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Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Parliamentary Procedure in an Academic Senate But Were Afraid to Ask

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1. How can I close off debate?

Parliamentary procedure often uses an archaic jargon when ordinary English would do just as well and be a lot clearer. To move to close off debate, the formulae customarily used are either "I move the previous question," or "I move the question," or "I move for closure." To "move the (previous) question" and to "move for closure" mean exactly the same thing as to move to close off debate. To close off debate requires a 2/3-vote and is not debatable. (In some groups this motion is not in order unless there have been a specified number of speakers on each side of the question.)

There is an important difference between moving the (previous) question and calling the question. You may move the previous question only upon being recognized by the Chair; and once the question has been moved, an immediate vote is taken on whether or not debate should be shut off. To call the question doesn't require recognition by the Chair but also doesn't do anything other than to let the Chair know that you personally would like debate to end. When the question has been called, the Chair will customarily ask, "Is there further debate on this question?" If there are people who still want to debate the issue, then debate

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continues—just as if the person who called the question had never opened his/her mouth. There are only three ways in which debate can end: (1) when the time limit on debate (if there is one) expires and the motion to extend debate time fails, or is never offered; (2) when the

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group, by unanimous consent, ends debate and proceeds to a vote, even though additional debate time remains. This may happen when no one wishes to speak on the question. In that case, the Chair will customarily say, "If there is no one who wishes to debate this issue further, is there objection to coming to an immediate vote? . . . Seeing no such objection, we will now proceed to a vote"; and (3) when someone moves the previous question and the motion is in order and receives the necessary 2/3 vote.

2. *What's the difference between a friendly and an unfriendly amendment?*

Contrary to popular myth, there is no such thing as a friendly amendment! Once a motion has been stated by the Chair, it belongs to the meeting as a whole and the maker must request the group's permission to withdraw or modify his own motion. Of course, in the brief interval between the time when a motion is made and the time when the Chair states it for the body, the proposer can make any changes in it that he chooses.

What happens when the proposer of a motion wishes to change it after it has already been stated by the Chair in its original form? To do this, the proposer may, upon recognition by the Chair, ask leave of the body to modify (or withdraw) his motion. This motion is treated first as a unanimous-consent request; e.g., Chair will state, "The delegate who introduced this motion has asked consent of the body to amend it by adding the words 'and chickens' after the words 'and

cows' in line three of paragraph two. Is there any objection to this change?" If there is no objection, then the change is made—by unanimous consent. If, however, there is objection, then there is an immediate vote (without debate) on the proposed change, and the amendment will require a simple majority for it to be incorporated into the original text.

Sometimes someone other than the person who proposed the motion will offer an amendment which the maker of the motion would like to see adopted. The maker may then request that this change be made; but, once again, if unanimous consent is not obtained for this request, then the amendment must come to an immediate vote without further debate. Even though supported by the maker of the motion, only if a majority of the group vote for the change will the change be made.

3. *What's the difference between the main motion and the pending question, and so what?*

There are four types of motions: main motions, subsidiary motions, privileged motions and incidental motions. The first kind, the *main motion*, proposes a course of action; e.g., "I move that we allocate \$1000 for an emergency student bail fund." The second, the *subsidiary motion* is one which either modifies the text of the main motion or sets debate rules for it, e.g., "I move that we amend the main motion to substitute \$2000 for \$1000 as the amount of the emergency bail fund" is a subsidiary motion; and so is "I move to set a ten-minute time limit on debate on the motion to set up the emergency student bail fund."

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The other two kinds, *privileged* and *incidental motions*, are ones which refer to voting procedures or to the rules of parliamentary procedure (e.g., a call for a recount on a questionable vote, a point of order, a call for the orders of the day,

etc.), or which offer motions which take precedence over whatever motion may be on the floor (e.g., a motion to recess or to adjourn). The distinction between privileged motions and incidental motions is sufficiently obscure that, unless you are planning on being a professional parliamentarian, you may as well lump them together.

It is often less time-consuming to let someone finish their remarks of their own accord, than to try to force them to shut up.

