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Snippet #168 Divide the Question

It happens to all of us – we try to be more efficient, doing several things at the same time. It's become so common it has a name -- multi-tasking. Unfortunately, this doesn't work well for most deliberative assemblies; instead, it tends to create confusion and frustration. Members can avoid these problems by learning how to make the motion to Divide the Question.

There are a couple of checks that need to be performed to see if the proposed motion can be divided. First, is this multiple motion composed of a series of completely unrelated actions? If so, it can be divided on the demand of one member and the motion to divide the question is not used. The member should be prepared to tell the chair exactly which parts are to be handled separately. The chair might also ask, "How shall the question be divided?"

If the parts of the motion are related in some way, the second thing to check is to see if they are too closely related. Are any of the parts of the motion dependent on another part? If so, then the motion to divide the question can't attempt to divide those parts. For example, assume that the pending motion is "to build a new headquarters building and hold future meetings there." In this case the motion can't be divided. The two motions would be "to build a new headquarters building" and "to hold future meetings at the new headquarters building." If the motion to build the new headquarters fails, the motion about where to hold future meetings is moot. The motion to divide the question can only be used if the two parts can be handled completely independently.

If the parts of the motion aren't *too* separate or *too* close, the motion might be a candidate for the motion to Divide the Question. Let's assume the motion is "to honor the past presidents with a banquet, publish a book on the past presidents' contributions to the association, and present each past president with a plaque". Let's try the first test: are the parts of the motion related? They are definitely related – they all are ways to honor the past presidents. Then we go to the second test: are the parts interdependent? They are not interdependent – any or all of them can be done without affecting any of the others. The motion can be divided to consider all three options individually, or in any combination.

When making the motion, the proposer tells the chair how to divide the motion. This motion can be amended, so by majority vote the assembly can consider a different configuration, such as the banquet and plaques together and the book separately. For example, a member could move "to divide the question so as to consider the book project separately from the banquet and plaques." Once another member seconds, and the chair states the question, an amendment could be proposed by another member "to consider all options separately." Again, this requires a second, and the amendments are not debatable. If the amendment to take all three items separately is adopted, the motion to divide the question is put with no debate. With a majority vote, the chair would take up each option in turn: "to honor the past presidents with a banquet", then "to publish a book on past presidents' contributions to the association", and finally "to present each past president with a plaque." Sometimes the best thing to do when faced with too many things at once is to divide – and conquer.