

SSMU General Assembly Reform Town Hall
Discussion Summary
November 2nd and 3rd, 2011
Compiled by SSMU Secretary General Jessica Wang


Students' Society of
McGill University

SSMU GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Association Etudiante
de l'Université McGill


TOWN HALL
General Assembly Reform
2011-2012









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General Assembly


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A SSMU General Assembly brings students together to debate and vote on policy decisions of the SSMU. Past motions have included everything from banning the sale of bottled water in the SSMU Building to SSMU's stance on porn to whether students should go on strike to SSMU's investment policies and Board of Directors structures.

Currently, General Assemblies (GAs) are held **at least once a semester** and are **open to all SSMU members** (one person, one vote). However, the GA has historically **struggled to get enough students to attend** and has been the subject of various **other criticisms**.

Consequently, we need your help in thoroughly reviewing the General Assembly so that we can help make it a more effective forum for student decision-making!

Reform Process

- **Review of documents from last year's General Assembly review**
- **Specific survey addressing options**
- **Two town halls**
- **Proposed amendments at Council for their first reading on November 17th (no debate)**
- **Proposed amendments at Council for debate and (potential) adoption on December 1st**

Throughout this process, documentation will be available on the SSMU website:


<http://ssmu.mcgill.ca/representation/governance/general-assembly/>

Survey: Timing

Timing


- **Once a semester**
- **Fall semester**
 - **Last week of September/first week of October**
 - **OR first/second week of November**
- **Winter Semester**
 - **last week of January/first week of February**

- Timing not controversial, but the survey did confirm preferable times



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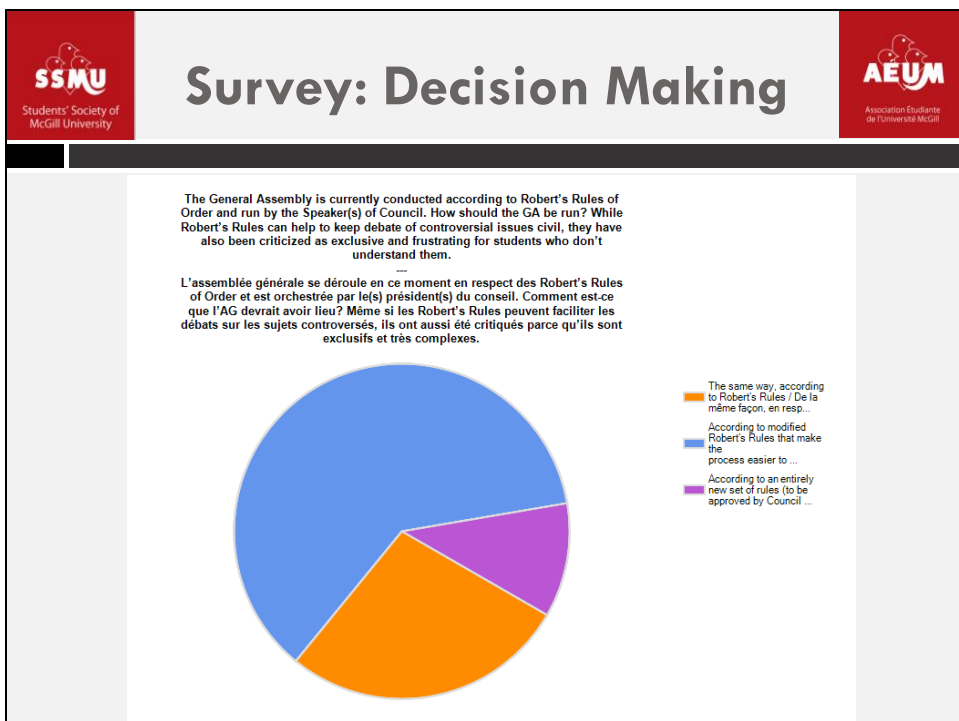
Survey: Process



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Process


- The survey respondents supported a use of modified Robert's Rule of Order that makes the process easier to understand and run by the Speaker(s) of Council



How could Robert's Rules be best modified to make the GA process more accessible to students interested in participating?


