

In Politics, How Should We Do Our Thing?

In the hurly-burly of an election year—the television coverage, the conventions, the primaries, the bands, the snake dances, the paper hats—everybody probably thinks about whether the methods with which various countries govern themselves are the best available. A physicist may wonder whether he as an individual and his colleagues as a group are contributing all they might and what their particular role ought to be. If they are not experts on the morality of Asian wars and European invasions, they surely have special knowledge about supporting 200-GeV accelerators, building antiballistic-missile systems and policing nonproliferation treaties.

Any nonexpert who has faced the difficulties of getting a small group to march in step or row together must look with awe on the problems of government. Even so, some questions arise that one is tempted to examine.

Are congressional speeches that nobody listens to an obsolete way to do business? Is representation based on geographical boundaries as obvious a way to govern as it was when the United States constitution was written more than a century and a half ago? It was designed when legislators traveled by horse to their capitals and told constituents what they were doing by stagecoach mail. Are these still the best methods when television and its cousins make instantaneous popular referendum a possibility and when an overnight referendum would be simple? Is it possible that nowadays a citizen identifies more closely with his business and professional colleagues than with the people on his street and would rather send a physicist to Washington, Paris or London to represent physicists than a local man to represent the neighborhood? Strikes of teachers and transportation operators are already proving that such groups are demanding a voice in management. Should the system be revised to accommodate the trend?

When physicists should take part, there are other ways to do so. Representative Emilio Q. Daddario has frequently pleaded for readier access to advice from scientists. Meanwhile the scientific societies are warned not to meddle in Washington lest they risk loss of their tax-exempt status. Some say too much has

been made of difficulties associated with tax exemption. If a real conflict exists, though, one can ponder ways to resolve it.

Should the societies, for example, establish information centers to supply the needs of legislators who want and solicit information? Should such a center gather information or merely distribute what is available? Should rulings be made under present laws, or should we have new laws so that a society operating such a center would know precisely when it steps over the line between information and influence?

Should the societies go further and establish political-action groups expressly to influence legislation? How should such a group limit its concerns? Should it attend only to scientific aspects of legislation or express the viewpoint of its constituents on all of it? Should the group be supported as a subsidiary of one or more existing societies or as a separate entity by either assessed membership fees or voluntary contributions?

Let us give at least appropriate recognition to the conservative view: that a system that works in some fashion may be better than untried methods. We can agree with Sir Winston that "representative government is the worst form except for all the rest." We may have to agree that deciding where a man is living and representing him by geography is easier than deciding whether he is physicist or chemist. Let us be quick to admit that a sloppy, muddling, inefficient government in which a man has a vote is likely to be at least as responsive to his wishes and as productive in supplying his needs as all the rest. We should recognize that the National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council are doing rather well at supplying advice and information. Let us raise our questions only in this context.

As for answers, they are hard to come by and there is room for a spectrum of opinions. We do think, though, that they merit considerable attention. Even when physicists, as a profession, show that they want to stay out of some situations, they show eagerness to pitch in where they can make contributions. If they can do any good, they should have the mechanism to do it.

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