The basic ideas are: main motions propose action; subsidiary motions modify what's in main motions or set debate rules for them; and incidental and privileged motions have to do with parliamentary procedures. Even though these definitions are not completely accurate, being right 99% of the time isn't bad.

The pending question is whatever motion it is that is next up for a vote. There can never be more than one pending question at a time. For example, if there is a main motion on the floor and someone moves to amend it, then the amendment (which would be voted on first) becomes the new pending question. If then someone moved to table the amendment (which would carry with it the tabling of the whole motion), the motion to table would become the new pending question, since the motion to table has higher priority than the motion to amend.

Sometimes someone will move to close off debate on *all* pending questions. To do so one would state "I move the previous question on all pending motions," or alternatively, "I move all pending questions." If this were done when an amendment was *the* pending question, and the motion to close debate (which requires a 2/3 vote) carried, then this would require a vote *first* on the amendment, and then, with no further debate, a vote on the main motion (as amended).

There is a rank ordering of motions which determines whether one motion is in

order when another motion is the pending question. Roughly speaking, privileged motions have the highest priority, i.e., they are in order regardless of what motion is pending. Incidental motions also are usually of high priority, but they take their priority from the motion to which they are incidental. Main motions have the lowest priority of all. Among subsidiary motions there is a clearly defined pecking order with the motion to lay on the table the highest priority and the motion to postpone indefinitely the lowest priority. Table 1 provides the rank ordering of the most common motions. Once again, this chart is not 100% accurate, but the exceptions are sufficiently esoteric that they can safely be neglected.

4. How can I shut somebody up who keeps interrupting the person who has the floor; or who when he/she has the floor, keeps on talking long after his/her speaking time has elapsed?

In a legislature there may be a sergeant-at-arms in charge of maintaining order who may be directed by the chair to politely request people to shut up and stop disrupting the meeting. In groups without a sergeant-at-arms, i.e., most groups, it is the chair's responsibility to maintain order and she may designate people on the floor to help her. All requests for order should be channeled through the chair, either by passing the chair a note and/or by, on a point of privilege, requesting the chair to bring the body to order (i.e., quiet) so that the speaker's remarks might be heard. A good chair will, without naming names unless it becomes absolutely necessary,

Do not try to learn parliamentary procedure by reading Robert's Rules of Order.

call the body to order and simply stop business until people shut up. Sometimes, the chair will be able to succeed in this by establishing eye contact with the disrupter(s) and staring at them until he/they shut(s) up.

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When someone continues to speak after their debate time has elapsed, the chair may be reminded of this by note and/or by calling for the "orders of the day," which, in this case, becomes a demand to move on to the next speaker, the present speaker's debating time having already elapsed. To call for the "orders of the

day" does not require recognition by the chair. In general, it is better to pass the chair a note reminding him of the end of debate time than to yell out "orders of the day." However, if the chair fails to act, the latter course of action may be necessary. Remember, however, that it is often less time-consuming to let some-

