

Report on BSA Election Processes, Outcomes, and Recommendations for Reform

Botanical Society of America Election Processes Capstone Group

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Introduction to BSA elections

Election-related BSA Bylaws, Policies, and Instructions that are codified and publicly available:

BSA has policies and procedures related to elections codified and publicly available in several places on the BSA website, including in the Bylaws of the BSA, BSA Policies, and in the Officer Duties, under Duties of the Past President. We prepared a [background references document](#) to accompany this report including links to relevant areas of the website and a summary of each.

The BSA Bylaws were adopted in August 1985 and updated in 2016, 2017, and 2019. The Bylaws include several articles relevant to elections, including Article III (defines members, membership classes and voting rights), Article V (describes how and when votes are cast), Article VI (defines and describes roles of elected officers, terms of offices, removal), Article VII (defines elected Director-at-Large and Student Director positions and appointed Editor positions), and Article VIII (defines Board of Directors powers, composition, tenure, how Board decisions are made). Bylaw amendments require member vote, with approval of $\frac{2}{3}$ of those voting. A minimum of 10% of the membership must participate in voting to constitute a quorum (Article XV). This is important in the context of the Capstone Group's work because Bylaw changes will take longer to implement and require member support.

BSA Policies may be changed more quickly via a majority vote from a quorum of no less than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the Board of Directors (Policy XVIII). Several BSA policies provide more details about the officers (Policy VII), the Board of Directors (Policy IX), and about the Election Committee's role in elections (Policy XII: Part 7). Policy VI: Elections is most relevant as it includes a step-by-step description of the election process:

1. After the annual meeting the Past President activates the Election Committee.

2. The Election Committee through the Business Office canvases each voting member of The Society for nominations for offices to be filled that year.
3. The Election Committee prepares a slate of two names for each office. The candidates for each office shall be selected from a combination of persons nominated by the membership at large and selected by the Election Committee. Consent to serve, if elected, is obtained from all nominees.
4. An election is carried out by the committee at that time each year which seems most expedient in the overall program of The Society. The Executive Director's office is responsible for receiving, opening, and tallying the ballots. The candidate for each office who receives the largest number of votes is recognized as elected to that office.
5. In the event of a tie vote, the Executive Committee votes to resolve the tie vote. The chair of the Election Committee conducts the voting.
6. Results of the election are reported by the Election Committee chair to the President and to the Secretary of The Society. The Secretary promptly notifies each candidate of the outcome of the election. The President invites each officer-elect to attend the annual meeting of The Society. Results of the elections are announced to the membership at the annual business meeting and are published in the *Plant Science Bulletin*.

BSA Policy VII: Part 10 states that "the Society shall maintain job descriptions for the elected offices which shall be available to all members." There is a link to Officer Duties on the website. Under "Duties of the Past President" there are more detailed descriptions including a timeline of the Past-president's role and duties related to chairing the [Elections Committee](#). Duties in the timeline relevant to elections are as follows:

September: Activate the Elections Committee. Contact members and ask them to be thinking about candidates. The Ballot is made up of candidates the Committee selects, and, if possible, includes names from the nominations by the general membership. This is not so hard; there are a number of good persons nominated by the general membership, but the Bylaws do not restrict the ballot to the open nominations. ELECTION/NOMINATIONS see [Article IV, section 1](#), for the specific charges to the Election Committee, of which you are the Chair. Prepare the Call for NOMINATION OF OFFICERS which goes out with the Fall Mailing, as an email to members and is posted on the BSA website. The Executive Director will provide the appropriate form ([example](#)) and ensure the email and web-posting. Deadline for the return of the nominations is February 15th.

February: Send list of persons nominated to the Elections Committee to seek their input and to add other names if required. In consultation with the Election Committee, decide on a slate of candidates. They must agree in writing to stand for election. Advise the Executive Director to prepare the ballot. Ensure each candidate

Commented [1]: includes a broken link to Article IV, Section 1 (<https://botany.org/governance/bylaws.php#ArtIV>). Should this go to election committee description now here: <https://cms.botany.org/home/governance/election-committee.html>

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provides a profile that is included on the ballot. Distribute ballot by separate mailing and as an electronic ballot. Paper Ballots are sent to members without email. Elections open March 1st and close April 15th.

