

# Understanding and Using Parliamentary Procedure

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A quick guide to parliamentary procedure, including types of motions, forms of voting, and the appropriate times to use them.

Parliamentary procedure is the result of centuries of accumulated experience. Thomas Jefferson wrote the first American manual that remains as the basis of parliamentary procedure today.

Boards and organizations typically operate under rules of order or written rules of parliamentary procedure. These formally adopted rules help facilitate the smooth functioning of a group and establish the rules that an organization and its membership will follow.

While parliamentary procedure can appear intimidating and confusing, it is a time-tested method of conducting business, and operates under four basic principles:

- Justice and courtesy for all.*
- One thing at a time.*
- The rule of the majority.*
- The rights of the minority.*

## Parliamentary Procedure Vocabulary

**Motion** is a formal proposal made in a deliberative assembly.

**Main motion** is the basis of all parliamentary procedure. It provides a method of bringing business before the assembly for consideration and action, and can be considered only if no other business is pending.

**Privileged motions** are such that, while having no relation to the pending motion, are of such urgency or importance that they are entitled to immediate consideration. They relate to members, and to the organization, rather than to particular items of business.

**Subsidiary motions** are those that may be applied to another motion for the purpose of *modifying* it, *delaying action* on it, or *disposing* of it.

**Incidental motions** are related to the parliamentary situation in such a way that they must be decided before business can proceed.

**Restorative motions** bring a question back before the assembly for its consideration.

## Forms of Voting

A **voice vote** is most commonly used.

A **rising vote** is the normal method of voting on motions requiring a two-thirds vote for adoption. It is also used to verify a voice vote or show of hands.

A **show of hands** is an alternative to a voice vote, usually used in small groups.

**General consent** is a vote of silent agreement without a single objection.

A **ballot or roll call vote** can be ordered by a majority. Rulings of the chair can be appealed.

## Obtaining and Handling a Main Motion

When no one else has the floor, a member typically rises, if it is a large group, and addresses the chair: “Mr. Chair/Madam President.”\* The member pauses (before stating his or her motion) to be recognized by the chair.

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\*It should be noted that **chair** and **president** are considered gender neutral. Presiding officers might be addressed as **Mr./Madam Chair** or **Mr./Madam President**.

## Thirteen Ranking Motions

- **Main Motion** is the basis of all parliamentary procedure. It provides a method of bringing business before the assembly for consideration and action. Can only be introduced if no other business is pending.
- **Privileged Motions** are such that, while having no relation to the pending question, are of such urgency or importance that they are entitled to immediate consideration; they relate to members, and to the organization, rather than to particular items of business.
- **Subsidiary Motions** are those that may be applied to another motion for the purpose of *modifying* it, *delaying action* on it, or *disposing* of it.

|            | <i>Name of Motion</i>                   | <i>Is it in order when another has the floor?</i> | <i>Does it require a second?</i> | <i>Is it debatable?</i> | <i>Is it amendable?</i> | <i>What vote is required for adoption?</i> | <i>May it be reconsidered?</i> |
|------------|---|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Privileged | *Fix the time on which to adjourn       | No  | Yes                              | No                      | Yes                     | M  | Yes                            |
|            | **Adjourn                               | No  | Yes                              | No                      | No                      | M  | No                             |
|            | *Recess                                 | No  | Yes                              | No                      | Yes                     | M  | No                             |
|            | Raise a question of privilege           | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (1)  | No                             |
|            | Call for the orders of the day          | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (2)  | No                             |
| Subsidiary | Lay on the table                        | No  | Yes                              | No                      | No                      | M  | No                             |
|            | Previous question                       | No  | Yes                              | No                      | No                      | 2/3  | Yes                            |
|            | Limit or extend limits of debate        | No  | Yes                              | No                      | Yes                     | 2/3  | Yes (3)                        |
|            | Postpone to a certain time (definitely) | No  | Yes                              | Yes                     | Yes                     | M (4)                                      | Yes                            |
|            | Commit (refer to a committee)           | No  | Yes                              | Yes                     | Yes                     | M  | Yes (5)                        |
|            | Amend                                   | No  | Yes                              | Yes (6)                 | Yes                     | M  | Yes                            |
|            | Postpone indefinitely                   | No  | Yes                              | Yes                     | No                      | M  | Aff. Only                      |
|            | Main motion                             | No  | Yes                              | Yes                     | Yes                     | M  | Yes                            |

Based on *Robert's Rules of Order (Newly Revised)*

\*A main motion if made when no business is pending.

