

Parliamentary Procedure

What is Parliamentary Procedure?

Helpful Questions and Answers

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What is Parliamentary Procedure?

NOW's business meetings (for example, all board meetings and the Friday morning and Sunday plenary sessions at the national conference) are governed by *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised*, the most widely-used parliamentary authority in the U.S.

Parliamentary Procedure can appear intimidating and confusing. However, it sets up a specific set of rules for the easy and orderly conduct of meetings, allowing every person within the organization to be heard and helping members make decisions. This time-tested method of conducting business is a way to ensure democratic rule, protection of rights, flexibility and a fair hearing for everyone.

There's an easy guide to floor proceedings available, and people knowledgeable in parliamentary procedure are on call at all times during the meeting sessions to answer any questions.

Helpful Questions and Answers

1. What's a point of information?

This is a question directed to the chair. If you need some information in order to decide how to vote on a motion, you request it by asking a point of information. Since red cards are used for points of information, they are called on ahead of green or yellow cards. Points of information should, therefore, not be used as a disguised form of debate, as it's unfair to members who are waiting to speak using green or yellow cards. An example of debate disguised as a point of information is a question that begins with "Isn't it true that...?"

2. What's a point of personal privilege?

Points of personal privilege concern a person's rights as an individual. For example, if you are having trouble breathing because the ventilation system in the room isn't working properly, it's appropriate to bring this to the chair's attention using a point of personal privilege.

Another kind of personal privilege is when someone has described your position on an issue (by naming you specifically) and has misstated your viewpoint. If this happens, it's appropriate to correct it using a point of personal privilege. If, however, a speaker in debate says something about a general group, like NOW members, it's not appropriate in that case to respond using a point of personal privilege. To do so (using a red card) would place you unfairly at the head of the line for debate. The proper way to respond in that situation would be by using a green card for debate.

3. **What's a point of order?**

A point of order is used to call a violation of the rules to the attention of the chair and the conference. For example, if the adopted rules say that the aisles and the microphone lines shall be cleared during a vote, it's appropriate to use a point of order if this procedure isn't being followed.

Similarly, if *Robert's Rules of Order* says that a particular kind of motion is not debatable, it's appropriate to use a point of order if the conference is in fact debating such a motion.

4. **What's a point of parliamentary inquiry?**

This is used to ask the chair how to go about doing something properly using our parliamentary procedure. For example, if you want the conference to vote separately on two parts of a motion so that one portion could pass and one portion could fail, but you don't know how, it's appropriate to use a point of parliamentary inquiry (red card) to ask the chair how to do so.

5. **Who answers these points of order, information, etc.?**

The chair rules on whether a point is being properly used. For example, if a member is using a point of information to debate rather than request information, the chair will rule that the member is out of order. (Rulings of the chair can be appealed; appeals require a second and are debatable).

The chair responds to all points of order and points of parliamentary inquiry. Parliamentarians do not make rulings. They advise the chair who makes all rulings. The chair responds to the points of information for which s/he knows the answers. When it is appropriate, the chair will ask the maker of the motion to provide the information requested.

Points of personal privilege generally do not require a specific "response." If it is a question of the ventilation system, for example, the chair will ask someone to attend to the problem. If it is a question of an individual's view being misstated in debate, the person raising the point of privilege is given the opportunity to correct the misstatement.

6. **What does *Robert's Rules of Order* say about decorum in debate?**

Robert's Rules of Order is designed to promote debate in a smooth and orderly manner. It specifically provides that "when a question is pending, a member can condemn the nature or likely consequences of the proposed measure in strong terms, but [s/he] must avoid personalities and under no circumstances can [s/he] attack or question the motives of another member. The measure, not the member, is the subject of debate." *Robert's* further provides that the chair normally should first warn the member who isn't abiding by these rules, but with or without such warning, the chair or any other member can "call the member to order."

Sometimes it's hard to believe, but when used properly and in good faith, red card points can actually improve the flow of the proceedings instead of bringing them to a grinding halt.

May the process be with you.