



Moving the Previous Question (Closing Debate)

Larry Larmer, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison

A recent questioner asked, “When an amendment is on the floor, does a motion for the previous question terminate debate on the amendment or terminate debate on the item, calling for a vote on the unamended matter?” The direct answer is that if the motion for the previous question passes, a vote would be taken first on the amendment and then on the main motion. However, an explanation of the answer invites a fuller discussion of the rules of precedence and their effect on voting as set forth in Robert’s Rules of Order.

The system of “precedence” in Robert’s provides that some higher-ranking motions can replace lower ranking motions as the focus of deliberation. Main motions, such as the adoption of a resolution, ordinance, or other matter of original business are among the lowest ranking motions. This means that the body can make other decisions about the treatment of the main motion – called subsidiary motions – such as amending it, postponing it, tabling it, or closing debate on it before action is taken on the main motion itself. There are other actions – called privileged motions – that have to do with the event of the meeting such as recessing, adjourning, or fixing the time to which to adjourn that can also be taken up and decided before action is taken on the main motion or subsidiary motions.

Once a higher-ranking motion is made while a lower ranking motion is pending, the higher-ranking motion is under discussion and is regarded as “immediately pending.” Under the rules of precedence, it’s possible that more than one subsidiary motion and/or privileged motion could be pending at the same time. When the previous question is moved without qualification, it would apply only to the immediately pending motion. In such a case, debate is ceased on the immediately pending question, it is voted on, and debate

is then in order on the next pending motion. If the mover wants to close debate on more than one or all of the pending questions, the motion for the previous question must so specify – something like, “I move to close debate on all pending motions.” If such a motion passes, debate would be closed and votes taken on the pending motions in order of their ranking – higher ranking motions being decided first.

It should also be noted that the questioner referred to a “motion” for the previous question as the means of closing debate. This reflects the understanding that closing debate is a decision made by the body – not just by one member who “calls the question.” The body’s decision might be made rather informally by the process of unanimous consent as well as by the formal motion process. If a member suggests that debate be closed, the chair can ask the body if they are ready to vote on the pending motion. If all agree – i.e., if there is no objection, unanimous consent is obtained and voting can begin on the pending or immediately pending motion. However, if any member(s) objects, debate can only be closed by a formal motion which requires a second and the affirmative vote of 2/3 of those voting. Of course, the decision to close debate can be initiated by a formal motion which Robert calls the motion for the Previous Question.

Do you have a question about parliamentary procedure?

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