



# BASIC PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

An Introduction to Robert's Rules of Order





Parliamentary law provides the best method yet devised to enable assemblies of any size to arrive at the general will on a maximum number of questions of varying complexity

## Introduction

Parliamentary procedure is a body of common practice that has both grown and been refined over the years into a methodology that enables deliberative assemblies (boards, clubs and other organizations of varying size) to reach decisions in a reasonably expeditious manner.

Brig. Gen. Henry M. Robert (1837-1923), an Army engineering officer was, responsible for codifying these practices. He was active in church work, civic and educational organizations, wherever he was stationed. In 1863 and without warning, he was asked to preside over a church meeting and realized that he did not know how. He tried anyway and felt extremely embarrassed by his performance. That event left him determined never to chair another meeting until he knew something of parliamentary law.

Ultimately, he found and studied the few books available on the subject. From time to time, his military duties had him transferred to various parts of the United States where he found virtual parliamentary anarchy. Organization members from different parts of the country had differing ideas of correct procedure. To bring order out of chaos, he decided to write Robert's Rules of Order, as it came to be called. The first edition was published in February 1876, under the title *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies*. The 10th edition was published in 2000 under the title *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*. This brochure is based on that reference work.

One's first encounter with parliamentary procedure often produces bewilderment at the mass of detail and a feeling of annoyance at the seemingly stilted language employed. However, the details follow a logical pattern and are easier to cope with once the principles are understood. The specific language has a reason for being. Just like legal terminology, each phrase has developed a very precise meaning, over the years. Sticking to the proper phrasing reduces the chance of misunderstanding and makes it easier to find needed information in *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*.

This brochure introduces the reader to the principles of parliamentary procedure and should ease your transition into using Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised and other reference works to understand and apply the more complex principles to your meetings.

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## Principles Underlying Parliamentary Law

The rules of parliamentary law are constructed upon a careful balance of the rights of persons or subgroups within an organization's total membership. That is, these rules are based on a regard for the rights of:

- › The majority.
- › The minority.
- › Individual members.
- › Absentees.

The means of protecting all of these rights form the substance of parliamentary law, and the need for this protection dictates the degree of development that the subject has undergone, over the past 130 years.

Parliamentary procedure enables the overall membership of an organization to establish and empower an effective leadership and, at the same time, to retain the degree of direct control over its affairs that it chooses to reserve to itself. Ultimately, it is the majority that decides the general will, but only after providing an opportunity for a deliberative process of full and free discussion. Only two-thirds or more of those present and voting may deny a minority or any member the right of such discussion.

In this connection, there is an underlying assumption that each individual or subgroup has the right to make the maximum effort to have his, her, their, or its position declared the will of the assembly, to the extent that can be tolerated by the entire body. However, constant repetition is usually not in the body's best interest.

Another important principle is that as a protection against instability arising, for example, from such factors as slight variations in attendance, the requirements for changing a previous action are greater than those for taking the action in the first place.

Fundamentally, under the rules of parliamentary law, a deliberative body is a free agent — free to do what it wants to do with the greatest measure of protection to itself and of consideration for the rights of its members.

Parliamentary law provides the best method yet devised to enable assemblies of any size to arrive at the general will on a maximum number of questions of varying complexity in a minimum amount of time. The process works under all kinds of internal climate,

ranging from total harmony to major divisions of opinion, and gives due regard to every member's viewpoint.

## Motions

The business of a deliberative assembly is handled by the basic unit of the motion. The *main motion* brings business before the assembly. However, the main motion is low in priority relative to other motions. A main motion may only be introduced when there is no other business before the body.

Once introduced, there are numerous motions that take precedence over the main motion. No motion may be acted upon while another of a higher precedence is pending (under consideration). These motions fall into three categories:

- > Privileged motions.
- > Subsidiary motions.
- > Incidental motions.

There is a fourth category of motions that *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* calls motions that bring business back to the assembly.

Examples of all the motions are presented, in order of precedence, in the chart found on pages 10-11.

**Privileged Motions** do not relate to pending business, but have to do with immediate and overriding importance, and should be allowed to interrupt anything else. These motions are not debatable. They are to:

- > Fix the time to which to adjourn (if another meeting is not scheduled).
- > Recess.
- > Rise to a question of privilege.
- > Call for the orders of the day.
- > Adjourn.

**Subsidiary Motions** assist the assembly in treating or disposing of a main motion and sometimes other motions. Some of the subsidiary motions are debatable and some are not. They have all four of the following characteristics: (1) are always applied to another motion while it is pending; (2) can be applied to any main motion; (3) fit into an order of precedence; and (4) are in order from the time the chair states the motion until the vote is started. They are to:

- > Lay on the table.
- > Postpone to a certain time.
- > Call the question (previous question).
- > Commit (or refer).
- > Limit or extend the limits of debate.
- > Amend.
- > Postpone indefinitely.

