

SENY Rules of Order

How we run our meetings

Introduction

Why have rules of order? Most formal groups need some structure to their meetings in order to assure they are able to effectively deal with matters of interest and concern, and so every member understands how their meetings will run. How much structure, what it looks like and how it works in practice will vary from one group to another. The rules governing most formally constituted groups follow a hierarchy running from those imposed by applicable law, to charter (mainly for corporate entities), to by-laws, to rules of order, to standing (administrative) rules, to custom. In Alcoholics Anonymous we seek a limited set of rules sufficient to allow orderly and effective meetings while fully respecting the AA principles reflected in the “Twelve Traditions” and the “Twelve Concepts.” In other words, we try to keep it simple yet effective.

As far as we know, there is no single place we can go to find a statement of what should be taken as SENY’s rules of order, that is, there is no available written record of a full conscience on what is effectively a series of questions. Some firm points are asserted in the area’s by-laws found in the *SENY Handbook and Articles of Association and By-Laws, Seventh Revision*. These are binding and will over-ride any other rules of order, standing rules or custom unless formally changed by a two-thirds vote of the committee. No doubt some additional decisions have been made at area committee and assembly meetings over the years, but good records of these decisions are not readily available. Therefore, the rules suggested here do not reflect a unified and complete conscience. They are instead a suggested summary and interpretation for discussion of what seems to be reflected in:

- ◆ SENY by-laws as described in the *SENY Handbook and Articles of Association and By-Laws, Seventh Revision*,
- ◆ *The AA Service Manual Combined With Twelve Concepts for World Service*,
- ◆ how rules of order are handled at the General Service Conference as reflected in the hand-out, “Summary of Conference Procedures,”
- ◆ “custom” in area meetings.

These all favor putting AA principles in the forefront. Where there are possible questions of procedure yet no clear rule, guideline or custom seems to exist, we may choose to fall back on Robert’s Rules.* The result is a set of rules less encumbering and less formal than Robert’s Rules which better respect the non-governmental nature of our service entities and the history and spirit of our fellowship.

Any “Rules of Order” currently in use by the area are subject to the will of the meeting and its right to amend them consistent with our by-laws. It is usually helpful to restate and re-affirm the rules which will be in operation at the beginning of meetings. Also, while it may be easier for clarity sake sometimes to talk in terms of winning or losing sides when explaining procedure, we are reminded, “the purpose of . . . debate is to reach a group conscience—there are no winners or losers.” (From, “How the General Service Conference Operates,” a General Service Conference handout.)

Finally, in many settings rules of order and the knowledge and understanding of those rules are used by members to outmaneuver other members in discussion/debate. The spirit of our meetings make such a use of any rule undesirable and unnecessary.

*The current edition of Robert’s Rules is *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 10th Edition also referred to as “RONR.” An easy to use short reference to RONR is *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief* .. There is also, <http://www.robertsrules.com> which provides access to some useful FAQs.

Some central ideas and terms

“An assembly makes its own rules, and the chairperson should be sure all members are aware of current suggested procedures. . . . If members want to make a change in the rules, it should be done before a vote is taken. . . .” (From, The AA Service Manual, p. S41.)

A **quorum** is the minimum number of members needed to be present for business to be conducted by the meeting. The quorum is set in the SENY by-laws for committee meetings at two officers and at least 12 DCMs.

Courtesy suggests a member raise his/her hand and wait for the chair running the meeting to **recognize** them before they **take the floor** to speak. There are acceptable and expected exceptions to this. A **motion** is a formal proposal by a member that the group take a certain action. A motion brings business before the meeting. Good motions are simple, clearly stated. Compound motions, those with sub-sections, are allowed, but may make discussion and decision making more difficult. The substance of the motion is referred to as **the question** before the meeting.

A motion requires a **second** in order to be further considered. That is, it needs a second member's agreement that it should be considered. The “second” may simply be called out after the motion is made without waiting to be recognized by the chair.

