

A Guide to the WSFS Business Meeting at DisCon III

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How are Hugo categories determined? Who says how voting works in Site Selection?
When can Worldcons raise membership rates?

Worldcon members can find a superficial answer by peering into the Souvenir Guide—the WSFS Constitution. But how, then, is the Constitution created?

The Constitution of the World Science Fiction Society (“WSFS”) is amended and other rules pertaining to, and requests of, Worldcons and WSFS are made, by the WSFS Business Meeting. The Business Meeting occurs at Worldcon, having a session beginning at 10 a.m. each day, beginning on the second day.

Every Attending Member may attend and participate in the Business Meeting. There is no “Visitors’ Gallery;” If you have an Attending membership badge for the convention, you are entitled to be at the meeting, which means you can introduce motions, debate proposals, and vote on them. You don’t need to be elected to a council of delegates, board of directors, or anything else. You represent yourself.

Supporting Members can propose business, but not attend the Meeting. Remember that all proposed business needs two sponsors—these can both be Supporting, both Attending, or one of each, and, of course, a proposal can have more than two sponsors.

The Meeting is run by, in descending order of precedence: The WSFS Constitution and Standing Rules; such other rules as may be published in advance by the current Committee; the customs and usages of WSFS (including the Resolutions and Rulings of Continuing Effect); and the current edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised*. This ensures that debate is structured and allows for proper consideration of the rights of individuals, minorities (particularly strong minorities, defined as more than one-third of the attendees), majorities (majorities have rights, too), super-majorities (the 2/3 vote required to kill motions or close debate are protections against having the meeting’s time wasted), and absentees.

Below are some common questions about the Business Meeting with slightly simplified answers.

Are proxies allowed? Can I participate remotely?

Proxies are not allowed, nor are any forms of remote participation. You must be present in person to debate, make motions (except items submitted in advance), and vote. Thus, only Attending Members can participate in the Meeting.

How do I submit a proposal?

Any two or more Attending and/or Supporting members can submit business to the meeting. To submit a proposal, send it to businessmeeting@discon3.org. You can contact us at that address in advance if you need help crafting your proposal into the correct format.

The deadline for submitting proposals to the 2021 WSFS Business Meeting is November 16, 2021. New proposals after that date will generally not be considered, subject to the provisions of Standing Rule 2.1.

When is the Business Meeting?

There are three (occasionally four) sessions of the WSFS Business Meeting scheduled at each Worldcon. Most years (including this year), they start at 10 a.m. on the second, third, and fourth days of Worldcon. This means the sessions will begin at 10 a.m. on Thursday, December 16, 2021; Friday, December 17, 2021; Saturday, December 18, 2021; and possibly Sunday, December 19, 2021. Although the meetings will not be formally called to order before 10 a.m., we recommend that you arrive no later than 9:45 a.m. because we are likely to have a busy agenda and must adjourn no later than 12:30 p.m. (see below). We will not delay starting the meeting to wait for latecomers.

How long is the Business Meeting?

Each session usually lasts between 90 minutes and three hours. There are occasional breaks. This year in order to accommodate “second stage”, we need to vacate the room no later than 12:30 p.m. Therefore, meetings will start on time, and we will probably have a fourth (Sunday) meeting.

Where is the meeting being held?

Currently the location of the Business Meeting will be in the Palladium Room of the Omni Shoreham Hotel.

What is a Preliminary Business Meeting and do I have to attend that?

The first session is called the Preliminary Business Meeting, where agenda matters are settled. Debate time is set during this meeting and items may be Postponed Indefinitely or Objected to Consideration. If you'd like a matter to see substantive debate, the best way to ensure that is to attend the Preliminary Business Meeting. Resolutions, but not constitutional amendments, may be debated and voted at the Preliminary Business Meeting, and Reports may also be heard.

What about the other sessions?

The second session is the Main Business Meeting, where substantive debate and votes happen on constitutional amendments. The third session is the Site Selection Business Meeting, where the results of Worldcon Site Selection are announced and any business

not resolved on previous days is dealt with. In the event of insufficient time during the second and third sessions to resolve everything, there is an “overflow” session scheduled for the last day of the Worldcon. This was used in 2015 but the last time we used it before that was 1992. In recent years before 2015, all substantive business (constitutional amendments) was resolved by the end of the second day’s meeting, so the third session was mostly ceremonial, consisting of hearing site selection results and the initial presentation from the winning bid, then dealing with Question Time for the following year’s convention (a formal time for that bid to take questions about their event) and bids for future Worldcons.