**Incidental Motions** relate to the business at hand in different ways. They must be decided immediately before the assembly can proceed. Most are not debatable. They are to:

- > Appeal (the decision of the chair).
- > Suspend the rules.
- > Object to the consideration of the question.
- > Divide the question.
- > Divide the assembly.
- > Rise for a parliamentary inquiry.
- > Rise for a point of order.
- > Rise for a point of information.

The motions that bring questions again before the assembly have no order of precedence. They are to:

- > Take from the table.
- > Rescind.
- > Reconsider.

## **Role of the Chair (Board President)**

The person presiding over a meeting is referred to as *the chair* or *chairperson*. Usually, that individual is the president. The principal duties of the chair are to: (1) open the meeting at the appointed time; (2) announce in proper sequence the order of business or agenda; (3) recognize members who are entitled to the floor; (4) state and to put to vote all motions, and to announce the result of each vote; (5) rule if a motion is made that is out of order; (6) protect against obviously frivolous or dilatory motions; (7) enforce the rules relating to debate and those relating to order and decorum; (8) expedite business in every way compatible with the rights of members; (9) decide all questions of order, subject to appeal; (10) respond to inquiries of members relating to parliamentary procedure or factual information bearing on the business of the assembly; and (11) declare the meeting adjourned when the assembly so votes or, when applicable, at the time prescribed in the program, or at any other time in the event of a sudden emergency affecting the safety of those present.

## **Making a Motion**

The process starts with the making of a *main motion*. After being recognized by the chair, the member states the motion. For example, "I move that we adopt the recommendation of the superintendent to expand our sports teams by adding lacrosse for boys and girls." The privileged, incidental and subsidiary motions are used to debate the issue or modify it, until agreement is reached and some disposition of the issue has been made. Two main motions may not be on the floor at the same time.

## Seconding

Most motions require a second (see chart on pages 10-11). The principle behind seconding is that at least two members should want the matter discussed or a particular action taken, thus preventing one person from being able to tie up an assembly with unnecessary motions. Seconding does not mean that you agree with the intent of the motion, just that you feel it merits consideration. The motions that do not require seconds are: rising to a question of privilege; rising to a point of order; call for the orders of the day; object to the consideration of the question; divide the assembly; parliamentary inquiry; and point of information.

## Amendments

It is not necessary for a motion to be perfectly expressed in order to start debate. The motion can be changed by amending it. The motion to *amend* can be stated in one of six ways: to add a word or words; to add a paragraph or paragraphs; to strike a word or words; to strike a paragraph or paragraphs; to strike a word or words and add a word or words; or to substitute a paragraph or paragraphs. For example, "I move that we amend the motion to adopt the recommendation of the superintendent to expand our sports teams by adding lacrosse for boys and girls, by adding the words 'effective, July 2006.'" Assuming the amendment was in order, the chair would read the motion to amend and ask if there is a second. Debate then moves to the amendment. There is no limit to the number of amendments that can be applied to a motion. Even an amendment can be amended, but here the process stops. You cannot amend an amendment to an amendment.

## Voting

The formal way to conclude discussion and vote is for a member to "move the previous question" (close debate). Once the motion has been seconded, the chair calls for the vote on the motion to close debate, and if that passes with a two-thirds vote, calls for a vote on the motion. In a less formal sense, the chair, seeing no one wishes to be recognized, might say, "Is there any further discussion? Seeing none, we'll vote on the motion to..."

Under Robert's Rules, votes may be by voice, rising, or a show of hands. However, many votes that boards of education take are required to be recorded roll call votes. In addition, several board actions require more than a simple majority of those present and voting for the motion to pass. (Go to [www.njsba.org/legal](http://www.njsba.org/legal) and click on Voting Requirements for Board Members, for a complete list.)

If an amendment to a motion was proposed, the body first votes on

the amendment. If the amendment passes, discussion is reopened on the motion as amended, before a vote is taken on the amended motion. If the amendment does not pass, discussion is reopened on the original motion. At the conclusion of each vote, the chair announces results.

## Abstentions

Very simply — abstentions do not count as either “yes” or “no” votes. To abstain means to refrain from voting. In typical situations, where a majority or a two-thirds majority of the *votes cast* is necessary, the abstention has no effect. In cases where a majority or a two-thirds majority of the full membership of the board is required, the abstention will have the same effect as a “no” vote. Regardless, an abstention is not a vote. Members should abstain on a question in which he/she has a direct personal interest. However, the person does not have to explain the potential conflict.

