

call to order

The Rules of Debate

—J. Michael Blaska, *Parliamentarian & Chief of Staff,*
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Very often when we mention *Robert's Rules of Order*, we think of it as a guide to what motions are in order, i.e. Is a second required? Is the matter debatable? Can the matter be amended and the vote required? *Robert's* does all of that and much more. Rules governing *Debate* and *Rules of Decorum* are a major component to rules of order and running effective meetings. In this month's *Call to Order*, I will review the rules associated with *Debate*.

The ability to debate is a basic right of every member of a body and is limited only by parliamentary law or the rules of the body. However, until a matter is brought before the assembly, it cannot be debated. The general rule against discussion without a motion is one of parliamentary procedure's most powerful tools for keeping business on track.

Again, until a matter has been brought before the assembly in the form of a motion, it cannot be debated. A member who has obtained the floor when no other action is pending can make the motion. The motion must be seconded and restated by the chair before it is ready for debate.

The maker of the motion is entitled to debate first. Once debate has concluded the chair should ask, "Are you ready for the question?" After a reasonable pause, the chair may put the question to a vote. However, if someone rises to speak, it must be allowed. The chair cannot end debate by putting the question.

No member can speak more than twice on a matter or for longer than ten minutes. Some believe this is unreasonable in that members should be allowed to speak as often as they want. This rule, however, is important in running effective meetings as it forces members to think about what they are going to say and to plan their debate.

Some also say that this rule is unreasonable when it comes to debating important or comprehensive motions such as adoption of the budget. Keep in mind that this rule applies to every single motion. You can speak twice and ten minutes on the motion to *Adopt*, twice and ten minutes on each and every amendment, twice and ten minutes on a motion to *Postpone to a Certain Time*, *Refer* to a committee or *Adjournment*. Remember, that giving a report, asking a question, responding to a question or offering a suggestion is not counted as debate. For those of you who watch C-SPAN, you are not allowed to yield your unused time to another member as Congress does.

Every member should be allowed to speak once before allowing a member to speak a second time. If possible, the chair should alternate between those for and against the matter if known. This is especially important when holding a public hearing in which speakers should be required to register. This allows the chair to alternate between those for and those against the matter at hand.

Stay tuned for the next month's 'Call to Order' to review the Rules of Decorum and keep on the right side of debate.

Members must confine their remarks to the merits of the question. In debate, a member's remarks must be germane to the question before the body. Statements made during debate must have bearing on whether the pending question should be adopted or defeated. Debate unrelated to the subject matter should not be allowed.

Robert's also suggests that no one speaks while seated except in committees and small boards. Many boards allow members to be seated while speaking, which is fine. Standing makes it clear who has the floor, especially on larger boards where

members may whisper or talk to each other during the meeting.

Remember, just because you are not following the rules as specified in *Robert's Rules of Order*, does not mean you are doing it wrong; however, it is always better to adhere to your local rules and *Robert's* as much as possible.

Stay tuned for the next month's *Call to Order* to review the *Rules of Decorum* and keep on the right side of debate ... and who knows, maybe your mother too! •

Source: Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised, 11th Edition

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The pressure you're putting me under is too much.
I QUIT!
Sincerely,
Your Heart

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