

THE
BOARD
MEMBER'S
BOOK

Third Edition

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Appendix C

Robert's Rules of Order— Demystified

Robert's Rules of Order can be very complicated—but almost always unnecessarily. Occasionally all that complexity is required—and that's why the Rules are extensive—but for most of us, it comes down to some fairly simple ground rules that in turn are based on common sense and courtesy. These will get you through 99 percent of the situations you are likely to face.

Robert's Rules of Order begins with this basic rule of fairness: "American Parliamentary Law is built upon the principle that rights must be respected: rights of the majority, of the minority, of individuals, of absentees, and rights of all of these together."

There's one quick way you can be smarter about *Robert's Rules* than almost anybody else. You are about to become one of the rare ones who knows who Robert was! Poor Robert almost always gets left out, even by the show-offs who can recite which divided motions can't be amended. The next time one of them tries to bamboozle you with more knowledge than common sense, get him or her aside and casually ask who Robert was? Chances are, that will be one up for you.

Robert was Henry Martin Robert, a young Civil War officer on the Union side, who later became a general and head of the Washington, D.C., District. He took on the task of codifying and simplifying the rules of procedure of the U.S. House of Representatives. The work was completed in 1876, at which time General Robert adapted those rules to fit other civic organizations.

Other rule books have been written, but *Robert's* is still the basic text. Indeed, if your own bylaws or rules don't stipulate otherwise, it is standard practice, and the law in many states, that *Robert's Rules* shall be used in the resolution of internal differences.

I'll begin with the most common parliamentary procedures you are likely to need. Indeed, once you are a third of the way through this review, you'll have covered most of what you'll ever need to know and probably more than you want to know.

Starting at the most elementary level, this is the way a group formally makes a decision:

- One of the members will *move* that a decision be made (this is proposing that the board go on record in favor of a certain definite action).
- Another member of the group will *second* the motion, which means "support" for the action proposed. (The second is necessary to be certain that the issue is of interest to more than one person.)
- Once the motion has been made and seconded, there is *discussion, clarification, and debate*.
- When the subject has been covered fully, there is the *vote*.
- Prior to both discussion and vote, the person in the chair should *restate the motion* to be certain everyone knows what is being discussed and decided.

It may strike you as an enormous simplification, but for most committees and boards, that's all you need to know: a motion, second, discussion, and vote.

The next level involves a situation in which the group considers that it might want to make some changes in the motion as originally offered. In the course of the discussion, it may become obvious that the motion doesn't quite

say what the board now has in mind. This is the way that a slightly more complicated scenario would unfold:

- The motion.
- The second.
- The chairperson restates the motion.
- Discussion, clarification, and debate.
- Someone suggests that the original motion be amended, and another person seconds the idea. (At that point it will usually happen that the maker and seconder of the original or main motion will agree to the amendment even though a vote on the amendment has not been taken. Technically, once a motion has been made and seconded, it involves the whole assembly, but if no one offers objection to the amendment, no vote is usually taken.)
- If the persons who moved and seconded the original motion do not agree to the amendment or anyone else voices objection, then there is discussion, clarification, and debate on the amendment itself.
- After the group has adequately considered the amendment, the chairperson restates the motion to amend, and the group *votes on the amendment*.
- Once the amendment has been accepted or rejected, the group returns its attention to the original motion.
- If the amendment passed, the main motion would now be known as “the original motion as amended.” If the amendment had been defeated, it would simply be “the original motion.”
- Debate would proceed on the original motion. It could be amended again, in which case it would be the new amendment that gets the informal or formal consideration.
- When the amendments have been disposed of, the board votes on the original motion (as amended, if that’s the case). Although that is slightly more complicated, it is simply the group’s way of deciding

whether the original motion needed some changes before it reflected the combined view of what should be done.

- If the main motion is defeated, the same basic proposal cannot be brought forward again at the same meeting. That's to keep the losers from filibustering by bringing the same motion up again and again. (There is an exception. If one person who was on the winning side of the vote realizes that he or she may have made a mistake, such as misunderstanding what the motion called for, he or she can move for reconsideration, at which point the board decides whether to allow reconsideration.)

