

Early Rules of Parliamentary Procedure
Compiled by Patrick Wilson, January 2016

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”

—Thomas Jefferson

Some rules of parliamentary procedure go back hundreds of years. Here are a few that have stood the test of time (RONR [11th ed.], pp. xxxiii–iv):

- *One subject at a time* (1581)
In the interest of focusing discussion and saving time, business is conducted by means of motions, only one of which may be on the floor at a time.
- *Alternation between opposite points of view in assignment of the floor* (1592)
In order to give opposing views a fair hearing, when several people wish to speak to a motion, the chair tries to let the floor alternate between those favoring and those opposing it. (“The last speaker opposed the motion; does anyone wish to support it?”)
- *Requirement that the chair always call for the negative vote* (1604)
So as to preserve the right to dissent, the chair always calls for “those opposed,” even in cases of apparent unanimity.
- *Decorum and avoidance of personalities in debate* (1604)
To foster order and impartiality, members discuss motions, not motives or personalities, and address each other formally (“Mr. Chairman,” “The previous speaker,” “My esteemed colleague from Philosophy”).
- *Confinement of debate to the merits of the pending question* (1610)
To keep discussion on track, a speaker’s remarks must be germane to the motion on the floor.
- *Division of a question* (1640)
To cover cases in which the assembly may favor one part of a motion but oppose another, a motion with separable parts may be divided into distinct motions for subsequent debate and vote.