Motions may be changed before they go to a vote. An **amendment** to a motion on the floor must be germane to the motion, that is, it must involve the same question. (For example, a motion is made to increase the PI committee budget to \$400. An amendment to change that amount to \$600 would be germane while an amendment to serve refreshments at the next meeting would not be germane.) In ruling a suggested amendment is not germane, the chair should state the basis for the ruling. Amendment requires a specifically worded motion saying exactly how the motion in question is to be re-worded (amended). A motion to amend must be seconded, then may move to discussion and vote. A simple majority decides. If approved, the amended motion is restated by the chair, and debate on the motion as amended moves on.

We may also entertain what are referred to as **friendly amendments**. As handled in AA, such amendments allow for accepting relatively small changes to motions with the consent of the maker of the motion. These changes seek to improve the statement or effect of the motion. In some cases, suggestions offered as friendly amendments may be taken by the chair to be too substantial to be informally accepted as such.

Debate is the discussion of the question. It is customary that members limit their comments on a question to two minutes and to not speak a second time until those who wish to have been able to speak a first time. The chair may suggest the closing of debate to move the meeting along once it appears the meeting has had its say. Some procedural motions (see below) are not debatable, but simply move to a vote if seconded. (Procedural motions usually are intended to help move the discussion along or to limit or end debate. If they were debatable, that would defeat their purpose.)

There may be times when it is felt the question may profit from redrafting or further detailed study not practical or possible in the full meeting. In such cases a motion may be offered to **refer** the question to a group (either a standing committee, or a special or *ad hoc* committee) for redrafting or study before the full meeting further considers it. The motion requires a second, is debatable and amendable, and requires a simple majority to pass. Commonly in our meetings the chair may simply suggest the question be referred to a study group and does so if without objection.

A motion to **call the question** or **close debate** asks that debate be halted while the meeting decides to proceed to the vote on the question or not. The chair may disallow such a motion if it appears premature. After a second, the motion is not debatable and requires a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to pass.

A motion to **postpone** to a certain future time allows the meeting to put off the vote until a time specified in the motion. This may be desirable for a variety of reasons such as a lack of urgency in the face of more urgent business or a need for more information. This may be preferable to a motion

to table (see below) a motion under consideration. After a second, the motion is debatable, amendable and requires a simple majority to pass.

A motion to **table** or to **lay on the table** a motion asks the meeting to postpone further discussion of the question to an unspecified later time. After a second, the motion is neither debatable nor amendable and requires a simple majority to pass. To later consider the tabled motion, a motion to **take the motion from the table** must be made and seconded. It is not debatable, and is passed by a simple majority. Where a motion to table has been made and defeated or to take from the table has been made and passed, further motions to table the matter are not allowed since the meeting has indicated its readiness to deal with the motion in question.

If rules exist concerning the limits on debate, they may be changed to allow for special consideration of a question. A motion to **limit** or **extend debate** should be specific on how the rules will be changed. After a second, it is not debatable, is amendable and requires a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority to pass. This is also not a procedure commonly used in our meetings.

Who is eligible to vote?

In area committee meetings all DCMs, DCMCs, standing committee chairs, the recording secretary, all elected officers (including the alternate delegate) and all past delegates are eligible to vote. Alternates to any position are eligible to vote if the member to whom they are the alternate is not in attendance. All those eligible to vote at area committee meetings are eligible to vote at area assemblies in addition to all GSRs. The rule for alternates holds here too. Proxies do not vote in either body nor do the chairs of special (*ad hoc*) committees.

A **vote** on the question is taken after sufficient discussion. In some cases where a simple majority may be sought, it may be acceptable for the chair to state what he/she feels is **the sense of the meeting** on the questions which may then be accepted by the meeting in lieu of a formal vote if **without objection**. If any members does object, then a vote is taken. It is suggested important matters be decided by a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority of the eligible voters present actually voting. This is called seeking **substantial unanimity** (agreement) on the question offering a firmer foundation for meeting decisions. Some procedural matters are decided by a simple majority only. The chair or the recording secretary reads the motion before the vote so the meeting is clear on the question. Except in the election of officers (conducted by written ballot following the "Third Legacy Procedure"), the vote is by a show of hands or a voice vote. "Yes" votes, "No" votes and "Abstentions" are each counted for the record, but only "Yes" or "No" votes count toward the outcome on the question.

