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# HOW TO USE ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER FOR YOUR COALITION

A GUIDE FOR NEWBIES (OR “OLDIES” NEEDING A REFRESHER)

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Evolution Foundation

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## Introduction

We, the Evolution Foundation staff, have participated in literally thousand's of coalition, committee, and board meetings. Sounds exciting, right? It's what we do. During those thousands of meetings we have often seen business handled appropriately by the volunteer leaders of the groups. However, on occasion we have also seen business handled inappropriately.

When the business of coalitions or committees is not conducted correctly it can cause confusion at best. Often, however, it results in frustration or even anger among the members. The easiest way to avoid such confusion and frustration is to follow Robert's Rules of Order which were designed to keep groups on track as they make important decisions. Being familiar with these parliamentary rules is essential for coalition and committee leaders. In this guide for Newbies we'll walk you through the basics. At first it can seem unnatural and a bit foreign. Stick with it. Soon it will become second nature.

## How This Manual is Organized

Each section of the Newbie's guide will give a brief overview of that topic followed by a more detailed explanation of the topic. If after reading the introduction, you think you already know the material that is to follow, we still encourage you to at least glance at what follows. You might be surprised at what you learn.

In addition, to the text, we at the Evolution Foundation are very aware that some people learn better through more visually stimulating media like videos. Where possible we've placed a few links to quality YouTube videos in the guide as well. Be aware, however, that these were not produced by the Evolution Foundation but have been posted on YouTube for public use.

# Part 1: Basic Parliamentary Procedures

## HOW TO MAKE A MOTION

Since Robert's Rules of Order can be one of those topics that put people to sleep, how about a humorous video to get started?

This video gives us a simple start, but keep in mind there is more to come.

Just click on the video to learn how to make a motion properly.



### Summary:

When everything goes smoothly, coalitions or committees make decisions with a few basic steps. Someone recommends an action with a motion. Someone else “seconds” the motion. The chairperson gives the group an opportunity to discuss the motion. Finally, the group votes to approve or disapprove the motion.

Here is a quick quiz to see how much you know about Robert's Rules of Order.

You are chairing a coalition meeting, and someone makes a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting. Do you?

- a) Discuss the minutes for any necessary changes then get a second for the motion as a way to approve the minutes?
- b) Discuss the minutes for any necessary changes, get a second for the motion, then vote to approve the minutes?
- c) Get a second to the motion in order to approve the minutes?
- d) Get a second and discuss the minutes for any necessary changes to approve the minutes?
- e) Get a second, discuss the minutes for any necessary changes, then vote to approve the minutes?
- f) None of the above
- g) Any of the above

If you chose “e”, you would be correct. Robert's Rules of Order, also known as parliamentary procedure, has very specific and set rules for handling business in your coalition. If you learn the basic formula you will be able to handle 95% of the business your coalition needs to address.

This basic process outlined in Robert's Rules of Order looks like the following in schematic form.

## *Basic Parliamentary Procedure*

### *Motion*

A motion is a recommendation that the group go on record in favor of a certain definite action. A motion is also called a “move.” That is, a member will “move” an action. Specifically, the member will say, “I make a motion that...” or “I move that...”

### *Second*

After a motion is made, another member must “second” the proposal as a way to demonstrate that the issue is of interest to more than one person. If no one “seconds” the motion, the motion is dead and cannot be further considered. If the motion comes from a committee, a second is not necessary because more than one person already agrees the issue is of interest. Specifically, the member wanting to make the second will say, “I second the motion.”

### *Discussion*

The discussion period gives everyone an opportunity to ask questions, clarify the meaning of the motion, and debate its usefulness to the group. This is where things can get complicated including the addition of amendments to the original motion. See the next section on “Common Parliamentary Variations” for a discussion about amendments. Most motions will be simple and not need amendments.

### *Vote*

There are several different ways a group may vote. The chair may ask for a show of hands, a voice vote, or even a secret ballot. A voice vote or a show of hands are the most common in coalitions. The chair will say, “All in favor say ‘I’” or “All those in favor raise your hand”. Next, the chair will say, “All those opposed say ‘no’”, or “All those opposed raise your hand”. For most motions, a simple majority rules.

Here is an example of a simple meeting exchange:

## THE BASICS OF MAKING MOTIONS

Although this video is not nearly as humorous as the first one, it does a good job of explaining the four steps in the motion process.



