



WHO IS THE SENATE PARLIAMENTARIAN?

A Clear and Digestible Guide

The Senate Parliamentarian is the Senate’s chief advisor on rules, precedents, and procedures. This person serves as a kind of “rules referee,” but with an important distinction:

- The Parliamentarian does not make decisions for the Senate.
- The Parliamentarian advises the Senate’s presiding officer and senators on the correct procedural interpretation.

In practice, this advice holds significant weight because it reflects the Senate’s past rulings and longstanding precedent. Many senators and Senate leaders rely heavily on the Parliamentarian to keep the chamber operating smoothly.

In simple terms: The Senate Parliamentarian helps answer questions like:

- What is allowed under Senate rules?
- What vote threshold is required?
- Can this amendment be offered right now?
- Does this bill qualify for a special process?
- What happens next if this motion passes?

The History of the Position

The U.S. Senate is one of the oldest functioning legislative bodies in the world. Its rules evolved over time—often through conflict, compromise, and unexpected political situations. As the Senate grew more complex, it became harder for senators and presiding officers to keep up with every procedural precedent. The Senate formally established the Parliamentarian role in 1935 with Charles Watskins becoming the first to hold the title

The Parliamentarian role developed to help the Senate manage this complexity by providing consistent institutional memory and reliable interpretation of Senate rules. The parliamentarian is appointed by and serves at the discretion of the majority leader and is a part of the nonpartisan office of the Secretary of the Senate.

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Key Duties of the Parliamentarian

While most Americans never see this work on television, it affects almost everything the Senate does.

1. **Advices on Senate Rules** Parliamentarians advise on Senate rules and standing orders, procedural motions, what is in order or out of order, and limits on debate and amendments
2. **Tracks Senate Precedents:** Senate precedents are built over decades and come from past rulings and procedural decisions. The Parliamentarian helps apply those precedents consistently.
3. **Guides the Presiding Officer:** The senate is often presided over by the Vice President of the United States, or a senator designated to preside. Presiding officers often rely on the Parliamentarian's guidance to make accurate rulings.
4. **Helps Determine how Bills Move:** Some legislation follows different tracks, like the normal Senate procedure, an expedited process, or perhaps a special budget-related procedure. The Parliamentarian can help clarify which process applies and what limitations come with it
5. **Supports The Legislative Process:** Parliamentarians also assist behind the scenes with:
 - a. organizing floor consideration
 - b. identifying procedural options
 - c. helping senators avoid rule violations
 - d. ensuring Senate actions align with procedural requirements

The Parliamentarian is influential, but not powerful in the same way a senator is. They cannot vote, cannot introduce bills, cannot block legislation, is not elected, and does not set policy preferences.

However, the Parliamentarian has real influence because senators depend on procedural legitimacy, determines what is possible according to the rules, and their interpretation can change the fate of major legislation. So in sum, the Parliamentarian does not control outcomes, but the rules often control outcomes, and the Parliamentarian helps interpret those rules.

The Parliamentarian's role in Big, National Moments

Even though the Parliamentarian is not a political actor, the position often becomes nationally visible during moments of high political stakes.

- **The Filibuster & Cloture:** The Parliamentarian helps guide senators through the procedures surrounding extended debate, motions to end debate (cloture), and timing or voting requirements. Now, while the Parliamentarian doesn't decide whether the filibuster should exist, their knowledge helps senators navigate it.

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- **Budget Reconciliation:** Budget reconciliation is a special process intended for certain budget-related legislation. It can allow bills to pass the Senate with a simple majority rather than the 60 votes often needed. The Parliamentarian plays a major advisory role in determining whether provisions meet the requirements under Senate rules – especially what is commonly known as the Byrd Rule. For example, major national laws involving taxes, spending, and the deficit may depend on reconciliation rules, and the Parliamentarians guidance can shape what can and cannot stay in the bill.
- **Amendments and “Points of Order:”** A senator can raise a point of order to challenge whether something violates Senate rules, and the Parliamentarian’s expertise helps inform rulings on those challenges.

Why does the Parliamentarian Matter?

At first glance, Senate procedure can seem distant from daily life. But many of the biggest issues Americans care about depend on whether the Senate can move legislation efficiently.

Whether a bill can pass, how quickly it can move, and whether it needs 50 votes or 60 votes can determine whether Congress acts at all. Even when Americans agree there is a problem, Senate rules often determine whether solutions can become law.

Broadly, the Senate Parliamentarian represents a key democratic principle: rules matter. The Senate cannot function if its procedures are ignored or constantly reinvented for political convenience. The Parliamentarian helps protect procedural consistency, institutional stability, predictable legislative rules, and fairness in senate operations.

In sum, while senators debate what the law should be, the Parliamentarian helps guide how the Senate can legitimately get there. And that matters.

References

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