March: Attend Executive Committee meeting. Report on activities.

April: Receive and count BALLOTS. In consultation with the President, notify the winners and other candidates of the outcome. Also, report to the Elections Committee - if they have not helped count the ballots (given that the Committee is spread across the country, the Chair usually seeks permission to use other local BSA members to do the counting).

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A description of the [Election Committee](#) role, composition, member criteria, time commitment, and how to apply to be considered for service on the committee is also provided on the website. Current members of the committee are also listed on the website. The description of the committee's role is as follows:

Chaired by the BSA Immediate Past President, the Election Committee oversees the BSA election for the BSA Board positions during the first four months of each year. The Committee sends out a call for nominations to the BSA membership. The Executive Director, who is part of BSA staff, provides all nominations to the Committee Chair of the Elections committee, and on occasion the Chair may reach out to obtain additional nominations. The Election Committee follows the BSA Bylaws to prepare a slate of candidates for the election which is presented to the BSA Board for approval prior to holding the election

Inconsistencies and information missing from Bylaws, Policies, Officer and Committee Roles documentation:

We did notice that there are several inconsistencies in the information provided about elections that show up in different places on the website. It appears that the job description provided on the website may not have been updated as recently as policies and committee descriptions were. For example, Policy VI: Elections states "The Executive Director's office is responsible for receiving, opening, and tallying the ballots." while the job description states "April: Receive and count BALLOTS. In consultation with the President, notify the winners and other candidates of the outcome. Also, report to the Elections Committee - if they have not helped count the ballots (given that the Committee is spread across the country, the Chair usually seeks permission to use other local BSA members to do the counting)." There are inconsistencies elsewhere, such as the elections committee description including a Board of Directors ballot approval step not described in the policies, "The Election Committee follows the BSA Bylaws to prepare a slate of candidates for the election which is **presented to the BSA Board for approval** prior to holding the election." In

addition, several links in the Past President job description were broken (404 error), including where the committee description information can be found, and an example form for a call for Nomination of Officers.

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In interviews with Past Presidents and the Executive Director, members of the capstone committee learned that additional instructions/models/examples/norms are provided to the Past President and Elections Committee based on prior practices, and that these are updated regularly as the capabilities of our email service and website change. For example, an updated format for soliciting bios from candidates for election was recently created to standardize the information provided to members. Voting is now handled through a form on our website accessed via an email to all members, and profiles of candidates are linked from that "ballot" form.

Some aspects of the election process are left to the discretion of the election committee under guidance of the Past President acting as chair of the committee. For example, the process of determining which nominated candidates will appear on the ballot, the process of soliciting more nominations, who is qualified to be a candidate. In addition, the reports that are written by each Past President chairing the election committee and delivered at the Council meeting are inconsistent in terms of format and the level of detail they provide about the activity of the Elections committee.

Based on nominations received by the Executive Director, reports of the Election Committee to the Council meeting, and past ballots, we have created [a spreadsheet covering the last 5 years of BSA Officer elections](#). The spreadsheet contains historical election information including elected officers, candidates, nominees (and their nominators when known), and the members of the Election Committee in each year.

From 2018-2022, there were a total of twenty-one open positions (for nine unique roles) on the Board of Directors open and called for nomination (2018=4, 2019=4, 2020=5, 2021=4, 2022=4). There were 89 names nominated for those positions, which counted for 70 people in total. Those 70 nominees were from 56 different institutions. Among the 89 nominations, four of them were recommended by the Election Committee, 22 were self-nomination, and 63 were nominated by others. Interestingly, these 63 nominations were made from only 33 different people, and only 6 (~18%) had not served on the BSA leadership by the time they made their nominations. On the contrary, only three of those 22 self-nominated candidates had served on the BSA leadership by the time of nomination, while the majority (~55%) of self-nomination were for the Student Representative positions. Among the four nominations recommended by the Election Committee, only one position originally had one candidate. In other words, three nominations made by the Election Committee were for positions that already had more than two candidates. For instance, in 2020, a recommendation for President Elect was made by the Election Committee despite

the fact that there were already seven people nominated/self-nominated for this position; similarly, in 2022, another recommendation for President Elect was made by the Election Committee despite the fact that there were already six other people nominated for this position.