The Basics of Making Motions

### Simple Meeting Interchange

**Chair:** Do we have a motion to approve the minutes from our last meeting?

**Sally:** I make a motion that we approve the minutes.

**Chair:** Is there a second to the motion?

**Bill:** I second the motion.

**Chair:** Is there any discussion?

*Members discuss the motion.*

**Chair:** All in favor of approving the minutes, raise your hand.

*Members raise their hands.*

**Chair:** All opposed to approving the minutes, raise your hand.  
The minutes are approved.

Much of the coalition's business that requires a vote will use this basic formula:

Motion—Second—Discussion—Vote

Often, however, in coalitions or committee meetings, this formula is not strictly followed.

For example, the chairperson might bring an item of new business to the coalition for consideration. After introducing the item, the chair might say to the group, "What do you think?" Coalition members share their opinions, ask questions, and discuss the pros and cons of the item. Finally, someone will say, "I move we do..." Someone else seconds the motion and the group votes.

In this common scenario, the formula now looks like this:

Discussion—Motion—Second—Vote

The "discussion" portion is out of order. The reasoning behind the order in Robert's Rules is, "Why discuss something if you can't get someone to make a motion and another person to second it? Why discuss something no one cares about? Thus, the

discussion should come after at least two people think this item is important enough to discuss.

With that said, discussing an item before a motion is given is perfectly okay in the context of coalitions. In fact, after much discussion the group may decide no motion is necessary or that they can agree through consensus to do something.

If a motion is made after some discussion, however, the chair should still stick with the proper order of Robert's Rules which means after the "second" the chair might say, "Is there any further discussion before we vote." In that way, everyone feels that they have an opportunity to say what they want about the motion under consideration.

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## Part 2: Common Parliamentary Variations

### Summary

Although 95% of your business that requires some motion or vote will be resolved with the simple formula outlined in Part 1, there are times when motions and discussions can get quite complicated. What happens, for example, when someone wants to change or amend a motion after it has been seconded? Is that allowed, and if so, what is the procedure? For that matter, what happens if someone wants to make amend a motion that has not even been seconded yet? What do you do? What about a "motion to table" or a "calling of the question"? Do you know how to handle these situations? In this section, we take a look at a few of the more complex variations in Robert's Rules of Order.

Most of the decisions made by committees and coalitions will follow the simple pattern described above. On occasion you may experience variations that become slightly more complicated. Remember, however, that even the variations continue to follow

this basic pattern. Here are some of the variations you need to know about.

**Unanimous Consent.** Sometimes it may seem obvious to the chairperson that everyone already agrees with a motion and no vote is necessary. In such cases, he or she may ask if there is any objection to the motion. If there are no objections, the chairperson may declare that the motion is adopted without a formal vote.

**Motion to Table.** If a coalition or committee member thinks the discussion of a motion is going too long or is not moving the group productively toward a solution, he or she can move to table the motion. This motion requires a second and no discussion is allowed. If the group votes to approve the motion to table, the motion is taken “off the table” and no further discussion is allowed. Discussion and a subsequent vote on the motion will take place only if someone moves to take it off the table.

Sometimes group members move to table in order to “kill” the motion. If, however, the group clearly wants to discuss this motion more in the future, a better motion may be to postpone the issue until a designated future date. A motion to postpone needs a second and is debatable.

Another alternative is to make a motion to “table the item until the next meeting.” In essence, this is a motion to table the item at the moment (which requires a second and no discussion) and a motion to take it off the table at the next meeting. This is a common way to handle issues that cannot be resolved in the time constraints of a typical coalition meeting.

**Calling the Question.** If a member believes the discussion has gone on too long and no more new information is being shared, he or she can call for the question. A call for the question is a motion to cease discussion and move on to the vote. Like every other motion it needs a second but no discussion. This vote to cease discussion, then, needs a two-thirds majority vote to pass. If the call for question motion passes, the chairperson will then immediately call for a vote on the original motion that was being discussed.

## THE BASICS OF AMENDING MOTIONS

Want to amend a motion?  
Here's an example of how to do  
that? Notice in the video that the  
chairperson is very careful to  
make sure everyone knows what  
motion is being considered and  
what they are voting on.



**Amendments.** Sometimes, during the discussion phase of a motion, group members may want to make some changes to the original motion. This requires that a member make a formal motion that the original motion be amended. For example, if the original motion was for the coalition to spend \$1000 to promote an upcoming health fair, someone during the discussion phase may move that the amount be changed or amended to \$500.