- People mainly in favour of **adjusted** use of Roberts Rules
- Why change?

- Procedural votes are really confusing to people – voting on whether to vote is confusing, people don't know when they need to vote vs. when they can abstain.
- People feel alienated by the more obscure elements of Roberts Rules
- Not everyone knows all the rules well enough
- Advantages of modified Roberts Rules
 - Easier to facilitate/participate.
- Disadvantages of modified Roberts rules
 - Might create problems when people are trying to bring up really specific points
 - May not be able to prevent tyranny of the majority over the minority
- Suggestions
 - Possibility of putting up guide to GA procedures on website
 - Also hand out paper copies at the GA
 - Limit the number of rules to a couple dozen. Refer to the constitution as much as possible. Give people possibility of simply raising a generic point if they are confused
 - The speakers should move the assembly along and ensure debates don't drag on for too long
 - Simplify terminology



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Consensus at the GA?

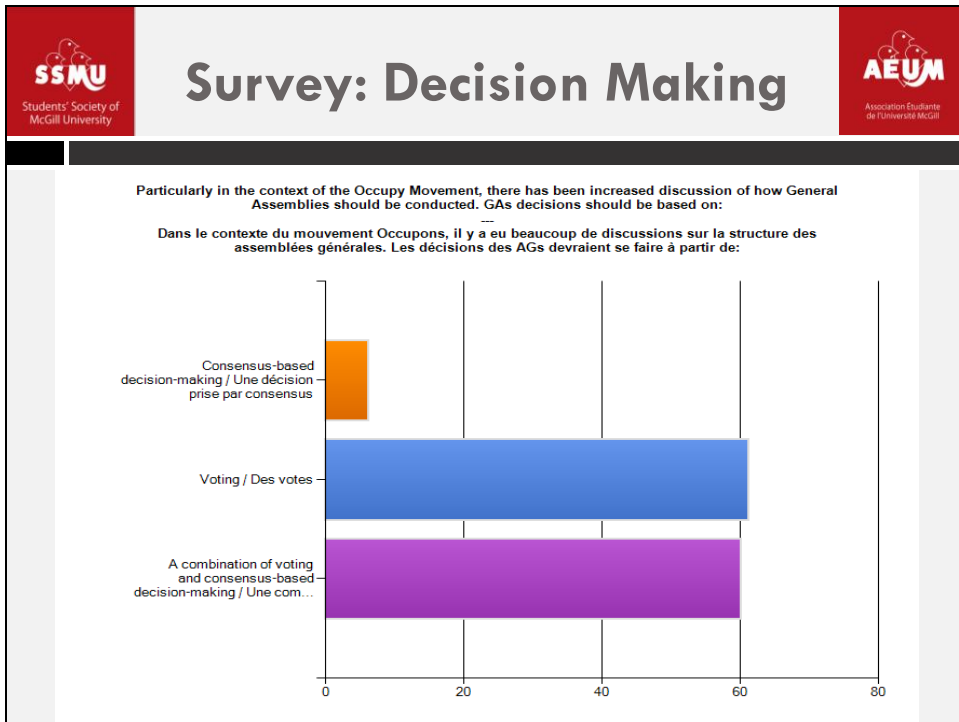


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The General Assembly can reach a decision when the students-at-large have come to an agreement. Students may reach an agreement when reaching a consensus or through voting on an issue.


The results of the survey indicate that were many people in favour of a combination of voting and consensus-based decision-making and purely voting.

However, the problem at hand is that one person can stall the entire process in consensus-based decision-making and consensus is very hard to reach. When to use consensus-based decision-making versus voting must also be established.




Is introducing elements of consensus-based decision-making feasible? How would this work?

