



Understanding Democratic Rules of Order

Description

By Former Board Secretary & Parliamentarian, [Marcy G. Mermel](#), 10-21-20

Let's First Look at our Authors

Peg and Fred Francis have lived in Victoria, Canada since 1950, which explains why the book is published by a Canadian firm, "New Society Publishers." Fred was a Math teacher, and Peg, an elementary teacher and hobby painter. Aside from the **Democratic Rules of Order** (DRO), together they have designed valuable new products including a children's building set called "Carpento," an all-metal, rodent-proof composter called "[Speedibin](#)," and more than twenty different wood stoves and furnaces, some of which, at the time of being certified by the EPA, were the cleanest burning stoves ever tested in the lab. Manufacturers have sold thousands of these stoves, saving tons of smoke pollution in North America and overseas every year.

The Francis's saw an urgent need for more justice and stronger democracies in our world:

"For a democracy to work successfully the populace itself must understand and want to obey the democratic principles. Citizens need practice in making the individual rights of each member and the rights of the majority work together."

They intended that people using this book are practicing and learning these laws at the grass-roots level. Fred Francis passed in 2003 with Peg and their children carrying on the work of updating and publishing new editions...The work of revising and publishing new editions by remaining relatives is something that **Robert's Rules of Order Revised** (RR) and DRO do have in common. DRO is in its 10th edition, while RR is coming out with number 12 sometime in the fall of 2020.

In the September 7th HSV Board discussion Session, Chairman Sherman remarked specifically about changing from the use of RR (which has been used for 50 years by HSV) to the DRO, which he said he was obviously in favor of: “The input I have gotten through both my personal email and the POA email is what I think is a misunderstanding of what Robert’s Rules of Order versus the Democratic Rules of Order are. This is **Robert’s Rules of Order**, simplified, in a nutshell. It really is.”

Sherman continued: “It’s modernized and clarified, and its use is getting to be more widespread, but we don’t really need to have a situation where a board member or a committee member needs to know that they have to ask for the question when they could say something simple, ‘can we just take a vote now?’ That’s what the informal process allows you to do. It also, and Joanie (JoAnne Corry) doesn’t have it with her today, but it also doesn’t require every person to know what’s in a manual that’s that thick [using his hand to intimate 4 inches or so) and understand all the nuances of **Robert’s Rules**.”

Sherman: “We’re here to conduct business. We should be able to do it in an orderly and yet a somewhat informal, but following **Robert’s Rules of Order** structure. Motions are still made the same way. It’s just that the formality, the objections that can be made, and that kind of thing, although you can do them, are not as...you don’t have to follow the finite rules that are in **Robert’s Rules of Order**.”

Before we look into the details of either the **Democratic Rules of Order** or **Robert’s**, let’s first address our Chairman’s statements:

1. DRO is NOT:
 1. RR simplified;
 2. A version of RR;
 3. Structured following RR.

In the Preface of DRO, it reads: “Fred and Peg recognized the need for a concise, authoritative resource to assist boards of directors, committees, and other organized groups seeking to fairly represent their memberships by hosting efficient, effective meetings. **Because they could not find such a resource, they created one.**”

The introduction of DRO reads under “Democratic Principles”: **This is not an abridged version of other books.** It is a complete set of rules determined by common practice the natural laws of democracy – “rule by the ruled,” as Webster’s dictionary puts it.

In a comparison of RR to DRO, Prospectbusiness.org answered the question, “Why was the Book [DRO] written?” this way: In hundreds of meetings, the authors saw the frequent frustrations caused by the complexities of the traditional rules.....They searched for a set of rules which were simpler **but found none satisfactory. Nearly all were incomplete or modifications of the same complex procedures [RR].** Finally, they decided to write **a complete set of rules** based only on democratic principles and common practice.

This does not mean DRO is good or bad; it does mean that it is neither a version nor a derivative of Robert’s Rules, which was strongly misstated. Other directors mentioned how DRO was catching on and being used by organizations more and more. Yes, DRO is a best seller in Canada, but its use is really unknown in the States.

Let's look at some interesting aspects of DRO taken directly from the "Introduction" and "Members Making Decisions" portions of the Booklet.

Introduction

Democratic Principles

The right of each individual member to participate equally and fully in orderly meetings that are free from intimidation, filibustering, and other disturbances and in which all members will follow the same easily understood rules, including the right to be equally and fully informed of all events, whether a member is present or not.

This makes an interesting point as this board had/has a tendency to segregate certain members depending on the meeting topic or does not make sure an absentee member gets all the information and facts of the meeting or call – now they must.