After a vote, a **minority opinion**, additional sharing from a member who voted on the non-prevailing side of the question, is allowed/invited.

After hearing the minority opinion or in possession of other new information on the question, a motion for **reconsideration** may be made by a member who voted on the prevailing side of the question. It may be seconded by any member. If adopted after discussion, the meeting returns to the point in procedure just before the vote on the question and continues.

A **point of order** calls to the chair's attention a violation of the rules. To raise a point of order the maker need not be recognized before speaking, and simply calls out "point of order." The chair then asks the maker to specify the point to be made. After the member raises his/her point, the chair rules on the point affirming or denying it with a brief explanation. If the maker disagrees with the chair's ruling, without waiting to be recognized, he/she may **appeal** the chair's ruling to the meeting itself. The appeal must be seconded, may be debatable with some limits, is not amendable, and requires a majority vote to pass. This too is not a procedure commonly used in our meetings.

Raising a **point of information** is a procedural move not usually followed in our meetings. It allows a member to ask a question, not on procedure, but relevant to the matter at hand. (It does not allow a member to offer information. This is done in turn as part of the debate of the question.) To

raise a point of information, the member may interrupt and state, "point of information." The chair allows the member to state his/her question. Additional procedural formalities follow here. In our meetings a question may simply be raised and answered, then the discussion continues.

RONR has many other rules and definitions, but the above seems to be a select and amended subset more than sufficient to satisfy our purposes and principles.

More About Majority Decisions

Questions before the area committee or assembly are decided by a majority vote following ample discussion and an opportunity for reconsideration of any decision. (See also below.) Depending on the question, the committee/assembly may wish to make its decision based on a simple majority (greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ of the total vote), a substantial majority (at least $\frac{2}{3}$ of the total vote) or a super majority (at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total vote). It is suggested questions of conscience (policy) be decided on the basis of a substantial majority. Abstentions are not considered (counted) toward the decision, but may be recorded for the record. Whatever the basis for decision, the chair should assure the committee/assembly is clear on the method for decision before the vote.

More About Minority Opinion & Reconsideration

AA service principles as outlined in the *Twelve Concepts for World Service* try hard to respect minority views in decision making. "Concept Five" reminds us that "a traditional 'Right of Appeal' ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard . . ." Seeking a "minority opinion" after a vote allows an opportunity for "reconsideration" of a question based on the strength of additional minority sharing allowing all participants a sense of a fair hearing.

In practice, the respecting of minority views works as follows in our meetings.

It is suggested the chair allow for ample discussion on any question before a vote assuring all points of view an opportunity to be heard. To that extent it is the individual member's responsibility to speak up during any discussion period if his/her point of view has not already been stated. To wait until after a vote may only waste meeting time.

After a vote, the chair may ask if anyone who voted on the non-prevailing (losing) side of a question wishes to express a "minority opinion" not already stated during the previous discussion on the question. (In some meetings, it may be expected any member wishing to express a minority opinion after a vote will simply step forward to do so without prompting. This can also save the meeting time.) At this point the chair will allow additional time for one or more members who voted on the non-prevailing side of a question to express a minority view. Members are expected to try not to simply restate points already made, but to raise additional points on the question. This sharing is not subject to discussion (debate).

After hearing such opinions, any member who voted on the prevailing (winning) side on the question may offer a motion to reconsider. (In some meetings the chair may ask if any member who voted on the prevailing side on the question wishes to offer a motion to reconsider, that is, is there anyone who voted on the prevailing side who wishes to change his/her vote. This may not be the best way for the chair to handle the minority opinion/reconsideration procedure since it may give the impression that the chair is prompting such a motion.) While such a motion must be offered by a member who voted on the prevailing side of the question, it may be seconded by any member. If seconded, the motion may be debated but not amended, and is decided by a simple majority. If the majority votes to reconsider the question, the question is reopened to full discussion as if the original vote had not taken place. After such reconsideration a question is not open to further reconsideration in that session (meeting).

