

# The Democratic Process: *THE* Solution to What's Troubling the Girl Scout Movement

“ *The ultimate responsibility for the Girl Scout Movement rests with its members. We govern by an efficient and effective democratic process that demonstrates our leadership in a fast-changing world.* -- The Preamble to the GSUSA Constitution

Girl Scouting is facing a number of pressures from many different angles. Declining membership, poor volunteer satisfaction, and competition from the Boy Scouts and other activities - just to name a few - are all difficult challenges that are at the forefront. And more importantly, is everyone that's part of this Movement all working together or against each other?

The solution to these challenges is something that's been at the core of our Movement from the very beginning of its formation and at the root of our success for over 100 years. The solution is the democratic process. Unfortunately, it has been given lip service or has disappeared completely on both the council and national level during the past decade. The failure to maintain a healthy democratic process has been disastrous to our organization. However, it is still feasible to incorporate it once again and get our Movement back on a successful path.

What is the democratic process specifically when it comes to Girl Scouting? It is defined in the GSUSA publication *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting: Combining Our Voices* as “a basic belief of the Girl Scout movement, defined as the various means or avenues through which the membership can influence decisions and activities in matters of governance and management, and have access to those responsible for decision-making.”

## History of the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting

“ *The Girl Scout Movement in the United States is rooted firmly in the belief that all of its activities shall be guided by the democratic process. Over the years, Girl Scouting has created a wide variety of systems for involving its membership in this process. This is evidenced at all levels of the Movement, from the decisions made by girl members in a Brownie Ring to the deliberations of the National Council.* – The Democratic Process: The Role of a Delegate (1983)

Throughout its history, Girl Scouting has incorporated the democratic process on all levels – from National all the way down to troops. It is inherent in the Girl Scout Leadership Experience (GSLE) and manifests itself in the *Girl Led* and *Cooperative Learning* components.

In 1916, the National Council was established and set forth as “the coordinating head of the Girl Scout Movement” per the GSUSA Constitution and has served as such since then. The majority of the National

Council is made up of National Delegates representing councils, and they have been the driving force behind the direction of Girl Scouting through the decades.

In 1939, the GSUSA Constitution and Bylaws were completely rewritten so that it “emphasized the democratic participation of local groups in the affairs of the national organization” according to the 1940 *Blue Book of Girl Scout Policies and Procedures*. The foreword, written by National Director Constance Rittenhouse, stated: “Organizations, like people, must learn democracy by living it, and while we realize that the democratic participation of local groups in the affairs of their national organization depends on much more than the adoption of a constitution, yet we know that the machinery itself does play an important part. The Girl Scout organization feels that it now has a constitution that should carry it further forward toward real democratic administration.”

In 1958, the Blue Book was retooled again, and this sectional model is what is still in use today. This statement in the 1958 Blue Book prefaced the GSUSA Constitution and Bylaws: “In making the revisions, the National Council, acting in the best interests of the total organization, has provided a Constitution which reflects sound structure and is consistent with our belief in the democratic process. It provides the framework within which we agree to operate as we work toward the achievement of the purposes of Girl Scouting.”

At the 1993 National Council Session, the National Board brought forth a proposal to create a national task group to study the democratic process in Girl Scouting and how to efficiently implement it. That task group released its findings and recommendations at the 1996 National Council Session. Their report put forth twenty-three recommendations to strengthen the democratic process on both the local and national level. Additionally, two monographs entitled *Governance and Management in Girl Scouting* (1997) and *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting: Combining Our Voices* (1999) were published as a result of the task group’s findings. Links to PDFs of the National Task Group’s report and the two monographs can be found at the end of this white paper.

When the Core Business Strategy rolled out in 2004, six gap teams were created including a “Governance and Organizational Structure” team. One of its goals was to create “a streamlined governance structure that is agile and decisive.”<sup>1</sup> The GSUSA website detailed the Core Business Strategy during its formulation, and one of the FAQs under the “Governance and Organizational Structure” section asked, “What is being done to streamline and improve governance?” The answer was: “Representatives from councils and GSUSA and a number of outside experts researched and evaluated a range of governance ‘best practices’ from both the nonprofit and corporate sectors. Currently, Girl Scouts is implementing practices that will strengthen governance, maximize member participation, allow for responsive decision making, and forge strong links at the local and national level.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the promise of strengthening governance, maximizing participation, and responsive decision-making, the end result of the Core Business Strategy’s implementation is that the democratic process has been largely phased out within the Movement, creating the current dysfunction felt on both the governance and operational levels. Instead of looking to history and the internal structure of Girl Scouting, including the aforementioned 1996 National Task Group report published less than ten years before this overhaul, the Core Business Strategy gap team studied nonprofits and corporations unrelated

