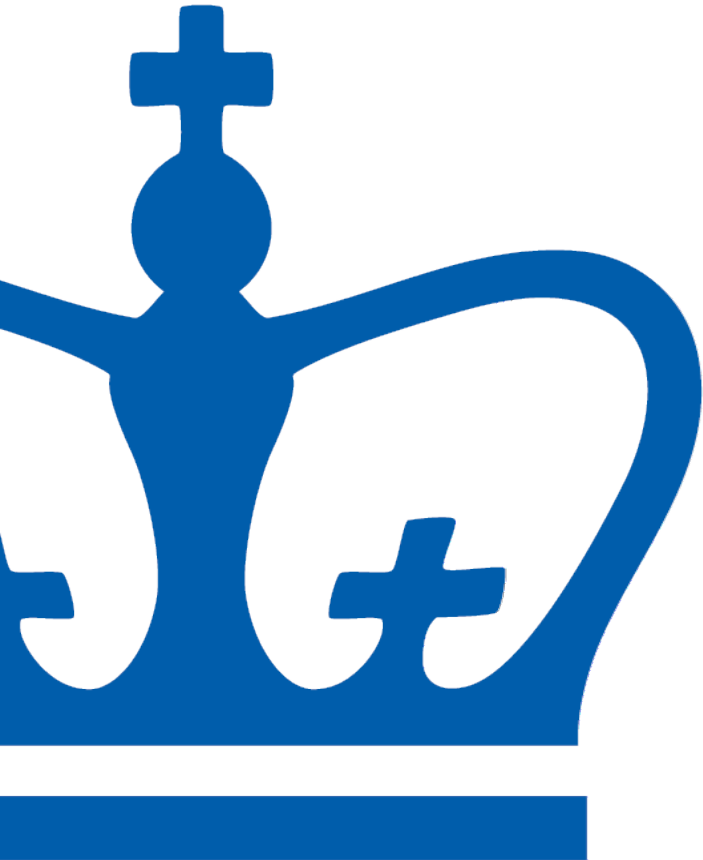


The University Senate | Orientation 2026-27



September 10 and
11, 2026



Disclaimer

This slide deck is an informal document that is for pedagogical purposes only. It is not a formal University Senate document or official interpretation of University Senate or University documents.

Orientation 2025-26: Two days

- September 10: In person & Zoom
- September 11: Zoom

Plan for today

- What the Senate is
- Documents that govern the Senate
- Senate members
- Committees
- Plenaries
- Parliamentary procedure

PLEASE INTERRUPT AND ASK QUESTIONS

What the Senate is (and isn't)

Basics

A legislative body

- A group of 111 people, most elected, some appointed
- Part of the governance structure of Columbia University
- With certain rules
- With powers and duties

Basics

- Started after the 1968 events
- Replaced the Faculty Senate
- Most members are elected from a variety of constituencies
- Most Columbia affiliates are members of a constituency
- Columbia in the wide sense—not just the Columbia Corporation

Officers

- The President of the University is the presiding officer of the University Senate
- The chair of the executive committee presides at many Senate plenaries
- The vice chair of the executive committee assists the chair of the Executive Committee

The Senate does not

- Control much money
- Enter any contracts
- Hire and fire beyond immediate staff
- Admit anyone
- Give grades or degrees
- Control any buildings or spaces beyond one office (sort of)

The Senate does not

- Control much money
- Enter any contracts
- Hire and fire beyond immediate staff
- Admit anyone
- Give grades or degrees
- Control any buildings or spaces beyond one office
- For the most part, individual Senators have no powers—only the whole body acting formally in a plenary session has any power.

Basic documents

You should have quick access to at least the first two

University Statutes

- https://secretary.columbia.edu/sites/secretary.columbia.edu/files/content/University%20Statutes_January2022.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email
- Maintained by the Trustees
- Chapter II is about the Senate, but there are several references in other places
- This chapter establishes the basic structure of the Senate
- The Senate “initiate[s] changes in Chapter II ... which have been passed by a vote of at least 3/5” of all incumbent Senators.(section 23 j.)

