

Fundamental Principles of Parliamentary Law
Compiled by Patrick Wilson, January 2012

The judge's only obligation—and it's a solemn obligation—is to the rule of law.
— Samuel Alito

The purpose of parliamentary law is to promote efficiency and fairness in deliberative assemblies. The three principles listed below are so central to this purpose that they are considered “fundamental principles of parliamentary law.” As such, they

- “cannot be suspended, even by a unanimous vote” (RONR, 11th ed., p. 263, l. 17–18)
- are enforceable by a point of order raised at any time after a violation, for as long as the violation continues to have an effect. (Points of order must ordinarily be raised promptly at the time a rule is violated.)

One thing at a time

The principle that “only one question can be considered at a time” (p. 59, l. 18–19, italics omitted) dates to an entry in the Journal of the House of Commons from 1581.

Members vote in person

The principle that “the right to vote is limited to the members of an organization who are actually present at the time the vote is taken in a regular or properly called meeting” (p. 263, l. 19–22) follows from the nature of a deliberative assembly, which consists of members whose face-to-face deliberations in an actual meeting crystallize opinion as expressed by a vote *ad locum*.

All forms of absentee voting, including proxy voting, are thus prohibited unless authorized in the bylaws.

Each member gets one nontransferable vote

“Each person who is a member of a deliberative assembly is entitled to one—and only one—vote on a question” (p. 407, l. 2–4).

Cumulative voting—under which each member may, for example, cast three votes to fill three vacancies on a committee and may cast all three votes for the same individual—is thus prohibited unless authorized in the bylaws. The same goes for proxy voting, which transfers to another person a member's right to vote, and is therefore “incompatible with the essential characteristics of a deliberative assembly in which membership is individual, personal, and nontransferable” (p. 428, l. 35 – p. 429, l. 2).