However, due to our time constraints this year, if we do not dispose of constitutional business on at the Main Business Meeting, we will dispense with most of the Site Selection Business Meeting’s ceremonial business and, after dealing with Site Selection, go back to work debating and voting on substantive matters.

You mentioned Objection to Consideration and Postpone Indefinitely, what are those? Object to Consideration (OTC) is the 12-ton block that drops on proposals that are so unpopular that they can’t even muster a 25% vote in favor of discussing them. When an item of new business comes before the meeting, before there is any debate and before any amendments have been proposed (and stated by the Chair), any member may rise (possibly interrupting other members because OTC has a higher priority in debate) and say, “I object to the consideration of the question.” This motion means, “I think this is such a bad idea that I want us to kill it now, without debate.” The motion to Object to Consideration is itself undebatable, and furthermore, you can’t start discussing the proposal to which the OTC has been lodged.

The Chair then asks for a vote of who is in favor of considering the question. If 3/4 of the people voting vote against consideration, the original proposal is killed without debate. The person who made the original motion doesn’t even get to make an opening statement other than what was included with the proposal in writing.

There is a slightly milder procedural motion to kill new proposals called Postpone Indefinitely. It requires a 2/3 vote to kill a proposal, but it also allows each side (those opposed to and those in favor of considering the proposal) two minutes each to make a case for why the proposal should or should not be considered. If the meeting votes to postpone something indefinitely, it is effectively dead for the remainder of that Worldcon. (It can be re-introduced next year.)

Note that voting in favor of consideration *does not necessarily mean you favor the proposal*. It simply means that you favor debating it. That may be because you want to hear the makers’ arguments, make your own arguments against the proposal, or offer amendments to change the proposal to something more to your liking.

How do we vote?

Once debate time has ended or a vote to Call the Previous Question (Close Debate) passes, we vote on an issue. We can also, as noted above, vote on procedural motions, such as Call the Previous Question or Move to Adjourn. Voting on non-controversial items is normally done by Unanimous Consent. If the Chair says something like, “Without objection, [X] will be done” it means, “If there is anyone who thinks we need to take an actual vote, say so now.” When the Chair asks this, don’t dilly-dally; he or she will move right along and you’ll lose your chance to say anything at all if you don’t call out “object” or rise and try to get the chair’s attention. Note that you shouldn’t do this solely for the sake of form; it’s common enough to let unanimous-consent motions go through on things where you know your side doesn’t have the votes to defeat the proposal.

We don’t usually do votes by an “ayes and noes” voice vote since it just leads to people trying to out-shout each other. Instead we use an Uncounted Show of Hands, where the chair calls for the affirmative and the negative in turn and the members raise hands to show their support for one side or the other. These shows of hands are not counted. If the result is not conclusive (and in any event if there are enough members who call for a “Division” meaning a counted vote), the Chair will proceed to a counted vote.

Counted votes are usually done by a Standing Serpentine Vote. This is done by those people in favor of the motion standing, and then counting off one at a time, starting at the front, moving back and forth across the room, and then back through the room until everyone who wants to vote has done so. When the count gets to you, you call out the next number and sit down. You may think this is slow, but it’s faster than multiple counts of shows of hands, keeps the blood from draining out of your arm while you wait, deals with dithering voters, and generally makes the total quite obvious when it is done.

Abstentions are not counted. There’s no point: if the Chair were to call for abstentions, people who say nothing have abstained just as much as those who raise their hands. An abstention is not a vote against a proposal; it’s not a vote at all, and it’s the same as if the person were not even in the room. For example, if there are 200 people at the meeting, and 30 people vote yes, 10 vote no, and everyone else doesn’t vote at all, the motion passes 30-10, and the fact that there were 160 other people present who didn’t vote doesn’t matter.

Why are there all of these complicated rules?

Parliamentary procedure as codified in *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised*, along with WSFS’s own Standing Rules, are there to help large groups like the Business Meeting consider proposals in a structured format that allows for proper consideration of the rights of individuals, minorities (particularly strong minorities, defined as more than one-third of the attendees), majorities (majorities have rights, too), super-majorities (the 2/3 vote required to kill motions or close debate are protections against having the

meeting's time wasted), and absentees (you can't suspend your own constitution). Experience shows that, particularly in large groups, you can't just let anyone who wants to do so speak for however long he or she wants, and without structure that is fair, it turns into a free-for-all.

Remember that "fair" doesn't always mean "I get what I personally want." It's a deliberative assembly run in a democratic manner. That means that sometimes you don't win, but it does mean that you and everyone else has to play by the same rules.