

high degree of abstention, the resolution's effective impact will be sharply reduced, whereas, if a resolution registers a true consensus, or is adopted by acclamation, it can have a much greater importance.

Votes on General Assembly resolutions, so long as they achieve the required majority and regardless of the degree of opposition or abstention, have specific and concrete consequences when they deal with such matters as status (e.g., admission of the PLO to observer status or refusal of South African credentials); membership (on recommendation of the Security Council); procedures (e.g. establishment of committees to investigate human rights in Chile), and administrative and financial questions.

In judging Canada's position by the vote it casts on a given issue, it is important to understand certain features of voting procedure in the United Nations. Before a resolution is brought to a vote, its proponents may explore the possibility of approving it by consensus or acclamation. This avoids a divided and recorded vote and enhances the role of conciliation and moderation as an effective method of pursuing the United Nations dialogue. A consensus, or approval of a proposition by acclamation, implies that informal negotiation has taken place and has been productive; it permits the concerns of the majority to be met without creating undue acrimony as a corollary -- i.e., if the resolution had been put to the vote, it might have attracted abstentions or negative votes. This fruitful and important procedure has succeeded much more frequently than one might think. From 1972 to 1976, 468 out of a total of 966 (i.e., 48.5 per cent) of General Assembly resolutions have been adopted in this way.

The rules of procedure in all United Nations bodies provide not two but three voting options -- to vote in favour, to vote against, or to abstain. Abstention is a decision to decline to vote either in complete support of, or in unqualified opposition to, a proposal.

UN voting procedures and machinery always provide for these three options to be both exercised and recorded. For example, the rules of procedure of the General Assembly stipulate that certain questions shall be decided by a simple or a two-thirds majority (as the case may be) of the "members present and voting". The phrase "members present and voting" is defined as members casting either an affirmative or a negative vote; therefore, those members that abstain from voting are technically considered as not voting (Rule 86). Thus an abstention, i.e. not voting, changes the arithmetic of a voting situation; it reduces the number of votes necessary to obtain the required majority to adopt or defeat a proposal.

For a political resolution to carry weight, it must be adopted by a majority of member states from each regional group. A resolution carried by a large majority but lacking the support of a regional group will usually be ineffective. A confrontation over such resolutions may be avoided by the use of abstention, which signals a willingness to negotiate further if the majority so desires.