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<sup>1</sup> 2010 GSUSA Website: Core Business Strategy Governance Gap Team  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20100613031514/http://girlscouts.org/strategy/gap\\_team\\_organizational\\_structure.asp](https://web.archive.org/web/20100613031514/http://girlscouts.org/strategy/gap_team_organizational_structure.asp)

<sup>2</sup> 2010 GSUSA Website: Governance FAQs  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20100613093713/http://girlscouts.org/strategy/faqs\\_governance.asp](https://web.archive.org/web/20100613093713/http://girlscouts.org/strategy/faqs_governance.asp)

to Girl Scouting. Girl Scouting is a unique organization with its own creative history and does not fit into the standard nonprofit or corporate mold. No other nonprofit has a volunteer base that is so invested in the Movement and devotes so much energy and time working toward a mission that positively impacts society as much as Girl Scouting. In an effort to streamline and speed up decision-making on the governance level, the democratic process was stripped out on both the national and local levels. The consequences have manifested themselves in many ways such as declining membership, high volunteer dissatisfaction rates, distrust between all levels of the organization, low usage rates of operational implementations such as the Volunteer Toolkit, and a disengaged membership.

## Why the Democratic Process is Important

“ *The way of work in Girl Scouting is that of democratic participation. Democratic methods are as important for adults in the Movement as they are for girls. The Girl Scout organization has, from its inception, believed strongly that democracy means not only the right to vote but the responsibility of voting for the good of the whole rather than for purely local interests; that, while the majority might prevail, there is an unfailing obligation to consider the minority and to find ways of reconciling differences; that people working democratically develop not factional decisions nor sterile compromises but new plans and new solutions growing from the merging of individual points of view.*

– from an early Blue Book of Policies

As the GSUSA Constitution states, ALL MEMBERS should take responsibility for the Movement and sustaining it for future generations. Boards of directors, both national and local, must fulfill their fiduciary duties and are accountable for the success of the organization. Staff must be able implement strategies and policies effectively and efficiently. And in turn, volunteers take these pieces and deliver the program to the girls. *All* of these groups have to be in sync.

But in order to do that, decision-makers should know how all of the moving parts work together, and it's critical that as many facts as possible are presented in order to see the big picture. The democratic process is the mechanism to do this by creating an avenue to include and evaluate all points of view. Well informed decision-makers make successful decisions. Respecting opinions and observations from all of the levels mentioned previously is a necessity in order to effectively move forward and so that all are on board with a decision, especially if it requires support to implement it. Without it, the puzzle is incomplete and the pieces don't fit together.

Additionally, the democratic process allows for decision-makers to keep their finger on the pulse of what's going on at the ground level. It's the way to stay on top of what's really going on instead of becoming isolated and therefore missing important trends and critical realities. And when an issue or problem crops up, the democratic process is the way to effectively get to the root of the problem and creatively solve it instead of using guesswork and assumptions. This white paper mainly speaks to the governance side of Girl Scouting, but the democratic process should also be applied to operational matters for the same reasons.

## Consequences of the Disappearance of the Democratic Process

“ One of the most important parts of transforming a large and complex organization is inclusion: engaging all of the people every step of the way. You can't develop a great plan, 'give' it to 'the people,' and expect them to feel that it's theirs. So every Girl Scout planning group and every working group had people from the councils, volunteers, staff, board members involved – so that decisions were everybody's business. When you include representatives of all of your people, you've opened a door, making people feel welcome. -- Frances Hesselbein from *My Life in Leadership*

There are dire consequences when the democratic process is not a part of the decision-making process. They are as follows:

