

A WORD FROM...



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Former Chair of the AMS Nominating Committee

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Photo courtesy of Daniel Dugger

The AMS Nomination Process Demystified

For the past two years, I have served on the AMS Nominating Committee (NomCom), chairing it this past year. NomCom consists of nine elected members, three of whom are elected each year for a three-year term. Thus, there are always a few new faces on the committee along with more experienced committee members in their second and third years of service. The committee starts its work late in the fall by collaboratively building a spreadsheet listing lots of potential nominees. Then NomCom meets intensively for three days during the Joint Math Meetings in January to formulate a slate of proposed nominees for the next year's election (the one exception being that presidential candidates are proposed by NomCom nearly two years prior to when they stand for election).

NomCom suggests twice as many candidates for each position as are to be elected. The positions for which NomCom recommends candidates are: AMS president (two candidates every other year since each AMS president serves for two years as president), AMS vice president (two candidates each year since a new VP is elected each year for a three-year term),

AMS Board of Trustees (one or two candidates to be proposed by NomCom each year, depending on whether there is an incumbent standing for reelection), and AMS Council (ten candidates each year).

The spreadsheet of potential candidates is not just a list of names to be considered by NomCom. Other data gets filled in too such as affiliation, area of math, past AMS committee work, previous AMS offices for which a person has run, and any special qualities a person could bring to the job. This spreadsheet really helps the committee to hit the ground running at the Joint Math Meetings. It also ensures that every member of NomCom has a chance to suggest names of potential nominees and be sure those names will be carefully considered.

For the remainder of this article, I focus on how the process ran in the year when I chaired NomCom. As the membership of NomCom evolves from one year to the next, there is inevitably some fluctuation from year to year both in some of the details of how the nomination process runs and also in terms of precisely which traits the committee seeks in potential nominees for each office.

Following in the footsteps of my predecessor, I asked each committee member to contribute at least five names for president, five for VP, three for Board of Trustees, and ten for AMS Council by late December. Asking for so many names from each committee member was to make sure that we would have a wide assortment of good prospects to consider. We also included in the spreadsheet of potential nominees any suggestions we had received from the math community at large, as is now done every year. Several years ago, the AMS added a form to its website where anyone can propose nominees: <https://www.ams.org/about-us/governance/committees/committee-nominate>. To assist with this process, the AMS staff provided us with a very helpful book that they prepare each year with data on who ran for which offices in which previous years. This book also lists the current office-holders to help us choose nominees who can round out the list of AMS officers, e.g., making sure not too many ongoing and potential new AMS officers come from the same institution, the same area of math, or the same region of the country.

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Much of the committee's work is typically done during three very intensive days at the Joint Math Meetings. For the past two years, this process had to be moved online to Zoom. AMS President Ruth Charney met with us at the very beginning of our first NomCom meeting on Zoom and emphasized the importance of choosing a slate of candidates that is diverse in all different ways, including but not limited to area of math, type of institution where a candidate is employed, geographic location, gender, and race. Indeed this is something we very much kept in mind throughout the process, a topic we revisited regularly during our three days of deliberations.

We first discussed and voted on the potential candidates for president, then Board of Trustees, then VP, and finally member at large of the Council. We began the discussion of candidates for president by talking about what qualities we each thought would be important in an AMS president, e.g., having high enough stature to serve effectively as a public face of the society to entities such as Congress, having the dedication as well as appropriate prior experience to serve as preparation for this important position, and qualities of character including wisdom, diplomacy, and of course integrity, as well as the ability to run AMS Council meetings and other discussions effectively, truly listening to all different perspectives. We talked through each name on the lengthy list of suggestions, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate in turn. Those putting forward a candidate explained why they thought the person could be good for the job of president. After hearing about all of the potential nominees, we did a round of voting where we each were allowed to vote for about one-third to one-half of the candidates, then made a shorter list of high vote-getters to consider further. Then we did more rounds of voting where we started to weight the votes to get a more refined sense of committee preferences (e.g., five points for first place, four points for second place, etc.) until everyone agreed that we had an ordered list that made sense and was long enough to allow for the possibility that some very desirable candidates might say no.

We started working our way down this list, with me as chair asking each prospective candidate in turn if they would be willing to run for president, making sure they understood what a very serious commitment this would be and getting them whatever information they needed to help them make a well-informed decision. Fortunately we did fairly quickly find two willing candidates whom we all felt would be excellent options for the presidential election to be held in 2023. We also rapidly found appropriate mathematicians willing to write nomination articles about each of the two candidates, articles that will appear in the AMS *Notices* shortly before the election in 2023.

While working our way down the list for president, giving each potential candidate adequate time to decide whether to agree to run, we went ahead and started the process of likewise discussing candidates for the Board of Trustees and then for VP. This year we only needed to choose one candidate for the Board of Trustees since the incumbent decided to stand for reelection, which in the case of the Board of Trustees is always their option. Much like with president, we used multiple rounds of voting after a discussion of all of the suggested names. Again we formulated ranked lists of potential candidates for the Board of Trustees and VP and worked our way down these lists.

Members of the Board of Trustees do a substantial amount of work over their five-year term managing the finances of the society and serving on the various AMS policy committees, among other things, so we sought candidates who would take this seriously, who seemed sensible, and ideally who had relevant experience as an administrator. The VP positions are seen as good positions for prominent mathematicians who may not be ready yet to take on as big a job as AMS president but who could potentially be good candidates for that in the future, as this is a prominent position on the AMS Council that would allow a person to learn more about the AMS and play somewhat of a leadership role as well.

Finally, we turned to the truly massive list of ideas of possible candidates for AMS Council. As with the earlier positions, we began by discussing what qualities we thought we should be looking for. There were more wide-ranging views here as to what attributes we should be seeking, but this meshed well with the fact that we needed ten nominees and indeed it seemed desirable to give the AMS membership a diversity of candidates from whom to choose. Some qualities that were mentioned by committee members as desirable included being good overall citizens within the math community, bringing to the Council a diverse array of perspectives as well as awareness of different issues mathematicians may face, thoughtfulness, and of course mathematical stature. There was a sense that in addition to considering individuals already heavily involved in the AMS, we also should seek out people whom we thought could be good to draw into a more active role in the AMS. For every single potential nominee, we discussed what they could bring to the Council. After this daunting task, we did several rounds of voting, thereby settling on an ordered list of potential nominees that quickly led to an actual slate of ten nominees for Council.

This was a pretty grueling three days of Zoom meetings. For me, as chair, it was interspersed with phone discussions and email and text exchanges with potential candidates each evening and during breaks throughout the three days. At the same time, it was fun getting to know the other members of the nominating committee and learning about so many exceptional members of the math community who were being proposed for the various positions. We tried to strike a good balance between using voting to be fair and also stepping back and discussing things holistically, paying attention to the overall composition of the slate of candidates.

In April 2022, as committee chair I presented the slate of proposed nominees to the AMS Council at the April Council meeting. Fortunately, the slate was approved without any major concerns being raised, so at that point my work as chair was essentially done. In my opinion we all should be very grateful for the willingness of so many outstanding citizens of the math community to agree to run for AMS office each year. It is my sincere hope that this year (and every year) you find so many strong candidates on the ballot that the challenge is in deciding who not to vote for. And more seriously, I hope the nominees who are elected will lead the society thoughtfully and effectively in the years to come.