

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE

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Turning Out the Vote

This annual election issue of *Science* serves as a reminder of how much the AAAS has changed since the new constitution and bylaws were enacted in 1973. The reforms made then were intended to return the power of election to the members, so that the many rather than the few would determine the quality of the Association's leadership. The choice of a president, a board of directors, a council, the committee on nominations, section chairpersons, the nominating committees of the electorates, and the members-at-large of 21 section committees now rests with the members. It is a formidable and expensive process. All of the candidates, it is worth noting, are volunteers, not in the sense of itching for office but in terms of giving their time and efforts generously to the advancement of science.

Last year some 29,000 members—about 24 percent of the eligible voters—cast their ballots for the election of a president of the AAAS. It turned out to be a close contest between two impressive candidates. We think that if the new constitution is going to work as it was meant to, the major offices should at the very least reflect the voting preferences of a majority of the members rather than a minority, however conscientious that minority may be.

Voter apathy is a troubling phenomenon in any electoral situation, including ours. The AAAS is sometimes alluded to as the "lower house" of American science, suggesting a populist alternative to those venerable institutions whose members are knighted and lead a more elegant existence. We, in our humbler way, represent a potential of diverse opinion and energies that has merits of its own. But if we are democratic in our character, we ought to exercise the privileges that go with democracy. Turning out the vote is a good sign that we are alive and well, and that the lower house is in purposeful session.

The prospects for science and technology at the present time are not as clear as they should be. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the so-called scientific community does not act as a community but is seen as a feudal system without a unifying agenda. In such a state it is slow in its reactions and divided in its objectives. The AAAS, as a kind of loose holding company connecting nearly 300 affiliated societies, is certainly not the appointed representative of science in its relations with government, the media, and the public. But it can and should have a voice that is heard and respected for the company it keeps. That voice could come through loud and clear, to a greater extent than it now does, if its members voted with authority. Counting heads is one measure of the significance of the AAAS, but counting votes is better.

This issue of *Science* contains the information about nominees for elective office; those elected will assume their responsibilities in 1977. Ballots will be mailed around 1 September, but biographical data will not accompany them. This issue of *Science*, therefore, should be retained and consulted when the ballots arrive. It would help if members would read the biographical information and the short statements of the nominees *now* and note the candidates they prefer so that in September the ordeal of marking the ballots will be less trying.

There is much talk of accountability, and the lack of it, where public service is concerned. In practice, those in office respond to the concern or the disinterest, as the case may be, of the electorate. This may not guarantee accountability, but it probably brings us about as close to it as we are likely to get, either in national affairs or in the AAAS. The cheerful exhortation to vote "early and often" may not fit the case, but a large and lively vote will say a good deal about the vital signs of the AAAS.—WILLIAM D. CAREY