Dot voting

Description

Dot voting is a flexible technique for public *semi-anonymous* voting (semi-anonymous because it's hard to determine how individuals vote without watching them during the process). Participants are given identical sets of one or more colored paper dots, one dot per vote, which they stick onto paper sheets, each listing one of the available choices. Dots can be of equal value, or different dot colors can represent ranked choices (e.g., red for your favorite option, yellow for your second favorite) or other voting preferences (e.g., a green dot means "I'd like to work on an issue").

Dot voting can be used either with *predetermined options*, or as part of a *two-step* process in which options are first generated by a technique such as *Post It!* or *affinity grouping* and then voted on.

Dot voting can be more than a decision-making strategy. Think of it also as a powerful method for both investigating support for ideas and options as well as informing fruitful discussions that follow a vote.

If you require a more deliberative voting technique, check out Idea Rating Sheets.[152] This is a paper-form-based approach, particularly suitable for large groups working on decision-making, in which ideas are written on special paper forms and participants fill in dots to record their degrees of agreement. If ideas to be voted on are generated prior to the session, Idea Rating Sheets can be used to uncover their popularity and the amount of agreement existing in the group. The forms can be downloaded from the Idea Rating Sheets website for free.

When?

Use dot voting when you need a tool to explore and prioritize ideas, rather than a means to choose a specific action or outcome. When participants come up with multiple proposals and the time

available is too short to give them all adequate attention, dot voting provides a useful instrument to help a group focus on what it sees as most important, and, optionally, determine an order to discuss the ideas.

Resources

Dot voting requires:

- Colored sticky paper dots, which are sold adhered to a backing sheet.
- Paper sheets onto which participants stick the dots.
- Markers to list choices for dot voting on each piece of paper.
- Alternatively, sufficient colored markers (if dots are not available—see below).

Sticky dots general requirements

Determine dot requirements before voting, using the information supplied in the remainder of this section. Decide whether dot color will indicate significant information, and, if so, assign an appropriate color to each desired choice.

Use dots that are at least half an inch in diameter, as smaller dots are hard to remove from their backing and stick in position. Pick colors that contrast.

Prepare sets of dots, still attached to their backing, to hand out to participants when the vote occurs. Buying sheets of dots with multiple colors on each sheet can reduce the cutting necessary to create multiple identical sets of dots. If only one dot is needed for each person it's possible to distribute dots as needed, peeling them off the backing as they're handed over, but in general it's better to let voters remove the dots from the backing themselves. Provide somewhere to dispose of the backing paper.

Dot paper

Use flip chart or other large sheets of paper for dots, as sticky dots are too hard to remove from permanent surfaces like walls and tables.

If you're using predetermined issue voting you'll need a sheet of paper for each idea. Label each sheet so people know where to attach their dot.

If you're using two-step voting, be sure you have enough paper area for the quantity of ideas expected. Draw a regular grid on each piece of paper with each grid square large enough to hold a sticky note with the written idea plus space for dots around it.

Dot substitutes

If no paper dots are available and participants are trustworthy, people can make their own dots with colored markers. In this case it's a good idea to clearly display on a poster or screen the number of color dots to be made, along with their significance.

How many dots to use?

While there are no widely accepted metrics on how many dots to provide each participant, here are some rules of thumb suggested by facilitators who have experience in dot voting:[153]

If you are looking for the top X of N ideas (where X is predetermined in advance)

- Give each participant X+1 dots. (X+1 should be less than N!)

- Or use weighted voting. For example, give each participant six dots: three for top choice, two for second, and one for third. Participants cannot use all their dots for one option.

To rank a set of N ideas

- Give each participant between N/2 and N/5 dots. This will usually allow you to categorize ideas into 3–5 bands of similar importance.

To discover importance/influence/commitment/vetoes/must dos

- Give each participant one or more colored dots for each factor you are exploring: for example, green dots to mark what's important, red dots to indicate options on which the voter has influence or control, and blue dots for issues to which the voter will commit time and energy. You can also assign colors for "vetoes"—options that a participant feels should not be pursued—and "must-do" issues.

- If you are exploring other issues besides importance or ranking, optionally have additional dots available on demand so that people can dot as many influence/commitment/veto/must-do items as desired.

