

Robert's Robert's Rules Rules

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Like many folks, I have attended many nonprofit meetings in my day--in the audience, at the front table, and holding the microphone as president. "Old Business" is old business.

Also like many folks, I have had only the foggiest of notions of "parliamentary procedure." I have witnessed its tattered vestiges; heard phrases like "come to order," "point of order," and "out of order;" made motions and seconds; and cast nautical-sounding "ayes" and "nays," one side or the other of which would then be announced to "have it." Someone might have said "call the question" or "table the motion," and the rest of us might have been suitably impressed.

My bemusement with such niceties began early. This is an actual excerpt from a 1975 Boy Scout organization newsletter, showing my formidable prowess at the tender age of seventeen:

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♦ "I move that we move the table over  
  there." -- Dean Walters  
  "I move we table the motion to move  
  the table." -- Robert James
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I belatedly decided to wade into the authorities, to see what all the fuss is. The following informal guide is based on the 764-page (!) *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (11th ed. 2011) and Slaughter et al., *Notes and Comments on Robert's Rules* (4th ed. 2012) (where citations to most materials I reference here can be found). It is obviously only a summary, and I am obviously not a parliamentarian—just a present, past and future member, officer and president of several nonprofit organizations. Organizations that rarely, but occasionally, have referred to parliamentary procedure in their bylaws and deliberations.

BACKGROUND

Parliamentary procedure is a subject as old as the deliberative body, stretching back to ancient Greece, and the principles we use developed concurrently with the English Parliament. Rules adopted by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives carried over to other legislative bodies. A U.S. military officer of French Huguenot descent, General Henry Robert, faced with running unruly San Francisco gatherings, further customized the rules and published his version in 1876.

The Association of International Parliamentarians (AIP) is separate from the heirs of General Robert, who maintain the "official version" of the good soldier's original rules to this day. The professional parliamentarians are not in love with *Robert's* in any of its iterations—see Hellman, "Robert's Precedence is Nonsense" (1971) or Phifer, "The Robert Heirs Blew It" (1982)—but *Robert's* is still said (by those who must know) to be used in "91+%" of organizations that specify rules of order. Other books with other rules of order may be clearer and more concise, but they are rarely specified. Thus, *Robert's* is the most secure authority when there is a dispute, which after all is the only time that the rules really matter. So I think it is best to plow into the belly of the beast.

Organizations may have bylaws or standing resolutions that change the rules on such topics as the necessary attendees or "quorum," the process that must be followed before a motion may be made, and the like. So before piping up on the subject, look at the authorities to see if they supersede any of these rules.

CONCEPTS

My eyes always glazed over when looking at the dense charts of motions with seemingly random priorities, passmark levels, debate rules and the like. But there are a small number of general principles that help make sense of the system, which I refer to as “General Robert’s World” or “Robertsworld” to distinguish it as needed from our planet.

1. **In General Robert’s World, meetings consist of reports and motions.** The meeting comes to order on finding of a quorum, minutes are confirmed, then there is “unfinished business” (not “old” business, that’s surprisingly not in *Robert’s*) of reports and motions, then there is “new business” of more reports and motions, then the meeting adjourns and you go home.

In the basic version of this system that I have seen in practice, the general presumption is against open bull sessions with “discussion” in the absence of a particular motion before the assembly. In Robertsworld you do not take “straw votes” to “test the waters” for a motion, or conduct an “opinion polls” among several alternative proposals; everything is for real on one and only one motion. (There are ways to use the technical system to achieve some of these purposes, like a “motion to constitute a committee of the whole” dispensing with some formalities, or a “motion to postpone consideration of a motion” that effectively tests the waters, but those are advanced skills.)

Breaking Robert’s Rules (2006), by Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, has an effective critique of Robertsworld. It is a world in which the majority wins and the minority acquiesces or slinks away. As Susskind and Cruikshank stress, volunteer organizations seldom function that way. A disgruntled minority might look for ways to re-fight the battle, organize opposition, or opt out. *We need our minorities.* We need those in opposition to a particular motion to keep participating, and we need to avoid having them passive-aggressively (or active-aggressively) impair the long-term success of our group. (Compare Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970).)