### ON THE COUNCIL LEVEL

- Trust and communication breaks down between the parts of the council – the board of directors, the staff, the delegates, and the volunteer base. The resulting lack of trust and poor communication among these factions severely affect the health of the organization and therefore the girls and communities we are serving. They cannot work together as a unified force to bring Girl Scouting to where it needs to be.
- When decision-makers sincerely need feedback, they don't receive it or just get shallow responses leading to poor decisions based on bad information or a lack of knowledge.
- Girls do not get to witness and participate in the democratic process. This past summer, GSUSA hosted a webinar featuring a number of influential women in politics regarding civics education and the importance of it in our society. Our organization is the perfect place for girls to receive a hands-on experience that they can build upon in the future, but they can't participate and grow if the opportunity isn't there.
- A disengaged delegate base cuts off and misrepresents communication to the membership they are supposed to report to and represent, and in turn, volunteers become isolated and misinformed.
- Volunteers do not become invested in Girl Scouting when they are not sincerely engaged in the decision-influencing process. Even if they are a volunteer for a lengthy amount of time, they do not see the value of continuing to stay in the program past their troop's life or becoming a lifetime member. These people are critical to membership numbers, the success of the volunteer base, and continued support for service units and new troops due to their years of experience.
- A lack of respect and sloppy attitude toward governance due to no checks and balances can lead to blatant bylaw violations which put the council's nonprofit status at risk.
- Dysfunction, or worse, the death of the council occurs due to poor decisions stemming from an isolated and ineffective board of directors.

### ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

- National Delegates who have not received appropriate orientation and training due being considered unimportant become confused during the National Council Session because they do not understand the debate and issues. Those delegates who are poorly trained are ineffective participants. The National Council is the coordinating head of the Movement and cannot fulfill

this responsibility when National Delegates are not fully educated and engaged before, during, and after the National Council Sessions.

- If a council doesn't integrate the democratic process, the council leadership is isolated and cannot share a realistic picture of what is going on within their council. Because of this, the National Board and GSUSA receive mixed messages at conferences between the Triennial. This leads to ineffective strategies and misaligned operational implementations.

## How Breakdowns in the Democratic Process are Occurring

“ *Good leadership requires you to surround yourself with people of diverse perspectives who can disagree with you without fear of retaliation.* -- Doris Kearns Goodwin

What actions are taking place that result in a breakdown of the democratic process? Here are some ***actual*** examples of things that are happening in councils across the country:

### ON THE COUNCIL LEVEL

- Removing checks and balances from bylaws such as board of directors having the authority to amend the bylaws, giving no notice of meetings or in accordance to their bylaws, and no way to nominate board members outside of an internal nominating committee
- Little to no delegate orientation or training
- The membership receiving no update on what the board is doing between annual meetings
- Claiming feedback from “volunteers” when really they are referring to volunteer board members and not operational volunteers such as troop leaders, service unit managers, and trainers, thereby leaving out important voices
- The membership having no way to contact board members due to “privacy concerns”
- A lack of transparency such as not providing financial documents and refusing to answer standard governance-related questions
- Lack of a clear nomination and election process for board members or delegates
- Boards springing major decisions on volunteers such as property sales without discussion, feedback, or collaboration to find a win-win solution for all parties
- No process for how delegates should submit ideas and proposals for consideration at annual meetings
- Self-perpetuating boards
- Council staff interfering with delegate elections or “assigning” volunteers to delegate positions despite bylaws requirements for elections
- Hostilities, threats, censures, removal of volunteer statuses, and revocation of memberships for those who question, request information, or express disagreement with decisions
- No dedicated Q&A or open discussion time during annual meetings
- Forcing volunteers to sign policies such as social media contracts that have the potential to be abused in order to silence dissenting opinions

## **ON THE COUNCIL LEVEL IN REGARD TO NATIONAL DELEGATES**

- Awarding National Delegate spots as favors or rewards (e.g. the top cookie seller, board members' daughters, or a financial contributor) instead of giving it the respect it deserves with an objective application process
- No clear nomination and election process for National Delegates
- Providing shallow orientation and training (if any) of the National Council Session process
- Hampering National Delegates from doing their duties such as waiting to hand out Workbooks until their arrival at the National Council Session
- No engagement of the local membership regarding National Council Session proposals
- Rubberstamping proposals with little to no discussion or research on the part of National Delegates due to council leadership giving direction as to how they should vote

## **ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

GSUSA has de-emphasized the democratic process through three major actions in the past decade which have led councils to believe the democratic process isn't a valued and necessary part of their governance structure.

### **1) The National Council Session**

Up until 2017, the National Council met over a four-day period (Thursday through Saturday). This schedule allowed the business involving action items such as proposals and discussion topics to be covered over at least two days on Friday and Saturday, with opening activities on Thursday night and closing activities on Sunday morning. Because National Council business sessions were normally scheduled for only half-days on Friday and Saturday (with time for other non-NCS activities such as visiting the exhibit hall during the remainder of the day), the schedule had additional time built-in which could be and was used for delegate-only sessions if more discussion was needed for a particular topic. This was not the case in 2017, where multiple reports, three proposals, a discussion item, and voting for National Board and National Board Development Committee members were compressed into one day (Thursday), with very few breaks. This condensed schedule created a time crunch, and requests for more time from National Delegates were shot down very quickly. It was also obvious that the voting was rushed, and those who wanted more time for questions and discussion became frustrated when they were denied this request. The hurry-up feeling created a tense atmosphere for the entire day and left both delegates and visitors with a bad taste in their mouth.