- Very little interest in making decisions solely via consensus
- There may be an opening for functioning on consensus or supermajority basis for procedural motions, speakers would have to be informed.
 - Ideally we would function by consensus
 - The point of a GA is to fight things out. Motions need to reach a point where everybody is comfortable debating them, not necessarily voting on them.



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Survey: Voting Method



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There is a strong in an online portion of the General Assembly, with the strongest support for an in-person vote on amendments and an online vote on the final question.

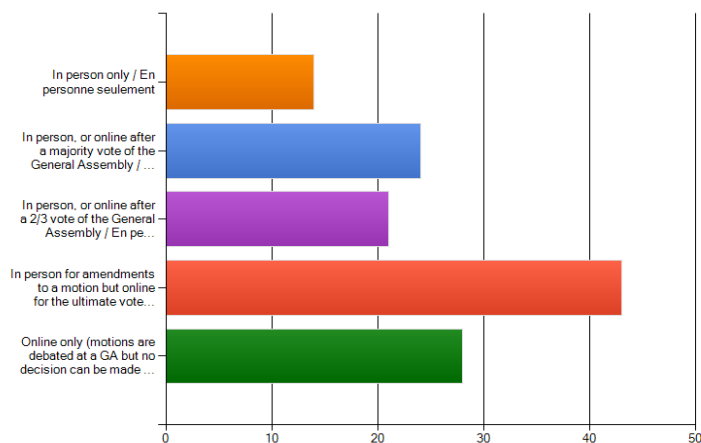
Advantages of an online voting system include convenience, better representation of the entire student body, and an overall increase in the percentage of students participating.

However, students would vote without hearing the debate and this could decrease attendance in person and/or the standard of information on which students base their voting decision.

Survey: Voting Method

General Assembly voting should be conducted:

Une assemblée générale votante devrait avoir lieu:

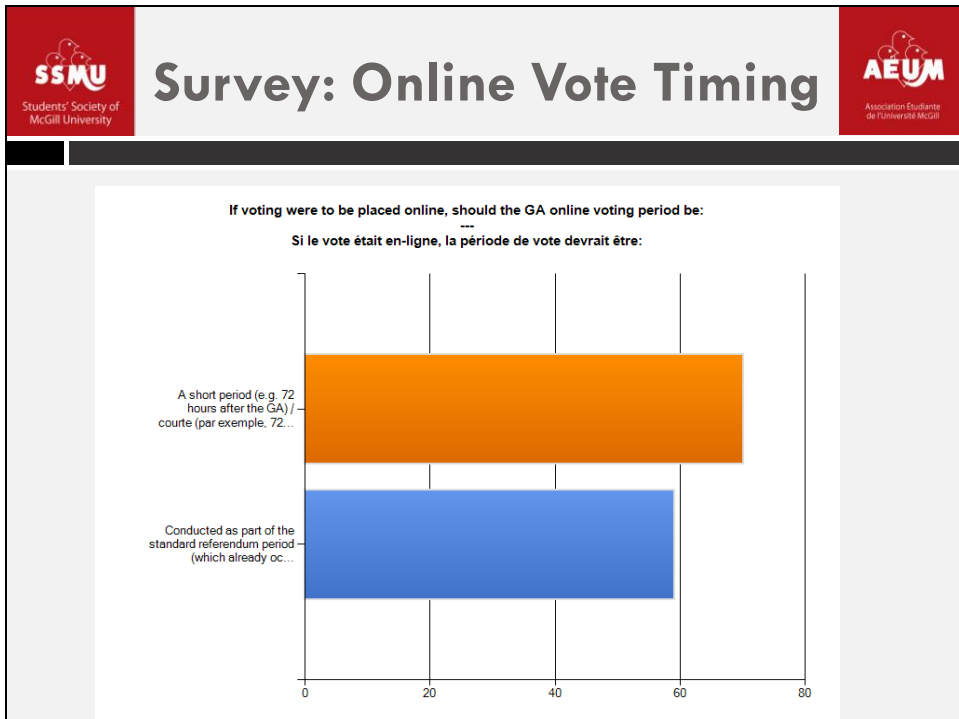


Survey: Online Vote Timing

Voting for the standard referendum already occurs once every semester. Including voting of motions of the General Assembly in the referenda could increase participation and ease of voting, as well as allowing students to look further into the issue.