University Senate By-Laws

- Adopted by the University Senate
- Amendments by 3/5 vote of incumbent Senators
- [Link](#)
- Section 1: General definitions and conduct of plenaries
- Section 2: Limitations on action—basically a copy of the sections in the Statutes
- Section 3: the 4 electoral caucuses and the executive committee
- Section 4: all other committees

Other basic documents

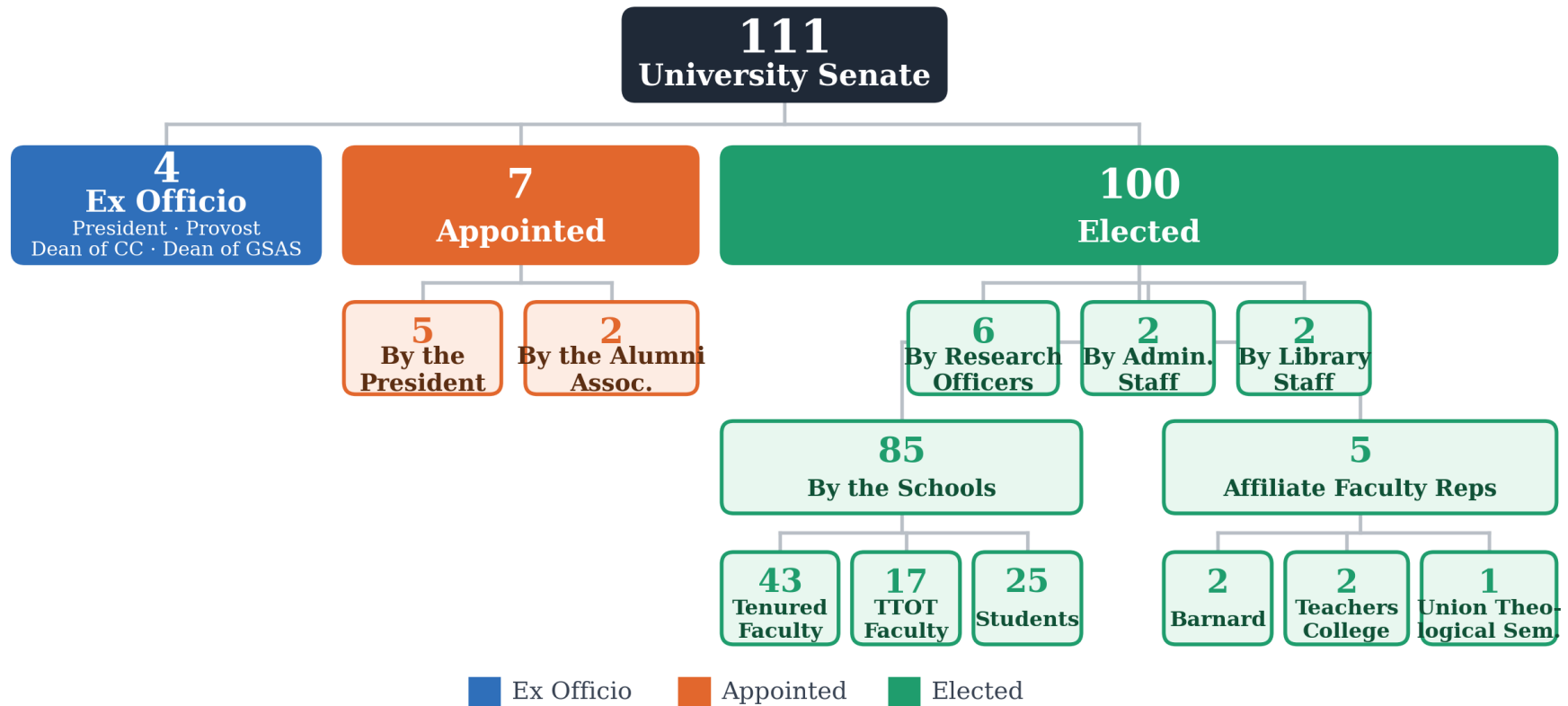
- Elections Code
- Rules on electronic meetings
- Policies on confidentiality

Senate Membership

How the 111 members get to be members

Senate Membership Tree

Total membership: 111



Source: University Senate membership breakdown

Allocating the 85 elected seats among schools

- Tenured: Each school's number of seats is proportional to its number of tenured faculty, except each school gets at least one seat and the numbers of seats are whole numbers.
- TTOT: Each school has one seat.
- Students: Each school has one seat, except that the largest school has three and the next two largest schools have two each.