In summary:

- ◆ Following a vote on a question, “minority opinion” is allowed/invited from the losing side
- ◆ After hearing the “minority voice,” anyone who voted on the winning side may move for reconsideration if they wish to change their vote
- ◆ If so moved, any member may second; hold a vote to reconsider; simple majority decides
- ◆ If a majority is for reconsideration, reopen discussion on the original motion; move to a decision
- ◆ No further reconsideration of the same question in the current meeting.

Summary of Rules Relating to Motions

| Motion | Requires a Second | Debatable | Amendable | Required Vote | Reconsider |
|---|-------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------------------|------------|
| Main motion or question | Yes | Yes | Yes | 2/3 ^a | Yes |
| Amend | Yes | Yes | Yes | Majority ^b | Yes |
| Refer [to a(standing, special or <i>ad hoc</i>) committee] | Yes | Yes ^c | Yes | Majority | Yes |
| Call the question / Close debate | Yes | No | No | 2/3 | Yes |
| Postpone (to a certain time) | Yes | Yes ^c | Yes | Majority | Yes |
| Table or Lay on the table | Yes | No | No | Majority | No |
| Take from the table | Yes | No | No | Majority | No |
| Limit or Extend debate on the pending question ^d | Yes | No | Yes | 2/3 | Yes |
| Reconsider | Yes | Yes ^e | No | Majority | No |
| Point of order | No | No | No | Ruled on by Chair | No |
| Appeal | Yes | Yes | No | Majority | Yes |
| Point of information | No | No | No | Not voted on | No |

a A simple majority under RONR, but generally we seek a substantial majority to give the decision a firmer base.

b The area may wish to have the required vote to amend a motion match the required vote to pass a policy motion, that is, $\frac{2}{3}$. In that way both require substantial unanimity to pass.

c Limited to its merits only, and usually cannot extend to the main question it concerns. For example, once a motion to refer a matter to a committee is on the floor, speakers may debate whether this is the appropriate committee to handle the matter or whether to refer to any committee, but should not continue to address the merits of the main motion itself.

d The meeting must first have rules on the limits to debate in place. Custom holds to two minutes at a time and not a second time before others who wish to have spoken the first time.

e When the motion to be reconsidered is itself not debatable, then the motion to reconsider is also not debatable.

Examples of outcomes under different rules for counting votes

This section is included to illustrate how the rules for counting votes effect the outcome of the vote on a question. (The question of who is eligible to vote is handled elsewhere.) Since an abstention strictly speaking is not a vote at all, but a refusal to vote for whatever reason, it is suggested when counting votes on a question the area seek its majority or substantial majority “of the eligible members voting” rather than “of the eligible voters in attendance.” If the area chooses to rather seek its majority or substantial majority “of the eligible voter in attendance” rather than “of the eligible members voting,” it should understand the demand it is putting on its decision making as illustrated below.

A motion is made to change the day of the meeting from Mondays to Tuesdays. It is seconded, debated, then moves to a vote. In each example there are 10 members eligible to vote in attendance.

Example #1: In this example all members vote on the motion. There are no abstentions.

| Required to Pass | Does the motion pass? |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Simple majority | 6 |
| Substantial majority (2/3) | 7 |
| Super majority (3/4) | 8 |

In examples #2 and #3 below, five of the ten eligible members in attendance vote yes, two vote no, three abstain.

Example #2: The rule is the majority is sought *of the eligible members voting*. An abstention is not a vote and therefore does not effect the outcome.

| Required to Pass | Does the motion pass? |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Simple majority | Yes |
| Substantial majority (2/3) | Yes |
| Super majority (3/4) | No |

Example #3: The rule is the majority is sought *of the eligible voters in attendance*. Abstentions are still not a vote, but do effect the outcome. In this case, abstentions, regardless of intent, have the effect of a “no” vote since they are counted against the majority required for the motion to pass.

| Required to Pass | Does the motion pass? |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Simple majority | No |
| Substantial majority (2/3) | No |
| Super majority (3/4) | No |