TABLE 1
Parliamentary Procedure According to *Robert's Rules of Order**

Types of Motions (Numbers refer to priority)	Needs		Debatable	Vote	Can Be Reconsidered	May Interrupt Speaker	Debate Confined Pending Question
	Second	Amendable					
Privileged Motions							
(1) Fix Time to Reassemble ¹	Y	Y	N	M	Y	N	Y
(2) Adjourn ²	Y	N	N	M	N	N	Y
(3) Recess ³	Y	Y	N	M	N	N	Y
(4) Question of Privilege	Y	Y	Y	Y	M	Y	Y
Parliamentary Points							
Privileged Points							
(7) Point of Privilege	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
(8) Call for Orders of the Day	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
Incidental Motions							
(9) Call for Division of the House	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
(9) Call for Quorum	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
(9) Point of Order	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
(9) Point of Parliamentary Inquiry	N	N	N	—	N	Y	Y
(9) Point of Information	N	N	N	—	N	N	Y
(9) Query of Previous Speaker	N	N	N	—	N	N	Y
(9) Unanimous Consent Request	N	N	N	U	N	N	Y
Incidental Motions⁴							
(5) Withdraw or Modify ⁵	N	N	N	M	Y ⁶	N	Y
(9) Appeal from Chair ⁷	Y	N	Y ⁷	M	Y	Y	Y
(9) Fix Methods of Voting	Y	Y	N	M	Y	N	Y
(9) Suspend Rules	Y	N	N	2/3	N	N	Y
(9) Close Nominations	Y	Y	N	2/3	N	N	Y
(9) Reopen Nominations	Y	Y	N	M	Y	N	Y
(9) Object to Consideration	N	N	N	2/3	Y ⁸	Y	Y
(17) Division of the Question	Y ⁹	Y	N	M	Y	N ⁹	Y
Subsidiary Motions							
(6) Lay on the Table	Y	N	N	M	N	N	Y
(10) Previous Question	Y	N	N	2/3	N	N	Y
(11) Limit, Extend Debate	Y	Y	N	2/3	Y	N	Y
(12) Create Special Orders	Y	Y	Y	2/3	Y	N	Y
(13) Postpone Definitely	Y	Y	Y	M	Y	N	Y
(14) Reconsider ¹⁰	Y	Y	Y ¹¹	M	N	Y	N ¹²
(15) Commit, Refer	Y	Y	Y	M	N	N	Y
(16) Amend	Y	Y	Y ¹³	M	Y	N	Y
(18) Postpone Indefinitely	Y	N	Y	M	Y ¹⁴	N	N
(18) Take from the Table	Y	N	N	M	N	N	Y
Main Motions							
(20) Main Motion ¹⁵	Y	Y	Y	M	Y	N	Y

*Y. = Yes, N. = No, M = Majority.

Notes to Table 1

- ¹To fix time to reassemble is privileged only when another question is pending and only in an assembly that has made no provision for another meeting soon enough to handle any pressing business. Otherwise, it is treated as a main motion which is debatable and amendable.
- ²To adjourn is privileged only if it is no way qualified as to time and only in an assembly which has made provision for another meeting. Otherwise, it is treated as a main motion which is debatable and amendable.
- ³To recess is privileged only when another question is pending. Otherwise, it is treated as a main motion.
- ⁴According to Robert's, all incidental motions including incidental points are of the same rank and are disposed of as they arise. In large assemblies assigning incidental points a ranking among themselves and above other incidental motions has proved useful.
- ⁵To withdraw or modify, although labeled by Robert's as an incidental motion, is treated by Robert's as the lowest ranking privileged motion. This motion is not in order for motions reported out of committee.
- ⁶To withdraw or modify can be reconsidered only if it fails of passage.
- ⁷An appeal relating to decorum or one made while the immediately pending question is undebatable is not debatable. An appeal may be postponed definitely or indefinitely but, in general, postponement of the appeal (or laying it on the table) carries with it the postponement of the main question.
- ⁸Objection to consideration which fails of passage cannot be considered.
- ⁹If a series of independent resolutions relating to different subjects is included in one motion, it must be divided upon the request of a single member which request may be made while another has the floor.
- ¹⁰The making of the motion to reconsider is in order at any time, however, it comes up for a vote only at such time as the motion to be reconsidered would be in order.
- ¹¹The motion to reconsider is undebatable when the motion to be reconsidered is undebatable.
- ¹²The motion to reconsider opens to debate the main motion when the latter is debatable.
- ¹³The motion to amend is undebatable when the motion to be amended is undebatable.
- ¹⁴A negative vote on the motion to postpone indefinitely cannot be reconsidered.
- ¹⁵The motion to rescind requires a 2/3 vote unless notice is given in advance. The motion to dispense with the reading of the minutes is undebatable. Motions which have led to irrevocable actions cannot be reconsidered. On the motion to rescind, debate is not confined to the pending question.

one finish their remarks of their own accord, than to try to force them to shut up—since such efforts often trigger protests against "suppression" and "parliamentary bullshit" and demands for "free speech."

5. How can I make people realize that they're only repeating things that have already been said and not changing anybody's mind?