Allocating the 85 elected seats among schools

- Tenured: Each school's number of seats is proportional to its number of tenured faculty, except each school gets at least one seat and the numbers of seats are whole numbers.
- TTOT: Each school has one seat.
- Students: Each school has one seat, except the largest school has three and the next two largest schools have two each.
- For student purposes, Arts and Sciences is 5 schools: CC, GS, GSAS, Arts, and SPS.
- For faculty purposes, Arts and Sciences is 5 schools: Humanities, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts, and SPS.

Type of appointment is the top level of the taxonomy

- The Senate is NOT a confederacy of schools or departments.
- Some seats are not associated with any school.
- Even those seats associated with a particular school are first associated with a type of appointment (student, tenured, TTOT), and that carries over into the rest of the organization of the Senate.

Committees

Several different kinds

General rules

- Most include non-Senators, but a majority of members must be Senators.
- Committees elect their own chairs or co-chairs.
- Composition is prescribed by the bylaws—in terms of type of appointment (not school).
- Most usually meet monthly.
- Proceedings of committees are confidential. (Results of meeting are generally not.)
- Most meetings are on zoom now.

Committees that often bring matters to the plenary

- Education
- Faculty Affairs, Academic Freedom and Tenure
- Student Affairs
- Campus Planning and Physical Development
- External Relations and Research Policy
- Senate Structure and Operations
- Elections Commission
- Rules of University Conduct

Committees mainly avoid the plenary except for reports

- Commission on the Status of Women
- Commission on Diversity
- Budget
- Alumni Relations
- Housing Policy
- Information and Communications Technology
- Libraries and Digital Resources
- Research Officers

Committees that can take actions without the plenary

- Honors and prizes
- Faculty Affairs, Academic Freedom and Tenure
- Elections Commission
- Rules of University Conduct?

The Executive Committee

- A committee like no other
- The agenda committee: it sets the agenda for the plenaries
- The committee on committees
- In addition, Trustees must consult with it on the appointment of the President, the Provost, and certain Trustees.
- It is supposed to be consulted before police are permitted on campus.

Officers of the Executive Committee

- Chair
- Vice chair.
- They are elected by the Senate for two-year terms in the spring of odd-numbered years.
- They must be tenured faculty, and they must be elected Senators at the time of nomination.
- Terms start on September 1. Term-limited to three terms.
- They cannot continue in office if they cease being Senators.

15 Members of the Executive Committee

- The President of the University
- An administrator selected by the President—usually the Provost
- The chair and vice chair of the executive committee
- Five other tenured Senators elected by the Tenured Electoral Caucus
- Two TTOT Senators elected by the TTOT Electoral Caucus
- Three student Senators elected by the Student Electoral Caucus
- One research officer Senator elected by the Research Officer Electoral
Caucus

Plenary sessions

What they are

- The official gatherings of the 111 Senators.
- Almost all official business is done in plenaries.
- Also, many reports by committees, Senate officers, or administrators.
- Generally Friday afternoons starting at 1:15 pm with a goal of getting done before 3.
- Most by zoom, some in person.

Conduct

- Only Senators can vote
- Only Senators can speak, with exceptions. Can speak only if recognized by the chair. One at a time.
- Voice but not a vote exceptions:
 - Non-Senator members of a committee that is presenting
 - Deans when a matter of special interest is being discussed
 - Union Theological student representative for a matter of special interest
 - Invited guest speakers
 - The parliamentarian
 - Other exceptions by specific motion to suspend the rules (2/3 vote)

Public

- Current CUID holders can attend, look, and listen
- No photography
- Covered by campus media
- Voting is public unless motion for a secret ballot is approved (majority vote). By show of hands or standing if in person, show of “hands” if virtual.

Why you should attend plenaries

- That's what you got elected to do.
- Let people hear your wisdom.
- Learn about your colleagues.
- Learn about the university.

Why you should attend plenaries

- That's what you got elected to do.
- Let people hear your wisdom.
- Learn about your colleagues.
- Learn about the university.
- If you want to accomplish something in the university, you have to do that learning, and the Senate is one of the few places where you can do it.

Part two: Parliamentary Procedure

University Senate Orientation

The Senate uses Robert's Rules of Order, 12th edition newly revised
(2020)

Why do we use RRO?

