



Why Parliamentary Procedure for My Meetings?

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How many times have you thought about your local government meetings and how to make them better? You have a good group of elected officials and dedicated staff, but it's hard to get everyone on the same page. What can be done to make your meetings more effective?

The Wisconsin Statutes do not require governing bodies to follow a certain set of parliamentary procedure rules. Rather, village boards and common councils may determine their own respective procedural rules. Wis. Stat. §§ 61.32, 62.11(3)(e).

So, why have rules of parliamentary procedure if they're not statutorily required? The answer is simple: Procedural rules are essential for running an effective, efficient, and orderly meeting. Procedural rules also help to protect the rights of meeting participants. Robert's Rules of Order, probably the most well-known set of parliamentary rules, explains that the rules are based on a regard for rights – those of the majority, the minority, of individual members, of absent members, and of the foregoing collectively. Parliamentary procedure also helps to establish and preserve consistency – often the process to change a previous action has more requirements than the process for effecting the action in the first place.¹

Conducting a meeting without a defined set of parliamentary procedure rules, or without a good understanding of those rules, can result in confusion, inefficiency, and frustration for members of the governmental body. Typical issues that arise include negative or awkwardly worded motions resulting in confusion on how to vote, members acting out of order, chairpersons disregarding procedural rules or failing to enforce

the rules, some members repeatedly talking while others are unable to get a word in edgewise, confusion as to what is actually before the body, etc. A governmental body that has adopted clear parliamentary procedure rules and that understands how they work, will be able to conduct a much more effective meeting. Adhering to known parliamentary procedure will allow the body to function like a well-oiled machine including: facilitating discussion by the majority, while preserving the minority's voice and right to participate; providing a civil way for members to voice disagreement without being disagreeable; establishing expectations for meeting procedures, conduct, and voting; and proper use of motions and other procedural tools.

In the coming months, we will explore how specific rules of parliamentary procedure can help facilitate effective meetings. Be part of the conversation; please share your questions, conundrums, or thoughts with me at: Daniel.foth@wisc.edu. I look forward to hearing from you. Also, thank you to my colleague, Philip J. Freeburg, J.D., whose input is always invaluable.

About the Author:

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1. Robert's Rules of Order, Principles Underlying Parliamentary Law, p. XLVII