If you serve on a fairly informal board or committee that rarely gets involved in parliamentary procedure, don't bother with the rest of this chapter. For those who participate in more involved board deliberations, including debates, there are some additional points worth knowing.

- (1) As obvious as it may be, it is important to know that if a motion is made and *not seconded*, the motion is automatically lost, and nothing further should be said about it. If there isn't a second, it means that the subject is not something the group wants to spend time on, and the individual who proposed the motion should not presume upon the group's good nature by commenting on the subject as though it had been accepted for discussion ("on the table").
- (2) Almost all motions can have only two amendments to them before a vote must be taken on at least one of those amendments. Otherwise everyone would get lost, and the main motion would be obscured. For example, if the original motion and second call for spending \$2,000 for new chairs around the conference table, one amendment may suggest changing the amount to \$3,000, and a subsequent and separate amendment may propose that the money be spent for chairs and a new conference table. If any more amendments were allowed, you can see how people would get confused about what they are expected to decide.

Also, amendments must be “germane,” that is, they must relate to the subject of the motion that would be amended. You can’t have an amendment that introduces a different issue.

- (3) A motion to amend can also be the subject of a motion to amend (“I move that the amendment be amended”), but there can be only one such motion to amend an amendment on the floor at any one time.

The debate and vote would first apply to the motion to amend the amendment. After that is disposed of, there can be fuller discussion and the vote on the amendment, and finally additional discussion and vote on the original motion (as amended, if the amendment was approved).

At the risk of laboring the point, let me provide a recap in the form of an example:

- “I move that we have a fundraising dinner and do it in June.”
- “I second the motion.”
- “We have a motion before us to have a fundraising dinner and do it in June. The floor is open for discussion.”
- Discussion.
- An amendment: “I like the idea, but I wonder if we should tie the hands of the committee by stipulating June. Would the maker and seconder of the motion be willing to delete that reference to the month of June?”
- The maker and seconder may accept the deletion, and if no one else offers objection, discussion would proceed on the original motion without the reference to June.
- The maker and/or the seconder of the original motion or anyone else may not agree to the deletion and therefore not accept the amendment. (“I like parties in June,” he exclaimed!) In that case, if the person offering the amendment feels strongly enough about the issue to want a formal consideration of his or her idea, a motion would be

made to amend the original motion by deleting the phrase "and do it in June."

- The amendment would require a second.
- The chairperson would state the motion to amend.
- Discussion, clarification, and debate would proceed *on the amendment*.
- After ample discussion, there would be a vote on the amendment; let's assume that the amendment "to delete June" passes. ("I hate you!" shouts the maker of the original motion. Sometimes even *Robert's Rules* don't assure courtesy!)
- After the vote on the amendment, the group returns to a discussion of the original motion.
- After ample consideration, the group votes on the original or main motion.

The amendment to "delete June" could have been amended if someone else had moved, "O.K. Let's not specify June, but let's stipulate that it has to be done sometime between April and July." ("How about the last day in May or any time in June?" pleads the originator, but the chairperson gavels him out of order.)

Usually the maker and seconder of the amendment and everyone else present will accept that kind of change without challenge, and discussion and vote would proceed upon the original amendment. If they don't informally accept the change to the amendment, then the immediate discussion and vote are on the substitution of the phrase "sometime between April and July" in place of the phrase "and do it in June."

Once the substitution has been discussed and voted on, the group would return to a discussion and a vote on the amendment. In cases such as this, the vote on the amendment to the amendment nullifies the need for the amendment itself. If the group has voted to hold the event "sometime between April and July," there's no need to vote on the "to delete June" issue. If, however, the

amendment to the amendment lost, then it would be necessary to vote on the amendment “to delete June.”

After the first amendment has been dealt with, the group would again return to discussion and consideration of the main motion.

