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# Meetings Without Rules?

## Parliamentary Pointers for Community Members

**A**rcane parliamentary terminology is easy to poke fun at and my colleague, Charles A. Perkins, did a humorous job of it ("Wouldn't It Be Great If... Ruminations of a Parliamentarian" *CondoMedia*, July). The column may have reinforced the misplaced idea held by many community association members that meeting procedures are complex, difficult to understand, and an unnecessary encumbrance. But the fact remains that there is no substitute for well-considered meeting ground rules. Such rules produce important products: group decisions that are

backed by all those affected because the process was transparent and fair.

Unfamiliarity with these rules causes problems. In some communities, the lack of established meeting procedures — or the failure to understand and abide by them — has allowed too many meetings to collapse into discord and acrimony, leading to continuing feuding among association members.

It's a problem due, in part, to modern times. Americans attend a lot fewer meetings today than in the 19th Century when volunteer activity was at its height. So, we have few opportuni-

ties to learn these rules as we go along. As a result, fewer people know what is going on when someone says "Point of order."

The solution, as usual, is education. Knowledge really is power.

A community association, like any organized deliberative body, needs some rules to process business efficiently while respecting minority viewpoints and individual members. Meeting procedures used in most organizations are based on common parliamentary law, that somewhat amorphous body of general knowledge that originated, like much of our common law, in England. Colonial legislatures, municipal governments, and voluntary organizations modeled their conduct on the usages of the English Parliament because of its prestige (hence "parliamentary" procedure). In America, the procedures evolved, with state legislatures and Congress serving as new models. This created chaos, which some authors attempted to tame by organizing and describing the meeting rules that people generally agreed about.

In 1876, military engineer Henry Robert published the initial edition of Robert's Rules of Order, the first popular book to prescribe default rules for those controversial subjects about which there was no consensus. Robert's premise was that it is sometimes more important to have a rule — any rule — as a default than to await the evolution of the best possible rule. In this, Robert echoed Thomas Jefferson, author of America's first parliamentary manual: "(W)hether these (rules) be in all cases the most rational or not, is really not of so great importance. It is much more material that there be a rule to go by, than what that rule is; that there may be a uniformity of proceeding in business, not subject to the caprice of the

### Motions Commonly Used in Association Meetings

*The following motions have no rank. They are in order whenever they are applicable:*

Motion	Vote	Debatable	Amendable
POINT OF ORDER (member raises possible rules violation)	No vote/Chair rules	No	No
APPEAL (from a ruling of the Chair)	Majority	Yes	No
SUSPEND THE RULES	2/3	No	No
DIVISION (recount of an oral vote)	No vote/ Single member demand	No	No
REQUEST (to request information or permission)	Majority	No	No
RECONSIDER	Majority	Yes	No

*The following motions rank in order from highest to lowest.  
A lower ranked motion cannot be made when a higher ranked motion is pending:*

ADJOURN	Majority	No	No
RECESS	Majority	No	Yes (w/ length of recess)
PREVIOUS QUESTION (closes debate and mandates immediate vote)	2/3	No	No
POSTPONE	Majority	Yes	Yes
COMMIT	Majority	Yes	Yes
AMEND	Majority	Yes	Yes
MAIN MOTION (brings new business to the floor)	Majority	Yes	Yes

*The rules for motions in this basic list are taken from Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (10th ed. 2000). See the book for details, exceptions, and other motions.*



Speaker, or (trivial objections) of the members."

Robert's organizational skills and the brevity of the "pocket manual" made it easy to find the relevant rule during the middle of a contentious meeting. And, if an organization wanted to change Robert's default rule, it could do so simply by adopting its own special rule.

In the 19th Century, when volunteer activity was the primary source of both charity and entertainment, Robert's Rules of Order took off. Robert's Rules became the byword for fair meeting procedure. Over time, however, subsequent editions of Robert's expanded to include more and more responses to questions that came up. The current (2000) edition, Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, published under the auspices of the Robert heirs, runs to 643 pages of text, not including the introduction, index, and tables.

An alternative parliamentary guide familiar to many community association residents is Town Meeting Time (TMT) now in its third edition (2001). TMT is published by the Massachusetts Moderators Association. TMT, written specifically for the town meeting, with many statutory constraints taken into account, unsurprisingly differs from Robert on a number of important points, which leads to confusion.

Lack of familiarity with Robert and TMT is particularly uncomfortable for association officers and members when others use some of the more archaic terms and procedures. The solution is not the most common response — trying to run a meeting while ignoring parliamentary procedure. Inevitably, a meeting without rules and with more than about a dozen members quickly descends into either dictatorship or anarchy.

There is a better solution: Make it easier for association members to learn the procedures that govern the association that governs their homes. It may not be a lot of fun, but it is a basic part of civic education that empowers association members to participate actively.

The CAI bookstore carries a number of useful titles and there are excellent correspondence and seminar courses available through the American Institute of Parliamentarians ([www.parliamentaryprocedure.org](http://www.parliamentaryprocedure.org)) and the National Association of Parliamentarians ([www.parliamentarians.org](http://www.parliamentarians.org)). In addition, there are a number of AIP-designated teachers in New England. A community association could encourage members to join one of the national parliamentary groups or organize a custom-designed seminar for members.

Another strategy is to adopt a more modern, simplified parliamentary authority than Robert. Alice Sturgis wrote The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure (4th edition 2000) to make parliamentary procedure accessible to today's audiences. The book is kept up to date (including provisions on electronic meetings) by the AIP. Doris Zimmerman's Robert's Rules in Plain

English (1997) covers the highlights of Robert's Rules in a simplified format. Modern Parliamentary Procedure by Ray E. Keese, published by the American Psychological Association, minimizes the number of motions while preserving basic safeguards.

Just as association members need to know the bylaws to participate effectively, they need to know the basics of parliamentary procedure to participate actively. It's true that the majority often gets its way. But wise association members will remember that a determined minority or a stubborn individual—armed with knowledge of parliamentary procedure and backed by the bylaws—can often prevail. ☐

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