

What are some of the parliamentary principles that Town Meeting voters should know about?

- *Only warned business can be voted on for action.* This principle has a number of ramifications, ranging from amending money articles to the prohibition against adding articles for voting that have not been included in the warning. It is “rural legend” that money articles can only be amended down from the floor. Contrary to this belief, the voters have clear authority to amend money articles, whether the amendment increases or decreases the final appropriation. However, such articles can only be amended within reason. While there is no bright line test, some commentators have suggested some sort of ratio between the gross dollar amount and the amount of the increase as related to the original figure. For example, a voter proposes to increase a \$100 line item to \$200. While this is a 100% increase, it is also a fractional amount of total dollars, even in the smallest town’s budget. On the other hand, consider an amendment that would bring a \$6,000 line item for an office copier to \$12,000. Clearly, there is a difference between both appropriations; while both are 100% increases, there is a much larger impact on the municipal budget in the second example. At some point, the amendment becomes hostile to the originally warned item. Without the aforementioned bright line test, the moderator must consider at what point an amendment to a budget figure becomes non-germane.
- *The voters have the right to change (some of) the rules of the game.* For example, Vermont law requires the moderator to conduct a vote by paper ballot if seven voters so request, “unless the town has provided some other procedure.” 17 V.S.A. § 2658. Some towns have changed this rule from seven voters to a majority of those voting. Others, recognizing the goal of protecting the rights of the minority, require a lower number of votes to take a vote by paper ballot – 25, for example. Keep in mind that not *all* rules can be changed.
- *Once an article is “passed over,” it cannot be reconsidered at the same meeting.* While there is no such motion in Robert’s Rules of Order, the motion to pass over may have one of two meanings. If the motion is made before the voters have begun consideration of the merits of the article, it is a motion “to object to consideration of the question,” and is only used when it would be strongly undesirable for a motion to even come before the assembly. Henry M. Robert III, *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* § 26 (10th ed. 2000). If the motion to pass over is made while discussing the main question, it is a motion “to postpone indefinitely.” In the case of the latter motion, the main question cannot be brought before the voters again at the same meeting. See 17 V.S.A. § 2661 (a) (article cannot be submitted to voters at same meeting after assembly has begun consideration of another article).
- *Can town meeting can be canceled?* No, town meeting cannot be canceled, but it can be adjourned to a time and date certain. For example, if a Nor’easter lays down 25 inches of wet, heavy snow the night before town meeting, the moderator, with at least two voters in attendance (one to make the motion and one to second it) can adjourn town meeting. Such adjournment should be made to a particular time, and the location should remain the same. Keep in mind that the voters still have an obligation to conduct town meeting, and that some items require voter approval, such as the election of officers, and the approval of a budget. Therefore, while a meeting may be adjourned, it cannot be put off indefinitely. The town must meet again to finish its annual business.

- *The moderator's role is like that of an air traffic controller.* All the planes in your airspace need to land, and while you may like one pilot more than another, you can't take sides in determining who gets to land first. However, some planes are entitled to greater priority than others. The same goes for your voters – you can't take sides based on whom you like, but some motions made by your voters take precedence over others. The moderator should remain unbiased in making these choices. For the air traffic controller, it's rather easy to figure out which planes need to land first – those running low on fuel. In town meeting, it isn't as clearcut, and that's why we use parliamentary rules to establish priority. The rules are in place to assure order, impartiality, and at least a modicum of decorum.

Let's examine a situation where the moderator must lay personal opinions aside, and let the "blind impartiality" of the rules establish order. The voters have been eagerly waiting to sink their teeth into a juicy issue. Debate on the question begins, and it looks like half the voters in the room are holding their hands up. One of those called on moves to "call the question." While the moderator may think the issue at hand is an important one, and doesn't want debate to be cut off, the motion is legitimate and must be entertained. It still requires a second, as well as a two-thirds vote, so the *voters* retain the authority to reject that motion. See *Robert's Rules* at § 16. However, this is one area where the moderator should steer clear of making policy choices, and stick to procedural ones. Letting the rules establish priority, like the plane's fuel reserve, assures a degree of impartiality that should instill some trust in the voters that your decisions are made on a fair and impartial basis.

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