Many people talk to hear themselves talk. Sometimes, it's necessary to put up with a certain amount of repetitious debate in order to convince people that they've had a fair chance to be heard and thus to build a consensus that the decision reached will reflect the genuine sentiment of the group. One way for the chair to speed things up, however, is to ask for a show of hands of those who've already made up their minds how to vote. If the time seems ripe for this, you might pass the chair a note suggesting this. If it becomes obvious to everyone that there's no one left who's undecided, then it becomes

easy to get the previous question moved and adopted.

If debate is dragging on and on and if no time limit has been set, one way to give people a hint that it would be good for the debate to end soon is to move to set a time limit on debate or to move to restrict the number of speakers who will be heard before debate is ended. These are each subsidiary motions and are in order at any time during the debate. Normally, they require a 2/3 vote. Finally, of course, if you can't stand it any longer, and calling the question has been unavailing, you can always obtain the floor and move the previous question.

6. How can I challenge a quorum if I think there aren't enough people present to transact business?

In mass meetings the quorum is simply whoever's there. In most other groups, a quorum is specified in the constitution or by-laws. In the absence of such a provision, a quorum is simply 50 + percent of

the organization's membership. In the absence of a quorum, no business can be transacted. Normally, it is the chair's responsibility to see to it that a quorum is present before doing business. But, in the absence of a challenge to the presence of a quorum, a quorum is always presumed present. The only exception to this rule is when, in a tallied vote such as a roll-call ballot, no quorum is shown (even after including abstentions). In such a case, it is the chair's responsibility to declare the vote null-and-void, and either to accept a motion to adjourn or to take immediate steps to get more people to the meeting so that a quorum might be achieved.

In any meeting where procedures are used to stultify free debate or to manipulate outcomes, parliamentary procedure is being abused.

If you believe that no quorum is present, you may challenge the presence of a quorum by using a point of order and saying "I challenge the presence of a quorum." To do so does not require recognition of the chair and may interrupt any pending business except for a vote (such as a roll-call ballot) which when completed would establish whether or not a quorum is present. If, however, there has just been such a roll-call vote or if a quorum has recently been counted, the chair may rule a quorum challenge to be "frivolous and dilatory" (i.e., out-of-order), because it would waste time to count a quorum when it is obvious that one is present. Calls for a quorum may not be used simply to delay business.

7. How do I know when my business is so urgent it can interrupt a speaker?

Contrary to popular belief, points of information and points of parliamentary inquiry can never interrupt a speaker, and even points of order and points of privilege can rarely do so. The common sense rule is simply this: only if the point is such that it requires an immediate decision whose outcome might affect either the

eligibility of the speaker to continue his remarks or his ability to be heard can it interrupt the speaker. Thus, a point of order calling the chair's attention to the fact that the speaker's time has elapsed can, of course, interrupt the speaker, as can a point of privilege requesting that people shut up so that the speaker can be heard. Even a challenge to the presence of a quorum, though it may be made while another has the floor, does not affect the speaker's right to complete his remarks before any action on the point of order is taken.

8. How do I get something put on the agenda?

In most groups, the preliminary agenda is set by the chair or by some sort of steering committee prior to the meetings. Unless there are specific provisions in a group's constitution or by-laws providing otherwise, the agenda must be adopted by the group by majority vote at the beginning of the meeting (usually right after the adoption of the minutes from the previous session). At that time, it's in order for people to propose amendments to the agenda. These amendments to the agenda require a simple majority. Once, however, the agenda has been adopted, further changes in it can be made only by reconsideration of the agenda or suspension of the rules. A good chair will see to it that a copy of the preliminary agenda is printed and distributed in advance of the meeting. If, at the beginning of the meeting, business proceeds without the adoption of an agenda, and if you have something you'd like added to (or deleted from) the agenda, it's appropriate, on a point of order, to remind the chair that the agenda hasn't yet been adopted and to request a formal vote on the question so that you might propose your amendment. In small groups, however, in order not to waste time, amendments to the agenda can often be adopted simply by unanimous consent.

