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# ELECTIONS: ASSOCIATION- STYLE

BY DAVID M. PATT, CAE



**ASSOCIATION PROFESSIONALS ARE FREQUENTLY CONCERNED ABOUT BOARD MEMBERS THEY THINK ARE ACTING IRRESPONSIBLY, INAPPROPRIATELY OR MERELY UNPREDICTABLY. THEY TRY TO WORK WITH BOARD MEMBERS WHO DON'T ALWAYS APPEAR TO UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLES OR WHO DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES WHAT THOSE ROLES WILL BE — AND COME AWAY FEELING FRUSTRATED AND HARASSED.**



Sometimes, they may wonder how someone got on the board in the first place. The answer is to look at the association's electoral system. How an association chooses its volunteer leaders often dictates what type of members will be elevated to governing boards. Organizational culture, societal habits and current or past internal politics thread their way into association life and create a system of leadership selection that may not seem logical to everyone and may not always produce the intended type of board member.



### DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Many associations cling to the belief that contested elections are more democratic than unopposed slates and that they provide members with a greater opportunity to assume leadership positions. Some consider lack of competition evidence of a closed governance system.

"The national encourages contested elections because we see greater participation by our members in the democratic process when two candidates are running," says Janice Page, director, board of directors' administration, American Academy of Pediatrics. "If only a slate were presented, the voter participation would be significantly reduced."

In such situations, candidates may expend a considerable amount of time — and sometimes money — running for board or officer positions. Winners often are the most aggressive campaigners or those who can mobilize the largest voting blocs, not necessarily those who will best serve the association.

"Our bylaws require at least one more candidate than available positions," says Chris Mahaffey, CAE, executive director, American College of Foot & Ankle Surgeons. "Contested elections are common in medical associations."

Where competition has been the rule, associations experience greater time and cost to administer elections, the necessity of drafting and enforcing campaign guidelines, and the unfortunate result of an election loser withdrawing from the association — or worse, skirmishing with the winner over future association issues.

"As for the loser ... it is always a great disappointment," Page says. "The loser is encouraged to remain active and, in some cases, tries again in a year or two."



"Not getting on the board sometimes does lead to hard feelings," says Patricia Blake, CAE, executive director, American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy and chair of the Association Forum Board of Directors. Yet, that outcome is considered by some to be unavoidable.



### TURF WARS

Board members selected by chapters or other membership segments may guarantee the existence of broad representation on the board of directors. But members selected in this manner may end up being responsive only to the needs of the group that selected them, not to the entire membership.

"The bylaws provide for specific numbers of board members to be elected from each membership category," says Stephen Heller, executive director, Insulating Concrete Form Association. "Naturally, they have tended to represent their particular segment rather than looking out for the association as a whole."

Members chosen from a broader elec-

torate may still possess geographic or specialty interests, but they will be more likely to view issues from the perspective of the entire association and not feel a duty to act on behalf of the narrow interest that selected them.

"It is difficult at times for the board member to remember that he or she is making decisions on behalf of the entire organization and not based on regional issues, since they are elected by their region," says Christie Tarantino, executive director, Academy of General Dentistry. "We've worked very hard on this the last several years. It's an education process and a cultural shift."



### FIGURING OUT THE REAL NEED

Nominating committees charged with recruiting a viable group of board members have an excellent opportunity to address representational needs as well as functional needs.

A "needs grid" can identify the qualities or characteristics beneficial to the board of directors. Geography, profes-

sional discipline, age, race, gender, educational level and other considerations can all be evaluated in a formal manner. At the same time, the committee can keep an eye out for people with talents that will enhance board policy discussions, for example, in areas like law, finance or marketing.

Mark Thorsby, senior director, Smith-Bucklin Corp., uses a detailed grid that includes levels of industry experience and desired participatory style. Mahaffey employs a “gap analysis” to identify important qualities missing on the current board. At the American College of Healthcare Executives, the nominating committee chair meets with the board to discuss the association’s leadership needs.

Most associations establish nominating committees of some type to recruit board members. While they generally try to address genuine governance needs, there are still instances in which someone is chosen because it is “their turn” or because they are well-known and/or well-liked by the leadership.

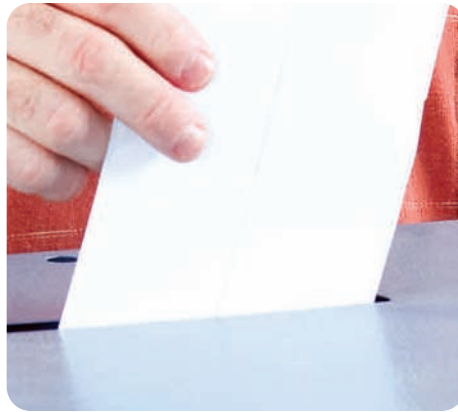
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## FINDING WHAT WORKS

Associations have adopted a slew of ways to manage parochial member interests without totally eliminating their influence. Some have a regional selection process for nominating committee members. Others elect officers from the entire membership and other directors from member segments. Still others require board candidates to have held chapter or section leadership positions, hoping to blend a variety of backgrounds into a cohesive, national voice.

Associations without contested elections provide a vehicle, usually spelled out in the bylaws, for members to challenge a nominated slate. Few challenges, though, are ever launched.

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“The process works *if* the CEO is proactive in shaping the vetting process,” Mahaffey says. Reconciling the cultural demands of the organization with professionally understood outcomes — in whatever fashion — will continue to be one of the most challenging tasks in association governance. ❏

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