Degrees of Formality

In small or close-knit groups, decisions can often be made by consensus or general agreement, provided that the chair or secretary recording each decision is sure that most members agree (see pages 15, Informal Chair, and 37, Less Formality).

Large groups, too, often make decisions informally. The mover's privilege (see page 19, Mover's Privilege) allows cooperative members to work out decisions quickly and easily. A more formal amending process is automatically required if opinions are divided. The degree of formality is usually determined by custom, agreement, or a law as defined in the next paragraph.

This means a decision can be made without even voting. Also, someone can/must make the distinction between more or less "formality" ...not quite sure how that will go over and who decides?

Higher Laws

Rules of order are automatically overruled when a law of the land, a constitution, a bylaw, or an existing standing rule applies. Throughout this book, we refer to any of these as a *law*. Rules of order apply to the conduct of meetings only. They do not interpret laws or make up for deficiencies in bylaws or standing rules.

IMHO, any rules of order *must* support and uphold the governing documents, which is often half of what the agenda items are about. This seems to be a serious disconnect between an organization's governing documents and how they govern.

For Maximum Efficiency

Sharing the decision-making process in meetings is like driving a car. There are rules to be learned

and skills to be attained. Once this has been done, group decision-making is second nature, like driving. If each member reads this book thoughtfully at least once, and if the chair does the same at least twice, and if members agree to follow these rules, your meetings should move as easily as the car of an experienced driver who can drive competently without wondering which pedal to press.

I believe the Villagers are going to want some sort of assurance that the Directors are going to “read it once and the Chair twice” ... DRO is truly suggesting that every board member learns the rules and be skilled at using them. If this is voted on October 21, when does it go into effect? How long will it take for everyone to get “up to speed”, or, is everybody ready right now?

Members Making Decisions

Equal Rights

Unless a law states differently, each member has one vote and an equal voice in all decisions.

That means everyone, not just the directors that like each other.

The Chair

The president or someone elected by the members or appointed by the executive board to conduct the members' meetings.

OK, sounds familiar, so far so good.

Chair's Authority

The chair's duty is to preserve order and fairness in meetings by following the bylaws and rules of order. Members must abide by the rulings of the chair without debate except when a point of order (see page 32, Point of Order) is made.

This sounds reasonable; however, the issue is when the bylaws and the rules of order clash (see “Higher Laws” above).

Formal Chair

In large meetings, the chair must be—and must be seen to be—absolutely impartial. The chair must refrain from expressing personal opinions in words or gestures and should not participate in discussion except to guide it in an orderly fashion. If, on rare occasions, the chair has relevant, brief information, the chair may depart from this rule, but the chair must always avoid showing any bias. The chair cannot make a motion.

I believe this would have been impossible for the recent former chair, and will be equally difficult for our present one.

If the chair needs to participate actively in a discussion, arrangements should be made for another

member to fill this position until the motion has been voted on. A member may call the chair to a point of order for wrongful participation, and the chair should comply with good spirit (see page 58, Q31).

This sounds like the situation could become quite unwieldy...who takes over when the chair wants to participate? How are the “arrangements” made mid-stream during a meeting?

Informal Chair

In smaller or less formal meetings, members may have a bylaw, standing rule, or custom permitting the chair to participate in discussions with the same privileges as other members.

“Less formal”, who makes the decision if a topic is less formal?

Addressing the Chair

Members must wait for permission (a verbal or nonverbal sign) from the chair before speaking. If several members stand at once, the chair selects one and notes who should be next. The others should sit until the speaker has finished; in large assemblies, the chair may require members wishing to speak to line up behind a microphone, or put their names on a list and wait their turn. A list of the order of speakers, preferably visible to all, is often useful, especially for virtual meetings.

IMHO, I do not see this happening at HSV Board meetings. This seems *MORE* formal, not less formal or informal.

Agenda

The items of business and the order in which they are to be discussed at meetings, generally prepared by the secretary with executive board approval, or, in smaller meetings, by the chair. The agenda should be made known to members beforehand. An agenda distributed in advance is particularly valuable for virtual meetings. The agenda can be changed by the members any time during the meeting except when another motion is on the floor (being considered by the members). The agenda change must be voted on if one or more members object. Agenda headings might include:

- Opening of the meeting and approval of the agenda
- Minutes of the previous meeting
- Correspondence and reports
- Business arising from minutes, correspondence, and reports
- Motions to be presented and new business
- Announcements
- Adjournment and closing

The agenda can be changed any time during a meeting except when a motion is on the floor – again, this could escalate into another unwieldy situation.

