**Frequently Asked Questions**

**on Parliamentary Procedure**

Q: What is “unanimous consent,” and when is it proper to ask for it?

A: In cases where there seems to be no opposition in routine business, or on questions of little importance, obtaining unanimous consent from the assembly can save significant amounts of time. The chair may seek unanimous consent by stating: “If there is no objection, we will ... [adopt a motion to do such and such].” When no objection is heard, the chair states, “Since there is no objection, … [such and such a motion is adopted].” If, however, someone objects, then the motion is handled in the traditional manner and ultimately voted upon.

Disposing of business by unanimous consent is particularly appropriate in the following situations: approving or correcting minutes; adopting a non-controversial agenda; withdrawing a motion before a vote is taken; suspending the rules on a non-controversial matter; allowing a speaker a few more minutes than the prescribed time; allowing a guest speaker to speak at a different time or in a different order than set on an approved agenda; dividing a complex motion into logical parts for discussion, amendments, and voting purposes; and electing a lone nominee by acclamation (unless bylaws prohibit doing so).

Q: How do you deal with a “friendly amendment”?

A: The Rules and Regulations of the Academic Senate state the following:

**6.3.1** To increase efficiency at Academic Senate meetings, “friendly amendments” may be accepted by the mover and seconder of the original motion.

**6.3.2** If a Senator and/or the seconder of the motion object(s) to such an amendment, then no further action is taken and the original motion stands.

Q: Must debate on a motion stop immediately as soon as any member “calls the question”?

A: It is a fairly common misconception that, after debate has continued for some time, if any member shouts out “I call the question!”, debate must immediately cease and the chair must put the pending question to a vote. This is simply not the case. Any member who wishes to force an end to debate must first obtain the floor by being duly recognized to speak by the chair, and must then move the *Previous Question* (i.e., “call the question”). Such a motion must be seconded, and then adopted by a two-thirds vote, or by unanimous consent. It is not in order to interrupt a speaker with cries of “Question” or “Call the Question”; even if no one is speaking, it is still necessary to seek recognition. [RONR 202]

Q: Isn’t it always in order to move to table a motion to the next meeting?

A: This question confuses the motion to *Lay on the Table* with the motion to *Postpone to a Certain Time*. The purpose of the motion to *Lay on the Table* is to enable an assembly, by majority vote and without debate, to lay a pending question aside temporarily in order to take up something else of immediate urgency. In ordinary societies it is rarely needed, and hence seldom in order. [RONR 209-18]

Q: Can something be defeated by adopting a motion to table it?

A: This is a common violation of fair procedure. Such a motion is not in order, because it would permit debate to be suppressed by a majority vote, and only a two-thirds vote can do that. [RONR 215-17]

Q: Who sets the agenda, and how can a person get an item on the agenda for a meeting?

A: For a proposed agenda to become the official agenda for a meeting, it must be adopted by the assembly at the outset of the meeting. At the time that an agenda is presented for adoption, it is in order for any member to move to amend the proposed agenda by adding any item which the member desires to add, or by proposing any other change. It is wrong to assume, as many do, that the chair “sets the agenda.” It is common for the chair to prepare a proposed agenda, but that becomes binding only if it is adopted by the full assembly, perhaps after amendments as just described. Note that when an agenda has been prepared by a committee (e.g., an Executive Committee), it does not require a second. [RONR 24-35]

Moreover, an agenda may be adopted without a formal vote. Like any other uncontroversial motion, it is proper for the chair to ask if there is “any objection” to adopting the agenda. If no objection is made, the chair may declare the agenda adopted. If even one member objects, however, the agenda must be voted on like any other motion. [RONR 54-56]

Q: May the chairperson vote?

A: If a member of the assembly, the chair has the right to make motions, debate, and vote; these rights are typically exercised in small boards of not more than about a dozen members present (e.g., on the Executive Committee). In larger assemblies, though, the impartiality required of the presiding officer precludes exercising the right to make motions or debate while presiding, and also requires refraining from voting except (1) when the vote is by ballot; or (2) whenever his or her vote will affect the result (i.e., to make or break a tie; to make or prevent a two-thirds vote). [RONR 405-06]

Q: How are abstentions counted?

A: Usually, abstentions are not counted. They are not technically votes. In a room of 100 people, a vote of 1-0 [one in favor and zero opposed] is legitimate and renders a binding decision. Also, a vote of 1-0 in a room of 100 people is technically a “unanimous vote” because there was no vote in opposition. However, if the Bylaws specify “a majority of those present” or “two-thirds of those present,” instead of “present and voting,” then an abstention has the same effect as a negative vote. (This language is generally undesirable, as it denies a member the right to maintain a neutral position by abstaining.) [RONR 400-03]

Q: Is it true that, once a quorum has been established, it continues to exist no matter how many members leave during the course of the meeting?

A: No. Once a quorum at a meeting has been established, the continued presence of a quorum is presumed to exist only until the chair or any other member notices that a quorum is no longer present. If the chair notices the absence of a quorum, he or she should declare this fact, at least before taking any vote or stating the question on any new motion. Any member noticing the apparent absence of a quorum can and should make a *Point of Order* to that effect whenever another person is not speaking. [RONR 348-49]

RONR refers to *Robert’s Rules of Order*, 11th edition (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2011). Some of the questions and answers above are adapted from *Robert’s Rules of Order in Brief* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2011).