By this point in my explanation, parliamentarians are probably on their feet hollering that I must explain the difference between “amendment” and “substitution,” which I’ll do at the end of this lesson.

- (4) For most votes, a majority of those present is all that’s needed to approve or disapprove a motion. (This is called a “simple majority.”)

Your bylaws and *Robert's Rules* may stipulate that certain votes require a two-thirds majority, such as for amendment of the bylaws (or impeachment of the president, who by this point would recognize any seconder).

A two-thirds majority is also required to suspend the rules, close nominations, or end debate.

- (5) You’ll frequently hear people say, “I move the previous question,” or, “Move the question,” or even “Question.”

When a member of the board feels that discussion has gone on long enough, he or she can move that debate be ended—in essence saying, “I move that debate be ended and that we now vote immediately on the motion before us.” The motion before the group can be an amendment to an amendment or the original motion. Calling for an end to debate is usually referred to as “the previous question.”

If there is a second, there can be no debate on the motion to close debate, but two-thirds of the group must vote for the motion. If they do, there must be an immediate vote on the issue at hand. If “the previous question” is not approved, debate on the issue at hand proceeds. After an interval, someone else can also move the previous question, but if the group doesn’t feel that all the points

or people they want to hear have been heard—or if they are not sick of the topic—they can again defeat the “question.”

There is a pervasive misperception about “the previous question.” Frequently one or more people will feel that the group is ready for a vote and will say “Question” or “Move the question.” Then the person in the chair will assume that the group must therefore vote and will cut off further debate. Debate cannot be ended unless the group actually agrees.

The person in the chair can say something like, “Some people are ready to vote—does the whole group agree.” If just one person disagrees or is waiting to say something, the debate continues. If those who called “Question” really mean it, they must formally move the previous question and see if two-thirds of the group agree to end debate.

The maker of the motion being debated can't propose ending debate. Be alert also for those who have already had their say who want to deny the same chance to others.

When someone shouts “Question!” it's appropriate for the chairperson to say, “I know several people still seem to want to speak to the issue and as a matter of fairness I will let the discussion proceed.” If someone formally moves the previous questions, even the person in the chair can't do any more than clarify what the group is voting on (closing debate) and that it requires a two-thirds vote.

(6) Some other motions are not debatable:

- “Protest a breach of rules or conduct.” (*“She’s pulling my hair.”*)
- “Call for intermission.” (*“With all this coffee, doesn’t anyone else need to. . . ?”*)
- “Complain about conditions.” (*“This heat is so bad, my underwear is sticking!”*)

- “Avoid considering an improper matter.” (*“I agree we should all be concerned about fluoridation, but after all, this is an association of grandmothers for planned parenthood!”*)
 - “Confirm a decision by calling for a standing vote.” (*“I know it sounded unanimous, but with this crazy person in the chair, it’s the only way we’re ever going to get to stretch.”*)
 - “Call for a point of information.” (*“Are you out of your cotton-pickin’ mind!?”*)
- (7) Voting can go from the very informal to formal. The chairperson may say something like, “There appears to be a clear consensus, and unless anyone objects, we’ll assume the matter is approved.” If that’s not challenged, it would be considered an unchallenged vote. (In the original draft of this chapter, I said that “it would be considered a unanimous vote.” The Master Parliamentarian who reviewed the chapter for me said that it is incorrect to assume that silence means support. Technically then, the only votes that can be recorded as unanimous are when each person actually votes on the same side.)

Very often there is call for a voice vote: “All those in favor, please say ‘Aye.’ All those opposed, please say ‘No.’” Usually the decision is obvious. Frequently because most people seem to have voted “Aye,” there is not a call for the “No” votes. That’s not good practice. It’s good for the group to see that votes are unanimous or unchallenged, and it’s equally important that people have a chance to register their dissent.

If the results of the voice vote are not clear or if it’s the practice of the organization to try to make a record of how people vote, then there would be a raising of the hands for “Aye” and “No.” Sometimes this is done as a standing vote.

