



# On Second Thought

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The practice of seconding motions with words such as “I second the motion” or “second!” has become so routine and so expected that we might think that it is an absolute necessity before the body can legitimately consider a motion. There are, however, some nuances.

Often, during workshops I conduct, I ask participants what happens if a motion is made, discussed, and passed but never officially seconded. Because many think incorrectly that the absence of a formal second makes the motion invalid we should consider what the intended function of a second is.

Although there appears to be no absolute legal requirement that a motion be seconded, in parliamentary systems like Robert’s a second signals to the chair that at least one member other than the mover thinks a motion is worth talking about, thus prompting the chair to present the motion to the body for deliberation. If, for whatever reason, discussion begins before the motion is formally seconded, the motion is regarded as **de facto** seconded. That is, by talking about the motion, a member other than the mover has declared the motion worth talking about. The motion is as much in order as if the words, “I second the motion” had been uttered.

The member who seconds a motion need not be in favor of it. Possibly the member has no position one way or another but sees the motion as something the body should address. Or, possibly, the member may be strongly opposed to the motion but is confident that it will be voted down. But, given the above explanation, a member who speaks negatively about a motion prematurely – i.e., before it has been formally seconded, should be aware that doing so **de facto** seconds it.

Given that the sole function of a second is to declare that a motion is worth talking about and, remembering the concept of ownership of motions that was discussed in a previous column, a member’s attempt to withdraw a second to a motion that has been talked about is moot – the discussion by others constitutes “seconding.”

Under the Robert’s system, there is no need to formally second a motion that is submitted by a committee composed of members of the parent body. Presumably, more than one member of the parent body believes that the motion should be deliberated.

In smaller bodies such as committees, Robert sees a second as unnecessary. In bodies of any size, there appears to be no reason why the presiding officer, if a member of the body, cannot second a motion to keep it from “dying” for lack of a second. A mayor presiding at a council meeting is not regarded as a member for the purposes of seconding motions.

## Do you have a question about parliamentary procedure?

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