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Understanding and Using Parliamentary Procedure

Gary C. Bergman, Extension Educator

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, the basis of all parliamentary procedure, provides method of bringing business before the assembly for consideration and action, 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: 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 it must be decided before business can proceed.

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 showing of hands.

Show of Hands is an alternative to a voice vote and is 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. Chairman/Madam President." [1]The member pauses (before stating his or her motion) to be recognized by the chair.

[1]It should be noted that **chairman** and **president** are gender-neutral words. Therefore, referring to the presiding officer as **Mr. Chairman/Madam Chairman** or **Madam President/Mr. President** is acceptable. In the author's opinion it is also less cumbersome than using chairperson or chairwoman as the case may be.

How a Motion is Brought Before an Assembly

Once recognized by the chair, a member makes the motion: "I move that or 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 recongized 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 (two-thirds 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 who are in favor by saying "Aye." Those opposed, 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.

Thirteen Ranking Motions

- **Privileged Motions** are such that, while having no relation to the pending question, are of such urgency, or important that they are entitled to immediate consideration; 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.
- **Main Motion** is the basis of all parliamentary procedure -- provides method of bringing business before the assembly for consideration and action. Can only be introduced if no other business is pending.

Name of Motion	***Is it in order when another has the floor?***	***Does it require a second?***	***Is it debatable?***	***Is it amendable?***	***What vote is required for adoption?***	***May it be reconsidered?***
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	No	Yes	No	Yes	2/3	Yes[3]

of debate						
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 (RONR)*
*A main motion if made when no business pending.
**Check RONR 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 situation; (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 them which are most commonly used.
- **Motions that bring a question again before the assembly (restorative)** are, as their name implied, motions which bring a question again before the assembly for its consideration. Listed below are the two that are used most often.

Name of Motion	***Is it in order when another has the floor?***	***Does it require a second?***	***Is it debatable?***	***Is it amendable?***	***What vote is required for adoption?***	***May it be reconsidered?***
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 floor--if that member has not begun to speak.

Robert's Rules of Order promote 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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