For the main part, meetings of my nonprofits have deviated from Robertsworld. A topic is usually introduced by a report or comments by the responsible officer or committee member. A discussion ensues with different proposals tossed around. Finally, whether for consensus or because time for that agenda item has long run out, there is a motion. Sometimes the discussion has left room for further consideration. The good nonprofit chair will try to finish the agenda item with either a motion or a clear action plan for one. But we should recognize that this is not the world called for by the good general.

2. **The assembly should consider only one thing at a time.** In Robertsworld, that means one *motion* at a time. But there are motions and then there are motions! Some motions relate to the conduct of the assembly and meeting overall (“I can’t hear the speaker!” or “Let’s adjourn or recess!”); some are dispositive, in that they would suspend or terminate debate on a given motion (“Let’s vote!” or “Let’s refer this to the X Committee”); and some address an aspect of the way in which the motion is being debated (“Let’s break the motion into two parts” or “I’ve got a factual question”).

The Robertsworld system allows such motions to be heard using a complex (some say over-complex) **“order of precedence.”** As shown below, a motion is in order only if it has higher priority than the existing motions before the assembly; and that high-priority motion is debated until it is EITHER disposed of (voted on) OR overlaid by a new motion of *higher* priority, at which time *that* higher-priority motion is the only one in the arena—it is the one exclusively to be seconded, debated (as permitted) and voted on. This last-in-first-out (LIFO) approach can lead to huge stack-ups of motions of ranked priorities, like planes circling an airport. See Demeter, “Twenty-Six Subsidiary Motions Pending At Once” (2011) (and even more than 26 are possible). But it insures that everything is discussed in a pre-ordained order such that by the time the underlying main motion is voted on, the subject of that motion is over and done with rather than being vulnerable to re-opening.

3. **Seconds ensure more than one member supports a motion.** Since the rules of order and the organization meeting's agenda are pre-ordained, they are rights of each member; we are all entitled to enforce them. So motions that enforce the rules and the agenda don't require a second. Those include Question of Privilege, Call for Orders (Agenda) to be Followed, Point of Order, Count the Vote (Division of Assembly), Parliamentary Inquiry and Request for Information. Withdrawing your own motion already seconded, and objecting immediately to consideration of a motion, also don't take a second, since two people have already shown interest. No need for seconds to committee motions.
 - a. **Don't debate decisions that will not be decided only by the chair.** This small point—that certain motions don't require a second because they give meaning to individual rights—explains much of the complexity of the Robertsworld motion tables. Motions that are handled exclusively by the chair of the meeting require no debate—Question of Privilege, Call for Orders (Agenda) to be Followed, Point of Order, Count the Vote (Divide the Assembly), Parliamentary Inquiry and Request for Information.
 - b. **Don't debate decisions that will not be illuminated by debate.** Up-or-down motions on whether to debate, like Adjourn, Recess, Lay on the Table, Close Debate 2/3, Limit Debate 2/3, Take From the Table, Suspend the Rules 2/3, Object to Consideration, Divide the Question, Withdraw My Motion, are similarly voted on without debate.
4. **A supermajority is needed to end or limit debate or change rules.** Simple minorities (not a pejorative, just “slightly under 50% minorities”) should not be steamrollered into ending debate or suspending the organization's rules for any period. Such actions should require a greater proportion of consensus. So Close Debate 2/3, Close/Reopen Nominations 2/3, Close/Reopen Polls 2/3, Limit Debate 2/3 and Suspend Rules 2/3 all require a two-thirds majority.
5. **Something extra is needed to undo or redo something the assembly passed.** We cannot go forward if we are at risk of going backwards. Therefore, to Rescind anything takes a 2/3 vote (there is an exception whereby majority suffices for rescission if prior notice of the rescission motion is provided, or if ayes are obtained from a majority of the entire membership rather than just those attending a given meeting). Reconsider is a majority vote, but can only be used by the end of the next meeting day, and can only be moved by someone who voted FOR the motion before. Discharge a motion from a committee also takes 2/3 vote.
6. **Don't retread ground.** No ordinary motion may be introduced on the same subject as covered in a motion that was rejected in this session of meetings, or that was adopted at any prior time (in the latter case, a Rescind motion is needed with its supermajority or notice protections). Retreading sometimes happens outside of Robertsworld, but in general it is to be avoided.

