This short guide is meant to help student representatives get a sense of the basics of navigating in-camera proceedings on elected bodies. We hope you find this guide helpful. Feedback or questions can be directed to Discover Governance by emailing sga@su.ualberta.ca.

Unless otherwise noted, this FAQ answers questions related to executive session (going in camera) as per Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised 11th Edition and so may not be accurate for organizations using other rules. Please consult your own organizational rules before using executive session.

If this resource guide proves useful for you, you might also want to check out these other great resources offered by Discover Governance:

- Wisdom for Effective Committee Chairs
- Why Use Robert’s Rules?
- Simplified Glossary for Robert’s Rules of Order

Good luck!

Questions

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3. What, exactly, is covered by the confidentiality of in camera proceedings?
4. Should we take minutes when we’re in camera?
5. Can a body move motions in camera?
6. Can I discuss in-camera proceedings with people outside of the meeting?
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Answers

1. **What does it mean to ‘go in camera?’**

   ‘In camera’ is Latin for “in chambers,” and it means to go into a confidential or secret session (literally, that whatever is discussed cannot leave the room).¹ For all intents and purposes, going in camera and moving into executive session are basically the same thing.

2. **How do you make a meeting go in camera?**

   Using *Robert’s Rules*, a motion to go into executive session is undebatable, is in order as long as you don’t interrupt someone who already has the floor, and requires a simple majority to pass.² To get out of executive session is the same motion except you move out of executive session instead of into it.

3. **What, exactly, is covered by the confidentiality of in camera proceedings?**

   The proceedings. This means **everything that was discussed**. Every single thing that happened in the meeting after you moved in camera is confidential. This often includes the topic of the discussion itself, and always includes every thing that every person in the room said. For groups that don’t automatically make motions public, it also includes the text of motions and the results of votes.

   **What in camera doesn’t cover:**

   a. **Things that were already public.** For example, if you discussed the results of the 1967 World Series while in camera, the fact that the Red Sox lost doesn’t suddenly become confidential. What you can’t discuss outside the room is the fact that you talked about the 1967 World Series while in camera, or what anyone in the room said about it.

   b. **Your opinion.** If you think that *The Empire Strikes Back* is the best of the *Star Wars* films and say so in camera, the fact that you believe that doesn’t become a secret. However, you can’t disclose that you shared this opinion while in camera. **Be very careful with this.** Opinions that you hold that are directly and obviously related to, or informed by, the business of your group should be kept to yourself. For example, if it’s common knowledge that someone in your group is facing disciplinary action, you should **not** publicly state that you think they should be kicked out of the group until the situation is resolved.

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c. **The behavior of people who aren’t in the room.** If your group is in camera discussing negotiations with a third party organization and that organization discloses things about your in camera proceedings, that doesn’t automatically mean they did anything wrong. Most importantly with this point, if someone else spills your group’s secrets, that **does not necessarily mean** that you are now free to discuss in camera proceedings publicly as well. You will need to consult your organization’s rules.

If you’re not sure about whether or not something is in camera, **err on the side of caution.** Wait until your next meeting, move back in camera, and ask the rest of the group what they think.

4. **Should we take minutes when we’re in camera?**

   Yes, **you should definitely** be taking minutes in camera. In camera minutes should be stored separately from your public minutes and only be accessible to members who were privy to the in camera session.

5. **Can a body move motions in camera?**

   Yes, **but only** if the motions made in camera only affect people who are privy to the secrecy of the proceedings.

   Some organizations operate entirely in camera (e.g. many fraternities and sororities).

   **However, all motions made by the Students’ Council** of the University of Alberta Students’ Union are **public**. Although a motion may be made in camera at one of these meetings, the motion itself will be published with the minutes. This is due to the fact that **the organization’s rules stipulate** that all motions are automatically public.³

6. **Can I discuss in camera proceedings with people outside of the meeting?**

   Yes, **but only** if they’re a member of the body that went in camera or they were specifically authorized to hear about the in camera proceedings. In other words, you can talk to people who were present during the in camera discussion or had the right to be present either because they’re a member of the group or because the group explicitly authorized them to be there. **You cannot** talk to anyone else about what was discussed.

7. **Isn’t it always bad for a democratic body to do things in secret?**

   **No.** All organizations will occasionally need the ability to have private discussions. Certain issues, such as conversations about intra-group conflicts, member discipline, private personal information related to group business (e.g. executive health, academic, or family issues),

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discussions about ongoing legal proceedings, or other kinds of sensitive negotiations require more candid, confidential conversations and, consequently, a more limited audience than is afforded in more public forums.\(^4\) Quite often, the early part of a discussion needs to be handled in camera to share the facts on a ‘need-to-know basis’ so that everyone involved has the information they need to make a public decision later down the road.

*Robert’s Rules* places no limits on the content of in camera discussion except suggesting that some things must always be handled in executive session (e.g. member discipline).

However, in camera session, like any tool, is open to abuse. The decision to move your group in camera should always be made carefully. Except in very specific organizational contexts (e.g. fraternities and sororities), in camera should not be the default setting for your group’s discussions.

### 8. Can in camera proceedings be retroactively made public?

**Yes.** If you want to take a motion that was moved in camera and make it public, the easiest way to do that is to write the original motion with a condition in it that, once fulfilled, makes the motion public.

For either minutes or motions, the easiest way to make things retroactively public is to move a new motion specifying which motion or which part of the in-camera proceedings you would like to see made public. That motion is handled the same as any other main motion.

However, making proceedings that are not recorded in the minutes public may not be possible.\(^5\) You should consult with your own organizational rules before trying to retroactively publicize proceedings.

### 9. What happens if I do disclose in camera proceedings?

**Very Bad Things.** You can face disciplinary action. Depending on the severity of the breach that could include anything from censure to fines to expulsion. You may even be sued or charged with a criminal offence.

You also breach the trust of your organization and the other members of your group, which almost always severely damages its ability to operate effectively. You may also cause other kinds of damage, such as opening your organization to being sued or causing resignations of other members who feel like they’ve been professionally compromised by your actions.

*Don’t breach confidentiality. It’s a bad idea.*

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\(^5\) Minutes are the official written record of what happened in the meeting. Most organizations vote to adopt the minutes at their next meeting.
10. Where can I learn more about in camera proceedings?

If your organization is working with Robert’s Rules, you should have a physical copy of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th Edition. Supplementary resources are also available at robertsrules.com, the official site of the Robert’s Rules foundation. Executive Session is covered in Part IV Chapter 16.

Executive Sessions: How to use them Regularly and Wisely is an excellent resource published by Board Source.