However, students may forget about the debated issues or vote without listening to both sides.


If voting were included in the standard referendum, the time at which General Assemblies are held may need to be altered accordingly.



Should voting be put online? If so, to what extent? What should quorum be? Would online voting be separate from or included in the standard referendum period? If separate, would referenda-period campaigning rules apply?


- Problem
 - Difficulty of finding a time when no portion of the SSMU can't come because of stages/placements
- Advantages:
 - Ensure democracy when ultimate vote is online
 - Convenience
- Disadvantages:
 - Fewer and fewer people will come, since it will not be decision-making. Quorum issues will arise.
 - Less debates
 - Telling people to come to the GA to amend motions is the worst publicity ever. It won't work.
 - Might lead to politicking
- Suggestions
 - Some people suggested having a larger consultative body followed by a referendum – possibility of amending motions at the GA but vote would go online.
 - Allow people to refer motions to an online vote if necessary
 - Placing GA votes online for the ultimate vote. General Assemblies should complement the referendum period. GA debates could be taped.
 - The QPIRG AGM has a culture of handing out material and text before the GA and having a reading time, where people can read and learn. This is important. (Ethan Feldman).

- We could get academic amnesty using letters to profs for GA participants?
- General Assemblies should be advertised by promoting the discussion aspect.
- To solve problems with student parent attendance, we could provide child care.
Also a way to prevent abuse with a letter from SSMU is for students to make arrangements in advance



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Motions from the Floor



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Motions from the floor are motions allow students write a motion the day of (or perhaps even during) the General Assembly. Motions from the floor can increase participation and make the GA more adaptable to current events.

However, there is potential for this process to be abused or for inadequately informed decisions to be made, particularly if quorum remains at 100 people. Additionally, issues of translation and review for constitutionality/compliance with SSMU policies could prove problematic.



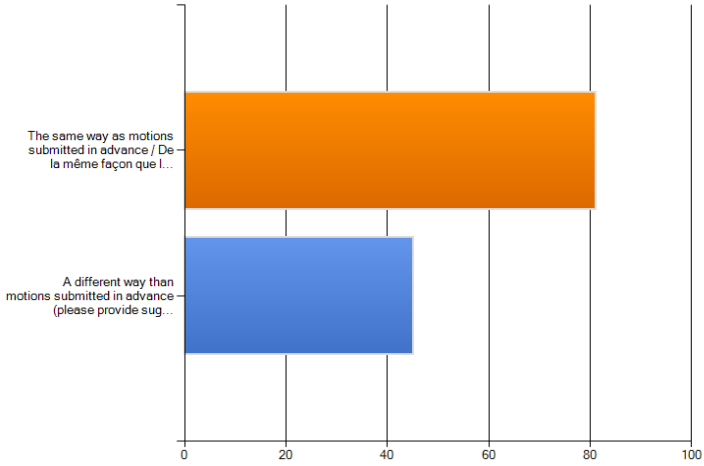
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Motions from the Floor

