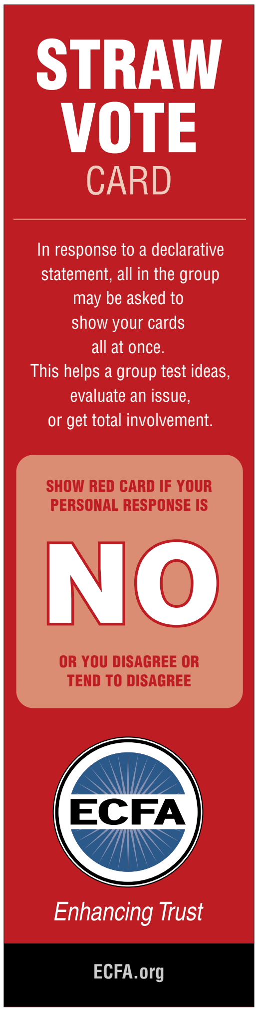
A Quick and Courteous Way to Give Every Board Member a Voice

If you are ready to vote, hold up your green card.

Finding consensus on challenging boardroom issues requires deft handling and a flexible approach by the board chair. Many boards use red and green straw vote cards to "check the pulse" of the board before a vote is taken.

> Determining if there is consensus on a particular agenda item before a vote is taken is often an excellent approach. After adequate discussion, the chair asks, "Is there consensus that it's time to vote?"
>
> This is a signal: If you have more to add, speak up! At times, a red or green straw vote card may be used to indicate consensus.
>
> "If you are ready to vote, hold up your green card; if not, hold up your red card."[1]

[1] Dan Busby and John Pearson, *More Lessons From the Nonprofit Boardroom: Effectiveness, Excellence, Elephants!* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress, 2019), 93. For more insights, read Lesson 16, "Looking for Consensus, But Finding Division."



Add Some Fun to Your Board Meetings!

At every meeting, provide green and red straw vote cards (green means “yes” and red means “no”). Any board member can ask for a straw vote at any time. Sometimes the loudest, longest-talking board member is the only one holding up a red card—and the instant feedback will help her see she’s not convincing anyone!

We were introduced to this time-saving tool by our friend and colleague, Bob Andringa, who notes: “The cards save time by testing the group’s leanings early on in what could otherwise be unnecessarily long discussions.

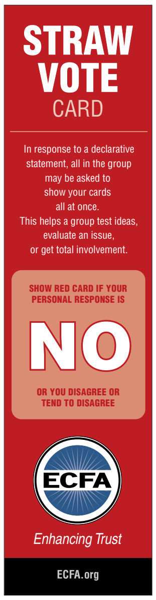
“The straw vote cards allow everyone, even the most extreme introverts, to have a ‘voice’ by going visual. And when anyone can ask to test an idea by a show of cards, they help keep board members more alert to the dialogue. And they can add some fun to your meetings!”[2]

USE STRAW VOTE CARDS to help your board “reach decisions peacefully, thoughtfully, fairly and openly.” Read more on the three approaches for finding boardroom consensus:

- **A consent agenda.** Routine items can be grouped under one agenda item, termed a consent agenda. Agenda items upon which the board is unlikely to quickly reach consensus should not be included in a consent agenda.
- **Unanimity.** It is rare for boards to require unanimity (100% agreement) on all actions. The danger in requiring unanimity is that one person can block an action and allow a decision to simply be endlessly kicked down the road.
- **Simple or super-majority.** Most boards make decisions by simple majority. A so-called super-majority usually requires a two-thirds or three-fourths affirmative vote of the board.[3]

[2] From an email communication to the authors on July 20, 2019. For more governance resources from Bob Andringa, visit *https://theandringagroup.com/resources/.*
[3] Busby and Pearson, *More Lessons From the Nonprofit Boardroom*, 94.

"I'd like to ask for a straw vote—before we vote on the motion."



When should a board member call for a straw vote?
Almost any time!

In hundreds of board meetings over the years, we've observed board members ask for a show of red cards or green cards hundreds of times.