- The same reasons why Columbia uses zoom, google mail, and Word.
- Many people know it already, and it's going to be useful to you in the future.
- Regular updating, and provisions for eventualities we never would have thought of.
- We can add our own modifications if we wish, but when we haven't done so, RRO makes the call.
- **LEGITIMACY. Our decisions are not based on procedures we cooked up.**

Starting a meeting

“Play ball!”

- A meeting starts when the chair calls the meeting to order.
- The chair is like an umpire or traffic cop.
- They’re not players but they make sure the players play according to the rules.
- Drivers do what the traffic cop says to do.
- Usually, if the traffic cop makes a mistake, they make a mistake. The traffic continues to flow through the intersection.

Quorum

- A quorum must be present for the meeting to start.
- In the Senate, quorum is 50% of the seats filled (since usually some seats are vacant).
- No quorum, no meeting.
- Members can discuss things informally if they wish, but no action can be taken, except to adjourn or to set a new meeting time.
- If attendance falls below quorum during a meeting, the meeting should stop.
- Quorum in committees is a majority of members.

Quorum niceties

- In an electronic meeting, “present” means connected to the meeting from a Columbia address with video on and visible.
- After a meeting starts with a quorum, the quorum is presumed unless otherwise determined. The chair (and the parliamentarian) should check to make sure a quorum is present before a vote.
- Any member may ask at any time whether a quorum is present as a point of order (coming up). Chair responds.
- If it’s discovered that a quorum is no longer present at a meeting, actions that have already been taken are not affected.
- Often some Senators do not vote. The sum of votes is not usually the total number of Senators present.

Parliamentarian

- The parliamentarian advises the chair.
- This is an office under RRO, not the Senate by-laws directly.
- The parliamentarian has no power.
- What if the chair disagrees with the parliamentarian's advice?

Parliamentarian

- The parliamentarian advises the chair.
- This is an office under RRO, not the Senate by-laws directly.
- The parliamentarian has no power.
- What if the chair disagrees with the parliamentarian's advice?
- **The chair wins.**

It's not quite baseball or traffic control

- At virtually any time, a Senator who thinks a rule is being violated by the chair or anyone else, may say, “I rise to a point of order.”
- The chair should then ask the Senator to explain what rule they think is being violated and how. It doesn't matter who is violating the rule—the chair, another member, the parliamentarian, et cetera
- This must happen when the breach is occurring or immediately thereafter, with some exceptions.
- The chair then rules, possibly after consulting with the parliamentarian or anyone else. “The point is well taken,” or “The point is not well taken.”

Ask for a vote

- The chair has a third alternative—to ask the assembly to decide by majority vote.

Appeals

- A member may appeal a decision of the chair. This requires a second.
- The appeal is decided by a majority vote of the Senate. In the case of a tie, the chair's decision stands. The chair can vote.
- Appeals also generally must be raised when the decision appealed is made.

Agenda

- The first action that the Senate takes is to adopt an agenda.
- A Senator makes a motion to adopt the proposed agenda, another Senator seconds it, and if there is no debate, the Senate votes.
- The proposed agenda can be amended before it is voted on.
- Adopting the agenda takes a majority vote but amending it later requires a (2/3) vote.
- Typically, Senate agendas do not include specific times when items come up, but it is possible to put times in for important matters (including adjournment).

Main motions and debate

Motions

- Approving motions is the only way that the Senate can take action as a body.
- A motion is a statement that starts with “I move that...”
- The simplest kind of motion is called a main motion.
- It is naked and is in order only when nothing else is before the Senate.
- Before it can be considered, a motion must be “seconded” by a member other than the maker. That means a member says, “I second.”
- Seconding a motion does not signal support for the motion, only for consideration of the motion.

Yes or no

- Votes on motions are binary (with occasional exceptions).
- The vote is going to be yes or no.
- It helps to prepare a motion that can be voted on by yes or no.
- And to explain what a yes vote means and what a no vote means.

Not in order

- A motion is not in order if it is not within the purview and power of the Senate; or contrary to the purposes of the Senate.
- Or if it presents substantially the same content as a motion that was considered earlier in the meeting and defeated or postponed in some way. Other types of motion (“reconsider,” for instance) can obtain substantially the same outcome.