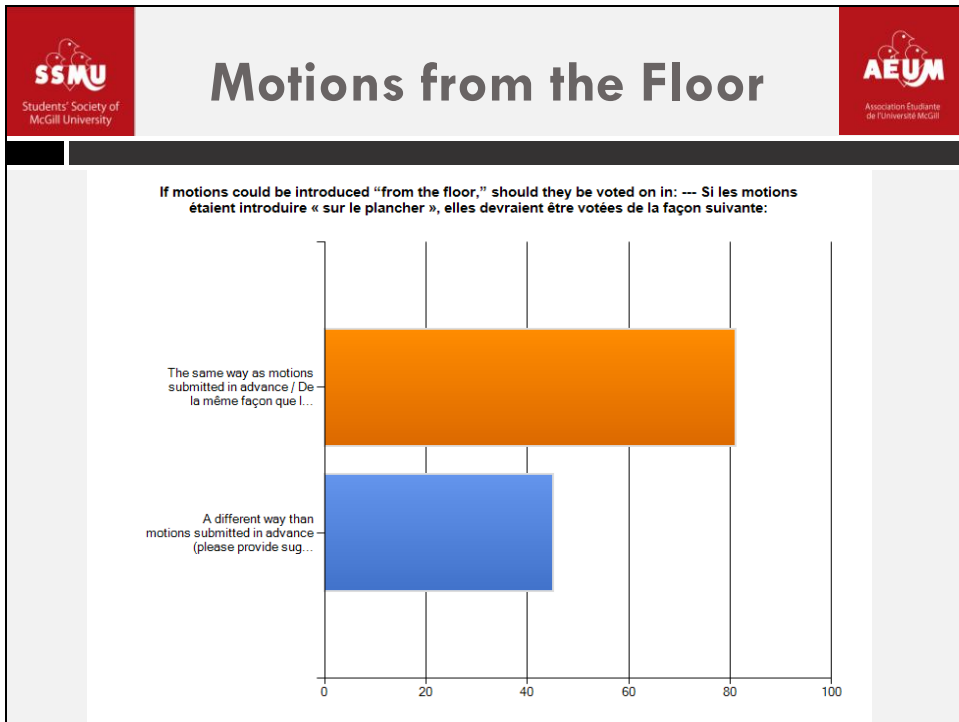



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If motions could be introduced "from the floor," should they be voted on in: --- Si les motions étaient introduire « sur le plancher », elles devraient être votées de la façon suivante:




Response	Percentage
The same way as motions submitted in advance / De la même façon que l...	~82%
A different way than motions submitted in advance (please provide sug...	~45%





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Motions from the Floor



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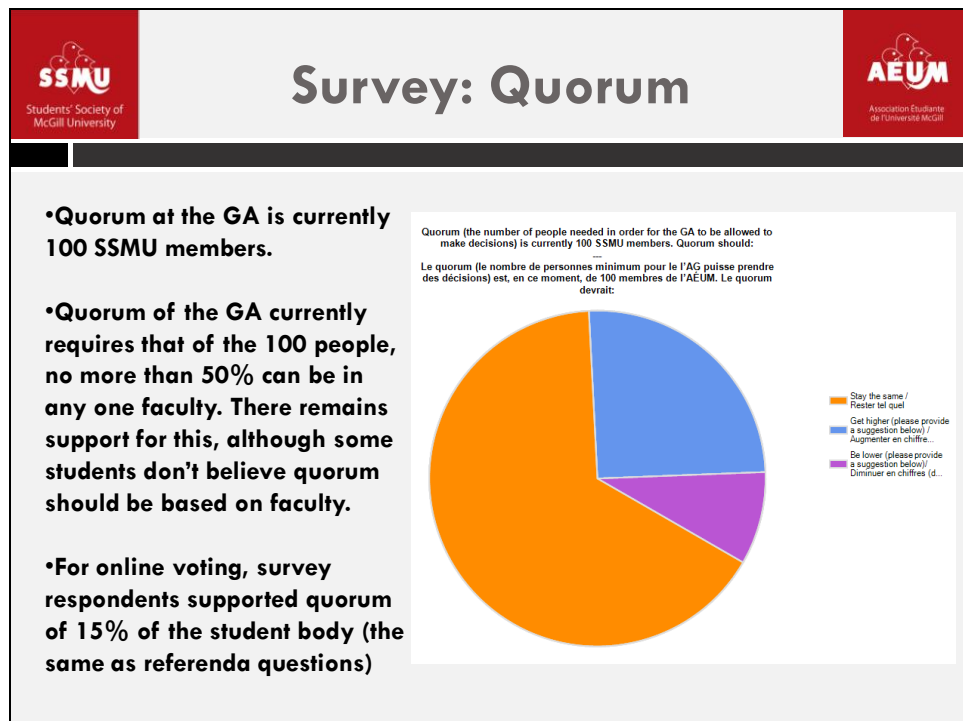
Some students are concerned that a motion could be passed without due consideration if it is simply brought to the floor and voted on all in the space of a few hours.

