

How do you “Call the Question” in Robert’s Rules?



The motion “to Call the Question,” which has the technical name of “Move the Previous Question,” may be the most abused motion in all of Robert’s Rules of Order. It is very common for people to shout out the word “question” or “I call the question” in the expectation that debate will immediately stop, and a vote will be taken. This is WRONG, WRONG, WRONG.

KEY POINTS TO KNOW ABOUT “CALL THE QUESTION”

- A member must have the floor in order to make this motion. Raise your hand and wait until the chair gives you the nod – “recognizes you” – before speaking.
- When you make this motion, you are only suggesting that YOU would like to stop debate and vote. It is an expression of your wish, not a hammer to bludgeon your colleagues.
- This motion requires a second. There have to be at least two people in the room who want to cut off debate before it can be considered.
- This motion cannot be discussed or debated. As soon as the chair hears a second, they immediately take the vote.
- It takes TWO-THIRDS of the voting members in favor to cut off debate. Therefore the chair should take the vote by show of hands, and not by voice.
- If indeed two-thirds of the group want to stop debate and vote, then the chair immediately takes the vote on the pending motion – the motion that the group is considering at this time. No further discussion is allowed.
- It is also possible to call the question on ALL the pending motions, in which case the chair will take the vote on each motion that is before the group, one after another.
- Robert’s Rules of Order does not allow this motion to be made in committee meetings.



SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR “CALL THE QUESTION”

Member A: *I call the question.*

Member B (without being recognized): *Second!*

Chair: *It has been moved and seconded that we stop debate and vote on the pending question, which is [state the motion being discussed].*

All those in favor of stopping debate and voting now, raise your right hand.

[Members in favor raise hand.]

Chair: *Thank you, hands down. All those opposed, raise your right hand.*

[Members opposed raise hand.]

Chair: *Thank you, hands down.*

[If the ayes have it:] *There are two-thirds in favor and we will vote immediately. [Take vote]*

[If the noes have it:] *There are not two-thirds in favor and debate will continue. Next speaker please...*

WHAT DOES THE MOTION “TO CALL THE QUESTION” OR “PREVIOUS QUESTION” REALLY MEAN?

This motion is actually a “vote on whether to vote.” The term “previous question” is an unhappy leftover from the 19th century. The words meant something completely different in the British parliament. We believe that it would be better to rename this motion as “the motion to stop debate” or “motion to vote immediately.”

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