Stating the motion

- After a Senator has stated a motion that is in order, the chair restates the motion for the entire Senate to hear.
- The mover should listen carefully to make sure that the chair's statement is correct. The Senate will eventually vote on the motion that the chair stated.
- When the chair has stated the motion, the motion is no longer the mover's property. It is the property of the assembly to discuss and vote on.

Debate

- After the chair states the motion, it is open for debate.

Debate means that Senators talk about whether the Senate should adopt the motion. And only about that.

- Senators signal their intention to speak, and the chair calls on them. In both in person and electronic meetings the signal is raising your hand, but “hand” means something different.
- It’s good to alternate pro and con, but generally not possible.
- Debate is what makes the Senate a deliberative body.

Rules for debate part 1

- **Germane.** Remarks must be confined to the pending question and whether the Senate should approve it or not.
- **Courtesy.** Remarks must not attack the motives of other members or other qualities of other members. The chair should never allow words like “liar” or “fraud” or “lie” be uttered about members of the Senate.
- **Names.** As much as possible, members’ names should not be used. “Previous speaker,” “Engineering Senator,” et cetera instead.
- **Speaking to other Senators only through the chair.**

Rules for debate—more prohibitions

- Speaking adversely about prior Senate actions not now pending
- Reading from lengthy documents without asking for the Senate's permission—(2/3) vote or unanimous.
- DOES NOT APPLY TO REPORTS, ONLY TO DEBATE
- Speaking more than 10 minutes without asking for permission (2/3 vote).
- Speaking more than twice on one motion without the asking for permission-- (2/3) vote or unanimous.

Ending debate

- Debate ends when nobody more wants to speak.
- Or when “the previous question” passes.
- At any point in debate, when no one else has the floor, any member may move “the previous question,” This motion requires a 2/3 vote. If it passes, debate ends. If doesn’t pass, debate continues.
- Or if the time arrives for another item on the agenda (and no motion to suspend the rules intervenes), debate must stop. But no vote occurs, and debate continues at the next meeting. This happens only if the agenda specifies times, and Senate agendas usually don’t.

Subsidiary motions

These get attached to main motions

What they are

- “Previous question” is an example of a subsidiary motion.
- Subsidiary motions are motions that get attached to other motions. Previous question gets attached to a main motion—it would make no sense to move the previous question unless some other motion were pending.
- Often, subsidiary motions get attached to other subsidiary motions and to incidental motions.
- Subsidiary motions must get voted on before the motions they’re attached to get voted on.

Subsidiary motions I'll talk about

- Amend
- Postpone definitely
- Refer
- “Table”

A motion to amend

- The purpose is to change the wording of a pending main motion.
- Must be seconded.
- In order whenever a main motion is pending.
- Debatable. Debate occurs immediately. Debate is only about the amendment, not the main motion.

Amend, continued

- Must be voted on before debate on the main motion can resume and before the main motion can be voted on.
- A vote on an amendment is not a vote on the main motion. How you vote on the amendment is independent of how you vote on the main motion.

“Friendly amendment”

- **No such thing.**
- There are no unfriendly amendments either.
- Typical use: Member A moves to go to the movies on Friday, September 19. Member B seconds the motion. Member C is sympathetic to Member A's idea of going to the movies next Friday but realizes that next Friday is really September 18. So member C offers an amendment to strike “19” and replace it with “18.” Member C thinks member A will support this amendment.
- That's the whole story. After the chair has stated the motion, member A does not own it. Member C's amendment must be voted on by the whole Senate no matter what member A thinks.

What's a valid amendment?

- An amendment can't just reverse the original motion. A motion to commend Ms. Jones cannot be amended by adding "not" before "to." Similarly, an amendment cannot strike a word like "Resolved" in the main motion.
- But the motion to commend Ms. Jones can be amended to replace "commend" with "condemn." It's still taking a position on Ms. Jones' action or character.
- An amendment cannot make a main motion improper. The motion to commend Ms. Jones cannot be amended to replace "commend" with "execute."
- An amendment must be germane to the main motion.

What does germane mean?

