

Robert's Rules of Order and Parliamentary Procedure

Background

Parliamentary procedure (or law) originally referred to the customs and rules for conducting business in the British Parliament and later referred to deliberative assemblies in general. In Great Britain, these procedures form a part of the unwritten law of the land, and in our own legislative bodies they are the authority in all cases where they do not conflict with existing rules or precedents.

Henry Martyn Robert was an engineering officer in the regular U.S. Army in the late 1800s. Without warning he was asked to preside over a church meeting, and to his embarrassment he realized that he did not know how. This situation, familiar to many of us who have been in heated or disorderly union meetings, left him determined never to attend another meeting until he knew something of parliamentary law.

Ultimately, he discovered and studied the few books then available on the subject. As he was transferred to various parts of the United States during his military service, he found virtual parliamentary anarchy, since people from different parts of the country had differing ideas about correct procedure.

In 1876, General Robert set out to bring the rules of parliamentary law (by then adopted by the U.S. Congress) to members of ordinary societies and organizations with the publication of the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order*. It sold half a million copies before it was completely reworked in 1915 and published as *Robert's Rules of Order Revised* and made Robert's name synonymous with the orderly rules in deliberative societies. In 1970 it was substantially expanded and became *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*.

The rules of parliamentary law are constructed upon a careful balance of the rights of the majority, of the minority (especially a strong minority greater than one-third), of individual members and of absentees.

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.

The current edition of *Robert's Rules* has been developed through a process of updating the book with the growth of parliamentary procedure. All editions of the work issued after the death of the original author have been the work of persons who either knew and worked with the original author or knew and worked with persons who did.

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised is designed to provide an answer to nearly any possible question of parliamentary law. It is, therefore, quite detailed. The average person may only occasionally be confronted with the small points that are necessarily dealt in the book, but if you attend many union meetings, you will probably want to own a copy (visit the official Robert's Rules of Order Web site, <http://www.robertsrules.com/>, for information and to order a hardback or paperback copy).

Parliamentary procedure is a time-tested method of conducting business at meetings and public gatherings. It can be adapted to fit the needs of any organization. Today, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* is the basic handbook of operation for most unions, clubs, organizations and other groups, so it's important that everyone know these basic rules!

The Basics of Parliamentary Procedure

1. The purpose of parliamentary procedure is to make it easier for people to work together effectively and to help groups accomplish their purposes. Rules of procedure should assist a meeting, not inhibit it.
2. A meeting can deal with only one matter at a time. The various kinds of motions have therefore been assigned an order of precedence
3. All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations. One of the chairperson's main responsibilities is to use the authority of the chair to ensure that all people attending a meeting are treated equally--for example, not to permit a vocal few to dominate the debates.
4. A majority vote decides an issue. In any group, each member agrees to be governed by the vote of the majority. Parliamentary rules enable a meeting to determine the will of the majority of those attending a meeting.
5. The rights of the minority must be protected at all times. Although the ultimate decision rests with a majority, all members have such basic rights as the right to be heard and the right to oppose. The rights of all members--majority and minority--should be the concern of every member, for a person may be in a majority on one question but in minority the next.
6. Every matter presented for decision should be discussed fully. The right of every member to speak on any issue is as important as each member's right to vote.
7. Every member has the right to understand the meaning of any question presented to a meeting and to know what effect a decision will have. A member always has the right to request information on any motion he or she does not thoroughly understand. Moreover, all meetings must be characterized by fairness and good faith. Parliamentary strategy is the art of using procedure legitimately to support or defeat a proposal.

Conducting a Meeting

Members express themselves in a meeting by making motions. A motion is a proposal that the entire membership take action or a stand on an issue. Individual members can:

- Call to order
- Second motions
- Debate motions
- Vote on motions

There are four basic types of motions:

- **Main motions:** The purpose of a main motion is to introduce items to the membership for their consideration. They cannot be made when any other motion is on the floor, and they yield to subsidiary, privileged and incidental motions.
- **Subsidiary motions:** Their purpose is to change or affect how a main motion is handled, and is voted on before a main motion.
- **Privileged motions:** Their purpose is to bring up items that are urgent or important matters unrelated to pending business.
- **Incidental motions:** Their purpose is to provide a means of questioning procedure concerning other motions and must be considered before the other motion.

How motions are presented

Obtain the floor

- Wait until the last speaker has finished.
- Rise and address the chairperson by saying, "Mr./Ms. Chairperson" or "Mr./Ms. President."
- Wait until the chairperson recognizes you.

Make your motion

- Speak in a clear and concise manner.
- Always state a motion affirmatively. Say, "I move that we..." rather than "I move that we do not..."
- Avoid personalities and stay on your subject.

Wait for someone to second your motion

- Another member will second your motion or the chairperson will call for a second.
- If there is no second to your motion, it is lost.

The chairperson states your motion

- The chairperson will say, "It has been moved and seconded that we ...," thus placing your motion before the membership for consideration and action.
- The membership either debates your motion, or may move directly to a vote.
- Once your motion is presented to the membership by the chairperson, it becomes "assembly property" and cannot be changed by you without the consent of the members.

Expanding on your motion

- The time for you to speak in favor of your motion is at this point in time, rather than at the time you present it.
- The mover is always allowed to speak first.
- All comments and debate must be directed to the chairperson.
- Keep to the time limit for speaking that has been established.
- The mover may speak again only after other speakers are finished unless called upon by the chairperson.

Putting the question to the membership

- The chairperson asks, "Are you ready to vote on the question?"
- If there is no more discussion, a vote is taken.
- On a motion to move the previous question may be adapted.

Voting on a motion

The method of vote on any motion depends on the situation and the bylaws of your organization. There are five methods used to vote by most organizations, they are:

- **By voice**--The chairperson asks those in favor to say "aye," those opposed to say "no." Any member may move for an exact count.
- **By roll call**--Each member answers "yes" or "no" as his name is called. This method is used when a record of each person's vote is required.
- **By general consent**--When a motion is not likely to be opposed, the chairperson says, "If there is no objection..." The membership shows agreement by their silence; however, if one member says, "I object," the item must be put to a vote.
- **By division**--This is a slight verification of a voice vote. It does not require a count unless the chairman so desires. Members raise their hands or stand.

- **By ballot**--Members write their vote on a slip of paper; this method is used when secrecy is desired.

There are two other motions that are commonly used that relate to voting.

- **Motion to table**--This motion is often used in the attempt to "kill" a motion. The option is always present, however, to "take from the table", for reconsideration by the membership.
- **Motion to postpone indefinitely**--This is often used as a means of parliamentary strategy and allows opponents of motion to test their strength without an actual vote being taken. Also, debate is once again open on the main motion.

Parliamentary procedure is the best way to get things done at your meetings. It will only work, however, if you use it properly. Remember to:

- Allow motions that are in order.
- Have members obtain the floor properly.
- Speak clearly and concisely.
- Obey the rules of debate.
- Most importantly, BE COURTEOUS.

Sources: AFT national rep Bob Brown, Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, Robert's Rules of Order Web site (www.robertsrules.com)