



Privileged Motions

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This month, we discuss a unique set of motions called “Privileged Motions.” These motions do not relate to the Main Motion. Instead, each relates to the governmental body or a body member’s rights (privilege). There are five privileged motions, which we note in the order of precedence: Fix a Time in Which to Adjourn; Adjourn; Recess; Raise a Question of Privilege, and Call for the Orders of the Day.¹ What makes privileged motions unique is that none are debatable, and each must be dealt with immediately (within their precedence order), regardless of any pending business before the governing body.

Taken in the precedence order, as noted in Robert’s Rules, the first of these is “Call for the Orders of the Day” (§18), which is a formal way to say, “please stick to the agenda.”² This type of privileged motion does not require a second and cannot be debated or amended. The chair would then return to the correct agenda item.

Second, “Raise a Question of Privilege” (§19), is not in itself a motion.³ This “Question” is appropriate when there is either some immediate interference with the effective conduct of the meeting or some impending danger to the body or its mission (e.g., confidential topics on an open agenda).⁴ The chair rules on the Question, as it does not require a second and is not debatable or amendable. Objections to the chair’s ruling are the same as with a “Point of Order.”

Third, a member may move to “Recess” (§20) for a specified length of time.⁵ One should use this motion to allow a member of the assembly to take a short break, (e.g., use the restroom). Sometimes, this motion is used to help cool down a heated debate and restore decorum. This motion requires a second, is debatable and amendable, and requires a majority vote to pass.

Fourth, a member may move to “Adjourn” (§21).⁶ A privileged adjournment motion may be made even when other business is pending, but not to interrupt a speaker. It must then be seconded and receive a majority vote.⁷ *It should only pass if the assembly has already set – or agrees to then set – the time for the next meeting before adjourning.*

The fifth type of privileged motion is one to “Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn” (§22).⁸ This motion is useful when the assembly desires to set the date and time for another meeting. One may make this motion even while another issue is pending unless it would be meaningless, such as a subsequent meeting is already scheduled. Also, it can be amended as to date and time, any time before a vote. Once passed, it may be reconsidered.⁹

Consider a meeting where members have returned from months of social distancing to a long agenda with many unresolved matters and a building that was closed for months. Everyone is feeling the August heat, particularly while wearing the requisite masks. Ten minutes into the meeting, a member raises a *Question of*

Privilege that the air conditioner is not cooling, which the chair acknowledges. Someone then moves for a brief *Recess* to open the windows, which is seconded and passes. The windows are now open and the meeting resumes. However, the chair launches into the second agenda item before the first item is complete. A member then *Calls for the Order of the Day*, and the chair recognizes the mistake and returns to the first item.

Halfway through item three, during the Health and Safety committee chair’s report, a member raises a *Question of Personal Privilege* regarding the prior month’s minutes he is just now reading; he attended July’s Zoom meeting by phone but isn’t listed. The chair correctly refuses to acknowledge the Question, since another member is speaking, but notes the member may raise this Question again once the floor is available.

Forty-five minutes later and still on item three, it starts raining. A member moves to Recess to close windows, but another immediately moves to *Adjourn*, with the latter motion promptly seconded. Before the “adjourn” vote, a third member moves to *Fix a Time in Which to Adjourn*, suggesting a date and time. Someone then amends the motion asking for a different time, which is seconded. The Chair calls a vote on the amendment. It passes, and then the Chair calls for a vote on the amended motion with the date and new time. The *Fix* motion passes resoundingly. The Chair then declares the meeting adjourned until the set date.

1. RONR (11th ed.), Chapter VII, pp. 219-246.

2. RONR (11th ed.), pp. 219-24. Compliance with the previously noticed agenda is especially critical in public meetings, which are subject to open meeting notice requirements.

3. See RONR (11th ed.), pp. 224-30.

4. Other interference examples would be tornado warnings or technology problems arising in virtual meetings.

5. RONR (11th ed.), pp. 230-33.

6. RONR (11th ed.), pp. 233-42.

7. It cannot be debated or amended.

8. RONR (11th ed.), pp. 242-46.

9. As with other privileged motions, it takes precedence over all other motions. It can even be made while a “Motion to Adjourn” is pending and cannot be debated.