

Congressional Debate Presiding Officer Guide

This information is provided to help parliamentarians guide presiding officers as necessary.

Opening a Session

1. Once elected, say “this session will come to order.” State you will use your best effort to recognize speakers around the chamber in a fair and balanced manner. If gavel time signals have not been explained previously, demonstrate how you will conduct them. Explain procedures clearly ahead of time to save time later, including that you will ask the chamber if it is ready for the question when it is clear that debate has exhausted, unless a legislator wishes to move the previous question to end one-sided debate. Always stand when addressing the chamber (to project authority). Use a calm, controlled and caring voice to show a genuine interest in the chamber’s business.
2. When you are ready to begin, say “Who would like to sponsor the first item of legislation?” When you recognize speakers, use the third person: “The chair recognizes...”
3. When a speaker concludes, say “The speech was ___minutes and ___seconds. Questioners, please rise.” Call on one legislator at a time, until the questioning period is over. You should keep track of questions to allow fair distribution.
4. You may gesture for questioners to sit down when it is apparent time is running out. Afterwards, say “The questioning period has concluded, and the speaker may be seated.”
5. “Those wishing to speak in opposition, please rise. Call on a speaker, using a fair and equitable system, but not using questions, motions nor standing time.
6. When you call on the last person seeking recognition to speak on a bill/resolution, say “since this is the last senator/representative who wishes to speak on this issue, if no one objects following his/her speech, we will move to voting on the legislation following this speech.” (That way, a separate vote to call “previous question” is unnecessary).
7. The motion for previous question should be discouraged when legislators have something new to contribute to discussion. When debate becomes repetitive/one-sided, however, allow the previous question without reservation.
8. When it is time to debate the next legislation, say “The next item of business is —” (say the legislation’s title). Legislation should be considered in the order established on the agenda, unless it is laid on the table. Laying on the table should only be done to allow a legislator time to construct a speech to continue two-sided debate, or introduce new information. It should not be abused to allow another legislator an earlier opportunity to get to a later agenda item. Time and prudence is spent by the entire chamber to set a fair and balanced agenda to give everyone an equal opportunity to debate their own legislation, and attempts to circumvent this should not be allowed. **The presiding officer has authority to rule abusive motions out of order.**

Legislators should refer to you as: Mr./Madam chair, *Speaker*, or *President*. Legislators may not approach the front table without rising to a point of personal privilege.

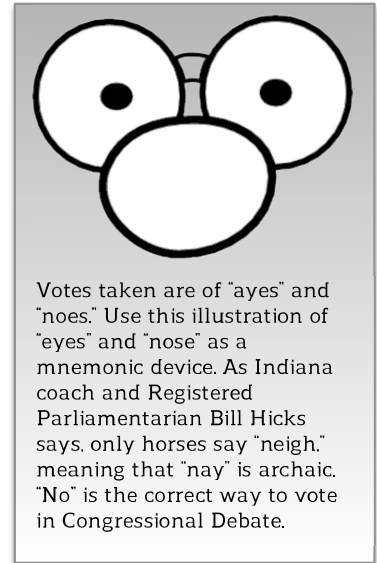
Motions and Voting

- ✦ At the beginning of the session, remind members to stand and seek recognition when they wish to move. Do not call for motions; rather, pause briefly between speeches.
- ✦ *Recognizing Members*: (for speeches): “The chair recognizes [Sen./Rep. last name]” or (for motions) *and then*: “State your point/question.”
- ✦ *Second*: (if the chamber is silent) “Is there a second?”
- ✦ *Stating Motions*: “It is moved and seconded that...”
- ✦ *Discipline*
 - *Motion Not in Order* “The chair rules that the motion is dilatory [or “not in order”] because . . .”
 - *Member Out of Order* (serious offense) “The member is out of order and will be seated.”



✦ **Taking Votes** (use recorded votes for any votes requiring other than a majority for passage (a specific fraction of members), and for the *main motion* (legislation itself), since legislators' voting records are ostensibly tracked by their constituents). All voting is done only by members present at the time the vote is taken.

- *Negative* votes and *abstentions* are counted for *majority* votes; votes taken where a fraction of members are needed are based on those seated in the chamber at the beginning of the session, so counting "no" votes and abstentions is unnecessary; however, never should an absentee or abstention be counted as a "no" vote.
- *Voice Vote* - "On the motion to [read the motion title] those in favor, say aye. (Pause) Those opposed, say no." If the result is not clear, especially evidenced by particularly loud members, or if a member moves for a *Division* of the vote, then a standing vote is taken.
- *Rising Vote* (You may substitute "raise hands") "Those in favor of the motion to [read the motion title] will rise [or, "stand"]." [Count vote.] "Be seated. Those opposed will rise." [Count vote.] "Be seated."
- Voting for individuals (presiding officer, awards) is done by *secret ballot*.
- *Roll Call* votes are a waste of time and not relevant to the activity of debating, and should be avoided.



✦ **Announcing the Result:** "On the motion to..."

- *Voice Vote* - "The ayes have it and the motion is adopted [or "carried"]." Or, "The noes have it and the motion is lost." If you are unsure of the prevailing side, announce that you will take a rising vote (before someone asks for a division... to save time).
- *Counted Rising Vote or Show of Hands Vote* - "With a vote of 51 in the affirmative and 23 in the negative, the affirmative has it [or, "there are two-thirds in the affirmative] and the motion is adopted."
- Or, "There are 29 in the affirmative and 33 in the negative. The negative has it and the motion is lost."

Procedural Reminders for all Delegates

✦ **It is unnecessary for speakers to state they yield to questions, because League rules conventionalize the period for questioning.** The presiding officer – who has a seating chart – controls calling on questioners, however, a legislator may call for a *suspension of the rules* to allow for recognition by the speaker on the floor.

✦ Legislators should not argue with presiding officers who are elected to facilitate debate. Decisions should not be challenged unless they violate the rights of the assembly or its members. For significant errors members should:

- Stand and say "I rise to a point of order." After the presiding officer says "state your point," the member replies by stating what s/he believes has been done wrong, and then sits down. Until the presiding officer – who may first confer with the parliamentarian – answers, members should remain respectfully quiet.
- If a member still believes the presiding officer is wrong and the mistake should be corrected, s/he should rise and say "I appeal the decision of the chair." This motion requires a second. There is no discussion, but the legislator moving this may *briefly* explain why s/he thinks the presiding officer should be overruled. The presiding officer then takes the vote by saying "those voting to sustain the presiding officer..." and "those voting to overrule the presiding officer..." Once the vote has been taken and the results announced, the decision is irrevocable and no further discussion is permitted on the manner.
- Please see National Forensic League rules relative to conduct and rules relative to what may not be suspended (because they form the framework for competition). On procedural rules, the parliamentarian is the final authority, and s/he will correct any deviations from rules, particularly when they affect competitive equity.

✦ **The motion for previous question may not be abused.** The reason it requires a two-thirds vote is it limits the free expression rights of legislators in the chamber. While majority rules for actions an assembly takes, the rights of minority to engage their peers in discourse is the very foundation of our democracy. When a legislator moves the previous question immediately after speaking, it sends the message "I gave a speech, and I don't care if others wish to have the same opportunity." Limiting other contestants' opportunities to engage in debate by suspending rules to alter the agenda, or by laying legislation on the table is even worse, and should be discouraged by presiding officers. If debate truly gets one-sided and repetitive, that is the only true purpose of the Previous Question.