



Parliamentary Procedure for Presbyterians

A. Introduction

Presbyterians are known for doing things "decently and in order." That really applies to the way we worship but is often used to describe the careful and prayerful way that Presbyterians make decisions. We make decisions together, usually in representative groups such as a committee, Session, or Presbytery, sometimes in a democratic way as in a congregational meeting.

The smaller the group the more flexible it can be in how its meetings are conducted, providing more time and freedom for discussion. This guide provides the "decent and orderly" system dictated by the *Book of Order* and *Robert's Rules of Order*. Your session may be more informal generally. However, when more formal rules are needed, particularly during times of disagreement, you'll want to be familiar with these rules.

For Presbyterians, *Roberts Rules of Order* is followed except when *The Book of Order* specifies otherwise (G-9.0303 and G-7.0302c). When those differences occur, they are referenced here.

B. Motions

1. Seconding a Motion

All motions require a second.

Except motions that don't require a second. A motion that comes from a committee, commission, or division does not require a second. Such a motion already comes from more than one person and can be assumed that it has "already" been seconded.

2. Non-debatable Motions

There are some motions, once they have been seconded, that do not permit any debate but must be put to a vote immediately. Sometimes these motions raise points of order and those must be dealt with by the Moderator as seen fit.

a. A call for the question or a motion to end discussion

The moderator usually calls for a vote when it appears the discussion is winding up or finished saying something like, "Are we ready to vote?" If even one member objects, debate continues until debate is closed either by another attempt by the moderator or by a motion to call the question. This motion requires a second but is not debatable. It must be voted on immediately. In order to pass, a two-thirds majority is required. The person making the motion must be recognized by the moderator and cannot interrupt someone who has the floor.



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b. A motion to table

The correct wording of this motion is to lay the motion on the table. This motion requires a second but is not debatable. It must be voted on immediately. In order to pass, a simple majority is required. Amendments to the motion are not allowed. The person making the motion must be recognized by the moderator and cannot interrupt someone who has the floor.

If the motion specifies a time to remove the motion from the table, then the motion is out of order. In that case, the proper motion is to postpone to a certain time (see section 3e) which is a debatable motion. The motion can be brought back to the floor later in the same meeting or at a later meeting by a majority vote. If the motion isn't reintroduced (removed from the table) during the same meeting it is lost unless reintroduced.

c. Limit or extend limits on debate

A motion may be made to limit debate (such as to limit to an additional 15 minutes or to limit until 4:00 PM) or, if a limit has already been placed, to extend the limit (such as to add 15 minutes or discuss until 4:15 PM). This motion requires a second but is not debatable. Amendments to the motion, such as to make it 30 minutes rather than 15 minutes, are allowed. It must be voted on immediately. In order to pass, a two-thirds majority is required.

d. Call for an order of the day

If the agenda calls for an order of the day (certain items are docketed for a specific time, i.e., 7:30 Stewardship Consultant Presentation), the time has been reached but the meeting is running behind docket, a motion may be made to call for the order of the day. This motion does not require a second, the person making the motion may interrupt a speaker on the floor, there is no vote taken, and there can be no amendments. The moderator must immediately go to the order of the day.

e. Raise a question of privilege

This is a rare happening. If a person is having trouble staying awake because it is much too warm in the room, that can be brought to the moderator's attention as a question (or point) of personal privilege. If some one during debate incorrectly describes your position on an issue AND refers to you by name, you may request a question of privilege in order to respond. (You must be referred to by name and not just as a member of a group.) This point does not require a second and is not debatable, and is dealt with as the moderator sees fit.

f. Point of order

This point is used to raise a question about what is seen to be a violation of the rules or an error in procedure. This point does not require a second, is not debatable, and is not voted on. The moderator rules on the point raised. After the moderator has ruled, a member may appeal the decision. This is discussed in section 3f below.



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g. A motion to adjourn

This motion requires a second, is not debatable, and may not be amended. A majority vote is required to pass. A related motion to specify the time at which to adjourn at some time in the future follows the same procedure except amendments are allowed with respect to the time of adjournment.

h. A motion to recess

A motion to recess must include a time to resume. The motion is not debatable but is amendable as to the time to reconvene. The motion requires a majority vote to pass.

i. A motion to divide the question

If a motion contains two or more parts, each of which could be a complete motion on its own, it is permissible to request that the motion be divided – that is, the parts be considered separately. The motion requires a second and is not debatable, and requires a majority to pass. The moderator may declare the division without a vote when there appears to be consensus. If there is disagreement with that, the process of appeal of a ruling can be instituted (see section 3f).