MEETINGS

A regular meeting is held on the scheduled date. A special meeting is held by notice given in accordance with the bylaws.

The chair of the meeting calls the meeting to order, announces the presence of a quorum, makes any needed introductions, and confirms the agenda or any changes to it. Usually the chair requests any corrections to the draft minutes that were distributed; after corrections the chair can declare them approved as circulated (and corrected). Every organization I have been part of has laboriously asked for a motion and a second to approve the minutes, and a vote, and an announcement of the results of the vote. None of that is required in *Robert's*; it just makes us feel official!

If a consent calendar with attachments was distributed, the chair refers to each such item and then (hearing no objection) a single motion, seconded and carried, approves any recommendations in those reports or motions. If

there are live reports of officers or committees, each of them is separately heard. The auditor's report is approved by motion seconded and carried. Ordinary reports of officers and committees are not required to be "approved" and any recommendations contained in them should be the subject of a separate motion that can be seconded (if not the committee's motion) and carried. This always confused me—why were we voting to approve a financial report, what else could we do? Here was the explanation, such a vote for an ordinary report is not technically required, but it is an affirmation of the committee's good work on the subject. Again, it is the opportunity to give the minority view a meaningful voice.

If there are elections, nominations may be made in the report of the nominating committee or other body ahead of time, in which case, once again, no second is needed (again, the committee evidences more than one voice and thus the purpose of a second has already been satisfied). New nominations at the meeting are often prohibited. Election of an officer is by majority vote, while election of members of a board or committee is by plurality vote. There is no entitlement to a secret ballot, but a motion to Count the Vote (Division of Assembly) is in order.

"Unfinished business" is the term, not "old business," and it consists of motions that were actually made but not actually disposed of at prior meetings. Some such items may be "special orders of the day" (to be handled at a specific time, save only pending motions for Adjournment, Recess or Question of Privilege) or "general orders of the day" (to be handled at a specific time or as soon thereafter as other business and any special orders are concluded).

Everything else is "new business."

At the conclusion of new business, the chair may ask whether there is objection to adjournment; hearing none, the chair may declare the meeting adjourned. The lack of objection takes the place of a motion, and a motion with a second, and a vote, and an announcement of the results of the vote—none of that frippery is required in Robert's. Alternatively, though, a member may move to adjourn (without interrupting anyone), and on second and carry the meeting is adjourned.

MOTIONS

Brace yourself, here are the motions. They are much easier to understand if you internalize the simple principles stated above. For each, I have shorthanded whether in Robertsworld a second is required (2d), whether it is debatable, and whether it requires a majority or 2/3 vote or is acted upon by the chair instead.

Main motions freshly bringing business to the assembly

2d DEBATE MAJORITY (except change bylaws, suspend rules, or rescind)

A main motion is made by a member who has the floor (without making an interruption; in formal settings, ask chair to be recognized or to be given the floor) when no other question or motion is pending. The paradox of Robertsworld is that a main motion, the actual reason why the organization is meeting, has the lowest of parliamentary priorities.

A main motion must be "in order," i.e., must be consistent with the bylaws and articles and germane to the agenda of the meeting. The chair or any member (immediately with an objection to consideration or thereafter as a point of order) may object to an inappropriate motion. That is what is meant by the term of art "out of order." A motion should not be the same as a motion previously rejected at the same session, or adopted at any time (except a valid motion to Rescind, or amend, an adopted motion).

The main motion (other than one out of committee) must be seconded (orally, without requesting the floor; not even recorded in minutes). At this point the chair restates it, preferably as an affirmative rather than a negative. Longer motions can be written resolutions—keep recitals short and noncontroversial.

The maker should address the chair only, and should not just say “I so move” after some discussion. The maker may correct the wording with the seconder’s consent or withdraw the motion until it is restated by the chair; at that point the motion belongs to the board not the maker.

Main motions are debatable. The maker speaks first, then the chair seeks to alternate the microphone between opponents and proponents. Unless other rules apply, you only have the right to speak twice, and for 10 minutes in total, in a debate.

