

Abortion Stirs the Neuroscience Gumbo

A flap is developing over whether neuroscientists should boycott Louisiana because of the state's strict abortion law

NEXT MONTH THE 18,000-MEMBER SOCIETY for Neuroscience will descend on New Orleans for its annual meeting, and most members' minds will be on scientific subjects, such as neurotransmitters and ion channels. But just before converging on this popular convention mecca, famous for ragtime and gumbo, society members will cast their votes in a referendum that could keep them from enjoying New Orleans' hospitality again—a referendum that has little to do with synapses and everything to do with what the political

returning to New Orleans. Ballots were sent out on 30 September, and council member Thomas Carew of Yale told *Science* that the more than 6000 replies received as of 15 October were running 2 to 1 against holding future meetings in New Orleans. The final tally won't be known until just before next month's meeting, however.

Though Wurtz's letter seems to be supported by a majority of the members, it hit a nerve in part because he sent it out without first consulting them. "Bob [Wurtz] made

an error in presentation," said a society councilor who requested anonymity. "His letter was written in a way that suggested the society had voted on this and he was representing the society. But it hadn't, and he wasn't."

But others defend Wurtz's move. "I don't fault him for doing it," says former society president W. Maxwell Cowan, now vice president of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and one of those who urged Wurtz to send the

of it was supportive—but not all. "A subset of the membership was uncomfortable with [the letter]," says Carew. And those in that subset are not all abortion opponents. Some believe that the Society for Neuroscience shouldn't be battling it out on *Roe v. Wade*. "My personal feeling is that the law is not right," says Louisiana State University neuroscientist Sulie Chang. "But the society shouldn't take a stand." Adds neuroscientist Dennis O'Leary of the Salk Institute: Taking a stand on political issues may "compromise the society's primary goal, which is to lobby for neuroscience and biomedical science."

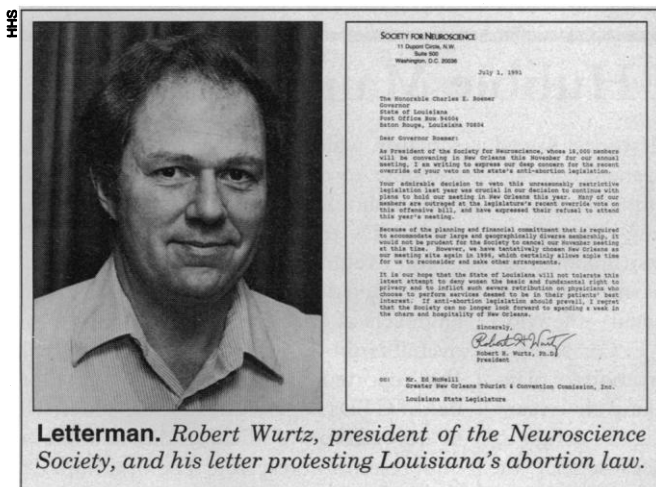
But Goldman-Rakic notes that "the society has always been very socially conscious." Members voted by referendum in 1978 to avoid meeting in states that had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, and the society has also taken stands on human rights in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Part of the problem, says councilor Carew, is that many members worry about where to draw the line on which issues the society should consider in choosing meeting sites. "It opens up a family of questions," he says. "Do we not go to states that have gun control policies we don't like, or that don't have drug programs, or housing programs?"

Wurtz has tried to downplay the notion that his letter—or even a decision to pull out of New Orleans in 1996—constitutes a policy stand on abortion. "The question is where we hold the annual meeting, not any policy of the Society for Neuroscience," he says. But most neuroscientists interviewed by *Science* nevertheless see that kind of choice as taking a stand. "Anything we do is in a sense political," says Carew. Society councilor Joshua Sanes, of Washington University, agrees: "We don't get any votes in Louisiana; the only choice we have is whether to spend our money there or not."

Is shunning New Orleans likely to have the effect that pro-choice society members want? "If [the society] does have a negative impact by not coming to New Orleans, it is unlikely to affect the people responsible for this kind of legislation," says William Banks, president of the New Orleans chapter of the Society for Neuroscience. That's because residents of New Orleans and their elected legislators, he says, tend to be more progressive than the rest of the state.

If the neuroscientists do vote to move their 1996 meeting, they won't be alone. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Psychological Association have canceled future meetings in New Orleans. And Van Sluyters predicts that "other societies that are a little more ostrich-like may wake up and say, 'Look what neuroscience did. Maybe, we should be thinking about that too.'" ■ **MARCIA BARINAGA**



Letterman. Robert Wurtz, president of the Neuroscience Society, and his letter protesting Louisiana's abortion law.

role of a scientific society ought to be.

At issue is Louisiana's anti-abortion law—the strictest in the nation—which is now being challenged in the courts and could provide the test case for overturning the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. When Louisiana's legislature overrode Governor Charles Roemer's veto of the bill last June, neuroscience society president Robert Wurtz, of the National Eye Institute, fired off letters to Roemer, the Louisiana legislature, and the New Orleans Tourist and Convention Commission, warning that the society would cancel future meetings in New Orleans if the legislation were to become law.

Wurtz's letter—part of which was published in the September issue of the society's newsletter—unleashed a controversy among neuroscientists over whether a scientific organization should take a stance on an issue such as abortion. The controversy became so heated that the society's council decided to poll the entire membership on the issue of

letter. "People are elected to higher office in order to provide leadership, including moral leadership," Neuroscientist Richard Van Sluyters, of UC Berkeley, agrees with Cowan. "That's how democracy works. You don't expect a senator to call up every constituent before he votes."

Wurtz says he wasn't ignoring the members. After the Louisiana veto he received a flood of mail from society members calling for the cancellation of this year's meeting. To heed those pleas, he says, would have meant "financial catastrophe" for the society. But he felt obliged to warn Louisiana officials that society members felt strongly about the abortion law, and might refuse to return to New Orleans as scheduled in 1996. Wurtz adds that, before sending the letter, he did get approval from the executive committee: ex-president Patricia Goldman-Rakic of Yale and president-elect Joseph Coyle of Harvard.

After Wurtz made his letter public in September, more mail began pouring in. Some