The separation can be complete or only one or more parts may be divided out. For example, if there are four parts there are several ways the division could be accomplished – it could be divided into four parts, it could be divided into part one and parts two through four, it could be divided into parts one and two and parts three and four, and so forth. The motion must specify how the division is to be made. An amendment to change the way the motion is divided is allowed.

3. Debatable Motions

a. Main motion

This is THE main motion. Once the motion has been made (and seconded, if necessary) the moderator may allow time for information from the committee or person who made the motion or for information questions from the floor before debate begins. The moderator needs to ensure that they really are information questions and not disguised debate.

A main motion is debatable, is amendable, and requires a majority vote to pass. The moderator needs to establish guidelines that ensure a fair and equitable debate. This is often done by recognizing speakers of opposing views alternately. If the issue is such that it is likely to generate a lot of debate, time limits should be set in advance and strictly adhered to. When a speaker is repeating points previously made, the moderator should interrupt and ask the speaker to limit remarks to new information. The discussion must be relevant to the motion; a speaker not addressing the content of the motion should be asked to keep remarks to the subject of the motion. If the speaker refuses to do that, the speaker should be ruled out of order. The moderator is not under obligation to entertain a motion if it is deemed to be absurd, obstructive, offensive, or trivial.

A main motion may be amended (see section 3b). Minor modification may be suggested to the main motion. If such a suggestion is accepted by consent of



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the body, the wording of the motion is changed. If anyone disagrees, then a change can only be made by passing an amendment.

What do you do if you declare a speaker out of order and the speaker refuses to relinquish the floor? The speaker will be either a Minister of the Word and Sacraments or an Elder or a Deacon. That person might be reminded of parts of the ordination vows that person agreed to. For example, the vows include a promise "to be governed by our church's polity and abide by its discipline" and to "further the peace, unity, and purity of the church".

b. A motion to amend

The main motion on the floor may be amended. A recognized speaker may make a motion to amend by giving the specific way in which the motion is to be modified. A motion to amend requires a second and a majority to pass. At that point, discussion must be relevant to the amendment, not to the main motion. In rare cases, a motion to amend may inspire a motion to amend the amendment. Only one amendment to an amendment is allowed.

The amendment must be germane to the main motion. If the main motion deals with the appointment of an ad hoc committee, that motion may not have an amendment offered that specifies the purchase of a desk for the office.

c. A substitute motion

A motion to substitute is the offering of a totally new motion on the same subject or the changing of a lengthy motion by substituting a new paragraph. In the latter case, this is the equivalent of a lengthy amendment and is more easily handled as a substitute. The new motion requires a second and is then treated as a main motion in terms of discussion rules and amendments. If the substitute motion passes – the vote is not to approve the substitute motion but to replace the original motion with the substitute – there is now a new main motion on the floor. Then the new main motion can be discussed further and voted on. If the motion to substitute fails, the body returns to discussion of the original main motion.

d. Refer to a committee

This motion is also referred to as a motion to commit. The motion must specify the committee to which referral is being made. The committee can be a standing committee or it can be a special committee. If the motion is referred to a special committee (often commonly called a task force or sometimes a "team"), the motion must specify the makeup of the committee or, alternatively, it could say, "to be appointed by the moderator" or something similar. The only allowable amendment is to change the committee of referral. The motion could include additional requirements such as "to report at the next meeting" or other specific directions such as what to include or not include.

e. Postpone action

There are two types of motion to postpone. One is to postpone indefinitely. This can only be applied to a main motion, not to amendments. It is similar to a



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motion to lay on the table except it is debatable. *Roberts Rules* suggests that this is a way to avoid a direct vote on the question. The motion requires a second and a majority vote to pass.

The other type is to postpone to a certain time (or to postpone definitely). The "time" could be later in the same meeting or could be at a later meeting. This motion requires a second and a majority to pass. It can only be applied to a main motion. The only allowable amendment is to change the time.

f. Appeal a ruling by the moderator

Once the moderator has made a ruling, that ruling can be challenged by a member by moving to appeal. The motion requires a second and is generally debatable. The moderator has the first opportunity to speak during the debate and to be the last to speak. The question is put to the membership as "those who agree to sustain the ruling of the moderator signify by saying aye" followed by the request for no votes. Note that the vote is not to sustain the appeal but to sustain the ruling. A majority vote is necessary to sustain the moderator's ruling; a tie vote also sustains the ruling. (Note that the moderator is allowed to vote.)