After discussion ends, the chair asks if members are ready for the question, and then takes an oral vote (for majority passmark), a rising vote (for 2/3 passmark), or a division vote (count ayes and nays) to determine and announce whether the motion is carried. The Chair should simply say “All those in favor, say aye,” “All those opposed, say nay,” and then (if he is confident of the voice vote) “The motion is carried/not carried.” If not confident he can say “It appears that the ayes have it,” and if there is no motion to Divide the Assembly or a call for a Ballot the chair can announce the carry.

An “incidental main motion” (a confusing term) may include a motion to make something a special order or general order, a motion to “adopt” a committee report (but why should the organization be required to adopt every part of a report? Better to ask for a motion on specific recommendations instead), a motion to ratify acts already done by the assembly or an officer or agent, a motion to limit debates in general, a motion to recess or schedule a recess, or a motion to adjourn or fix the time to which to adjourn, made when no other business is pending.

Four motions returning business to the assembly

These incidental main motions bring back to the assembly questions that had been presented before. Normally you cannot bring the same question up after the subject has already been decided, or if a motion on that subject is pending. More is needed to rescind or reconsider than a mere desire to redo.

1. *Take up from the table* (a motion to resume considering unfinished business). **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**
2. *Rescind or amend something already approved* at any prior time, before or during the pending session or meeting.
2d DEBATE 2/3 (unless already distributed, or ayes by majority of organization’s whole membership)
3. *Discharge a committee* by returning a matter to the assembly,
2d DEBATE 2/3 (unless already distributed, or ayes by majority of organization’s whole membership)
4. *Reconsider* (only available on the same or next day of the same session; motion must be made by someone who supported the carried motion, to evidence new information has caused someone to change his or her mind). **2d (by anyone) DEBATE MAJORITY (even if underlying motion is a 2/3 matter)**

Five privileged motions

These motions relate to the proper conduct of the overall meeting. They have priority in the following order, meaning that when one is pending, only the ones above it may be entertained.

1. *Fix time to which to adjourn* (not needed if to next regular meeting). **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**
2. *Adjourn* (privileged when moved during other business; an incidental main motion otherwise).
2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY
3. *Recess* (intended to be used for a “short intermission,” for “specified length of time”; reject as dilatory if intended to delay or defeat business). **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**

4. *Question of privilege* (personal accommodation of member (e.g., temperature, volume), or rights of the assembly (e.g., confidential information)). **NO 2d NO DEBATE CHAIR**
5. *Call for enforcement of special orders or general orders of the day* (force agenda to be followed concerning unfinished business given special order or general order).
No 2d NO DEBATE AUTOMATIC (takes a 2/3 vote to overturn special order or general order)

Seven subsidiary motions

These motions are directed at suspending or terminating consideration of another pending motion. They are all subordinate to privileged motions, and have priority among themselves in the following order:

1. *Lay on the table* (temporarily for an “immediate” “urgent” reason, e.g., departure or arrival of speaker; reject as dilatory if intended to prevent consideration of a motion); no debate; majority can decide to take back up from the table. **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**
2. *Close debate* (also called “move the previous question” or “call the question”). **2d NO DEBATE 2/3**
3. *Limit or extend limits of debate*. **2d NO DEBATE 2/3**
4. *Postpone to a certain time* but not later than the end of the next regular meeting, if the assembly meets at least quarterly. **2d DEBATE re time MAJORITY to create general order, 2/3 to create special order**
5. *Refer to a committee*. One option is a motion to go into a committee of the whole (to allow chair to enter debate, to avoid public notice, to excuse non-members, and to facilitate informal and unreported testing of positions). **2d DEBATE re commitment MAJORITY**
6. *Amend*, at which point the amendment motion becomes a mini-main motion eligible for other motions, including a motion to amend the amendment; deal with them in the reverse order of proposal, LIFO. Amendments to amendments OK, but no further. Priority depends on what motion is being amended. Use “strike” and “replace” language, not a restatement that leaves assembly to figure out what changed. **2d DEBATE MAJORITY (even if underlying motion is a 2/3 matter)**
7. *Postpone indefinitely* (equivalent to a rejection if it passes). If it fails, it cannot be reconsidered; opponents can move on to trying amendment or other options. Also used to back the assembly out of a badly chosen main motion (e.g., don’t want to vote against giving someone an honor). Also used to give people who have already spoken for 10 minutes or twice a chance to speak again. So this is a strategic weapon, not one you would see outside of Robertsworld, but it makes perfect sense inside Robertsworld. I can’t wait to try it out some time. **2d DEBATE MAJORITY**

Many incidental subsidiary motions

These motions relate to the manner in which the assembly and chair are hearing the pending motion or motions in particular. They do not have a fixed priority against other motions or against each other.

