

Science Societies and the Democratic Process

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After Ed Koch was elected mayor of New York City in 1978, he used to stop people on the street and ask, "How am I doing?" This act of populism charmed even the most cynical New Yorkers, who returned him to office for two additional terms.

It's a lot harder to gauge the happiness of your constituency if you work for a scientific society. There are no newspapers that editorialize on the latest initiatives of the Geochemical Society (GS), and cable news completely ignores the adventures of the Mineralogical Association of Canada (MAC). Instead, one is left to look at more indirect indicators. Is the total membership growing or declining? Do the publications attract cutting-edge articles that are widely cited? Are the scientists engaged in society affairs?

To weigh this last question, we can ask another: How many scientists take the 10 minutes required to read the biographical statements of candidates for society positions, check the boxes next to the ones they like, and mail in the pre-addressed envelopes? George Will, political commentator for *Newsweek*, has argued that electorate turnout is a most imperfect measure of voter satisfaction; non-voters may be so at ease with the status quo that their absence should not be construed as discontent. On the other hand, I would note that (a) George Will is wrong about most things; and (b) these are not two-dimensional television personalities who are running for office but our friends and colleagues with whom we went to school and whom we meet at conferences.

I wrote to the presidents of five of the societies that sponsor *Elements* to find out how their leadership is chosen. All responded immediately, and I learned something that surprised me. Only the Mineralogical Society of America offers elections that are actually democratic, meaning that there are more candidates than positions to be filled. The other societies are not in constitutional violation. By-laws for most of the societies are available on the web. Of the five societies polled, MSA alone explicitly requires that its elections shall be contested: "For Councilors there shall be at least twice as many nominees as there are open positions, and there shall be two nominees for Vice President."

This situation provokes a thought: How much democracy do we really need in our scientific societies? Even though MSA calls for contested elections, history shows that most of the membership does not take advantage of that privilege. Alex Speer, Executive Director of MSA, provided me with a list of voter participation going back to 1925. Over the last 10 years, voting rates have averaged only 27%, with a range of 23 to 29%. Interestingly, these figures are consistent with those of the 1930s through the 1950s. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a surge in the percentage of returned ballots, coincident with slight increases in the levels of membership (in 1971, for example, 41% of 2,674 members voted).

What does it mean when only a quarter of eligible voters cast a ballot? Is MSA structured so adeptly to represent its citizenry that the particulars of the people in the top offices are immaterial? Or does the MSA Council make decisions that are so irrelevant to life's daily routine that the majority of the membership can happily detach from the political process? No one involved in the running of MSA is arrogant enough to assume that the former is true, but neither is the latter. For example, the society is spearheading the development of GeoScienceWorld, which will permit electronic publishing of *American Mineralogist* and the *RiMG* volumes as well as allow full-text web searching on any given topic, and this is exactly the kind of contribution that flies completely below the radar of most members (until they find themselves using it).

It also seems important to note that the period of maximum voter participation coincided with the heady days of the lunar exploration program, when mineralogy, petrology, and geochemistry had a cachet that is less evident in this post-Apollo landscape. One can only conclude that today's anemic voter participation reflects a lack of investment in the direction that MSA is following. That's too bad, because these societies belong as much to the first-year graduate student trying to make sense of Schreinemaker's rule as to the latest winner of the Roebling medal.

And what of the other societies that do not offer even the committed 25% an opportunity to select among multiple candidates for office? Initially, the democrat in me responded to this potential for cronyism with outrage. After all, societies make decisions that can affect some lives pretty profoundly; they all designate the organizers and locations of international meetings, and they all present prestigious awards that can make or cap a career.

But conversations with representatives of those societies have moderated my indignation. The smaller organizations, with their limited membership, sometimes struggle to convince members to add the burdens of office to their already overloaded schedules. In addition, a lack of democracy can paradoxically allow for fairer representation. Though members of MSA are unambiguously committed to gender diversity (no female candidates for office have ever lost), they apparently are more ambivalent regarding international representation (7 of the last 9 foreign candidates for Council have been defeated, despite the fact that roughly half the MSA membership and contributors to *American Mineralogist* are based outside the US). Conversely, MAC explicitly searches for one representative from each of the geographic regions of Canada (as well as one from the US), and GS requires that at least two of its directors reside outside the US.

These are complicated issues, and the purpose of this column is not to moralize. But if you're feeling disenfranchised, you can change that. If you belong to MSA, you can vote. If you belong to the other societies, you can read the by-laws. They may not require multiple candidates, but they don't prohibit them either. And they all have mechanisms to allow non-council members to put up nominees. What's beautiful about democratic science societies is also what's terrible about them: they are as successful or as ineffective as the people who participate."

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