

Law of Total Tricks

A simplified use for partscore bidding decisions.

The Law of Total Tricks is a fairly complex set of principles that experienced bridge players use to decide how high to bid in competitive auctions. Two entire books are devoted to "The Law" (*To Bid or Not to Bid* and *Following the Law* by Larry Cohen), but there are some basic elements of the Law that beginners can adopt.

Described here is a simplified version of a guideline you can use to decide if you should pass and let the opponents play in their partscore, or if you should bid one level higher in your suit. It operates on the principle that "trumps are (almost) everything" and high-card strength is not critical. In its simplest form, the rule is:

On partscore deals (where each partnership has a combined total of about 17-23 high-card points): the number of tricks you can take on offense is equal to the combined number of trumps you hold.

In practice, this means that if you and partner have only an 8-card fit, you should usually stop at the 2-level. If you have a 9-card fit, you can safely bid 3 of your suit if the opponents try to force you one level higher.

Using the Law

	<u>Partner</u>	<u>RHO</u>	<u>You</u>	<u>LHO</u>
(1)	1H ?	1S	2H	2S
(2)	1C 2S	Pass 3D	1S ?	2D

In Auction (1), partner should take the "push" to 3H *only* if he has a sixth heart, even if he has a bare 11-12 pts. If partner passes, he's showing a minimum opener with only 5 hearts -- when this auction comes back to you, **you** will bid 3H *only* if you have an extra trump (4 hearts instead of the 3 you've promised). Again, points don't matter -- if you have 4-card heart support, bid 3H, even with a weak hand (♠43 ♥10854 ♦AJ94 ♣Q86).

In Auction (2), partner should never be the one to bid 3S because he can't have an extra trump (the auction has told you he holds a minimum opener with *exactly* 4 spades). The decision is up to you. If you have the high-card strength to make a game, go ahead and bid 4S. But if it's a partscore deal (one where you have a weaker hand of 6-10 pts. and wanted to stop in 2S), you should bid 3S now only if you have a 5-card suit (one more than you showed with your 1S response). You would bid 3S here with ♠J10843 ♥K4 ♦654 ♣QJ2. You should pass with ♠QJ43 ♥K64 ♦J54 ♣QJ2

Note: In competitive auctions like those above, the partner who bids at the 3-level is *not* inviting game nor showing extra points. He is merely competing, and the other partner should always pass. If you have extra values and want to invite game, you must make a game-try bid in a new suit.

Adjustments to the Law

There are a few special cases where you might want to violate this rule and bid to a level higher than the number of trumps you hold. You would only do this if your hand has a good combination of the following features:

- **A strong trump holding** -- K107 instead of 643.
- **Honor strength or length in a side suit partner has bid** -- in Auction (2) above, help in clubs (a holding of Kx, QJx, Jxxx, etc.) would be an asset.
- **No honor wastage in the opponent's suit** -- if you hold lower honors (jacks, queens, kings) in the opponent's suit, they may be valuable only if you're defending.
- **Shortness in the opponent's suit** -- best is a singleton or void, but even a doubleton may provide a ruffing value.
- **Unbalanced distribution** -- something better than 4-3-3-3.