If the vote is still not clear or if it is important that there be a clear record of votes, there can be an actual roll call, with each member asked to respond “Aye” or “No.” If a person prefers not to vote, he or she can just say “Present.”

In large gatherings, there can be a "count off." All those in favor stand up, and the chairperson designates a person to begin. That person says "one" and sits down, the next person says "two" and is seated, and so forth until all those who were standing have counted off and been seated. Then those voting "No" go through the same procedure. This is a clear way to get an actual count and to guarantee that no one is voting twice or not being counted.

At the extreme there can be a ballot. This is sometimes used in voting on nominees or on very sensitive issues.

Any member can call for any one of these voting procedures, and it is up to the chairperson to decide. If he or she decides against such a suggestion, the group can go through the formal procedure of a motion, second, debate, and vote on whether to accept the voting procedure called for in the motion. Usually the chairperson goes along, unless it is a delaying tactic that the chairperson believes is fundamentally unfair to the group.

- (8) The Motion to Table is used often enough and has enough confusion surrounding it that you may want to have some briefing about it. If a board member feels that the discussion is not getting anywhere or that the group clearly does not want to decide the issue at hand (at least at that time), the individual can "move to table." This requires a second and is not debatable. Only a majority vote is required.

The move to table is often used to "kill" the matter, but others have the privilege of bringing it up again ("take it from the table") later in the meeting or at a future meeting. To take an item "from the table" requires a motion and a second, is not debatable, and can be approved by a simple majority.

Sometimes items are postponed to "a time certain," such as, "I move that this item be postponed until after we've disposed of these other matters," or "until the next meeting," or "until the budget has been developed." A motion to postpone is debatable.

The motion to table is a more deliberate challenge to the matter at hand. Some people really don't want to deal with the issue, and

they want an immediate sense of the assembly. The motion to postpone is a more practical scheduling situation.

In preparation for the annual meetings of delegates to the National Mental Health Association, we included in the advance resource packets a “Basic Chart of Motions.” Those meetings frequently involved complicated subjects and charged debates; we also frequently ran into self-styled parliamentarians. We wanted everybody to be on equal footing or at least to have readily at hand a chart that explained what was going on and what their rights were.

The Channing Bete Company has produced a good primer called *The ABC's of Parliamentary Procedure* that includes “Parliamentary Procedure . . . At a Glance,” which is reproduced at the end of this section. It gives a good overview of many of the basic procedures you are likely to run into.

If you're a perfectionist or a masochist, you can get your own set of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th Edition*, Henry M. Robert III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, Thomas J. Balch, New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2000.

For some of you it might be helpful to talk briefly about parliamentarians. Usually it's sufficient that the chairperson has some grasp of the basic rules. It's probably more important for persons who regularly staff boards and committees to be reasonably familiar with *Robert's Rules*, at least to the extent of knowing the kinds of matters covered in the “Parliamentary Procedures.” I routinely recommend to staff members that one of the items in the file carried to all meetings should be a summary of parliamentary procedures.

Many organizations identify a particular board member as the informal parliamentarian. It's important to be sure that the individual in that role will be even-handed. It's equally important that the individual not get the group more deeply involved in parliamentary procedure than is necessary.

When major controversy is to be put before the board, or if certain types of meetings routinely involve very complicated or divisive matters, a professional parliamentarian should be at hand. In those cases the parliamentarian should not be a member of the board. The person chairing the meeting should do everything possible to put the issues out for full and adequate debate before the parliamentary maneuvering begins. Despite the good intentions of *Robert's Rules of Order*, their implementation often thwarts early consideration of the broad issues. Someone's always quick to jump in with a motion to amend,

motion to substitute, motion to split, and all the other maneuvering that so often focuses debate either on the parliamentary procedures themselves or on issues that may not get at the heart of the matter.

