

When and how do you pass the gavel?



The term “pass the gavel” refers to a situation where the chair of a meeting (the presider, the person running the meeting) temporarily gives up the position of chair (the authority to run the meeting) to allow another person to preside over the meeting.

PASS THE GAVEL IN A LARGE MEETING

In a large meeting, the chair serves as a facilitator. The chair does not take any part in discussion and does not vote, unless the vote is by ballot. This enables the chair to maintain neutrality.

However, there are some circumstances where a chair should step down. Examples might be:

- 1) When the chair has a **conflict of interest** pertaining to the motion being considered.
- 2) When the motion being considered refers only to the chair in a capacity not shared in common with other members, or that commends or censures him with others.
- 3) When the chair wishes to take part in debate.

Ordinarily, the chair would pass the gavel to the vice-chair or vice-president, unless she also, because of involvement in the debate or for any other reason, should disqualify herself from presiding in the particular case. See *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 12th edition* 43:29 for more details on how this works.

SAMPLE SCRIPT TO PASS THE GAVEL

Chair: *Since the chair is the subject of this motion to censure, the chair will pass the gavel to the vice-president.*

[Vice-president takes the chair and presides while the motion is considered, until the vote has been taken and announced.]

Vice-President: *Your vice-president will now return the gavel to the president.*

Chair: *Thank you, Vice-president. The next item of business in order is...*



Sometimes we see a situation where the chair passes the gavel in order to make or second a motion, and then takes it back again. This is incorrect. Once the authority to preside has been relinquished, the chair remains as an ordinary member of the assembly until the matter is disposed of.

PASS THE GAVEL VERY RARELY

Jurassic Parliament concurs completely with this warning from Robert's Rules:

Unless a presiding officer is extremely sparing in leaving the chair to take part in debate, he may destroy members' confidence in the impartiality of his approach to the task of presiding. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th edition* 43:29.

PASS THE GAVEL IN A SMALL BOARD

It is a little-known fact that Robert's Rules of Order has different rules for small boards (up to about 12 people). In a small board, the chair may make and second motions, take part in debate, and vote, unless the bylaws or other authorities prohibit it. Read [Small board rules are different](#) to learn more. Although the chair of a small board may make motions, we strongly recommend that the chair refrain from doing so. If the chair is interested in a certain motion, they can say, "Would any member care to move that..." Better decisions arise when everyone is on an equal footing, and the chair can encourage this by holding back. Note that this is a Jurassic Parliament suggestion and is not taken from Robert's Rules.

So strictly speaking, the chair of a small board has no need to pass the gavel to make or second a motion or to participate in debate, unless the bylaws say otherwise. Of course in our first and second cases, conflict of interest, or a motion referring only to the chair, the chair should step down.

Learn more in our article [When does the chair discuss and vote?](#)

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 12th edition was published in September 2020. Our previously published materials refer to the 11th edition. In substance the two editions are the same. We will be updating our articles to take account of the minor differences, textual changes, and the change in reference method. The new edition gives references by section number, not by pages.

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P.O. Box 77553, Seattle, WA 98177

TEL 206.542.8422 | EMAIL info@jurassicparliament.com

www.jurassicparliament.com