According to the preliminary schedule for G.I.R.L. 2020, the National Council Session looks to have the same one-day schedule for action items. Like in 2017, this schedule will not give sufficient time to fully utilize the resources and experience the National Council can bring to give the Movement direction as directed per the GSUSA Constitution. This turns the National Council Session into more of a "sit and listen" event instead of one centered around the democratic process, and it also leaves the impression that the National Council is there just to quickly rubber stamp proposals.

### **2) GSUSA's Annual Review of Councils**

In GSUSA's Annual Review, councils are measured by a series of questions. However, NONE of them involve the delegation or the democratic process. Instead, the questions only regard what are considered best practice in the general non-profit sector:

- 5 – Is our board engaged in its governance and resource development?
  - 5.1 Are the board’s fundraising expectations in line with nonprofit best practices?
  - 5.2 Is the board actively meeting fundraising expectations?
  - 5.3 Do our board committees match governance best practices?
  - 5.4 Is board attendance in line with nonprofit best practices?

Missing from these criteria are two key items: a realization that Girl Scouting is unique among nonprofits in its dependence on volunteers *and* questions about engagement such as delegate or membership participation and attendance and training. Councils are also asked in the review, “Are you engaged with the Movement?” How do councils describe and define “The Movement?” Engagement in the Movement is far more than just participating in nationally-based systems, policies, and procedures such as the implementation of CEI. The engagement of the membership is a critical part of the Movement’s mission to serve girls and always has been throughout its history.

### **3) Blue Book Changes**

In September 2011, the *Criteria and Standards for an Effective Girl Scout Council* section in the 2009 edition of the Blue Book of Basic Documents was completely rewritten by the National Board, and the changes were published in the 2012 version of the Blue Book. During this revision, two direct mentions of the democratic process were removed from Criterion II:

***(2009’s version) Maintaining Organizational Integrity /Criterion II summary:***

*An effective Girl Scout council sustains the purpose of the Girl Scout Movement by conducting its business through the democratic process, consistent with the charter requirements, policies, and standards of Girl Scouts of the USA.*

was changed to:

***(2012 and current version) Governance and Administration /Criterion II summary:***

*A chartered Girl Scout council advances the movement through strategic governance and leadership that employ effective systems and structures to deliver the Girl Scout mission.*

Also,

***(2009’s version) Maintaining Organizational Integrity /Criterion II/Standard 4:***

*The council actively seeks to strengthen the democratic process to ensure that the membership is involved in direction setting and influencing major policy decisions.*

became:

**(2012 and current's version) Governance and Administration /Criterion II/Standard 2:**

*The council actively seeks to strengthen the stakeholder involvement and interaction to ensure that the membership is involved in influencing major policy decisions and helping to set strategic direction.*

The phrase “the democratic process” was completely removed in Criterion II’s summary. In Standard 2, the wording is essentially the same, except that “the stakeholder involvement and interaction” is used in place of “the democratic process.”

It could be argued that “the stakeholder involvement and interaction” matches the definition of the democratic process for all intents and purposes. But words have emotion behind them, and “the democratic process” is much more inspiring than “the stakeholder involvement and interaction.” The result of these changes is that the criteria do not measure how councils are strengthening any stakeholders other than the board of directors. Additionally, the word “stakeholder” has a business connotation to it. Depending on their profession, board members might first think of donors and sponsors before the membership. If this terminology remains, then “stakeholders” should be specifically defined, and volunteers and girls should be a part of that definition.

## What are the Red Flags of the Disappearance of the Democratic Process?

“ We find that essential to the democratic process are the elements of trust, openness, willingness to share power and control, flexibility, accessibility, respect of all opinions, and the ability to foster and accept change. Girl Scout members not only have a right but a responsibility to participate in the democratic process. – Report of the National Task Group on the study of the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting (1996)

What are some red flags that appear when the democratic process is not being implemented in a council or on the national level?

- The volunteer base having little to no knowledge or understanding of the governance structure and our governance documents
- Difficulty in finding people willing to serve as a delegate
- Lack of understanding about the delegate position and what it involves
- Delegates expressing frustration and apathy: “What’s the point? They don’t care what we think anyway.”
- Low turnout at annual meetings. There could be a couple of reasons for this:
  - Councils covering a large geography that were formed after the merger have made it difficult for delegates to travel hours in some cases to attend an annual meeting for only a short period of time.
  - Frustration due to not being heard leads to delegates not attending meetings because they feel it’s a waste of their time.