9. How can I postpone debate on the motion that's on the floor; or better yet, get a stupid idea killed without wasting any time debating its stupidity?

To postpone debate, there are two motions available. One is called the motion to "postpone definitely." This motion must specify a definite time at which the motion being postponed will be brought back to the floor and is debatable/amendable only with respect to the time being proposed. It requires a simple majority. The second motion is called the motion to "lay on the table." This motion is nondebatable and it, too, requires only a simple majority. When a motion is laid on the table, it stays there until a motion to take it from the table is made. There is no such thing as the motion to "lay on the table until the next meeting." Whenever a specific time is mentioned, the motion is really a motion to postpone definitely and is thus debatable/amendable as to the time proposed for postponement. The same applies to a motion to "lay on the table until after we have finished the next item of business." That, too, is simply the motion to postpone definitely in disguise.

The motion to lay on the table is often used to kill a bill quickly. Since this motion is nondebatable, if it's clear that a bill has little support, rather than wasting time on debate, the motion may simply be quickly tabled. Once tabled, for all practical purposes, it is dead; since its supporters are unlikely to ever be able to muster the majority needed to take it from the table for further debate. Warning: Don't try to table an amendment or a subsidiary motion if you're in favor of the bill but merely opposed to the amendment or subsidiary motion. When an amendment or subsidiary matter is tabled, it takes with it to the table the main motion to which it is attached!

There is one other esoteric parliamentary device which may sometimes be used to kill a bill—the motion to "object to consideration." It requires a 2/3 vote, but if it carries, it ends all further consideration of the bill. It is only applicable to main motions, and may only be made before any debate has taken place. It does not require recognition by the chair and it is nondebatable. If you want to kill a bill, the advantage of the motion to object to consideration over the motion to table is that the former does not require recognition by the chair and the latter does. On

the other hand, the motion to table requires only a simple majority, while the motion to object to consideration requires 2/3. The only time it is appropriate to use the motion to object to consideration is when certain members of the group introduce motions which have virtually no support simply to obstruct business. The motion to object to consideration provides a mechanism to quickly dispose of such motions without wasting the group's time in debate. This obscure technique should be used sparingly and only when appropriate.

10. How can I learn parliamentary procedure?

By and large most questions about proper procedures can be solved by using common sense, by asking yourself what's fair. Nonetheless, there are enough technical aspects to parliamentary procedure (including the jargon you have to master) that it's useful to sit down with a parliamentary primer.

Most groups in the U.S. use *Robert's Rules of Order* as their parliamentary guidebook, but there are dozens of other books on parliamentary procedure available and they are all indistinguishable from *Robert's* except on a handful of very esoteric parliamentary points (e.g., *Robert's* requires that you have been on the prevailing side in order to be eligible to move reconsideration; *Sturgis* requires that you not have been on the defeated side in order to be eligible to move reconsideration. Think about that one for awhile!). Do not try to learn parliamentary procedure by reading *Robert's Rules of Order*. That would be like trying to learn to speak English by reading *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* from cover to cover. Pick up a *simple* book on parliamentary procedure intended for use by beginners, e.g., Alice Sturgis, *Sturgis' Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*.

Only when you've mastered the basics, is it worth trying to wade through *Robert's* and even then, you should think of *Robert's* as an encyclopedia to be consulted rather than read.

The best way really to learn parliamentary procedure is to see it effectively and

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accurately practiced. Unfortunately, many people see parliamentary procedure practiced by people who either don't know it and flounder around in a parliamentary morass, or who appear to know it and use it to manipulate the less knowledgeable. In either case, they've probably been turned off on parliamentary procedure. The basic rule to remember is that parliamentary procedure is intended to help people do what they want simply and efficiently, without trampling over the rights of the minority

in the process. If the meetings you're at succeed in that aim, then they are being true to the spirit of parliamentary procedure, whatever technical niceties they may violate. In any meeting where procedures are used to stultify free debate or to manipulate outcomes, parliamentary procedure is being abused rather than being made use of. In such a case, don't blame the procedures, blame the people who are manipulating and also blame the people who through their ignorance are allowing themselves to be manipulated!