

## Quick Reference Handout 9.7: Alternatives to *Robert's Rules of Order*

**Planning councils/Planning bodies (PC/PBs) need an agreed-upon process for discussion and decision making** at both committee and full PC/PB meetings. HRSA HAB does not specify what process should be used, so long as it is fair and democratic – everyone follows the same rules and has the same opportunities to participate. It should provide order, support open decision making, meet the needs of most members, and help create a culturally sensitive, comfortable atmosphere that promotes full participation and high productivity. By managing discussion, a sound process also protects the PC/PB from individuals who want to put their own interests first. This resource provides a brief overview of several processes used by PC/PBs, including Robert's Rules of Order and alternatives to it. Online references providing details about each process are also provided.

**Robert's Rules of Order is widely used.** It provides a consistent structure and process for discussion and decision making in meetings, but it does not necessarily meet the needs of every PC/PB. Among its key principles: all members have equal rights and obligations; the majority rules (based on one person, one vote), and the minority is respected (with some decisions requiring a "super majority"). Some of the procedures can seem cumbersome, especially in committee meetings. Because of the rules about making, amending, debating, and voting on motions, some PC/PBs feel it can discourage participation by members new to the process, and may be unnecessarily complex for use in committee meetings. Current and recent editions of Robert's Rules of Order agree that "some of the formality that is necessary in a large assembly would hinder business" in a small group.

### Alternatives to *Robert's Rules of Order*

Following are some alternatives to Robert's Rules of Order that PC/PBs may want to consider. These alternatives include:

- A modified form of parliamentary procedure, usually based on Robert's Rules of Order
- A consensus model
- A combination process, with voting used if consensus is not reached
- A PC/PB's own process, usually including basic elements of parliamentary procedure

### A Modified Version of *Robert's Rules of Order*

Robert's Rules of Order has different rules for small boards, defined as a group of about 12 or less, like most PC/PB committees. Here are some of the more important flexibilities:

- There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a question.
- There is generally no need for a motion to close or limit debate.
- Informal discussion is permitted while no motion is pending.
- The Chair can speak in discussion and vote on all questions.

## Special or Simplified Rules based on *Robert's Rules of Order*

Your PC/PB can adopt its own modified “special rules of order.” One principle of Robert’s Rules of Order is that a group’s Bylaws and other rules apply, so your specific provisions take precedence over the regular provisions. Your PC/PB can adopt “special rules” to supplement or modify procedures to fit your needs. For example: You can revise the “standard order of business” so committee reports with no action items come late rather than early in the meeting. You can choose to use regular Robert’s Rules of Order in full PC/PB meetings but a simplified version or an alternative in committee meetings. Or your PC/PB can adopt its own simplified version of Robert’s Rules of Order, which follows the major concepts and key principles of parliamentary procedure but revises some procedures.

## References for *Robert's Rules of Order* and Modified Versions

### *Robert's Rules of Order*

- **The A-B-C's of Parliamentary Procedure.** A 16-page plain-language pocket guide to Robert's Rules of Order developed by the American Institute of Parliamentarians. Covers meeting agendas and the typical order of business; the five general types of motions; and procedures for proposing, discussing, and voting on motions. <https://www.ewh.ieee.org/soc/pes/switch-gear/O-and-P/ParliamentaryProcedures.pdf>

### *Modified Versions of Robert's Rules of Order*

- **How to Ignore Robert's Rules and Do Your Own Thing.** Blog post by Sarah E. Merkle, February 28, 2018. Describes ways to use “special rules” that supplement or modify Robert’s Rules of Order. <https://civility.co/uncategorized/how-to-ignore-roberts-rules-and-do-your-own-thing/>
- **Small Board Guidelines from RONR (Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised).** Explains the differences in RRO procedures that reduce formality and can be used by small boards (about 12 people or fewer), as described in Robert’s Rules of Order, 12th edition. [https://01fac7b6250d493d1127-d8590c8a28c33460e15368faedce8b94.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/r/0e11781603\\_1615816036\\_roberts-rules-on-small-boards.pdf](https://01fac7b6250d493d1127-d8590c8a28c33460e15368faedce8b94.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/r/0e11781603_1615816036_roberts-rules-on-small-boards.pdf)

## Consensus Decision-Making

Some PC/PBs use consensus decision making, in committees and/or full PC/PB meetings. Consensus provides a way of reaching agreement among all members of a group that provides an alternative to decision making based on voting and “majority rules.” The group tries to find “win-win” decisions and solutions that balance what different people want. Use of consensus is process-oriented: it depends on listening and working together. It is inclusive, participatory, and collaborative, and is based on the belief that when everyone agrees with a decision, they are much more likely to help implement it. It can be inclusive and collaborative, but—like Robert’s Rules of Order—its proper use requires training, and it can increase the time required to reach a decision. Some PC/PBs use consensus decision-making most of the time, and vote only when there is serious disagreement.

## References for Consensus Decision Making

- **Consumer Decision Making: A Short Guide.** From Seeds of Change, a cooperative located in England. Guide on what consensus decision making is, benefits of using it, and how to implement it. <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortconsensus>
- **Consensus Decision-Making.** A virtual learning center that includes an online training video and other basic information about this method of decision making. <https://www.consensus-decisionmaking.org/>

## Martha's Rules of Order for Meetings

Developed for use by low-income housing groups in the 1970s, Martha's Rules of Order are consensus-based, but let the group decide through a pre-vote or "sense" vote whether an issue is worth the time required for consensus. It provides a clearly defined set of procedures, including an agenda with time limits, and rules for presenting proposals to be considered for a vote or consensus.

## References for Martha's Rules of Order

### *Martha's Rules of Order for Meetings*

- **Is Robert's Rules Too Restrictive: Consider Martha's Rules of Order for Meetings.** Posted on the CAM Blog by Andrea Drennen, April 17, 2015. Describes a set of rules for meetings developed by a low-income housing cooperative that uses consensus decision making but only for important issues. Provides a "Miniature Toolkit" that lists the main components of this set of rules. <https://topsssoft.com/is-roberts-rules-too-restrictive-consider-marthas-rules-of-order-for-meetings/>
- **More Effective Meetings Using Martha's Rules of Order.** Summary of how to use Martha's Rules, provided on the Humane Network website. [https://2917dbb3-64ed-41ad-a761-74ec-c505ac66.filesusr.com/ugd/b03e13\\_4c6c1fc03f0b4f268c35dce696947c07.pdf?index=true](https://2917dbb3-64ed-41ad-a761-74ec-c505ac66.filesusr.com/ugd/b03e13_4c6c1fc03f0b4f268c35dce696947c07.pdf?index=true)

## Adopting and Using a Process

Regardless of the approach your PC/PB chooses, members should agree together on the process to be used and include it in the Bylaws. One of the challenges of any process is ensuring that all members are knowledgeable about it and comfortable using it. The PC/PB should:

- Provide training so all members understand it.
- Make sure every member receives a handout that explains the main points.
- Follow the process consistently but not rigidly.

- Have the Chair ensure that individual members are not permitted to use their expertise to control meetings or discourage participation.

Some PC/PBs hire a parliamentarian to attend meetings and help guide the process or elect a member to serve in that role. Often the presiding Chair or someone from the PC/PB support staff is expected to ensure that the PC/PB or committee follows whatever rules are specified in the Bylaws.

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<sup>1</sup>*Robert's Rules of Order*, 12th edition, p 464.