## Motions to Delay Acting on a Main Motion

There are several motions that may be used to prevent taking immediate action on a main motion. Each one has a purpose, but are occasionally used incorrectly. These include:

- > Postpone indefinitely.
- > Postpone to a certain time.
- > Commit (or refer).
- > Lay on the table.
- > Object to consideration of the question.

**Tabling** is often mistakenly used to kill a motion. Many people believe that when you make a motion to *lay on the table* or simply to *Table*, and that motion passes, that the motion is gone forever. Incorrect! Any motion that is tabled can be brought back to the body again by a motion to *take from the table*. The absolute best way to kill a motion is to vote it down. However, there are other ways to kill a motion.

**Objection to Consideration of the Question** should only be used to block debate on a subject that the mover has reason to believe will be detrimental to the assembly’s interests. Such might be the case if a member knew that another was likely to make a destructive harangue about another member or an employee. This is one of the few motions that does not require a second, since the mover may be the only one who has knowledge of the impending embarrassment. Since the motion does block free and open debate, it must receive a two-thirds majority vote to pass.

**Postponing Indefinitely** is used when the assembly declines to take a position on the main motion. Its adoption kills the main motion (for the duration of the session, at a minimum) and avoids

a direct vote on the question. It is useful in disposing of a badly chosen motion that cannot be either adopted or rejected without possibly undesirable consequences.

**Postponing to a Certain Time**, on the other hand, can be used regardless of the amount of debate held, so that it may be considered at a more convenient time, until a certain event has taken place, or because debate has shown reasons for holding off on a decision. The motion must contain the time when the main motion will be brought back to the assembly.

**Committing or Referring** is used to send the pending question to a relatively small group or an individual, so that it may be carefully researched or investigated before the assembly considers it. The motion to refer may contain specific instructions as to when the information is to be reported to the body.

Tabling motions has high priority, taking precedence over postponing, referring, or closing debate, as tabling leaves the question within reach of the assembly, while the other actions put the matter beyond reach, or out of consideration for this session.

## **Bringing Motions Back for Consideration**

In addition to a motion to *take from the table*, motions to *reconsider* and *rescind* also bring motions back for consideration. They serve similar purposes, but at different times.

**Reconsider** enables the majority in an assembly, within a limited time and without notice, to bring back for consideration a motion that has already been voted on. The purpose is to permit correction of a hastily, ill-advised, or erroneous action, or to take into account added information or a change in conditions that has taken place during the vote. A motion to reconsider must be made at the same meeting in which the original action was taken, and only by a member who voted with the prevailing side. A motion may be reconsidered only once during a meeting.

**Rescind** is a motion by which a previous action or order can be canceled or countermanded. Its effect is to strike out an entire main motion, resolution, by-law, etc. that was adopted at some previous time. Any member, whether that person was on the prevailing side or not, may make a motion to rescind. There is no time limit as long as the previous motion can be rescinded. A motion to rescind is not in order at the meeting in which the action was taken. If the motion maker gives prior notice that the motion to rescind is going to be made, only a simple majority vote is necessary for passage. Without prior notice, a two-thirds majority vote is required to rescind the previous action.



## Other Frequently Used Motions

**Point of Order** calls the assembly's attention to a possible procedural error. The motion is given a high priority, so that if an error has occurred, the assembly is saved the trouble of undoing work done incorrectly. Any member may move it, it does not require a second, and may even interrupt a speaker who has the floor. It should be moved promptly, at the point of infraction. It is moved by saying, "I rise to a point of order."

**Point of Information** is an inquiry as to the facts that affect the business at hand. It is directed to the chair or through the chair to another member or resource person.

**Parliamentary Inquiry** is a request for the chair's opinion on a matter of parliamentary procedure as it relates to the business at hand, but does not require a ruling.

**Suspend the Rules** is used when the assembly wishes to do something during a meeting that it cannot do without violating one or more of its regular rules. For example, if a rule limits public input to 30 minutes on an issue, the board may wish to suspend that rule to allow for greater public input. The motion to suspend may not propose something in conflict with the organization's by-laws or constitution, state, local, or national laws, or parliamentary procedure. However, it is bad practice to circumvent rules simply as a matter of convenience. If suspension is felt to be necessary, a formal motion should be adopted and recorded.

**Division of a Question** is used when a motion is put on the floor containing two unrelated ideas, or ideas the assembly wishes to discuss separately. The chair divides the question in response to a motion from the floor, if there is no objection from the members. If there is objection to the division, the matter should be put to a vote, the assembly being the final authority. The division should take place before debate begins.

## References

There are four good references for those who wish more detailed information:

Robert, H. M., Evans, W. J., Honemann, D. H., and Balch, T. J., *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th Edition*, Da Capo Press, 2000.