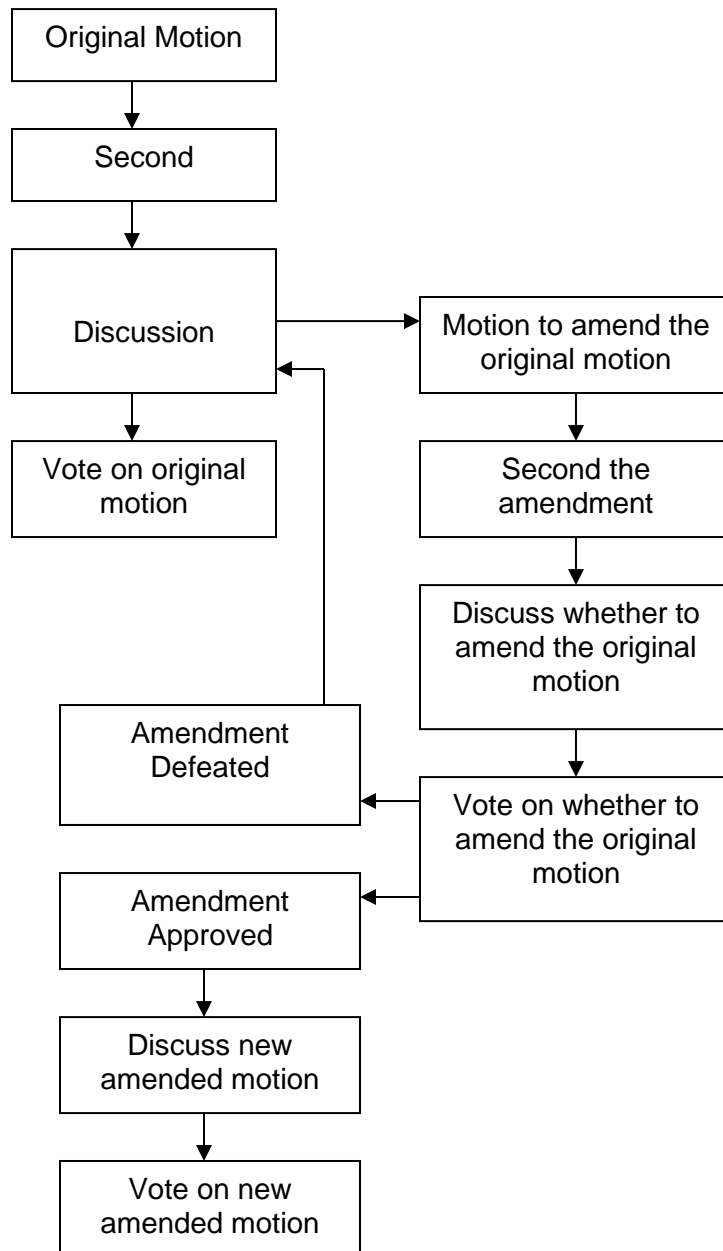
An amendment is another motion that needs a second, discussion, and vote before the group can move on to the original motion. Since only one motion can be considered at a time, the group must now consider this new amended motion before returning to the original motion. In our example, once the amendment is made to make the amount \$500, someone else has to second that amendment and the group must discuss whether or not to amend the original motion. Finally, the group will vote to amend or not amend the original motion. If the amendment doesn't pass, the group returns to the place they were before—discussing the original motion to spend \$1000. If the amendment passes the group moves on from that point and discusses the new amended motion to spend \$500 on the health fair promotion.

Because this gets confusing, remember that a vote to amend a motion is not a vote to approve an amended motion. It is simply a vote to replace the original motion with the new amended motion. In our example, if a member voted to amend the motion so that it included a \$500 limit, that is not a vote to spend \$500. It's only a vote to change the wording of the original motion. After the amended motion has been approved the group may discuss further the merits of spending the \$500 and vote on whether or not to do so.

Below is a flow chart for those of us who are more visual.



# THE AMENDMENT PROCESS



In the following scenario a coalition is discussing a matter of importance to them. Somewhere along the way it got messy and complicated. Can you figure out the mistake the chairperson made? What should he have done differently?

### Amendment Scenario

*(Using the above diagram determine where the group lost their way in the following scenario. How should the amendment have been handled differently?)*

Helen brought a motion to the coalition that they should make a standing committee to develop an “Awareness” campaign about their organization. George immediately agreed and gave a second to the motion. The group then discussed the motion. Most people were in favor of the motion. A few were concerned that they didn’t have the money for such a campaign so developing a committee would be a waste of time. Another person argued that what they needed was an ad hoc or temporary committee rather than a standing committee to do this task.

After much debate, Clint offered an amendment to the motion. He moved that the committee be made an ad hoc committee and be given the responsibility of coming up with a funding plan for the campaign. Immediately, everyone began debating this new proposal. The chair interrupted the debate and told the group they needed to deal with the first motion first, then if the group agreed on a forming a committee they could come back to this amendment and decide what kind of committee it needed to be and what its responsibilities would be.

