

Simplified Parliamentary Procedure

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Parliamentary procedure is a very efficient and thorough decision-making process, but as with any majority-rule system it gives little recourse to the minority. A popular version of parliamentary procedure is “Roberts Rules of Order” developed by Henry Martyn Robert, an American military engineer. The procedure has been continually revised, the latest edition of which is *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*. Parliamentary procedure is very complex. Versions based on Robert’s Rules are often simplified or tailored to particular decision-making contexts, with reference to the full text to handle situations not addressed.

Parliamentary procedure can be a clear and effective technique for many activist or civic organizations that choose not to use more casual or inclusive methods. The following, based faithfully on Robert’s rules, is a highly simplified version of parliamentary procedure. Using this process, a group should establish *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* or another specific reference as a fallback to resolve unaddressed circumstances. Note that the complexity of more complete versions makes it possible for those with advanced knowledge of parliamentary procedure to gain advantage. Groups should appoint a “parliamentarian” to serve as a resource to the entire body and the chair should be mindful of supporting all members in using the process.

Motions

Decisions in parliamentary procedure are made by members making motions (proposals), both substantive and procedural, and the body voting on them. Some motions entail debate (discussion) by the body and others proceed straight to a vote. Since everything is based on motions, a system of precedence is used to prioritize or order their handling. (This is where the phrase “you’re out of order” comes from.) There are three categories of motions:

- **Main motions.** These are proposals about what to do about some substantive matter before the group. They have the *lowest* precedence.
- **Ordinary motions.** These are proposals that impact the resolution of a main motion (such as a motion to amend a proposal). Because they need to be heard and resolved before voting on a main motion, they are of the next highest precedence.
- **Special motions.** These are about high-caliber, generally process-oriented issues and are of the highest precedence. This means that they are always “in order” no matter when they come up.

Making and deciding on motions

Motions can only be made if there are no higher ranking ones pending (e.g., you can’t make a motion with a precedence of five if a motion of precedence two is unresolved).

All motions have features attached that dictate how they are handled. These govern when they can be made and who can make them, whether they must be seconded (i.e., given

one other member's consent to be considered), are debatable (i.e., discussed), amendable (i.e., changed) or can be reconsidered (i.e., cancelled). Generally, motions are adopted by a majority vote (which means that more than half of the votes cast, excluding abstentions and blank votes, are in favor), but some require a 2/3 majority. Votes are generally done by general consent ("If there are no objections, the motion is accepted"), by voice (if there looks like there is some dissension, but not enough to merit a count), or by hand count. A tie vote, except as noted, means that a motion does *not* carry (pass).

The most important motions and their features are listed below, in order of precedence. All those numbered "1" are special motions and are all tied for highest priority. Everything else is an ordinary motion, except for the last item—the lowly, but all important, main motion.

Special motions

1. **Point of Order** An objection or suggestion about process. [Features: Can be made any time, no 2nd needed, not debatable.]

1. **Point of Information** A *request* for information on a specific question, either about process or about the content of a motion. This is *not* for giving out information you think others need to know. [Features: Can be made any time, no 2nd needed, not debatable.]

1. **Point of Personal Privilege** A comment addressing a personal need such as giving a response to a personally-defaming comment or a plea to turn down the furnace. [Features: Can be made any time, no 2nd needed, not debatable.]

1. **Motion to Appeal** A proposal to change a decision or ruling of the chair. [Features: Must be made immediately following a ruling, 2nd needed, not debatable, not amendable, can be reconsidered.]

1. **Motion to Withdraw** A proposal that there be no vote on a motion. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, debatable, not amendable, can be reconsidered only if it passes.]

1. **Motion to Suspend Rules** A proposal to temporarily side-step a process rule within the body's jurisdiction. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, not amendable, cannot be reconsidered, requires 2/3 majority.]

1. **Motion to Reconsider** A proposal to cancel the outcome of a vote and to reopen the matter at some time for more debate and another vote. [Features: Can only be made by someone who voted in favor of the motion being reconsidered if it passed or who voted against if it did not pass, can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, not amendable, cannot be reconsidered, requires 2/3 majority.]

1. **Motion to Rescind** A proposal to cancel the outcome of a vote. [Features: Can only be made by someone who voted in favor of the motion being reconsidered if it passed or

who voted against if it did not pass, can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, debatable, amendable, can be reconsidered if it fails, requires 2/3 majority.]

Ordinary motions

2. **Motion to Adjourn** A proposal to end the meeting. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, not amendable, cannot be reconsidered.]

3. **Motion to Recess** A proposal to take a break. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, amendable, cannot be reconsidered.]

4. **Motion to End Debate (Call the Question)** A proposal to stop discussion of the motion currently on the floor and proceed to a vote. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, not amendable, can be reconsidered if it passes and the vote it forces has not yet happened, requires 2/3 majority.]

5. **Motion to Limit or Extend Debate** A proposal to change the planned time for debate. Can be for a specific time or number of speakers. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, amendable, can be reconsidered, requires 2/3 majority.]

6. **Motion to Postpone** A proposal to consider a main motion at a later time. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, debatable, amendable, can be reconsidered.]

7. **Motion to Refer** A proposal to refer a main motion to a committee for further action. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, debatable, amendable, can be reconsidered (if the committee is not underway).]

8. **Motion to Divide the Question** A proposal to break a main motion on the floor into separate parts. [Features: Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, not debatable, amendable, cannot be reconsidered.]

9. **Motion to Amend** A proposal to change a main motion. [Features: If the amendment is accepted as “friendly” by the maker of the main motion, it is accepted without a vote. Can be made when you have the floor, 2nd needed, debatable (if the motion to be amended is debatable), amendable, can be reconsidered.]

Main motions

10. Main motions are proposals about a substantive matter before the body. For example, one might move that “Our group should organize a major community forum in January to raise awareness about the war.”

The role of the chair

The basic role of the chair in parliamentary procedure is to preside over the handling of motions. The chair should generally:

- Restate the motion and call for clarifying questions.
- Open debate (discussion), if the motion is debatable.
- If debate carries on too long, impose time limits on speakers or allow a fixed number of additional speakers.
- End discussion, restate the motion, and resolve the motion by general consent, voice vote or hand vote. (The chair first calls for those in favor, then those opposed and finally those abstaining.)
- State the result.

As motions arise, the chair rules on their order based on their precedent and compliance with the rules, proceeding first with those that are proper and have highest precedence. The chair can rely on a designated “parliamentarian” for help with the rules.

The chair cannot make a motion, but can invite one, saying something like “the chair is willing to entertain a motion to...” The chair can vote, if he or she is a member of the group, but should temporarily relinquish the position of chair to participate in a debate in a substantial way.

Appealing decisions of the chair

It is important for all members to know that any ruling of the chair can be challenged using the motion to appeal. Such appeals, however, must be made immediately after the ruling, before handling of the next motion is underway. If a motion to appeal is seconded, there is no debate. The question put to the body is “Should the ruling be sustained?” and a majority *or tie* vote sustains the decision. If the ruling is not sustained, the chair must make another ruling.