



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #122 Calling the Question

The meeting is progressing, and suddenly the phrase “I call the question!” cuts through the air. Everyone looks at each other, and the chair says “Well, that’s it then. Debate is over.” What’s wrong with this picture?

Actually, there are two things wrong: 1) a chair who doesn’t realize that the motion called Previous Question does not interrupt – requires a second – and requires a two-thirds vote, and 2) members who don’t realize that their precious right to debate is protected by the rules. How can one person decide that his desire to stop listening supersedes everyone else’s right to debate?

Whether we call it “previous question,” “calling the question,” or “closing debate” the effect is the same: the motion is a request to close debate on the pending question and take the vote immediately. The rule is based on a balancing of the right of the majority to determine the direction and the right of the minority to be heard. The right of the minority to be heard remains a priority until the minority falls below one third. At that point there are twice as many taking one point of view as the other, and forcing debate to continue becomes counterproductive. The two-thirds vote requirement protects both the minority and the majority.

Some motions of a particularly urgent nature are allowed to interrupt a speaker; calling the question is not one of them. The person who wants to move to close debate must wait to be recognized by the chair. Once made, the motion requires a second. If it does not get a second, debate resumes. If another member seconds the motion, there is no debate on whether to close debate (thank goodness!). The chair asks if the members are ready to vote, and proceeds to vote on whether to close debate. If twice as many are in favor of closing debate as wish to continue debate, debate is closed and the vote is taken on the motion that was on the floor before the question was called.

Another interesting twist is that there might be more than one motion affected by calling the question. For example, there might be a main motion, an amendment (which outranks the main motion) and a motion to refer both the main motion and the amendment to a committee (which outranks the amendment). A member has three choices to close debate:

1. On the motion to refer;
2. On the motion to refer and the amendment;
3. On the motion to refer, the amendment, and the main motion.

The latter is called a motion to call the question “on all pending questions.” If adopted, there’s no more debate (or amendments or any other motions). The votes are taken in turn, and the motions handled accordingly.

Although the squeaky wheel often gets the grease, neither a chair nor a member should allow someone who shouts “I call the question!” to trample on the rights of the rest of the assembly. Besides being against the rules, it’s simply not polite.