

# Five Myths About Parliamentary Procedure

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From the moment the responsibility for a decision is invested in more than one person, a fair and orderly process for decision making becomes necessary. Rules of procedure have been used since the beginning of recorded history. For example, the parliamentary rule that there may only be one subject considered at a time was recorded as early as 1581. Unfortunately, just like the old game of telephone, where a message is passed along and frequently gets garbled along the way, some misconceptions have become common place.

**Myth 1: There should be an odd number on boards and committees.** Not only is there no such rule, it doesn't matter whether the number of members on a committee is odd or even. According to *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (10<sup>th</sup> Edition), a majority is "more than half of the votes cast by legal voters"; therefore a tie means that the motion is defeated. The number of people can't prevent a tie, unless you can guarantee that every member is present for every meeting and votes on every issue.

**Myth 2: The chair must turn over the gavel if he or she is a candidate in an election.** The chair does not turn over the gavel in presiding over an election. The chair does not turn over the gavel in presiding over an election. When a motion is made that reflects on the work of the chair, such as a commendation (or condemnation) or one that refers to the presiding officer in some capacity that is not shared by others, the chair should turn over his or her duties to a vice president. In such cases, he or she does not resume the chair until the question is resolved. In other cases, the regular chair should continue to preside.

**Myth 3: Debate ends when someone shouts "Question!"** Shouting "Question!" does not end debate. Debate cannot be closed by one member's demand. The proper motion to close debate is the previous question, which requires a second and a two-thirds vote, although it can be accomplished by general consent. The motion for the previous question cannot interrupt the member seeking to close debate must get recognition from the presiding officer before making the motion.

**Myth 4: The nominee with the fewest votes is dropped from the slate on the next ballot, and vote totals should not be announced.** This is also called the "dark horse" rule, because of the following statement from *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (10<sup>th</sup> Edition): "The nominee receiving the lowest number of votes is never removed from the next ballot unless the bylaws so require, or unless he withdraws--which, in the absence of such a bylaw, he is not obligated to do. The nominee in lowest place may turn out to be a 'dark horse' on whom all factions may prefer to agree." The assembly should continue to ballot until a majority is achieved by one candidate. If the vote totals are not announced, members don't know how to

cast their votes in the next ballot, and they tend to stay the course and vote the same way. Armed with the information about vote totals, the assembly may choose to elect a challenger whose total is close, or decide to give an incumbent one more chance. The rule states: "The tellers' report is entered in full in the minutes, becoming a part of the official records of the organization. Under no circumstances should this be omitted in an election or in a vote on a critical motion out of a mistaken deference to the feelings of unsuccessful candidates or members of the losing side."

**Myth 5: An executive committee is a subcommittee of the board, and ex officio members of the board are not full members.** The word committee causes a great deal of confusion when dealing with executive committees. An executive committee is not subordinate to the board, but is more clearly defined as a "board within a board," having all of the authority of the board between meetings, except that it cannot modify any action taken by the board. The executive committee must be provided for in the bylaws. Ex officio members of a board who are under the authority of the society (member, employee, or officer) have all of the rights and obligations of any other member of that board of directors, unless otherwise restricted. Therefore, a "nonvoting ex officio member" has the right to be notified and attend all meetings, make motions, debate, and all other rights aside from voting enjoyed by the rest of the board members. Often, parliamentary procedure gets blamed for creating confusion, when the confusion is really being caused by misconceptions and false information. Good rules are based on order and fairness. When in doubt, it's usually best to consult the association governing documents or have a professional parliamentarian on hand, rather than depending on myth.