Motions and Decisions

Sometimes decisions are made by consensus in which the chair says “If there are no objections, then [the decision is described],” but otherwise all decisions are made with motions or resolutions (see page 55, Q26) in which a member says “I move [that some action be taken].”

So, decisions can be made without a vote. This sounds very, very dangerous.

Opinion Poll (Straw Vote)

A nonbinding opinion poll (straw vote) can be held by the chair any time during a meeting if the members are willing. If a member objects, the chair should ask the members for a decision and conduct the opinion poll or not according to the members’ vote (see page 55, Q27).

OK, so you can ask for a vote that really isn’t a vote...also sounds dangerous.

Mover’s Privilege

During discussion, ideas for improving the motion may occur. Provided that not more than one member objects, the mover may reword or withdraw the motion any time before it has been voted on. A seconder for new wording or withdrawal is required. Rewording can be continued until the motion is as perfect as the mover, assisted by the meeting, can make it.

Once the mover has decided on new wording—and it has been seconded—the chair or secretary should read out the reworded motion, which immediately becomes a new motion on the floor, replacing the previous one. If two members object prior to this reading out of the reworded motion, changes can be made only with motions to amend.

All we can do is pray everyone can keep up!

Amendments

If the mover does not—or cannot, because of objections—make a suggested change to the motion, any member may move an amendment to the original motion. An amendment may delete, substitute, or add words that will modify the original motion but must not negate it or change the intent. The amendment, when accepted by the chair and seconded, immediately becomes a new motion on the floor, temporarily replacing the original motion. The amendment grants mover’s privilege to the mover of the amendment. Any rewording must be acceptable to the chair as not changing the topic. The details of the proposed amendment are discussed (not the original motion), and then the amendment is voted on.

An amendment cannot be amended, but it can be defeated and replaced with another amendment. If the amendment passes, the secretary should read the newly amended motion, which is now a new motion on the floor to be discussed (if desired) and voted on. It cannot be reworded or withdrawn by the mover's privilege now, since it has been partly established by the members, but this new motion can be passed, defeated, or amended again.

If the amendment fails, the previous motion again becomes the motion on the floor. If this previous motion was the original motion (having never been amended), then the original mover regains the mover's privilege. Further amendments are allowed, one at a time.

Even I will be reading this one several more times to understand it completely.

Voting

When all members who wish to speak have done so, the chair should call for a vote. Unless a larger majority is required (see page 25, Larger Majority Vote), a decision is made (the motion is passed) when a quorum is present and more than half the votes are affirmative. Spoiled ballots and members not voting are not counted (see page 51, Q18).

Sounds familiar – a little relieved.

Calling for a Vote

Members who believe discussion is complete sometimes call out "We are ready to vote," or the chair might ask "Are you ready to vote?" The response is a guide for the chair only and does not force a vote. A member who believes that the chair is calling for the vote too early or is delaying too long can rise on a point of order (see page 32, Point of Order) and move that "we delay the vote for more discussion" or that "we vote now." Such a motion needs seconding and should be voted on with little or no discussion.

This sounds viable and fair – one would hope it will be practiced by all.

This covers only a few pages of the Booklet. I will leave reading the remainder up to the board and any Villagers that wish to understand the new procedures, should this be voted through.

Author's note: Had I been asked to research the subject of a possible replacement for ***Robert's Rules of Order*** when I was Parliamentarian, or even while out of state, I would have certainly obliged.

I would have, however, first explained that ***Robert's Rules*** accommodates smaller boards and less formal activity, and that we should be looking into those options before completely jumping ship.

For example, here is a RR "Tool Kit" for smaller boards which appears quite simplified and handy:

[Roberts-Rules-of-Order-Cheat-Sheet-tool-kit](#)

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Here is one that explains specifically the paired down rules for smaller boards:

[Roberts-Special-Rules-for-Small-Boards](#)

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This explains the need for parliamentary procedures, the ten basic rules that are common among all rules, and then adds a section of Special rules for small nonprofits:

[Roberts-Rules-of-Order-Parliamentary-Procedure](#)

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I am hoping that this information will at least allow the board to defer the Democratic Rule of Order vote until these other options are evaluated. As always, I am willing to provide more information, insight, and conversation so that the board feels completely comfortable with such a weighty decision.

Respectfully,

Marcy G. Mermel. CCIM, CAC

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Date Created

10/21/2020

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