



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #117 The Chair's Vote

Impartiality is one of the most important characteristics of a great chair. An opinionated or biased chair can cause mistrust and resentment among the members, and the effects may last into subsequent meetings. Although the chair has the same rights as every other member, he or she relinquishes those rights in favor of taking on the critical responsibilities of chairing a meeting – granting the privilege of speaking to the members in turn, helping frame motions, and ruling on points of order, to name a few. The way the chair protects this impartiality is to refrain from voting except when that vote would affect the result, which over time has been mischaracterized as “to break a tie.” It’s a bit more complicated than that simple statement.

Sometimes the vote required is a two-thirds vote. In this case there’s no “make or break a tie” to consider. The chair takes the vote, counts the results, then decides whether to vote. When the chair has a choice whether to remain silent or vote “no,” and the result of the vote will remain the same, it is far better to let the vote fail without actually taking a position, in order to maintain the important appearance of impartiality. Some might resent the chair’s specifically voting against a proposal as an overt negative action, rather than just allowing the motion to fail anyway.

There’s a legal complication that can arise if the meeting is one of a board of an incorporated society. In many states, the law includes a phrase such as “the act of a majority of directors present is the act of the board...” This requirement can change whether or not the chair’s vote will affect the result, because under such laws there is no such thing as an abstention. If a director is present and does not vote, his presence alone counts the same as a negative vote. For example, if there are ten directors present including the chair, a vote of 5 in favor and 4 opposed will not pass a motion unless the chair specifically votes *for* the motion, because 5 is not a majority of 10. Therefore, when such a law applies, we always record the full vote as *for/against/present* or, in this situation, if the chair does not vote: 5/4/1. It’s the only way we can know that there was or was not a majority of the directors present. Although it’s too simplistic to say that abstentions count as “noes” – in reality, that’s the ultimate result.

Given a two-thirds vote with our ten member board, let’s assume the vote is 6/3 without the chair’s vote. If the above law applies, the chair can either vote in favor and the motion will pass by a vote of 7/3, or the chair can remain silent and the motion will fail by a vote of 6/3/1. If the above law does *not* apply, the chair’s choice is different – the only vote that will affect the result is a “no” vote. An abstention will mean that the motion is adopted.

If the vote is by ballot, the chair casts a ballot the same as any other member. In this case there’s no way to tell how the chair voted, so the process is equal for everyone. At times it can be an effective strategy for a member to move that the vote be taken by ballot so the chair can vote without having to divulge her vote. However, once the polls have been closed the chair cannot cast a ballot.

When the vote is by roll call, the chair is called last, so the chair must monitor the count to see what the effect of a vote or an abstention might be. Deciding when (and whether) to cast a vote is part of the art of being a great chair.