

MOST COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD POINTS OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

by Tammie Peters

Considering that our students learn to use parliamentary procedure for Youth in Government, Boys State, Girls State, Mock Trial, model U.N., Student Council, as well as NFL Student Congress, it's no wonder they sometimes get confused on some of the finer points. Although NFL publishes a thorough manual on Student Congress, there are still many abused and misunderstood motions. Here is a modest attempt to clarify some of the more bewildering points of parliamentary procedure as used by NFL Student Congress.

1. ABSOLUTE VOTE VS. COUNTING YES/NO/ABSTAIN:

This rule is often confusing. However, any vote which requires 2/3, 1/3 or 1/5 requires that percentage of votes of everyone sitting in the chamber. Motions such as previous question, seconding an amendment, or suspending the rules reflect the will of the *entire body*. Presiding Officers should calculate these numbers upon first taking the Chair. For these votes, "No" votes are not even required because the number needed is either reached or it's not.

However, in all votes requiring a *majority*, the Presiding Officer needs to take "Yes" votes, "No" votes, and "Abstentions." Abstentions do not count as a "No". In order for such a motion to pass (including the main bill or resolution), the "Yes" votes must simply outnumber the "No" votes. Abstentions are not counted, except as a courtesy to those members who wish to register their desire to avoid voting or who are undecided on the issue. In theory, all majority votes could be decided by 3 people (2-1) with everyone else abstaining.

2. FRIENDLY AMENDMENTS:

Often congress members try to get the author (or author-designee) to approve some minor changes to the bill/resolution as "friendly amendments". However, no such thing exists. Once the piece of legislation has left the author's hands and has been introduced to the congress, it belongs to the congress. On the other hand, this does not mean that all amendments of grammatical corrections need to be debated. If the amendment is introduced and receives the 1/3 second, previous question on the amendment can be called immediately and the amendment can be made in a matter of two minutes.

3. AMENDMENT AUTHORSHIP SPEECHES:

The NFL Student Congress Manual is very clear that authorship speeches are not guaranteed for amendments. Instead after the amendment has been introduced and received the 1/3 second, the Presiding Officer should call for an Affirmative or Proponent speech on the amendment. Then the Presiding Officer decides who gets to speak based on those interested and who has precedence. (Don't forget, though, speeches on amendments get scored and are counted against the maximum allowed per session, unless from a committee.)

4. TABLING A BILL/RESOLUTION:

Some students try to lay a bill or resolution on the table when there aren't enough students to get the 2/3 vote required for previous question. However, this is an abuse of this motion. The motion of tabling indicates that there is some pressing business which needs to be tended to im-

mediately. When making this motion, students need to give their reason in the motion. (For example, "I move to table this bill because the author of the next bill hasn't spoken yet and we're about to run out of time.") Without a reason, this motion is out of order. It is up to the Presiding Officer to determine whether the reason is good enough for the congress to vote on this motion.

5. WHEN TO CALL FOR PREVIOUS QUESTION (AND OTHER MOTIONS):

Some Presiding Officers are under the impression that motions (including the previous question) can only be made after Negative or Opponent speeches. While it may seem fair that both sides of the issue get the same number of speeches before the debate is ended, it is not a rule. Any motion, including previous question, can be made at any time. Motions, though, really shouldn't interrupt a speaker. Previous question could conceivably be called even before the authorship speech if the congress wants to dispense with the legislation before discussion. (Refer to the section on "Friendly Amendments.")

6. POINT OF INFORMATION/CLARIFICATION:

Students like to use this "motion" when the speaker has said something that may be incorrect or confusing. But this "motion" doesn't exist. Students may call for a point of order if they believe the Presiding Officer has made a mistake that needs to be reconsidered, but challenges to the speaker should be reserved for questions or speeches.

7. TWO-PART OR FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

Perhaps because many congresspersons are also debaters, many congresspersons like to try to ask a follow-up question of a speaker who has not satisfactorily answered the original question. Some congresses suspend the rules to allow for two-part questions, which is often interpreted as a way to ask follow-up questions. However, such questions do not exist in Student Congress.

To begin with, when a speaker yields his or her time to a questioner, the time yielded is a one-time shot. The questioner must ask the question and then sit down, as the "floor" is back in the hands of the speaker. If the speaker avoids the question or gives an insufficient answer, it is up to the questioner to point this out in a speech. (Refer also to the section on "Points of Information/Clarification".) If a congress chooses to suspend the rules and allow for two-part questions, this yielding procedure is still followed. The time yielded is still a one-time opportunity. The questioner must ask both parts of the question and then sit down and wait for the answer. For example, the questioner might ask, "Do you believe that every life is sacred, and if so, do you believe the government has the right to decide when that life should end?" There is no provision in parliamentary procedure for immediately challenging an answer or asking for clarification. The only way a questioner can follow-up a question of the speaker is to be re-recognized by the Presiding Officer during the questioning time.

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