

Why **YOU** need to learn the “rules of democracy”

You are a member on a deliberative democratic organization, which makes decisions affecting all members. Ideally, decisions are made after thorough discussion, debate and vote, respecting the rights of all members and keeping in mind the purposes of the organization. This process of decision making has its own set of parliamentary rules, which must be carefully followed. These rules are really the **rules of democracy**. Unfortunately, many members do not know the rules of democracy so they are ignorant of the rules of democracy. So, there are incidents where the members, in their ignorance of their own bylaws, make decisions in violation of their bylaws, thus violating the rights of some or even all of its members. Such decisions are invalid and surely an embarrassment to the organization. To avoid this kind of possible violation of bylaws or other parliamentary rules, you as a member of your organization should make the time to study and use the basic principles of parliamentary procedure in the decision making process of your organization. You should insist that your organization follow these rules.

Parliamentary rules are based upon protecting the rights of the members of the deliberative assembly. These rights include:

1. **the rights of the majority**, including the right to prevail following discussion;
2. **the rights of the minority**, including the right to speak on any issue;
3. **the rights of individual members**, including the right to participate in debate, hold office and vote;
4. **the rights of absentees**, including the right for sufficient notice on issues coming **before the assembly**; and
5. **the rights of all members taken together**. RONR (10th ed.) p. XLVII.

There are two kinds of parliamentary rules: **General Rules** and **Special Rules**.*

General Rules are those commonly applicable to all deliberative assemblies. They are referred to as Parliamentary Authority in the bylaws of deliberative assemblies. The most widely recognized authority on parliamentary law is entitled, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*. **10th edition, 2000**. It is commonly referred to as RONR.

Special Rules are rules that a particular organization adopts for itself in the conduct of its business. Some of the various kinds of **special rules** that a society may adopt include the following hierarchy of special rules: **corporate charter; constitution and/or bylaws; special rules of order** (affecting rights of members); **standing rules** (administrative rules). **Special rules always supercede any General Rules** with which they conflict. So when a question on procedure arises, special rules should be consulted first. If they do not contain an answer, refer to the organization's adopted parliamentary authority. Both **General Rules** and **Special Rules** must conform to federal and state laws.

* National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP). *Pointers on Parliamentary Procedure*, 5th edition, 2001, pp. 1-2. *Basic rules and principles*, September, 2003, page 1.