Table 1. Summary of BSA Leadership from 1894 to 2023.

Leadership Position	Female	Male	Total
President 1987-2023	17	20	37
President 1894-1986	7	86	93
President 1894-2023	24	106	130
Secretary 1894-2023	10	24	34
Treasurer 1894-2016	4	22	26
Student Representative 2006-2023	12	6	18

We would like to note here that the information representing gender categories is historical and that we hope the society will more accurately portray the gender spectrum when collecting demographic information in the future.

Why election reform is needed and what we aim to accomplish with reforms

Election reform is needed because our candidate pools are not diverse and may not represent all of the intersections of our society membership (Table 1). In addition, the three primary leadership positions have had a strong gender bias. Many have the impression that the leadership body is just rotating between the same group of people with most of the candidates nominated by people who have already served the BSA in a leadership position. This inequity may be discouraging people from less represented intersections, such as our colleagues from the Global South, from being willing to serve in leadership roles. Additionally, the election process (i.e., how the Election Committee selects, ranks candidates, and decides on who will eventually be

on the ballot) and the responsibilities for each position is unclear, even after the person is elected for the position.

Clarity, transparency, and equity of and within the election process is necessary. One way that can potentially increase the diversity of the candidate pool is to encourage more people to self-nominate. However, one of the current barriers that prevents people from self-nomination is the absence of a clear description of the responsibilities and commitment expected. Standardization of the nomination process would provide a more equitable playing field for potential candidates. Currently, the nomination process is not standardized as some of the nominations include detailed descriptions that speak to the candidate's abilities, while others only include the candidate's name.

Goal 2, Strategy 2.4 of the BSA Strategic Plan states that the BSA will "Increase the diversity of leadership on the Board and all BSA committees". With this report we aim to shed light on the inconsistencies and inequitable elements within the BSA elections process, while providing recommendations for reform.

Processes and approach

We came to the conclusion that the BSA election process needed to be addressed through personal experience with the process, conversations with staff and a past president who served on the elections committee, and word of mouth from other BSA members. We contributed equally to the report regarding brainstorming and writing.

Election reform recommendations

Recommendation 1: Clarify the categories of values, skills, and characteristics of BSA leaders most important to the membership, and provide the membership with sufficient information about candidates to fairly evaluate those things when casting their votes.

- Survey membership about what they value in a candidate for the BSA board. To better understand what the BSA leadership means to the BSA membership and what are the expectations for the leadership, we have added the following questions in our upcoming membership surveys:
 - Q1-Q5.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NjrEA_DDJRmA3BBQXnt_g3n3S2tIQAVH4Z_BS9ME-EA/edit#heading=h.35I516j98s7m

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- When asking materials from the candidates, decide on what kind of information that is the most important. For instance, the publication track record vs. service experience vs. commitment. The recommendation from the office hour is to ask them clearly about their positions on certain issues, such as funding. Not too open-ended is the recommendation from Movement.
- Request bio information from candidates on the ballot in a way that addresses the characteristics BSA members are seeking to evaluate. Aim to create fairly balanced bios of candidates by implementing word limits (or better, **word ranges** as suggested at office hours) and requesting responses to specific questions. Standardizing the information that is presented on the ballots, including having word limits on each answer. **(Probably need to offer some examples of questions here)**

Recommendation 2: Be more transparent about qualifications/targeted recruitment needs for leadership positions, benefits and responsibilities of leadership positions, and the election process.

