



Two Ways to Decide

Robert's Rules of Order and democratic centralism, compared

September 2026

The shared problem

Throughout human history, people have fundamentally struggled on how to effectively and fairly communicate in a group situation. People disagree, a decision has to be made anyway, and afterward the group has to act as if it agreed. A church board, a union local, a city council, and a revolutionary party all face this. How they solve it says a great deal about the morals, ethics and priorities of the group.

This sheet compares two well developed answers. One, Robert's Rules of Order, is the default procedure for meetings across the English speaking world. The other, democratic centralism, was the organizing principle of every communist party of the twentieth century and still governs several ruling parties today. They are often mentioned in the same breath because both involve votes, chairs, and binding decisions. Underneath, they are built on opposite assumptions.

Robert's Rules of Order

Henry Martyn Robert was a United States Army engineer who, in 1863, was asked to chair a church meeting in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and lost control of it. He spent the next decade studying how legislatures ran themselves and in 1876 published a pocket manual adapting the practice of the House of Representatives to ordinary clubs and societies. It has been revised ever since and the current edition is the twelfth, published in 2020.

The system rests on a few ideas. Any member may propose an action by making a motion. A second member must agree it is worth discussing. Debate follows under rules that give each side a fair turn and limit how long any one person may speak. A vote decides the question, usually by simple majority. The chair is a referee, not a leader: the chair recognizes speakers, rules on procedure, and generally does not vote or argue.

What makes Robert's Rules distinctive is how much protection the losing side keeps. A member on the winning side of a vote may move to reconsider it, and a later meeting may rescind or amend what an earlier one adopted. Members remain free to say publicly that they think the decision was wrong. The rules assume that the group's decisions are provisional, that disagreement will continue, and that members can always leave. Procedure exists to keep the peace among people who will go on disagreeing.



Democratic centralism

Democratic centralism grew out of the Russian revolutionary movement. Vladimir Lenin laid out the case for a tightly disciplined party in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), and the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party formally adopted the term at its 1906 congress. Lenin's summary of the principle was freedom of discussion, unity of action.

The democratic half means that policy is debated openly inside the party before a decision, and that leading bodies are elected by the bodies below them. The centralist half means that once a decision is taken, every member and every lower body must carry it out and defend it in public, whatever they argued beforehand. Lower bodies are subordinate to higher ones, and between congresses the central committee speaks for the whole party.

After the Bolsheviks took power, the centralist half hardened. In March 1921 the Tenth Party Congress banned organized factions inside the party. From then on, continuing to argue for a defeated position was not a right but an offense, and under Stalin it became a capital one. The underlying assumption is that the party is at war. Disagreement after a decision is not a difference of opinion but a breach of discipline.

Side by side

	Robert's Rules of Order	Democratic centralism
Purpose	Let a voluntary assembly decide while protecting the minority's right to be heard and to try again	Turn a party into a disciplined instrument capable of seizing and holding power
Where authority sits	In the assembly itself. Officers serve the meeting and can be replaced by it.	At the center. Lower bodies obey higher ones; the central committee governs between congresses.
The minority after a vote	Keeps its rights: the question can be reconsidered, rescinded, or amended, and members may disagree publicly	Must publicly defend the majority line. Organized dissent is factionalism and grounds for expulsion.
Who controls the agenda	Any member can move, second, and force a vote. The chair is a neutral referee.	The leading body decides what reaches the floor. The chair is a political actor.
Debate	Open ended within formal rules of recognition, time, and precedence	Permitted before the decision. The center decides when debate has gone on long enough.
Members	Equals. Rank comes with an office and ends with it.	Membership is conditional on discipline. The cadre hierarchy is permanent.
Unit of organization	A single assembly meeting in one room	A nested hierarchy: cell, district, congress, central committee, politburo
Characteristic failure	Paralysis. Skilled parliamentarians can stall or hijack a meeting with procedure.	Rubber stamp. The democratic half withers and only the centralism remains.



The split underneath

Both systems settle contested questions by majority vote, bind the group to the result, and distrust unstructured mass meetings. The difference is what happens to the people who lost. Robert assumes they stay members with full rights and may win next time. Lenin assumed that letting them keep fighting would destroy the organization's ability to act.

Each system fails in the direction of its own strength. Robert's Rules scale badly upward, because they were built for one room, and a determined minority can use the machinery to obstruct. Democratic centralism scales badly downward, because a cell of five people with a hierarchy above it has nothing left to deliberate, and nothing in the design stops the center from deciding that debate is over before it has begun.

Where the two histories touch

It is sometimes suggested that Robert's Rules shaped communism. The record does not support it. Communism's founding texts (Marx and Engels, 1848), its first international organization (1864), and its decisive organizational model (Lenin, 1902 to 1906) all came out of continental Europe and Russia, where the procedural traditions were those of the German and French parliaments. Robert's manual, published in the United States in 1876 for churches and clubs, played no part.

The two did meet at the edges. American socialists and communists ran their meetings on Robert's Rules because every American organization did. In 1925 the Communist International directed the American party to abolish its neighborhood branches, with their motions and seconds, and reorganize into workplace cells on the Russian model. Many members experienced this as a foreign imposition, and Robert's influence on American communism is visible mostly as something that was purged. In China, Sun Yat-sen published a meeting manual in 1917 adapted from American parliamentary practice and made it part of the Nationalist Party's civic program. The Chinese Communist Party, despite its alliance with the Nationalists in the 1920s, took its procedures from Moscow.

Further reading

Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order* (1876). The current authoritative text is *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 12th edition (2020).

V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904).

Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1960), on the 1921 faction ban and what followed.

Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960), on the 1925 reorganization of the American party.

Sun Yat-sen, *Minquan Chubu* (First Steps in Democracy, 1917).