

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE SURVIVAL TIPS

Jim Slaughter, JD, CPP-T, PRP

**Updated from "Matching Parliamentary Procedure to Needs,"
Association Management, 1999**

Does the way your association conducts board meetings hinder, rather than facilitate, business? Do board meetings get bogged down by procedural fights to the exclusion of useful discussion? Do meetings lack orderly procedures? Does debate drag on without decisions being made? If your answer to any of these questions is *yes*, then your association is probably using the wrong level of parliamentary procedure for your specific circumstance.

THE NEED FOR PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

In short, parliamentary procedure is all of the laws and rules of an organization that govern its transaction of business. Courts have held that all organizations are subject to the principles and rules of common parliamentary law. Likewise, most associations also adopt language in their bylaws stating that they will follow a particular parliamentary procedure book. Such language has the effect of law because organization members who act contrary to the rules they adopted may be liable for actions that go against the rules.

While parliamentary procedure takes on many forms, association leaders must be aware of the basics of parliamentary procedure. Such knowledge can enhance leadership credibility and make the difference between official actions and illegal ones. But the benefits of a meeting run according to parliamentary procedure extend beyond questions of liability. A presiding officer who properly applies parliamentary procedure has a better

chance at turning long, confrontational meetings into short, painless ones.

Several excellent manuals of parliamentary procedure are available, as well as organizations that can advise you on all matters related to this topic. (See side bar, “Parliamentary Resources.”)

FACTORS THAT AFFECT CHOICE OF PROCEDURE

The conduct of business in an assembly often varies by size. For instance, business conducted by a board of more than a dozen members typically follows a more formal procedure. In contrast, formal procedure in a meeting of fewer than a dozen may actually hinder business. For this reason *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* recommends that the procedure followed by smaller boards is less formal.

Formal procedure:

- Members must be recognized by the presiding officer before speaking.
- Members are to identify themselves before speaking, particularly in large assemblies where a microphone is required.
- A motion to take action must precede any discussion of an issue.
- Motions must be proposed, considered, and disposed of in a priority of order known as *precedence*.
- Motions must be seconded.
- Members may not speak a second time on a motion until all who wish to speak a first time have spoken.
- Members may only speak to a specific motion twice in one day.
- The presiding officer does not participate in debate.
- The presiding officer typically stands when calling the meeting to order or adjourning, putting a motion to a vote, or explaining a ruling.
- Formal votes are taken by voice vote, standing vote, or ballot.

Informal procedure:

- Members are not required to obtain the floor and can make motions or speak while seated.
- Motions need not be seconded.
- No limit exists to the number of times a member can speak to a question, and motions to close or limit debate generally are not entertained.
- The presiding officer need not stand while putting questions to a vote.
- The presiding officer can speak in discussion without rising or leaving the chair.
- Subject to rule or custom, the presiding officer usually can make motions and usually will vote on all questions.
- Decisions are often made by unanimous consent or consensus, rather than by formal vote.

Sidebar:

PARLIAMENTARY RESOURCES

PROCEDURE MANUALS

- Contrary to common perception, parliamentary procedure is not synonymous with the book *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (12th Edition)*. However, *Robert's Rules* is the most widely used book as well as the easiest to locate. The book includes sections on presiding, fulfilling duties of officers, running elections, writing and amending bylaws, counting votes, and holding board and committee meetings. Be sure to buy the right book. Numerous clones and earlier editions are easy to pick up by mistake. While the book publisher varies, you can identify *Robert's* by the number of pages (714).

- Another well-known parliamentary authority is *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure (4th Edition)*. For those new to parliamentary procedure, this book provides an easier introduction to parliamentary procedure than does *Robert's Rules*.

ORGANIZATIONS

Two nonprofit organizations promote parliamentary procedure and certify parliamentarians. Each organization makes referrals of skilled parliamentarians who can advise on matters of parliamentary procedure, train officers, supervise credentials and elections, review and recommend bylaws changes, and conduct workshops on effective meetings for local presidents.

The **American Institute of Parliamentarians** has two levels of parliamentary proficiency—Certified Parliamentarian and AIP's highest parliamentary classification, Certified Professional Parliamentarian. Contact AIP, 1100 E Woodfield Road, Suite 350, Schaumburg, IL 60173; phone: (888) 664-0428, fax: 847-517-7229; Web site:

www.aipparl.org

The **National Association of Parliamentarians** also has two levels of parliamentary proficiency—Registered Parliamentarian and NAP's highest parliamentary classification, Professional Registered Parliamentarian. Contact NAP, 213 S. Main Street, Independence, MO 64050-3850; phone: (888) NAP-2929; fax: (816) 833-3893; Web site:

www.parliamentarians.org

Jim Slaughter is an attorney, Certified Professional Parliamentarian, Professional Registered Parliamentarian, and past President of the American College of Parliamentary Lawyers. He is author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Parliamentary Procedure Fast-Track* and lead author of *Notes and Comments on Robert's Rules, Fourth Edition*. Jim is a partner in Law Firm Carolinas. For more information, visit www.jimslaughter.com.