- Clearly identify any qualifications for leadership positions **(career stage?)** and share these during call for nominations, with the election committee, and confirm all candidates for the ballot meet qualifications. (What are the qualifications of leadership positions? Not everyone is on the same page with this and it can create a different playing field depending on opinions of people on committee.)
- Host a Botany 360 annually focused on BSA Leadership during the call for nominations period. **Explain benefits and responsibilities of leadership positions, the election process, and answer questions from the community.** Ideally led by current leaders holding the positions up for election.
- Create a leader handbook **(potentially useful model from SSE)** shared publicly that clearly outlines the duties and responsibilities for each position and some of the key procedures surrounding leadership, with contacts and links to key documents like the strategic plan, bylaws, etc. This will help clarify roles, reduce uncertainty for prospective and new leaders, and reduce the friction of transition. Ideally this would be a living document updated by leaders during their term as policies and procedures change.
- Host a Botany 360 or send a newsletter/PSB article about changes made to elections, and be open to additional changes based on feedback from membership

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Recommendation 3: Be more intentional about leadership recruitment - recruit for a balanced board over time.

- Decide on characteristics of a well-balanced BSA board (could include skills, experiences, attributes, demographic background, etc.).
- Create a BSA-specific [balanced board matrix](#) to be filled in by onboarding leaders and tracked over time. (Movement recommended maybe making the actual info internal, and/or making particular questions optional)
- Each year, the BSA board can identify areas of current underrepresentation for targeted recruiting and share these priorities during the call for nominations, and with the elections committee.
- Plan to revisit and update the matrix categories during strategic planning

Recommendation 4: Make changes to the nomination process to provide more standardized information about nominees to the election committee.

- Keep the initial nomination process simple (name, e-mail, institution) to reduce barriers to nomination. Note: the recommendation from Capstone office hour is that the nomination process should be as easily accessible as possible, only ask about the most basic information (such as name, email, institution) so that anyone can nominate anyone. However, the process of the EC reaching out to the candidates and asking materials from them should be standardized.
- Make it very clear about the responsibility, time commitment, as well as the benefit of serving a certain position when reaching out to the candidates (note: recommendation from office hour is to include the information about how a candidate can be benefited from serving in this position). Invite nominees to attend or view the recording of an annual Botany 360 Leadership Q&A, and provide ample opportunity for asking questions.
- Create a simple form for nominees to fill in in order to accept their nomination. This simple form should include information that the election committee will use to rank candidates for determining who will be on the ballot. Ideally the rubric the election committee will use will be linked, or integrated into the form to make it clear what information the election committee is looking for to make their rankings. It's important to balance the burden of filling in this form with the benefit of providing some baseline equivalent information to the committee for ranking candidates. The form could potentially include items from the balanced board matrix to make nominee diversity, attributes, skills more apparent and to allow for self-identification. A statement could be useful that makes it clear that candidates do not need to meet all the preferred characteristics or something to that effect to reduce barriers to completing the form. This form should also include a checkbox verification RE following the society's code of ethics.

Recommendation 5: Create clear, transparent guidelines for the elections committee.

- There should be a very structured and transparent ranking system with clear rubrics. People who are elected will shape the society for years to come, so they have to be a body reflecting the community and those values should be included in the vetting process.
- Create and follow a template for reporting out the results of election committee activity to the BSA Council, to make information available more consistent from year to year.
- Track information about nominations, candidates on ballots, and election results over time so that historical analysis is possible. Consider sharing this publicly ([example from SICB](#)).
- Identify any potential conflict of interest and have a clear policy for reducing the appearance of bias in election committee members evaluating nominees.
- Consider ranked-choice voting of all qualified nominees as an alternative to the elections committee choosing 2 candidates for the ballot.

Action plan/timeline for implementing reforms

Who will be involved in implementing reforms?

Heather Cacanindin: Executive Director will provide historical context and help assess the extent to which organizational limitations will dictate the scope of the proposed recommendations, especially in terms of timeline and staff time & capabilities.

