

In Camera FAQ

This FAQ is meant to help student representatives get a sense of the basics of navigating in-camera proceedings on elected bodies that use Roberts' Rules of Order.

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. Whatever is discussed cannot leave the room.

How do you make a meeting go in camera?

A motion to go in camera 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. To go out of camera is the same motion except that you move out of camera instead of into it.

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

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:

- 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.
- 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. Opinions that you hold that are directly and obviously related to, or informed by, the business of your group should be kept to yourself.
- 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.

Should we take minutes when we're in camera?

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

Can a body move motions in camera?

Only if the motion will only affect people who are privy to the secret proceedings.

Exception: 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.

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

Only if they're a member 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.

Is it bad for a democratic body to do things in secret?

No. All organizations will occasionally need to have private discussions. Certain issues, such as intra-group conflicts, member discipline, private personal information related to group business (e.g. executive health, academic, or family issues), discussions about ongoing legal proceedings, or other kinds of sensitive negotiations require more candid, confidential conversations. 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. In camera should not be the default setting for your group's discussions.

Can in camera proceedings be retroactively made public?

Yes. 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. You should consult with your own organizational rules before trying to retroactively publicize proceedings.

What happens if I disclose in camera proceedings?

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.