Dot coding and usage

It's crucial that participants completely understand the voting process. Determine the following:

- How multiple dots can be used: only one vote per item; multiple votes per item; three for the highest priority, two for the second highest, etc.

- What each color signifies: importance, must do, veto, commitment, influence, and so on. Although some schemes use different colors to indicate first choice, second choice, and so on, I find it harder to evaluate the resulting votes and prefer to provide weighted voting either by allowing multiple dots on a single choice or the weighted voting scheme described above.

Unless the voting description is very simple (e.g., "Please place your dot on the issue that's most important to you."), post the voting instructions next to the voting sheets or project them on a screen for all to see.

How?

Dot voting preparation

All but the simplest dot voting requires preparation. Determine the following, with reference to the previous section and the additional information below:

- What will be voted on? For ideas/options generated by participants in the session, use *two step dot voting*. For specific predetermined options/ideas use *predetermined options dot voting*.

- How many colors to use.

- How many dots to use.

- The voting rules (see below).

Here are some additional rules you may want to incorporate into your voting process.

Pre-voting and/or voting silently

Voting may be influenced by participants' perceptions of how others vote—for example, people may be reluctant to be the first to vote for an option. One way to minimize this is by pre-voting. To do this, give every option a letter or number and allow time for everyone to survey the available options without placing their dots. Have participants write their options' letter/number on their dots without discussion and then vote.

Dot meanings

Give each color dot used a specific meaning and share with participants. Possible meanings include:

- This item is essential (must do). This item is one of my most important/highest rankings.

- I have influence or control over this option (optional: add participant name).

- I am willing to personally devote time and energy to this issue (optional: add participant name).

- This option should not be considered/acted upon (veto).

Multiple dot application

If you are distributing more than one dot of a given color, decide how dots may be applied:

- Only add one dot to each desired option.

- Dots may be distributed in any way—for example, all given to one idea.

- Give x dots to your first choice, y to your second, etc.—for example, 3 dots for top choice, 2 for second, 1 for third.

- Use x dots with the pre-voting procedure described above. Remaining dots are added as desired in a second round of voting. This provides a combination of uninfluenced and influenced voting.

You can also require everyone to commit to one of the ideas (see above) in a first round of voting before they are allowed to vote in a second round on the importance of the ideas themselves.

Two step dot voting

Two step dot voting precedes the voting with idea/topic generation, using *Post It!*, *affinity grouping*, or any other appropriate idea generation technique. The resulting options should be written on sticky notes, each of which is placed in the center of one of the grid squares on the voting sheet. If you are planning to dot vote on topics generated by affinity grouping, build the affinity grouping on a large paper sheet so dots can be applied close to the relevant sticky notes.

Predetermined options dot voting

Once voting choices have been developed and displayed, it's time to dot vote. Here are the steps:

Clarify what is to be voted on

Clearly explain the available voting options. Ask whether it's clear what people are voting on and resolve any questions before the vote begins.

Hand out dots and describe how to vote

Distribute an identical set of dots to each participant. Explain how to vote. Cover:

- The purpose of the voting. Examples: Find the top three options; rank these ideas by importance to you/highest priority/your commitment to them; register a veto on options we should not pursue.
- What each color dot represents.
- How multiple dots can be distributed.
- Voting round details. Examples: one round for all the dots; one round for each color dot; mixed rounds of pre-voting and free voting.
- Any other voting rules, such as a commitment voting requirement.

Ask whether there are questions, and answer them.

Vote!

Give people enough time to vote. When most people have voted, announce that voting will close in 30–60 seconds. Announce when voting is closed.

Review the vote

Once voting is closed, give people time to review the voting for themselves. Then review what you see and check that the group shares your understanding.

Unless you are using dot voting to make a quick decision on priorities ("After voting we will work on the three highest ranked issues"), you should allocate time to discuss the outcomes and consequences of the vote. Do the results make sense? If not, the questions asked should be rethought or reframed. Have clear priorities emerged? Are some options ranked as high priority but there is little commitment to making them happen? Perhaps there are items that have weak support; should they be put aside for now? Exploring what the vote means to the group is an important component of this technique.