\*\*Check *Robert's Rules of Order (Newly Revised)* for specific rules.

(1) Chair grants

(2) No vote; demand

(3) Unexecuted part may be reconsidered

(4) Two-thirds vote if made a special order

(5) Only if committee has not started work

(6) If applied to a debatable motion

- **Incidental Motions** are those (1) which arise out of a pending question; (2) which arise out of a question that has just been pending; or (3) that relate to the business of the assembly. Incidental motions usually apply to the method of transacting business rather than to the business itself. They have no rank among themselves because they are in order whenever they are incidental to the business of the assembly. Listed below are some of those most commonly used.
- **Restorative motions** are, as the name implies, motions that bring a question back again before the assembly for its consideration. Listed below are the two that are used most often.

|             | <i>Name of Motion</i>                          | <i>Is it in order when another has the floor?</i> | <i>Does it require a second?</i> | <i>Is it debatable?</i> | <i>Is it amendable?</i> | <i>What vote is required for adoption?</i> | <i>May it be reconsidered?</i> |
|-------------|--|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Incidental  | Appeal   | Yes   | Yes                              | Yes (1)                 | No                      | M (2)                                      | Yes                            |
|             | Consideration by paragraph or seriatim         | No  | Yes                              | No                      | Yes                     | M  | No                             |
|             | Division of the assembly                       | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (3)  | No                             |
|             | Division of the question                       | No  | Yes                              | No                      | Yes                     | M  | No                             |
|             | Objection of the consideration of the question | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (4)  | Neg. Only                      |
|             | Parliamentary inquiry                          | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (5)  | No                             |
|             | Point of order                                 | Yes   | No                               | No                      | No                      | (6)  | No                             |
|             | Suspend the rules                              | No  | Yes                              | No                      | No                      | 2/3  | No                             |
| Restorative | Reconsider                                     | (7)   | Yes                              | Yes (1)                 | No                      | M  | No                             |
|             | Take from the table                            | No  | Yes                              | No                      | No                      | M  | No                             |

(1) If applied to a debatable question

(2) Majority in negative required to reverse Chair's decision

(3) No vote; demand

(4) Two-thirds against consideration sustains objection

(5) Chair answers.

(6) Chair rules.

(7) In order if another has been assigned the floor—if that member has not begun to speak.

*Robert's Rules of Order* promotes smooth and orderly debate. Avoid personal attacks or personality clashes directed toward the member who moved the motion. **Remember, it is the measure, not the member, that is the subject of debate.** Debate on a motion's merit or shortcoming is encouraged and should always be directed to the chair.

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### **How a Motion is Brought Before an Assembly**

Once recognized by the chair, a member makes the motion: "I move that..." or "I move to..." and sits down.

Another member of the group may choose to second the motion. "I second the motion" or "I second it." The chair will then state the motion: "It is moved and seconded that..."

(Before a motion has been stated by the chair, it can be withdrawn or modified by the maker. After being stated by the chair, it can be withdrawn or modified only by general consent or a majority vote of the body.)

### **Consideration of the Motion**

Once a motion has been properly presented, members of the group can debate the motion. Before speaking in debate, the member must be recognized by the chair and all remarks must be addressed to the chair. The maker of the motion has the first right to the floor if it is properly claimed.

Debate must be confined to the merits of the motion and can only be closed by order of the group (2/3 vote) or by the chair if no one seeks the floor for further debate.

Once debate is closed, the chair asks: "Is the group ready for the question?" If no one claims the floor, the chair will proceed to take a vote by stating the motion and asking those who are in favor to vote by saying "Aye," and those opposed to say "No." The chair then will announce the result of the vote: "Motion adopted or motion defeated."

### **Helpful Advice**

*Become familiar with an organization's bylaws and constitution as the bylaws state which parliamentary authority rules the organization. Knowing parliamentary procedure and the rules that apply to the organization will make you an effective leader or member of the body. Always remember that parliamentary procedure is not intended to stifle problem-solving or creative thinking.*

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