Robert, H. M., Evans, W. J., Honemann, D. H., and Balch, T. J., *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief*, Da Capo Press, 2000.

[www.robertsrules.org](http://www.robertsrules.org) and [www.robertsrules.com](http://www.robertsrules.com)

# Precedence of Motions Chart

Based on Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (10th Edition)

From: <http://www.robertsrules.org/motions.htm>

**Part I: Principal Motions** These motions are listed in order of precedence. A motion can be introduced if it is higher on the chart than the pending motion. The § symbol indicates the section in Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised from which it comes.

| §   | Your purpose:  | You say:  | Interrupt? | 2nd? | Debate? | Amend? | Vote?    |
|-----|--|---|------------|------|---------|--------|----------|
| §22 | Set time to resume the current meeting if one is not scheduled | I move to fix the time to which to adjourn to _____ | No         | Yes  | No      | Yes    | Majority |
| §21 | Close meeting  | I move to adjourn                                   | No         | Yes  | No      | No     | Majority |
| §20 | Take break   | I move to recess for (length of time)               | No         | Yes  | No      | Yes    | Majority |
| §19 | Register complaint   | I rise to a question of privilege                   | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |
| §18 | Make follow agenda   | I call for the orders of the day                    | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |
| §17 | Lay aside temporarily  | I move to lay the question on the table             | No         | Yes  | No      | No     | Majority |
| §16 | Close debate   | I move the previous question                        | No         | Yes  | No      | No     | 2/3      |
| §15 | Limit or extend debate   | I move that debate be limited to ...                | No         | Yes  | No      | Yes    | 2/3      |
| §14 | Postpone to a certain time                                     | I move to postpone the motion to ...                | No         | Yes  | Yes     | Yes    | Majority |
| §13 | Refer to committee   | I move to refer the motion to ...                   | No         | Yes  | Yes     | Yes    | Majority |
| §12 | Modify wording of motion                                       | I move to amend the motion by ...                   | No         | Yes  | Yes     | Yes    | Majority |
| §11 | Kill main motion   | I move that the motion be postponed indefinitely    | No         | Yes  | Yes     | No     | Majority |
| §10 | Bring business before assembly (the main motion)               | I move that [or "to"] ...                           | No         | Yes  | Yes     | Yes    | Majority |

**Part 2: Incidental Motions** No order of precedence. These motions arise incidentally and are decided immediately.

| §   | Your purpose:                | You say:                                      | Interrupt? | 2nd? | Debate? | Amend? | Vote?    |
|-----|------------------------------|---|------------|------|---------|--------|----------|
| §23 | Enforce rules                | Point of order                                | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |
| §24 | Submit matter to assembly    | I appeal from the decision of the chair       | Yes        | Yes  | Varies  | No     | Majority |
| §25 | Suspend rules                | I move to suspend the rules                   | No         | Yes  | No      | No     | 2/3      |
| §26 | Avoid main motion altogether | I object to the consideration of the question | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | 2/3      |
| §27 | Divide motion                | I move to divide the question                 | No         | Yes  | No      | Yes    | Majority |
| §29 | Demand a rising vote         | I move for a rising vote                      | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |
| §33 | Parliamentary law question   | Parliamentary inquiry                         | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |
| §33 | Request for information      | Point of information                          | Yes        | No   | No      | No     | None     |

**Part 3: Motions That Bring a Question Again Before the Assembly** No order of precedence. May be introduced only when nothing else is pending

| §   | Your purpose:          | You say:                          | Interrupt? | 2nd? | Debate? | Amend? | Vote?                       |
|-----|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|------|---------|--------|-----------------------------|
| §34 | Take matter from table | I move to take from the table ... | No         | Yes  | No      | No     | Majority                    |
| §35 | Cancel previous action | I move to rescind ...             | No         | Yes  | Yes     | Yes    | 2/3 or Majority with notice |
| §37 | Reconsider motion      | I move to reconsider ...          | No         | Yes  | Varies  | No     | Majority                    |

If there is a shortcut to the mastery of technicalities, it consists in grasping the relationship between procedure and functions.

*Sir Gilbert Campion (subsequently Lord Campion)  
(1937-1948), Clerk, UK House of Commons*

The great purpose of all rules and forms, is to subserve the will of the assembly rather than to restrain it; to facilitate, and not to obstruct, the expression of their deliberate sense.

*Luther Cushing  
Cushing's Manual (1844) § 315*

It is only by having a law of proceeding, and by every member having the means of understanding it for himself, and appealing to it, that he can be protected against caprice and despotism in the chair.

*Thomas Jefferson  
Letter to Abraham Baldwin, April 14, 1802*



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