

Proxy Voting Report

Period: April 01, 2022 - June 30, 2022

Votes Cast	1376	Number of meetings	67
For	1269	With management	1268
Withhold	0	Against management	108
Abstain	0		
Against	107		
Other	0		
Total	1376	Total	1376

In 78% of meetings we have cast one or more votes against management recommendation.

General Highlights

Shareholder rights in the spotlight during 2022 Proxy Season

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 proxy season continues to witness an increased focus on shareholder rights. Virtual-only meetings and the push for more robust minority shareholder rights remain top of mind as companies come under high scrutiny over Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) topics.

The pandemic prompted countries worldwide to amend their legislation to enable virtual-only shareholder meetings. With the temporary relief measures expiring, many companies proposed article amendments that would allow them to hold virtual-only meetings at their discretion. Proponents of this meeting format cite its ability to facilitate high attendance while reducing costs and the carbon footprint. However, recent years have shown that virtual-only shareholder meetings can severely deprive shareholders of their rights as management is afforded the discretion to filter out inconvenient questions. For this reason, we oppose any article amendments that grant companies the discretion to hold shareholder meetings in a virtual-only format outside exceptional circumstances. However, we support amendments enabling hybrid meetings, as we consider that this format brings many of the advantages of virtual-only meetings without jeopardizing shareholder participation rights.

The 2022 proxy season also saw shareholders continue pushing to expand their rights and enact change at companies deemed to lag their expectations. Meeting agendas were packed with proposals seeking amendments to provisions governing proxy access, special meetings, and action by written consent, as well as resolutions calling for companies to adopt the “one share, one vote” principle. Particularly noteworthy were the many “fix-it” shareholder proposals seeking amendments to existing proxy access bylaws. These called for changes to aggregation limits or holding period requirements, indicating that shareholders have a thorough understanding of the technicalities surrounding their participation tools, and clear expectations regarding what rights they should hold. In all instances, we judged the merits of these shareholder proposals on a case-by-case basis. We supported proposals deemed to protect minority shareholder rights and strengthen director accountability while safeguarding long-term shareholder interests.

In some cases, shareholder initiatives to enact change translated into large-scale proxy contests. A notable development in this sense was the proxy fight launched by Carl Icahn at McDonald’s over animal welfare. Although the campaign failed, many viewed this attempt as a signal that ESG-driven proxy contests may become commonplace. This speculation is spurred by recent proxy rules amendments passed in the US by the Securities and Exchange Commission, which will mandate the use of universal proxy cards in election contests as of August 2022. These require that all proxy cards distributed in contested elections include all nominees up for election, enabling shareholders voting by proxy to mix and match nominees from distinct slates. In the case of proxy contests, we base our voting decisions on several factors, including, among other things, the validity of the dissident’s case for change at the company and whether the proposed plan is in line with the shareholders’ long-term interests.

Investors focus on this year’s Proxy Season

The 2022 proxy season, as it was expected, was an active one. It is challenging to decide where the focus was this season. There was certainly a lot of interest in numerous post-pandemic Say-On-Pay proposals and some corporate governance agenda items covering board elections. Additionally, there was also a lot of enthusiasm for some notorious Say-On-Climate resolutions. There is no doubt that

this season was busier due to the high volume of ESG shareholder resolutions making it to proxy ballots.

The increase in shareholder proposal filings was prompted by the priorities shift at the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) over the last year. In November 2021, the SEC issued new guidance on how they would interpret the rules used by companies to exclude ESG shareholder proposals, making it more difficult for companies to remove environmental and social proposals from their proxies. This guidance gave investors significant power to raise their concerns by submitting resolutions on essential matters and voting on them.

Investors' attention in this proxy season was on environmental matters. The most prominent shareholder resolutions requested companies for greater disclosure of their impact on climate and the risks this entails, the adoption of concrete emissions reduction targets in all scopes, and reporting on board oversight on the company's climate initiatives. We also saw investors asking companies to disclose their lobbying activities on climate issues, as well as to report on how they would shift their business to using recycled plastic, and to communicate their efforts to decrease deforestation.

