



Robert's New Rules Are Here!

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If you are of a certain vintage and artistic bent, you will remember the classic 1979 comedy film *The Jerk*, with Steve Martin in his first starring

role. In one scene, Martin joyfully leaps down the street, carrying AT&T's latest compiled listings, yelling, "The new phone books are here! The new phone books are here!"

In today's digital world, we don't have phone books, and I'm sure some folks are of the vintage that they have never seen one. What we do have in print, now, is the 12th Edition of *Robert's Rules of Order*, published in 2020.¹ I didn't run down the street like Martin did when I got my new copy of Robert's, but all parliamentarians feel a little twinge of excitement when a new edition of Robert's Rules is published.

Today we will talk about some of the major changes in *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (RONR, 12th Ed.), and discuss some of the history of the world's most-used guide to parliamentary procedure.

New citation system. Prior editions of RONR recommended citing to the page and line number of any rule being relied

upon. Recognizing that many rely upon e-editions or other electronic versions of RONR, the 12th edition recommends citing to section and paragraph (if any) number. These section numbers are greatly expanded, so that citing to the section number takes the reader to the very paragraph(s) citing the rule. Although we are to cite to the section number, RONR does not use "sec." or §§.

Electronic Meetings. RONR 9:30-36 expressly discuss the extension of parliamentary rules to electronic meetings. More importantly, the edition contains an extensive Appendix of sample rules for electronic meetings. These sample or model rules are not requirements, but suggestions for making the electronic meeting most compatible with RONR. A few examples:

1. Full-Featured Internet Meeting. This type of meeting includes voice and full video, and the Appendix provides a sample bylaw for such meetings, and rules for notice and logging in (to be provided by the Secretary, with the login available at least 15 minutes before the start of the meeting). Quorum is determined by an audible roll call, with any failure of quorum to be seen by the displayed list of participants. Rules are provided for displaying motions through screen

sharing. Each member is required to have adequate technical requirement to participate, and absent loss of quorum or some other violation of rules, any technical malfunction of an individual's internet connection has no impact on the proceedings.

2. Teleconference with Internet Voting and Document Sharing. As with the full-featured meeting, the teleconference establishes quorum by roll call at the start of the meeting and it is presumed to remain unless a person leaves or a roll call vote shows less than a quorum present. Members are to announce their presence at the start of the meeting and seek recognition of the chair to obtain the floor. Voting is done verbally, unless a roll call is requested, and then voting is done via the internet.
3. Speakerphone Participation in Face-to-Face Meeting. As with the other meetings, the Secretary is to provide the call-in information and be certain that the speaker phone is available for use 15 minutes prior to the start of the meeting. The sample rules provide that the Chair must be present at the face-to-face meeting.
4. Full Meeting by Teleconference. Sample rules similar to those above

are provided for these types of electronic meetings, with members announcing their presence and seeking the floor by request of the Chair. One important rule in all these electronic meetings is that the Chair has the power to order a member's voice muted if they are disrupting the meeting. Such a ruling by the Chair is subject to an undebatable appeal to the body.

The Appendix on electronic meetings recommends the body adopt rules for conduct of such meetings. I agree.

Expanded Charts. RONR 12th edition also has new and expanded charts on the nature and precedence of motions, motions requiring a two-thirds vote, which motions are in order when another has the floor, debatable and amendable motions, and rules for counting ballots in an election.

Other Changes in Rules. The preface to each new edition of RONR contains a quick summary of any substantive changes to the rules. The preface to the 12th edition lists 22 such changes, including a substantial reordering of section 37 on the motion to *Reconsider*, an expansion and clarification of section 23 on the *Point of Order*, and new provisions governing debate on nominations (RONR 46:27-29). I recommend that all who are asked to opine on Robert's Rules take the time to review these 22 changes.

New Editors. On a sad note, the last of the Robert clan, Henry M. Robert III, passed away in 2019 while the 12th edition was in the process of revision. Henry was the grandson of General

Henry M. Robert, the original author of *Robert's Rules of Order* (more about him below). Robert III's death ends over 140 years with at least one member of the Robert family being involved in publication of *Robert's Rules of Order*. This included the General's wife (Isabel Robert), his son (Henry M. Robert, Jr.), Henry Jr.'s wife (Helen Corbin Robert), and finally, Henry M. Robert III.

Two lawyers, a mathematician, and a computer scientist comprise the current editors (Daniel Honemann, Thomas J. Balch, Daniel Seabold, and Shmuel Gerber). One of the editors once held the daunting job of serving as the parliamentarian for the National Association of Parliamentarians. I think we can rest assured that they have earned their chops.

Some History. Few people know that *Robert's Rules of Order* is named after a real man, General Henry M. Robert (1837-1923). Henry was in the U.S. Army and rose to the level of Brigadier General in the Army Corps of Engineers. In the latter part of the 19th century, Henry became troubled by the lack of uniform rules to govern meeting of deliberative assemblies – particularly church congregational meetings – and thought some general guidance was needed for such bodies. At the time, rules were usually made by individual bodies. The U.S. House of Representatives tended to use *Jefferson's Manual*, while other bodies used a work called *Cushing's Manual*. Taking cues from these works and others, in 1876 Robert published the first two editions of *Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies*. Despite the title, it soon became known as *Robert's Rules of*

Order, and officially took on that title in the 4th edition of 1915.

General Henry M. Robert also had a direct connection to Wisconsin. He was the principal engineer in the construction of a number of ports in the U.S., including the Ports of Green Bay and Marinette, Wisconsin, in the 1870s, probably before he published his now famous book on procedure. So, when you are in those cities, you should marvel at the order of the ports, just as you marvel at *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (12th Ed).

"Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least of real liberty."

-Henry M. Robert

About the Author:

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1. See Daniel Foth's article, "For the Good of The Order, *The Municipality* (September, 2020).