

## Roll Call Voting System Primer

More and more, city councils, school boards, and other public meeting venues are turning to automated voting and meeting management systems for their proceedings. Here we'll present a brief overview of typical systems and offer guidelines to help in choosing one for your facility.

### What is a Voting System?

The core purpose of a voting system is to record, tabulate and display the vote results. Basic systems often consist of a push-button control panel and light display near the individual controlling the meeting, typically a city clerk in a council session. Expandable systems will display votes on a video projector or other large screen display, broadcast video or tote board and might feature microphone and timer control. Computer based meeting management systems also manage the agenda and create databases and reports summarizing the meeting activity. The heart of these systems is a GUI graphical interface that may also appear on monitors in front of each meeting participant allowing them to better follow the proceedings. This interface displays the agenda items for the meeting, and shows the name and location of those voting members. The number of members can vary from as few as three for a committee hearing, or more than 100 for a state legislature. Each of those members also has a small control box at their desk, with four to eight buttons to make a motion or second one, vote aye or nay, or other features like sending a page or a request to speak message to the podium.

### Why a Voting System?

Voting systems play an important part of automating and simplifying the tedious and ever growing record keeping tasks required during a public meeting. A well designed system speeds up meeting proceedings; efficiently processing the large number of issues a deliberative body is often called upon to process. The systems also equalize the voting process by eliminating biases that might result from hand or voice votes.

### Managing the Agenda

In a typical meeting scenario, the clerk enters the agenda items scheduled for the meeting into the system prior to the meeting. The three most common methods of entering the agenda are: 1) typing the information into a form, 2) cutting and pasting information from a word processing document, or 3) importing the information electronically from a file or database. Each method has its benefits and limitations. Cut and paste is quick and easy with no additional cost. Electronic importing can be fast but it adds to the system

cost and may require special document formats or preparation and results must be carefully checked for accuracy.

## The Voting Process

Some systems have the ability to automatically record attendance during the roll call from the vote panels. At least one system tracks a attendance if a member leaves and re-enters during the course of the meeting. As the meeting commences, the best systems follow parliamentary procedure, introducing agenda items, recording who makes motions and seconds, calling for the vote, and recording the outcome. Depending on the user's preferences, the vote results may be displayed in real time as each member depresses the desired vote selection on their panel, or withheld until all the votes are registered. Some configurations may allow the voting member to change his vote prior to the vote being recorded. The better voting systems will also flow with the unique proceedings of the meeting, enabling and recording amendments to motions, supplemental agenda items, and the like. All the while, following strict parliamentary procedure, so the meeting proceedings are properly controlled and recorded.

## Advanced Control

More advanced systems also integrate with the audio and video control of the room. For example, when a voting member requests to speak on a particular issue, his microphone is automatically turned on when the chair recognizes him (or turned off when the time limit for debate has been reached!!). Camera angle selection, visuals to be shown on the video screen, room audio volume and lighting levels can also be controlled by more advanced systems. The best systems will make all magic of control appear seamless and non-technical to the meeting participants.

## System Flexibility

Finally, one of the most important features is flexibility. The make-up of an elected body is ever changing, and the system should seamlessly change with it. Also, a good system will allow for multiple configurations, allowing the same system to manage various types of meetings in the same room (city council meeting, zoning commission hearings, school boards). The composition and unique characteristics of each group can be pre-loaded into the system for quick selection. It is important to consider how easily it is to expand a system or take advantage of new features. After initial installation it may be desirable to add timer displays, A/V control or remote control panels. What will be involved to add these features?

Voting systems have come a long way from the days of displaying results on a mechanical, scoreboard-like wall panel. Modern systems are flexible, create permanent records, and maintain proper meeting procedure, as well as enabling control of other equipment in the room.

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