C. Opening of a Meeting

It is important to set the tone from the beginning of the meeting. Also, some instruction and information can help.

1. Prayer

All Presbyterian meetings are opened with prayer.

2. Cell phones

Sometimes people need to be reminded at the beginning of the meeting to turn off their cell phones and pagers (or set them to vibrate).

3. Orders of the day

Session and congregational meetings do not usually include orders of the day – specific times when specified business will be conducted. If there is a turnover in membership, such as can be true for Presbytery meetings, a word explaining what orders of the day are might be good to do.

4. Consent agenda

A consent agenda is a list of actions to be taken that are generally routine in nature and are voted on all at once. Any member can request that an item be removed from the consent agenda and upon such request it must be done. That item then becomes a regular item in the agenda.

5. Wait to be recognized

State the policy by which speakers will be recognized. Even (or maybe especially) in a small group, more than one person may try to talk at once. In Presbytery meetings or congregational meetings one might hear someone call out "Question". The rule is that only the person recognized by the moderator has



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the right to speak. In a small group, the best way is to ask people to raise their hands when they wish to be recognized. If there are several with hands raised, the moderator can keep a list of the order in which hands were raised and recognize people in that order. In a large group where microphones are used, the moderator can recognize only those people standing at a microphone. If debate seems to be winding down and the last speaker recognized has finished, the moderator certainly has the right to recognize that person who calls out "Question" even if that person is not at a microphone.

6. Address the moderator (chair)

Remind speakers that they are to address the moderator, not the group, during discussion. Committee reports are addressed to the membership but if there are any motions included in the report, those are to be addressed to the moderator.

D. Voting

1. General voting

When it is time for a vote, the moderator should clearly state what the motion is before proceeding to the vote. There is sometimes a misunderstanding when there has been a motion to call the question – that motion must be voted on first before the vote on the main motion (or amendment) can be taken. If an amendment has been passed, it should be made clear that the vote is the motion as amended.

The usual voting is by asking for aye and no votes. When such a vote is inconclusive, the next step is to request a show of hands. For a small group it is easy to count hands if the vote appears to be close. For a large group when a show of hands is inconclusive, the next step is to have a standing vote with the moderator making a judgment based on that. If the result is still inconclusive, the next step is to have a standing vote with a count being made. Voting by ballot is required in certain elections (see section D3).

The moderator of a session has a vote, even though the moderator is not a member of the congregation. All pastors, co-pastors, and associate pastors are members of the session because it is specified by *The Book of Order* (G-10.0101). The minister who serves as moderator of a congregational meeting does not have a vote because the pastor is not a member of the congregation (G-7.0308). The moderator of a Presbytery has a vote because the moderator is a member of Presbytery either because that person is a minister member (G-11.0400a) or, if an elder, as specified by *The Book of Order* (G-11.0100c).

2. Amendments, substitute motions

Votes on amendments and substitute motions should proceed in the same manner as that for a main motion. If a substitute motion has been made and is passed, then it becomes the main motion. The vote on a substitute motion is not to approve the substitute motion but to make the substitute motion the main motion. The next step is to vote on the "new" main motion.



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3. Elections

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has its own rules for carrying out elections in congregational meetings. For the election of elders and deacons, election must be by written ballot if the number of nominees exceeds the number of vacancies (G-14.0204b). If the number of nominees equals the number of vacancies, the usual procedure is followed (see the *Church Nominating Committee Guide*). For the calling of a pastor or associate pastor, the vote must be by written ballot (G-14.-5-3b).

4. Proxy votes

Proxy votes (giving someone else the right to vote for you in your absence) are not allowed. The only exception is when civil law specifically requires it in corporate matters (G-7.0404).

5. E-mail Voting

Voting by e-mail is not allowed under *Robert's Rules*. The requirement is for "simultaneous aural debate." In other words, everyone voting must have the benefit of hearing the discussion of everyone else. That is not possible by e-mail. Even when everyone "replies to all" to discuss the motion and vote, aural debate is not provided for by e-mail - yet.

Clearly the best way to make a decision is in a face-to-face meeting. When that is not possible and a decision must be made, a telephone conference call is perfectly acceptable. In a conference call everyone eligible to vote is able to hear everyone else and participate in the discussion of the business and cast a voice vote. Likewise a member attending a session meeting by calling in and participating over a "speaker phone," while not ideal, is acceptable. Video conferencing and some internet applications that provide for every participant to speak and hear everyone else in "real time" are becoming more available and open new opportunities for deliberative bodies to span geography and make timely decisions. Still nothing beats sitting together around the same table.