Say-On-Climate has been a dominant issue since the 2021 proxy season, and the debate also continued this year. We also noticed a strong increase in shareholder proposals asking for the adoption of Say-On-Climate proposals in future AGMs. Investors' views in this respect though have been diverse. Some have been more decisive in supporting the facilitation of these proposals, while others have been more skeptical. One thing is sure - many investors are adopting a more detailed and case-by-case approach when assessing their votes on Say-On-Climate proposals, pushing companies to provide clear and comprehensive climate-related information.

Social shareholder resolutions focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion were also high on the agenda for investors. There has been increasing support for resolutions focusing on disclosing data on gender and racial pay gaps. High support was also received by resolutions asking companies to conduct racial equity audits to detect how their business activities might have 'adverse impacts on non-white stakeholders and communities of color.' This year we also saw shareholders asking companies to explain the use of concealment clauses in employment contracts, which limit the ability of an employee to discuss grievances or concerns about employment practices. Lastly, abortion rights have moved up on responsible investors' agenda, pushing companies to support employees' rights in those US states where lawmakers have passed or proposed legislation that would severely restrict women's ability to access legal terminations of pregnancies.

This proxy season, we also saw an increase in anti-ESG shareholder resolutions. A prominent example was the 'civil rights and non-discrimination' proposal, which asked the companies to conduct audits of their impact on civil rights. The resolution initially seemed supportable. Nevertheless, after carefully reviewing the proponent's supporting statement, it showed that the proposals also argued that "anti-racist" programs are discriminatory "against employees deemed non-diverse". This argument revealed filler's intentions to frustrate companies' efforts to promote civil rights and social justice.

Last but not least, on Governance, the shareholder proposals that attract investors' interest remain those focusing on supermajority vote requirements, the ability to call special shareholder meetings, and action by written consent. A high support rate was seen in the case of shareholder proposals asking the company to separate the roles of CEO and Chair of the Board. This development is welcomed by most investors since an independent chair can better oversee a company's executives and set a pro-shareholder agenda.

Voting Highlights

Shell Plc - 05/24/2022 - United Kingdom

Proposal: Approval of the Energy Transition Strategy and a Shareholder Proposal Regarding Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Reduction Targets.

Royal Dutch Shell plc operates as an energy and petrochemical company worldwide. The company operates through Integrated Gas, Upstream, Oil Products, and Chemicals segments.

On May 24, 2022, Shell held its first annual general meeting (AGM) since it registered its headquarters in the United Kingdom. Despite the new location, the agenda of the meeting included familiar items such as electing the Board of Directors and approving the Remuneration Report. Additionally, similar to last year, there were two climate-related proposals up for a vote: one management proposal regarding the company's energy transition strategy and one shareholder proposal regarding GHG reduction targets.

In line with our updated approach to assessing management proposals related to climate, or so-called Say on Climate resolutions (SOCs), we decided to vote Against the company's proposal regarding its Energy Transition Strategy as we identified further areas of improvement. These include absolute targets in the intermediary term, alignment of the carbon intensity metric with the TPI methodology, and further disclosures on the investment and the climate transition strategy.

Unlike the SOC proposal, we voted in favor of the shareholder resolution regarding GHG emissions reduction targets, which was filed by the Dutch investor activist group Follow This. Generally, we support reasonable shareholder proposals that ask for targets, reporting, and the development of strategies that are aligned with the goals of the Paris agreement.

Comparing the vote outcomes with last year's AGM results, we notice a decline in support rates for both the SOC proposal (from 89% to 80%) and the resolution filed by Follow This (from 30% to 20%). On the one hand, it seems that investors have become stricter on the company's climate transition action plan. However, on the other hand, it seems that some investors weigh the current energy crisis in their voting decision for the shareholder proposal. All in all, very interesting developments that we will continue to monitor going forward.

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