After further debate on the original motion, it barely past. Then the group began addressing the second motion to change the committee to an ad hoc committee and add the responsibility of coming up with a funding plan. The debate that followed was heated. Several argued that they wouldn’t have voted for a committee at all if they thought it might have these added responsibilities added to it. Others argued that they didn’t want a temporary committee because “awareness” needed to be an ongoing issue the board should address.

Eventually, the second motion was defeated, and many members left frustrated.

Did you figure out where they went wrong? Everything was fine until Clint offered an amendment to the motion. At that point, the chairperson should have asked for a second to Clint’s motion. If no one seconded Clint’s motion, then Clint’s motion would have been dead with no further discussion which would have brought them back to the original motion.

If Clint's motion received a second, then the group could discuss that motion and vote on it. If that passed, they would move forward with the new amended motion. If the amended motion did not pass, they would have returned to the original motion for further discussion at which point someone could have made another amendment, and so forth.

Yes, it can get complicated. However, if the chairperson keeps the above flow chart in mind and remembers that once an amendment is made and seconded, it becomes the priority amendment that must be dealt with before moving on.

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## Part 3: Discussing and Debating Motions

### Summary

There are times when motions are controversial or highly emotional. In those cases, the discussion phase of the parliamentary procedure can easily get out of hand. To keep this from happening Robert's Rules of Order has specific guidelines for discussion. If a chair follows these guidelines, everyone should be able speak their opinion in an orderly fashion.

In order to keep the debate over motions civil and orderly, Robert's Rules of Order defines specific rules for discussion. Here are some key ones to keep in mind.

- **Discussion can begin after a motion has been made and seconded.** Some individuals may want to speak their mind prior to any motion being made in order to sway how a motion is worded. Others might jump in with opinion as soon as the motion is made, often to object. Before any discussion can ensue, the motion needs to be a second to assure more than one person wants to consider the motion.
- **Those who want to speak must be recognized by the chairperson.** This is common courtesy. Instead of the

## DEBATING A MOTION

Since we started with a humorous video, we'll end with one that tries to lighten the "heaviness" of this topic.

In this video we see some of the rules about debating a motion. In a fairly informal coalition or committee you may not need to be as strict as this video demonstrates but you do need to know the proper procedure in case you need to use it.



loudest or the fastest getting their say, the chair should recognize one person at a time to speak in favor of or against the motion.

- **The person who made the motion gets to speak first.** The person who makes the motion should not immediately speak to why he/she made that motion. Instead, the chair should ask for a second. If there is no second, there is no need for the person to discuss why he/she made the motion. The motion is dead. Once the second is made, however, the chair should immediately give the floor to the person making the motion to see if he/she would like to make some comment.
- **A person may be recognized to speak a second time only after everyone else has had an opportunity to speak.** Too often in debates about a motion one or two people will want to speak repeatedly, each giving counterpoints to those who disagree with them. This could go on forever. Therefore, each person should only be limited to two opportunities to speak.
- **The chair should alternate recognition between proponents and opponents.** In highly contentious debates, the chair should make sure an equal number of people are speaking for and against the motion.
- **If an amendment is offered, it must be dealt with before discussion can continue on the main motion.** See Part 2 above. This keeps individuals from getting confused about which motion is being discussed. It is the chair's responsibility to continually make it clear to everyone which motion is being considered at any given point in the process.
- **An amendment to a motion may itself be amended, but only once.** This can get very complicated so try to avoid it if at all possible. If it happens, just remember the rule that you can only deal with one motion at a time so, in order, deal with the amendment to the amendment, then deal with the amendment, then deal with the motion.
- **Conditions of debate can be changed through adopting special rules of order, requiring a two-thirds vote.** The rules outlined here are some the basics for Robert's Rules of Order. If at some point in the process the group wants to dispense with some of these rules, then they can do so by making a motion, seconding that motion,

discussing the motion, and receiving a two-thirds majority in favor of the motion.

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## Conclusion

Robert's Rules of Order are widely used in boards, committees, coalitions, and other groups because they help groups manage their decision-making process. They give a clear step by step process for handling business, give everyone an opportunity to give their opinion, and value everyone's vote equally.

Sometimes they may seem a bit much for an informal coalition that tends to make many of its decisions by consensus. If your coalition is one of these, that is fine. However, you still need to understand and use Robert's Rules of Order in those cases when consensus may not be possible. You may also want to use these procedures to help formalize important decisions that need to be recorded in the minutes. A motion, second, discussion, and vote makes the decision clear for everyone.

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