- Positive test: if it would be improper or impossible to introduce the amendment as a new main motion after the main motion has been decided, then the amendment is germane.
- Converse does not hold.
- RRO example: If the main motion is that “the Society pay for a new desk for the secretary,” an amendment to add “and a matching bookcase,” is germane. But an amendment to add “and pay for the chair’s trip to the state convention” is not germane because it would be in order on its own.
- In case of tough calls, the Chair can ask the assembly to advise.

Amendments to amendments

- An amendment to an amendment is in order. Secondary and primary amendments.
- The secondary amendment is voted on before the primary amendment (and the primary amendment is voted on before the main motion).
- The secondary amendment cannot deal with an extraneous part of the main motion.
- A secondary amendment cannot be amended. No tertiary amendments.
- Both prohibitions can be worked around.

Practical advice

- We've never gotten very complicated. If we did, I would start drawing decision trees and showing them to the whole Senate.
- If you plan on amending something, it's best to prepare slides ahead of time to show the Senate the precise wording and what "yes" and "no" votes mean.

Motion to postpone definitely

- The purpose is to stop debate on a main motion now and take it up at a later time, either in the current meeting or the next.
- Not to kill.
- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable as to time to postpone to
- Majority vote
- Creates a special order at the designated time.
- That can be changed only by 2/3 vote

Motion to postpone definitely

- The purpose is to stop debate on a main motion now and take it up at a later time, either in the current meeting or the next.
- Not to kill.
- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable as to time to postpone to
- Majority vote
- Creates a special order at the designated time.
- That can be changed only by 2/3 vote.
- I've never seen the Senate do this but it's useful option.

Motion to refer

- This ends discussion of a main motion and requests a committee to consider it.
- Requires a second
- Debatable
- Amendable as to committee
- Majority vote

Can you postpone or refer an amendment?

- No.
- Only main motions are subject to these motions.
- When a main motion is postponed or referred, it takes all the pending amendments with it.
- Is this prohibition a silly rule?

Can you postpone or refer an amendment?

- No.
- Only main motions are subject to these motions.
- When a main motion is postponed or referred, it takes all the pending amendments with it.
- Is this prohibition a silly rule?
- Suppose the motion to commend Ms. Jones is pending. Then someone offers an amendment to change “commend” to “condemn”. Without a vote on this amendment, are you ready to vote on the main motion?

The motion to “table”

- As it's commonly thought about, this motion doesn't exist in RRO.
- Two somewhat related motions.
 - A. To lay on the table.
 - B. To postpone indefinitely.
- You can't stop debate on a main motion without a 2/3 vote

Motion to lay on the table

- The purpose is to let the assembly move to some immediately pressing matter and then return to the pending motion.
- For instance, a fire drill or the need to take up some pressing matter that must be completed at the current meeting.
- Undebatable, but chair should inquire about what the pressing matter that calls for the motion is.
- Not amendable.
- Majority vote
- After the emergency has passed, majority vote needed to return from the table.

Motion to postpone indefinitely

- Should be used rarely.
- Not in order if anything other than the main motion is pending.
- Requires a second.
- Not amendable.
- Debatable. Unlike the other subsidiary motions, debate can discuss the merits of the main motion.
- Majority vote.

Incidental and privileged motions

What they are—privileged motions

- Privileged motions are motions that are in order even when other questions are pending, and other motions cannot be made when they are pending.
- Privileged motions do not have to do with the business at hand but with special matters of immediate and overriding importance that should be allowed to interrupt anything else.
- They are undebatable.

The privileged motions, briefly

- Call for the orders of the day—to get the assembly back on track with the agenda.
- Question of privilege—an urgent matter that seriously hinders members or the assembly—noise, ventilation, disclosure of confidential information, doxxing, etc. Chair rules immediately.
- Recess
- Adjourn
- Fix the time to which to adjourn

What they are—incidental motions

- Incidental motions are questions of procedure arising out of pending business that must be decided before that business can proceed.
- They are mostly undebatable.

Incidental motions, briefly

- Point of order (we talked about this long ago)
- Appeal (ditto)
- Suspend the rules (2/3 vote)
- Division of a question
- Consider a document seriatim
- Division of the assembly (check on a vote)
- Motions relating to voting methods
- Parliamentary inquiry

The hierarchy of motions

- Privileged motions
- Incidental motions
- Subsidiary motions
- Main motion
- Motions lower in the hierarchy can be taken up only when no motion at the same level or higher in the hierarchy is not pending.