1. *Point of order* or procedure (interrupt). **NO 2d NO DEBATE CHAIR**
2. *Appeal decision of chair* (no interruption). **2d DEBATE MAJORITY (tie goes to chair’s ruling)**
3. *Suspend rules*. **2d NO DEBATE 2/3 if legal**
4. *Object to consideration of motion* (only immediately, before debate begins). **No 2d NO DEBATE 2/3**

5. *Division of question* into parts or by paragraph or seriatim. **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**
6. *Division of assembly* (i.e., object to relying on an oral vote, require a show of hands or the like). **No 2d NO DEBATE AUTOMATIC for rising vote**
7. *Ballot* or roll call or counted standing vote, close or reopen polls.
2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY except 2/3 to close or reopen polls
8. *Nominations*, when nominations from the floor are permitted. How to nominate, to close or reopen nominations. **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY except 2/3 to close or reopen nominations**
9. *Requests* (parliamentary inquiry, point of information **No 2d NO DEBATE CHAIR**; leave to withdraw a motion **2d NO DEBATE MAJORITY**)

Order of dealing with motions

1. *Privileged Motions* in order (fix time to which to adjourn, adjourn, take recess, question of privilege, enforce special or general orders of the day);
2. *Subsidiary Motions* in order (lay on table urgently, call for previous question/close debate, limit/extend debate, postpone to definite time, refer, amend, postpone indefinitely).
3. *Incidental Subsidiary Motions* as appropriate; priority within #1 and #2 and with each other varies (point of order, appeal, suspend rules, object to consideration, division of question, division of assembly, nominations, miscellaneous).
4. *Main Motion* (at last!). “Hey, remember me?”

Again, I do not profess to be an expert on these rules, just a layperson who slogged through the texts with the weight of experience of service in nonprofit organizations. Some aspects of Robertsworld, like having to begin any discussion with the making of a main motion, I would rather see deferred within a reasonable time period to see if a consensus emerges for a successful motion. Other aspects of Robertsworld, like what is and isn’t debateable, or retradeable, or amendable, and what takes a majority or supermajority vote, are very sound in almost all facets of nonprofit deliberation.

A handy chart summarizing the motions is attached. I had stared at similar charts in the past, blankly, like a dog watching television—I knew something was happening, but I didn’t know what. Now I look at such tables with fresh eyes. I hope it now makes more sense to the reader of these *Robert’s Robert’s Rules Rules*!

Parliamentary Motions

Motion	Second	Debatable	Amendable	Vote
PRIVILEGED MOTIONS				
Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn	Yes	No	Yes	Majority
Adjourn	Yes	No	No	Majority
Recess	Yes	No	Yes	Majority
Raise a Question of Privilege	No	No	No	None
SUBSIDIARY MOTIONS				
Lay on the Table	Yes	No	No	Majority
Previous Question (Close Debate)	Yes	No	No	2/3
Limit or Extend Limits of Debate	Yes	No	Yes	2/3
Postpone to a Certain Time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Commit or Refer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Amend the Amendment	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
Amend or Substitute	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Postpone Indefinitely	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
MAIN MOTIONS				
Original				
Main Motion/Resolution	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Bring a Question Again				
Reconsider	Yes	Varies	No	Majority
Take from the Table	Yes	No	No	Majority
Rescind	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority with notice
INCIDENTAL MOTIONS				
<i>No order of precedence</i>				
Point of Order	No	No	No	None
Appeal	Yes	Varies	No	Majority
Suspend the Rules	Yes	No	No	2/3
Object to Consideration	No	No	No	2/3
Division of a Question	Yes	No	Yes	Majority
Division of the Assembly	No	No	No	None
Parliamentary Inquiry	No	No	No	None
Request for Information	No	No	No	None
Withdraw or Modify a Motion	No	No	No	Majority