For the names of qualified professional parliamentarians in your area, you can write:

National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP)
213 South Main Street
Independence, MO 64050-3850
(816) 833-3892
Website: www.parliamentarians.org

American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP)
P.O. Box 2173
Wilmington, DE 19899-2173
(888) 664-0428 or (302) 762-1811
Website: www.parliamentaryprocedure.org

One of the best summaries of parliamentary matters I ever came across was put together by O. Garfield Jones at the University of Toledo in 1932. While giving ample attention to helping the reader work through the maze of what's possible, Jones emphasized that, "... common sense is the essence of parliamentary rules; fair play is their guiding principle; reasonable discussion followed by prompt action is what they are devised to achieve."

*Parliamentary Procedure . . . at a Glance**

To Do This:	You Say This:	May You Interrupt the Speaker?	Do You Need a Second?	Is It Debatable?	Can It Be Amended?	What Vote Is Needed?	Can it be Reconsidered
ADJOURN MEETING	"I move to adjourn."	NO	YES	NO	NO	MAJORITY	NO
CALL AN INTERMISSION	"I move to recess for . . ."	NO	YES	NO ¹	YES	MAJORITY	NO
COMPLAIN ABOUT HEAT, NOISE, ETC.	"I rise to a question of privilege."	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO VOTE	NO
NO TEMPORARILY SUSPEND CONSIDERATION OF AN ISSUE	"I move to lay the motion on the table."	NO	YES	NO	NO	MAJORITY	NO ²
END DEBATE AND AMENDMENTS	"I move the previous question."	NO	YES	NO	NO	2/3	YES ³
POSTPONE DISCUSSION FOR A CERTAIN TIME	"I move to postpone the discussion until . . ."	NO	YES	YES	YES	MAJORITY	YES
GIVE CLOSER STUDY OF SOMETHING	"I move to refer the matter to committee."	NO	YES	YES	YES	MAJORITY	YES ⁴
AMEND A MOTION	"I move to amend the motion by . . ."	NO	YES	YES ⁵	YES	MAJORITY	YES
INTRODUCE BUSINESS	"I move that . . ."	NO	YES	YES	YES	MAJORITY	YES

THE MOTIONS LISTED ABOVE ARE IN ORDER OF PRECEDENCE . . . BELOW THERE IS NO ORDER . . .

¹ Unless vote moved when no question is pending.

² Affirmative votes may not be reconsidered.

³ Unless vote on question has begun.

⁴ Unless the committee has already taken up the subject.

⁵ Unless the motion to be amended is not debatable.

*Parliamentary Procedure . . . at a Glance**

To Do This:	You Say This:	May You Interrupt the Speaker?	Do You Need a Second?	Is It Debatable?	Can It Be Amended?	What Vote Is Needed?	Can it be Reconsidered
PROTEST BREACH OF RULES OR CONDUCT	"I rise to a point of order."	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO VOTE ⁶	NO
VOTE ON A RULING OF THE CHAIR	"I appeal from the chair's decision."	YES	YES	YES	NO	MAJORITY	YES
SUSPEND RULES TEMPORARILY	"I move to suspend the rules so that . . ."	NO	YES	NO	NO	2/3	NO
AVOID CONSIDERING AN IMPROPER MATTER	"I object to consideration of this motion."	YES	NO	NO	NO	2/3 ⁷	YES ²
VERIFY A VOICE VOTE BY HAVING MEMBERS STAND	"I call for a division or 'Division'"	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO VOTE	NO
REQUEST INFORMATION	"Point of information . . ."	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO VOTE	NO
TAKE UP A MATTER PREVIOUSLY TABLED	"I move to take from the table . . ."	YES	YES	NO	NO	MAJORITY	NO
RECONSIDER A HASTY ACTION	"I move to consider the vote on . . ."	YES ⁸	YES	YES ⁹	NO	MAJORITY	NO

⁶ Unless the chair submits to the assembly for decision.

⁷ A 2/3 vote in negative needed to prevent consideration of main motion.

⁸ Only if speaker has the floor but has not actually begun to speak.

⁹ Unless the motion to be reconsidered is not debatable.