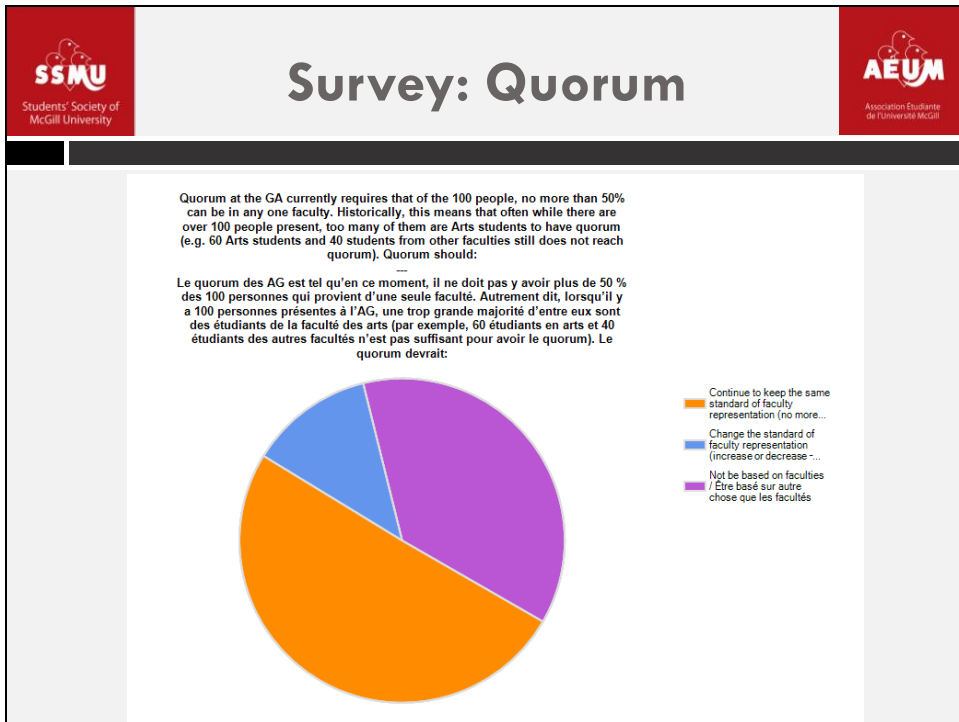
Others are comfortable with motions from the floor with an immediate in-person binding vote (perhaps with a 2/3rd majority requirement to pass), whereas others are comfortable with motions from the floor only if it subject to an online vote.

Should motions from the floor be permitted? How would translation and review for constitutionality be addressed? If motions from the floor are added, should they be voted on in the same way as motions submitted in advance?

- Suggestions:

- To combat the problem of reviewing constitutionality and translation: this could be done live during the GA by competent councillors, translator, Elections McGill?
- Motions on the floor are voted online
- Motions from the floor are voted for by council
- Setting a smaller deadline to submit motions before the general assembly if it means not automatically voting on GA motions online.
- Disadvantage:
 - A very interest-driven sample of people might pass motions that could make unrepresentative decisions.
 - Some people do well in this type of setting, some people don't.





Should quorum remain the same for in-person votes? Should there continue to be stipulations regarding faculty representation? Is introducing elements of consensus-based decision-making feasible? How would this work?

- Most respondents to the survey are for the status quo.
- Having motions that are faculty-dependent vs. not to determine the amount of quorum
- Suggestion: Could increase faculty sectarianism