

Fixing and Election Process Before Its Broken

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When asked whether they have considered adding an on-line voting option to their election process, most cooperative leaders would respond “why fix something that isn’t broken?” Using that analogy a hybrid voting process is preventive maintenance which increases transparency and engagement, appeals to younger and progressive members and can protect the cooperative from special interests. It can also be a practice that puts your members first.

Agricultural cooperatives operate under a one member-one vote system. The members present and voting at the annual meeting are often a small percentage of the total eligible voting members. In some cases the votes cast for board members represent less than 5% of the total membership. That can create a perception issue as to whether the election results truly reflect the entire membership. More importantly, the risk of a special interest candidate being nominated from the floor and elected increases when voter turnout percentage is low.

Adding options for voting such as on-line and mail voting can significantly increase participation. The knee jerk reaction to increasing voting options is the fear that it will change the board composition. In reality, it tends to make the election process more stable. Special interest groups have less of an impact when 25% of the total membership votes. Expanded voting options may also be more convenient for your member owners. It allows members to participate without driving to the annual meeting. It is beneficial for members who have employment, family or even farming commitments that conflict with the annual meeting. Today’s cooperatives have diverse membership. Older members may be partial to on-site voting. Younger members may prefer online voting options. Some groups of members may simply like having a choice. As you consider your options, consider the preferences and future demographics of your cooperative.

Now if we just had an online version of that Barbeque!

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