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Snippet #162 The Unsimple Majority

Of all the terms used in parliamentary procedure, the one that should be the simplest ends up being the most complicated. It's a word we just can't seem to leave alone. We have to keep *doing* things to it: the simple majority, the vast majority, the two-thirds majority, the supermajority – even the silent majority. Enough! Why can't we let the word speak for itself?

First, let's clear up the actual definition of a majority: it means more than half. The problem comes when we ask the obvious question – half of what? Now things get dicey. It turns out there are a lot of "whats" to consider. The normal and usual definition under Robert's Rules is that a majority is more than half of the votes cast, and abstentions don't count. Sometimes we refer to this as "present and voting."

Then one day someone decided that it sounded better to say 51%. Unfortunately, that only works for the number 100. If the number is 1000, 51% is 510, not 501. And 50% plus 1 isn't much better. If the number voting is 25, 50% plus 1 is 13.5. Complicating the definition only complicates the calculation. And, instead of saying "majority rules" do we want to say "51% rules?" What whole number is more than half of 25? Thirteen. Simple. Another way to let percentages wreak havoc is to decide (usually in the case of a condominium) that every owner is entitled to a percentage share of the total, usually resulting in individual voting percentages into four or five decimals, and where votes can only be calculated using a complicated spreadsheet and layers of ballots. Who cares if the total adds up to 100%? Why can't it all be calculated by whole numbers? Maybe there should be 1486 shares, proportionally divided.

Sometimes the requirement is a two-thirds vote, which is a 2:1 ratio. In that case, there must be twice as many in favor as opposed, and the easy way to calculate this is to double the number voting against and compare it to the number voting in favor. For example, if there were 12 in favor and 6 opposed, there is exactly a 2:1 ratio and there is a two-thirds vote. This is NOT a majority in any sense of the word – a majority when 18 are voting is 10. There's simply no such thing as a "two-thirds majority." They are mutually exclusive terms. Sometimes people like to call a two-thirds vote (or any vote that is more than a majority) a "super majority." This is meant to convey that the vote requirement was more than a majority, not that this is a really "super" vote. Swell, even.

Then there are the people who can't leave well enough alone and have to fill out the description. When that happens, the situation becomes, well – more complicated. The word "of" is the game changer, when we have to say "a majority of the directors present" or "a majority of the delegates" it applies to everyone in that category. Now the majority is not so simple! If there are twelve directors present, and the vote is 6 in favor and 5 opposed and 1 person abstaining, the motion fails because 6 is not a majority of 12. In a worst case scenario, the bylaws require a majority of the delegates so the only way to get the result on a close vote is to close the doors, count all the delegates in the room, then take the vote. So much trouble for a few extra words.

This is a call to go back to basics, remove the unnecessary adornments, and celebrate the concept of the majority – the number of votes that represents more than half of the total votes cast. The vast majority would agree.