Brenda Molano-Flores: As president-elect, Brenda will become chair of the election committee in 2024-2025. In the next year (2023-2024) she will serve as chair of the committee on committees. She will help facilitate the process of developing and testing aspects of our reformed process in the next year, with plans to collect feedback during the 2023-2024 election cycle and then make any additional needed changes to better achieve the goals of the election reform effort while she is in charge of the election process as chair of the election committee (2024-2025).

Imeña Valdes: Currently serving on the election committee as graduate student representative, Imeña is well-placed to help facilitate the process of developing/testing aspects of our reformed process in the next year, and providing

feedback about the process and any needed changes to Brenda who will rotate onto the election committee in 2024, as Imeña rotates off.

2023-2024 Election Committee: Chair: Vivian Negron-Ortiz; Election Committee members: Imeña Valdes, Lauren Eserman, Kathleen Pryer, Norm Wickett, (and one newly-appointed member)

Ad-hoc election reform committee: To be formed ASAP. Will recruit members from DEI committee, Election Committee, Advisory Council, Early Career Professional Development Committee

Min Ya: can prepare a graphic description of election reform recommendations to share with board for approval

Timeline/Action Plan

(Note: we are checking with BSA staff to see if these dates will work for BSA's staff and other behind-the-scenes things that need to happen associated with this (e.g. getting ballots online, etc.)

Pre-election season: BSA staff assist updating current "job" description for each leadership position (e.g., BSA Executive Director due to her knowledge associated with the duties of each position)

Election Capstone group will share recommendations and report from Capstone Group with the ad-hoc committee.

Ad hoc committee will:

- Get Membership Survey Feedback and discuss (results should be available pre-meeting in ~June 2023)
- Incorporate feedback into election cycle plans
- Create document (poster) describing election reform and new process
- Get election reform recommendations approved by board
- Create/Review job descriptions, rubric for nominee evaluations, forms for nominees, balanced board matrix categories, revise with feedback (DEI committee, election committee, advisory council?)

Nov 1: Call for Nominations

Nov: Botany 360 information session on serving in BSA leadership

Dec/Jan: Election committee notified, prepare to meet in Feb

Jan 15: Call for Nominations closes

Feb 1: Nominees asked to complete online form by Feb 1

Feb: Election Committee uses new rubric to evaluate nominees and create a ballot

Late Feb: Nominees not selected for ballot are notified

Early March: Board approves ballot

Late March: Selected candidates on ballot asked to complete bio/bio posted on website

April 1: Ballot opens

April 30: Ballot closes

Early May: Elected members notified, welcomed, get job descriptions, asked to complete balanced board matrix

Post-Election:

- Nominees/Candidates surveyed or interviewed about process?
- Records RE Election process archived? Report template used to transparently report out on activities of election committee?
- Discussion of changes to make to process for 2024/2025 Election cycle, documents, key dates revised as needed.

Conclusion

The Election Committee must have repeatable, transparent, and equitable processes and guidelines for the selection of candidates to be put on the ballot. The lack of proper documentation and clarity of the process has created confusion within the Election Committee and BSA Board members about the process and final selection of candidates to leadership positions. As part of our self assessment process we went back to the Capstone Project Guidelines IV. DETAILED GUIDELINES to determine if our solutions to improve our election process has taken into account Equitable, Realistic, and Actionable solutions. As part of the Capstone Project we have:

- Created a diverse Capstone Project working group to address the topic of the project (e.g., BSA staff, BSA leadership, and BSA members and future leaders).
- Provided documentation of the BSA election process (i.e., reviewing existing material, conducting interviews, and gathering statistics).
- Identified the historical gender biases associated with our leadership positions.
- Identified the need for reform to make the BSA election process as inclusive as possible (i.e., all groups).
- Identified areas of improvement.
- Made short and long term recommendations.
- Identified individuals that can assist with the development of better “job” descriptions for leadership positions (i.e., past serving members and BSA staff).
- Identified an individual that could implement the proposed changes (2024 Past President).

Conducting this exercise has provided a pathway forward to reform our election process and to make it repeatable, transparent, and equitable.

We are still awaiting feedback from our membership survey and there are several items that we still have questions about. This is definitely still a work in progress!