

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT TOPICS



## Parliamentary Procedures: Interesting Facts and Tips

For a meeting to be effective, it is very helpful for those involved to know something about parliamentary procedure.

### Background

In fact, that's how Henry Martyn Robert decided to develop the well-known *Robert's Rules of Order*. He was an engineering officer in the Army asked to lead a church meeting and realized he didn't know what to do. He made an attempt, was extremely embarrassed and that made him determined to learn about parliamentary law. After reading and seeing how differently and chaotically meetings were conducted in other states, he wrote the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies* in 1876. Now in its 10th edition, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* has been completely edited and refined for clarity and consistency.

### Forms

There are several forms of parliamentary procedure. Robert's Rules is most popular, used by approximately 80 percent of groups. One used by about 15 percent of groups, especially physicians and dentists, is the *Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*. Another, *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*, is used by approximately 5 percent, particularly labor unions. Other parliamentary books include *Riddick's Rules of Procedure*, *Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure* (used by many state legislatures), and *Bourinot's Rules of Order* (used in Canada).

### Definitions

Basically, parliamentary procedure is a code of rules and ethics for working together in groups. According to *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*, parliamentary law refers to the

“rules, law, or regulations of organizations, governing the orderly, expeditious and efficient transaction of business and meetings and conventions. Without rules, there would be injustice and confusion. Hence, it is as necessary to follow the rules of parliamentary law as it is to follow the rules of a ball game or a card game.”

Alice Sturgis in her code states, “All organizations, such as business, cultural, religious, social, fraternal, professional, educational, labor, civil, scientific, medical and governmental, are subject to the principles and rules of common parliamentary law. All profit and non-profit corporations and associations and the boards, counsels, commissions, and committees of government, must observe its rules.”

## Basic Principles

1. Parliamentary procedure facilitates the transaction of business and promotes cooperation and harmony.
2. All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations. The will of the majority must be carried out, and the rights of the minority must be preserved.
3. A quorum must be present for the group to act.
4. Full and free discussion of every motion is a basic right.
5. Only one question at a time can be considered at any given time.
6. The chair should be strictly neutral.

## Tips

Visit the library or bookstore for one of the resources listed above or log on to the Internet, where a number of good references are located. It is also helpful to observe a demonstration of proper parliamentary procedure in action or to listen to a certified parliamentarian when the opportunity presents itself.

We have provided a “cheat sheet” of the more commonly used procedures in meetings where parliamentary procedure is in effect. This cheat sheet is Appendix A, included with this Fact Sheet.

## Order & Control

The primary purposes of using parliamentary or other formal procedure are to maintain order in a meeting and to assure that the meeting ends at an appropriate time. Meetings without formalized procedures can extend well beyond a reasonable timeframe, often without important questions being resolved or necessary work getting accomplished.

A secondary reason for using parliamentary or other formal procedure is to control the direction of the meeting and/or the outcome of a particular matter being discussed. While this might sound devious, there are times when controversial issues are better simply resolved than expanded—most often when

resources that are needed and desired to attain a goal are just absolutely not available.

Parliamentary procedures may be followed exactly as the full procedures indicate or can be adapted to the type of group. Few organizations adhere completely to the full procedures; however, some will revert to the full version when addressing controversial or difficult issues or when numerous visitors attend an open meeting. It is wise to vote on a change in procedures before adopting different-than-normal procedure requirements.

It might be helpful to discuss a couple of common parliamentary procedural items that may need some clarification.

One item is the practice of having a motion on the floor before “debate” or discussion takes place, or the opposite—having a discussion before a motion is constructed. Interestingly enough, some professional parliamentarians have opposing views. Some feel it makes meetings go on too long to have the discussion before a motion is made. Others indicate the discussion should take place before the motion can be made. It is suggested to try both methods, and use the one that works best.

The other item is the chair voting to break a tie. Interestingly, one parliamentarian says there is no such thing as a tie vote. Joseph Dobrian says, “Most motions require a simple majority (more than half the votes cast) for passage. If exactly half the votes cast were in favor of the motion, it fails for lack of a majority.” Therefore, Dobrian also says, “the chair votes whenever it will affect the outcome: to create or deny a majority or supermajority.”



## Order of Precedence

The order of precedence—one motion takes over another—is primarily used to maintain consistency in a meeting's functions. Knowing the order and using it properly will keep the meeting flowing without interruptions in pace. Once meeting participants understand that there is an order of what can be done and when, this procedure limits frivolous attempts to prolong or disrupt a meeting. Most often, these are sincere attempts to gather more information or to clarify a point; however, use of *Order of Precedence* (again, once it is understood) allows discussion to move along at a smoother and timelier pace.

Again, in controversial or extremely important matters, *Order of Precedence* allows the executive of a meeting to control what can be placed on the table (and how) and what cannot. It also affords participants and guests the right to be heard by using the rules of order. It is wise to assure that all participants and visitors have a copy of the *Parliamentary Procedures Cheat Sheet*, (Appendix A). Also, when a larger group of visitors attends a meeting, a few moments before the meeting should be spent briefly going over the process rules and procedures. This levels the playing field for all involved.

## Summary

To hear a parliamentarian speak or watch a parliamentary procedure demonstration is interesting but sometimes sounds like mumbo-jumbo. The language is different from the way most of us speak. It will serve groups well to employ even the simplest, most basic form of parliamentary law to help meetings be as effective and efficient as possible.

## Resources

Cagle, John A., *Parliamentary Procedure: Toward the Good Order of the University*, website, 2002.

Dobrian, Joseph, *Parliamentary Procedure Guards Members' Rights*, website, 1999.

Lowry, Sheldon G. and Holik, John S., *a new look at: Parliamentary Procedure*, North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 48, 1976.

Slaughter, Jim, *Introduction to Parliamentary Procedure (Part 1)* and *Parliamentary Procedure in Business*, website.

The Official Robert's Rules of Order Web Site, *Short History of Robert's Rules*.



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