

On-Line Voting for Cooperatives

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Member control is a fundamental cooperative principle. Members typically vote for the board of director candidates and for major structural changes. Most cooperatives operate under a one-member one-vote system although voting in proportion to business volume is possible in some states. Historically agricultural cooperative members have voted in person at the annual meeting. A few cooperatives have procedures for mail in ballots but the practice has never been wide spread.

As cooperatives get larger it is more difficult to engage members. On-line voting is a potential tool to increase member involvement. On-line voting has a number of advantages. Many members find on-line voting more convenient so the option of voting on-line can encourage more members to participate. Rural electric cooperatives that have implemented on-line voting have achieved participation rates of up to 28% of the total membership. On-line voting also enhances the perception that the cooperative is operating in a fair and transparent manner. It also reduces perceived barriers to running from the board. Potential board candidates might be more comfortable to run against incumbents in an on-line election.

Adding an on-line voting option can help the cooperative to connect with member groups that are currently not participating. On-line voting appeals to younger members. Busy and over-scheduled members (who may be your key members) are also more likely to participate in cooperative elections when there is an on-line option. The option of voting on-line might also increase participation from producers at branch or remote locations. While we typically think of cooperative voting in terms of board elections, on-line voting systems could allow a cooperative to conduct non-binding polls of member attitude toward alternatives facing the cooperatives or new products and services that could be offered.

Finally, on-voting reduces costs and mistakes. Printing and mailing costs are reduced and human error in interpreting and counting ballots is eliminated. Tabulation is automatic and a paper trail (or rather paperless trail) of the election participation and results is instantly available. Members receive feedback as to whether their vote was received and have the chance to correct mistakes that might disqualify a paper ballot response.

In my next newsletter I'll discuss some of the issues with on-line voting