- Uninformed delegates not realizing that attending the annual meeting should be a priority.
- One way communication from the board of the directors to the delegate body or membership resulting in delegates turning into passive spectators rather than active participants in strategic thinking.
- Delegates neglecting their duties and rubberstamping whatever is put in front of them without any consideration or not reading what's been sent to them
- Delegates not consulting with those they represent and not sharing what was reported at meetings
- Extreme anger and frustration spilling over when major and unpopular decisions are made by boards such as camp and property sales
- An "us versus them" mentality between volunteers & councils, councils & GSUSA, and volunteers & GSUSA

## How to Bring Back the Democratic Process

“ *Democracy is the most difficult form of government. It is easy to talk about but another matter to put into practice.* – Woodrow Wilson

Although it will take patience, determination, and time, it is very possible to bring back the democratic process. Here are some ways:

### ON THE COUNCIL LEVEL

- As mentioned earlier, Girl Scouting cannot be treated like any other nonprofit. Best practices for other nonprofits do not necessarily work for Girl Scouting and its unique structure and membership base.
- The volunteer and older girl voice must be respected and not treated as threats. All too often, volunteers are looked down upon as uneducated and uninformed, and their ideas and input are ignored or only given lip service. Many volunteers today are professional women who are adept at strategic thinking, able to recognize problems when they see them, and, when provided with good information, can offer productive suggestions for how to best deal with issues.
- Volunteers need to realize that they are also tasked with maintaining the Movement per the GSUSA Constitution and should take the initiative to involve and educate themselves beyond the troop level.
- Establish collaborative versus authoritative atmospheres.
- If delegates are a part of the governance structure, councils should encourage delegates to actively engage who they are representing.
- Review the twenty-three recommendations published in the National Task Group results and implement or re-implement the best among these recommendations.
- Discover which councils are having success with the democratic process and use them as examples of what works.

- Bring back the Leader's Digest of the *Blue Book of Basic Documents*. Make it a part of the standard council website template and include it on the Resources tab of the Volunteer Toolkit. Volunteers and operational staff need exposure and familiarity with our governing documents and policies.
- For councils that encompass a large geography, research, develop, and implement alternative ways of attending and participating in the annual meeting. Most organizations now allow for electronic meetings provided certain parliamentary standards are met; why not Girl Scouts?
- In the spirit of transparency, board updates or meeting minutes, audits, governance documents, annual reports, and financial statements should either be found on the council website or made readily available upon request without refusal, questioning, hostility, or disapproval to the requestor. These documents should also not be limited to delegates.

Council leadership should ask delegates\* the following questions based on the ones found on pg. 28 in *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting*:

1. Is the board of directors consistently seeking guidance from the membership on major issues and policies affecting the total council?
2. Does the board of directors routinely see data that shows the council collects meaningful information and suggestions from its membership (not just reports from the CEO)?
3. What decision-influencing structure that is flexible and meaningful to both the grassroots volunteers and the council board of directors is best for our council?
4. Does the system for electing delegates ensure broad-based participation and representation?
5. Is there a more effective way to implement the concept of representative government in this council?
6. Do delegates understand and carry out their corporate responsibilities?
7. Does the way the council annual meeting is conducted represent a wise investment of human and financial resources?
8. Is the council's nominating process effective?

Council leadership should periodically assess and review the council's atmosphere via a survey of the delegates\* and the board's governance committee using these questions from *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting* on pg. 10:

1. Do councils have a truly democratic process as evidenced through the policy-influencing groups and the annual meeting?
2. Are appropriate topics discussed at council annual meetings?
3. Do councils make provisions for adult members to participate in decision-influencing discussions at times other than at the annual council meeting?
4. Are council delegates adequately informed about the critical issues that can have a positive or negative effect on the future of the council?
5. In discussions and debates, do council leaders and delegates show respect for minority opinions? Do all parties have the opportunity to voice their opinions?
6. When a final decision on a major issue is made by the board of directors or executive director, does the decision take into account the predominant opinion as determined to be in the best interest of the Girl Scout movement in the United States?

\* Or membership if using a Membership based governance structure where each member 14 years and older gets a vote.

## ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL

- GSUSA must stress to councils and to National Delegates that National Delegates be “informed but not instructed” when coming to a decision as to how they will vote during the National Council Session. This should be emphasized not only in training of National Delegates but should be said repeatedly by those chairing the meetings during debate and voting.
- The National Council and its authority should be respected as the head of the Movement and treated as such by ensuring the National Council has both important business to debate and decide on as well as sufficient time to adequately discuss topics which give general direction to the movement.
- Host a discussion topic and/or session about improving the democratic process either during the 2020 National Council Session (if time allows) or in sessions which occur after the National Council adjourns.
- GSUSA should modify what questions it asks during a council’s Annual Review to specifically include the democratic process and how effectively the council engages decision-influencing groups.
- Republish (and update for current language) the *Implementing the Democratic Process* and *Governance and Management in Girl Scouting* monographs for all council and National Delegates, council and National Board Members, and council and national staff.

National Delegates should be surveyed and asked these questions found on pg. 28 in *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting*:

1. Does the national organization provide a variety of ways for councils to communicate their needs and ideas other than at the National Council Session?
2. Is the National Council Session truly democratic in its ways of work?
3. Are National Council delegates well-informed and able to discuss critical policy issues with respect to the future of the Girl Scout movement in the United States?

For more in-depth ideas and rationale for how to bring back and support the democratic process, consult *Implementing the Democratic Process* and *Governance and Management in Girl Scouting*.

## Rebuttals to Common Statements

### **The democratic process slows down decision-making.**

It’s true – the democratic process does slow down decision-making. But it’s for a good reason. There are two enormous risks if it’s not used - making the wrong decision by not having all of the facts and not having everyone on board when there’s a decision that needs to be carried out by others. Although democracy may be messy and sometimes slow, it’s still the best system for making good decisions for our Movement.

### **Volunteers and girls don’t care about governance.**

Orientation and training are key, and an open and willing attitude to educate volunteers and girls must be present. It’s possible that apathy has set in because the membership doesn’t feel valued due to experiencing negative, or worse, hostile attitudes at some point and doesn’t feel like their input will make a difference.

### **Volunteers and girls don't understand governance.**

This goes back to effective orientation and training. You can't understand what you don't know.

### **Having to follow bylaws is tedious.**

Nonprofits are lawfully bound by their bylaws per a state's nonprofit act. It is careless and dangerous to not follow bylaws and governance documents and in turn risk a council's nonprofit status. Not following bylaws and other governance documents is also a violation of the charter agreement with GSUSA. See *Criteria and Standards for an Effective Girl Scout Council /Standard 13* in the *Blue Book of Basic Documents*.

### **Local council: We've tried to reach out before and there wasn't much response OR GSUSA: We use the Voices Count survey in order to get feedback from membership.**

When trying to reach a large member base, it's important to use multiple ways to contact them. Stress that their feedback is very important – and then actually follow through with what's been suggested or highlighted to show that the intention to reach out is sincere. Share results of surveys and demonstrate how survey results can lead to positive change. People will not waste time filling out something that they feel will be ignored or sense that it's just being done for the sake of appearances.

### **We have a low turnout rate for Annual Meetings and other forms of engagement with the membership, so there's not enough involvement for the democratic process to work.**

Voter turnout in the United States is low, but that doesn't mean we should away throw away our country's entire basis of government. If even only a small percentage participate, their voices are important. Plus, they may serve as an example to others, and participation could start to grow. Additionally, find out why the turnout rate is low. Could it be due to the distance that's necessary to attend or a feeling of discouragement among delegates?

### **We have a governance model that has worked well without the democratic process.**

It may be working now, but is there a possibility for abuse or corruption at a later date if the wrong people get in leadership positions? Are there ways to remedy this in the case it does happen? Worst case scenarios should always be considered when governance documents are created and/or revised.

### **We've done extensive research and have determined our type of decision-making process is the best course of action.**

What research was used? Girl Scouting doesn't fit the same mold as standard nonprofits due to its unique structure, membership base, and implementation of its programming. Plus, circumstances and the landscape change. How are you measuring your success and staying on top of what's going on beneath the surface?

### **We tried to integrate the democratic process but it doesn't work.**

Find out what specifically isn't working. As with other answers, do research to find out the root causes. It's worth it.

## Conclusion

It is hypocritical for us as an organization to promote civics education to girls when we are missing out on involving them in the built-in democratic process inherent to our Movement due to casting it to the side for the sake of expediency. We are also sending girls a confusing message when we tell them to be courageous, speak out, and stand up for their beliefs, but yet when it comes to those attempting to become more involved or questioning what they see as concerning, we denigrate and silence their voice. Girl Scouting encompasses a lot of passionate people who deeply care about its mission. Let's use this passion to our advantage.