Show your green card if you agree, or show your red card if you disagree:

- ❑ That we ask the Governance Committee to research the benefits of moving from 12 board meetings per year to just six.
- ❑ At our last meeting, we noted Dr. John J. Medina's wisdom: **"Multitasking, when it comes to paying attention, is a myth."**[4] So because we need everyone's focused attention on today's agenda—show your green card if you agree that we ask everyone to turn their phones off and place them in the center of the table until we adjourn.
- ❑ Before we vote on this motion, show your green card if you agree our esteemed chair of the Nominating Committee should receive a Chick-fil-A gift card for her tremendous work on this year's slate of nominees!
- ❑ Mr. Chairman, we've been discussing this topic for over an hour—**but not every board member has weighed in yet.** Could we do a quick show of cards to see if most agree—or disagree—with the motion on the table?
- ❑ Whew! I've counted no less than a dozen emails—related to the 2020 Vision Campaign—just in the last 24 hours from strongly-opinionated board members! I'm not sure what anyone believes! Would it be helpful to ask everyone to show their red or green cards if you're leaning toward a Yes or a No on this motion?
- ❑ Yikes! This discussion is getting a bit contentious, and I need to apologize for the first volley that prompted it. Would you join me in raising your green cards—if you agree we should stop for 15 minutes of silent prayer? We need God's help.

[4] Dan Busby and John Pearson, *Lessons From the Nonprofit Boardroom: 40 Insights for Better Board Meetings* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress, 2018), 13.

BONUS

5 Facilitation Techniques to Engage Board Members at Every Meeting

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On the drive home from your board meetings, you want every board member to reflect: "Was I needed at this meeting? Did others engage both my heart and my head—or do they have low or no expectations that I can add value?"

If your board meetings are long on talking heads (featuring boring CEO reports and excessively detailed financial reports) and short on energetic and engaged dialogue—then consider these five ways to facilitate lively value-added discussions:

- ❑ 1. **THE FIRST 30 MINUTES.** One of my board meeting rules of thumb is to ensure that every board member shares an insight in the first 30 minutes of the meeting. It's simple. Just write a thought-provoking question on the flipchart. (Example: "What are the three greatest threats to our future ministry?") Divide the board into groups of two—and start the clock (three to five minutes only). Ask each team of two to give a 60-second report. And…presto: every board member in the room has shared an opinion or insight. ("How was the meeting tonight, Dear?" Response: "Fantastic! They really liked one of my ideas.")[6]
- ❑ 2. **STAND AND DECLARE.** If two or three board members tend to do all the talking, call a time-out and do a "Stand and Declare." Ask everyone to stand up around the table. Then ask each person to share one insight on the agenda topic in 30 seconds or less. Go around the table, one-at-a-time, and after a person speaks, he or she should be seated. In about five to seven minutes you've heard from everyone—not just the talkers.
- ❑ 3. **STRAW VOTE CARDS.** At every meeting, provide green and red straw vote cards (green means "yes" and red means "no"). Any board member can ask for a straw vote at any time. Sometimes the loudest, longest-talking board member is the only one holding up a red card—and the instant feedback will help her see she's not convincing anyone!
- ❑ 4. **STOP AND PRAY.** Are you facing a difficult fork-in-the-road decision? Stop and pray! (While you likely pray at the beginning and end of your board meetings, it's not illegal to actually pray during the board meeting!) To engage everyone, break into groups of two or three—so everyone can pray.
- ❑ 5. **CHICK-FIL-A GIFT CARDS!** Provide your board chair with two or three Chick-fil-A gift cards per meeting. Award board members for insightful questions and/or observations. After the first card is awarded, the energy level will be raised—as others vie for gift card-worthy input.

[5] Adapted from "5 Ways to Engage Board Members at Every Meeting," by John Pearson, *RESCUE magazine*, July/August 2014, 10. Published by Association of Gospel Rescue Missions, now known as Citygate Network.

[6] Busby and Pearson, *More Lessons From the Nonprofit Boardroom*, 86–90. Read Lesson 15: "Be Intentional About Your First 30 Minutes."