Unfortunately, trust has been broken on multiple levels during the past decade due to exclusion, unpopular and heartbreaking decisions, poor communication, and hostile reactions. As the saying goes, "Trust takes years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair." However, the democratic process is the mechanism we should use to heal wounds, bridge divides, get back on the right track, and move in the same positive direction. It guards against poor decision-making and opens doors to creative and supportive solutions. And last but not least, it's keeping in accordance with the Movement's ideals and goals that have served us well for over 100 years and what will keep us moving forward in the future.

“ *In her address to the National Council, National Executive Director Mary Rose Main focused on the partnership between volunteers and staff, and between Girl Scout councils and the national organization. 'If an organization is to be successful, then every part of that organization must subscribe to the same value system and act in ways that are congruent with that shared value system. If we truly maintain that the strength of the Girl Scout movement rests in the voluntary leadership of its adult members, then we must ensure that the democratic process is genuinely working at every level. Girl Scouting can and will overcome every challenge by remembering why we exist—to serve girls—and using a simple but powerful equation for success: Shared Values + Cooperation + Respect = Unity. Ultimately, it is our unity that is our greatest strength.'* -  
- Leader Magazine, Spring 1997

## Appendix

### About the White Paper

This white paper was authored by Amy M. Brown and published in November of 2019. If you have any questions or comments, she can be reached at [amy@dawgtoons.com](mailto:amy@dawgtoons.com) or on her blog at <http://girlscoutwithacause.dawgtoons.com>.

### Links to PDFs of the National Task Group Report & Monographs

- *Final Report of the National Task Group on the Study of the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting* - <https://tinyurl.com/us2qjb2>
- *Implementing the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting : Combining Our Voices* - <https://tinyurl.com/tj7yd2f>
- *Governance and Management in Girl Scouting* - <https://tinyurl.com/tsdagqs>

## **The 23 Recommendations from the *National Task Group on the Study of the Democratic Process in Girl Scouting* Report**

The rationales behind each recommendation begin on pg. 18:

**Recommendation #1:** That the democratic process, as declared in the Preamble to the Constitution of GSUSA, permeate Girl Scouting. The national organization and its chartered councils must remove barriers that impede the democratic process.

The democratic process in Girl Scouting is defined as the various means or avenues through which the membership can influence decisions and activities in matters of policy or operations, and have access to those responsible for decision-making at the individual, troop/group, service unit, council, or national level.

**Recommendation #2:** That each council's board of directors ensure that when the council is considering major issues involving either policy or operations:

- Information regarding the issue(s) under consideration is communicated to the council's constituencies with adequate time for feedback.
- Input is solicited prior to taking final action.
- Results of decision(s) on major issues are reported, along with the rationale for the decision(s) and an explanation of how input was solicited and utilized.

**Recommendation #3:** That each council have one or more methods to facilitate two-way communication with the membership.

**Recommendation #4:** That council boards of directors provide for regular opportunities, at least once annually, for members of the Girl Scout family to come together, share ideas or concerns, debate issues, share suggestions for improvement, and initiate and develop issues for the council leadership to address. These opportunities could be offered in separate geographical areas, if appropriate.

Care should be exercised so that members of various groups, particularly Senior\* Girl Scouts, feel free to participate. Any issue should be heard, whether it involves an operational matter or a policy concern. All issues presented that are not immediately resolved should be forwarded to the appropriate leadership group and a report on the disposition of the issues be made available.

**Recommendation #5:** That councils ensure that information provided to the entire adult membership be provided to Senior\* Girl Scouts and to lifetime members residing in the council's jurisdiction.

**Recommendation #6:** That members of the corporate body voting at a council's annual meeting be one of the following:

- Duly elected delegates
- All adult Girl Scouts and Senior\* Girl Scouts (where permitted by state law) who are registered through the council

**Recommendation #7:** That when a council chooses to have council delegates, any system that meets all the following criteria may be used:

- Delegates must be adult Girl Scouts or Senior\* Girl Scouts (where permitted by state law) who are registered through the council, or lifetime members who reside in the council's jurisdiction.
- Delegates may be elected or selected by members of the council and/or by a combination of different subgroups within the council, such as geographical areas, volunteer positions, operational units, and staff groups.
- Delegates must be reflective of the composition of the membership within the council jurisdiction.
- The number of delegates is determined by a formula based on girl membership and approved by the council board. Formulas may vary depending on the size and needs of the council.

**Recommendation #8:** That the national organization identify and develop the materials required by Girl Scout councils to educate and train their constituencies to participate in as well as to facilitate the democratic process. In delivering services and providing materials, GSUSA will use consistent terminology and identify the components of the democratic process contained therein.

**Recommendation #9:** That councils ensure that all adult and Senior\* Girl Scouts receive information, education, and training on how to initiate and influence change regarding policy, practices, and procedures in the council and in the national organization, whether they use the delegate or town hall system.

**Recommendation #10:** That the National Board ensure avenues exist for two-way communication with council presidents, boards, executive directors, and National Council delegates.

**Recommendation #11:** That council boards of directors, as well as the entire adult membership and Senior\* Girl Scouts, understand and have access to the nominating process.

That council membership participate in and take responsibility for the nominating process in order to ensure a strong single slate.

That council bylaws guarantee a simple procedure, with minimal lead time, for nominations from the floor to allow alternatives to the single slate.

That councils adhere to the monograph *Nominating for Elective Office in Girl Scouting*.

**Recommendation #12:** That when councils hold an annual meeting to meet legal requirements of the corporation, that meeting is held at a single site or multiple sites. Whether it is held in one site or in multiple locations aided by technology, it must be set up so that those present can hear and respond according to the parliamentary rules of a deliberative assembly. All voting must be simultaneous. The tellers must report to the presiding officer immediately for the declaration of the results of the election. Written confirmation of voting at each site must be reported immediately following the meeting.

**Recommendation #13:** That every council have a system for the resolution of problems or grievances that is known and made available to all members. The system should be flexible and address the needs and structure of each individual council.

**Recommendation #14:** That councils review their recognitions criteria to ensure that volunteers who participate in the democratic process are effectively recognized for outstanding service.

**Recommendation #15:** That council presidents and executive directors communicate with the councils' national delegates prior to and after the National Meeting of Presidents and Executive Directors

and at other times throughout the triennium, as appropriate, for exchange of information, input, and reporting.

**Recommendation #16:** That in order to have informed and prepared National Council delegates, the national organization provide uniform, consistent, timely training in the democratic process using appropriate media and methods.

**Recommendation #17:** That the size of the National Council delegate body be reduced to keep the total number of local council and lone troop delegates as close as possible to 1,500 but not in excess of 1,500. [At the 2008 NCS, the National Board presented a proposal to reduce the delegate body to 1,000, but the proposal was amended and passed as 1,500 instead.]

**Recommendation #18:** That documentation on and proposals for action by the National Council reach local councils by April 1 of the National Council Session year.

**Recommendation #19:** That the current three-year cycle of national meetings be maintained.

**Recommendation #20:** That the National Board of Directors revise and expand its guidelines for formal invitations and informal contacts between National Board members and councils, allowing for more accessibility.

**Recommendation #21:** That the National Nominating Committee\*\* members meet with the National Council delegates in conjunction with the National Council Session for the purpose of discussion, education, and understanding the referral process. The National Council delegates would explain the work of the National Nominating Committee to their councils and prospects for nominees for the National Board and National Nominating Committee, resulting in a larger number of qualified candidates for positions. [*\*\* Now named the National Board Development Committee*]

**Recommendation #22:** That the National Board of Directors should consist of no more than 40/41 elected members, to include five officers: the president, two vice presidents, secretary, treasurer, and 35 members-at-large. This change should take effect with the election at the 1999 National Council Session. [*This recommendation passed as a proposal at the 1996 National Council Session. In 2005, a proposal was passed to reduce the number of National Board members to 25.*]

**Recommendation #23:** That there shall be a National Nominating Committee\*\* consisting of nine members, including the chair. The members of the National Nominating Committee shall be representative of the various geographical areas of the country and shall include at least two National Board members and at least three persons who are not National Board members. The eligibility for election requirement of being a member of the Girl Scout movement in the United States of America shall be deleted.

That members of the National Nominating Committee\*\* shall be elected by the National Council to serve a three-year team beginning at the adjournment of the next regular session of the National Council. Members shall serve for no more than two consecutive terms. At least three members, but no more than four, shall serve a second consecutive term. The National Board of Directors shall have the power to fill vacancies in the committee. [*\*\*Both of these recommendations passed as a proposal at the 1996 NCS. Further changes have been made since then including a rename to the NBDC.*]

*\* In 1996, there was only one level for girls in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade called Senior Girl Scouts. Today, Senior Girl Scouts are in 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> grade while Ambassadors are in 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup>.*