

History of Chemistry

edited by
William B. Jensen
University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172

Why Has the Value of Avogadro's Constant Changed over Time?

William B. Jensen

Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio 45221-0172, United States
jensenwb@ucmail.uc.edu

Question

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Ben Ruekberg
Department of Chemistry
University of Rhode Island
Kingston, RI 02881

Answer

As noted in an earlier column (1), the concept of Avogadro's constant or number (N_A) was not introduced by Avogadro in 1811, but rather by the French physical chemist, Jean Perrin, in 1908. It may be formally thought of as the value of the conversion factor between the gram (g) and the unified atomic mass unit (u), as may be seen from the requirement that the molecular mass of a given atom, molecule, or ion, as expressed in atomic mass units per entity, must be numerically equal to the molar mass of the same substance as expressed in grams per mole. Thus for example:

$$207.2 \text{ g/mol Pb} \\ = (207.2 \text{ u/Pb atom})(1 \text{ g}/N_A \text{ u})(N_A \text{ Pb atoms}/1 \text{ mol Pb})$$

There are two reasons why the value of N_A has changed over time. The first, and most obvious, is that any change in the standards used to define either the atomic mass unit or the gram will cause a shift in the value of their conversion factor and hence in the value of N_A . Such a change occurred in 1960 when the standard for the atomic mass unit was changed from the O = 16 scale to the $^{12}\text{C} = 12$ scale. A similar shift would have occurred around 1900 with the shift from the H = 1 to the O = 16 scale, but, of course, the concept of N_A was not a part of chemistry at that time (2). The second reason for a shift in the value of N_A has to do with an ever-increasing ability to accurately measure the value of this constant, as illustrated by the selected examples given in Table 1 (3).

The standard definition of N_A is that it is the same number of entities as there are carbon atoms in exactly 12 g of carbon-12. Consequently, students are often surprised when they are told that its numerical value is actually determined by the conversion factor between the gram and the atomic mass unit. If chemists had failed to adopt the metric system and had instead continued to use some older conventional mass unit, such as the ounce, dram, or grain, to weigh chemicals in the laboratory, it would still have been expedient to maintain a numerical identity between atomic and molecular masses, as measured in atomic mass units, and the molar masses of the various substances as measured in the lab. Under such conditions, Avogadro's constant would have had a very different value, and it makes an interesting teaching exercise to assign students the task of calculating the corresponding

Table 1. Example Experimental Values for Avogadro's Constant over Time^a

Year	Author	$N_A/10^{23}$
1908	Perrin	6.7
1917	Mullikan	6.064
1929	Birge	6.0644
1931	Bearden	6.019
1945	Birge	6.02338
1951	DuMond	6.02544
1965	Bearden	6.022088
1973	Cohen	6.022045
1987	Deslattes	6.022134
1994	Basile	6.0221379
2001	De Bièvre	6.021339

^a A more complete list can be found in ref (3).

values of N_A for each of these alternative macroscopic mass units. Likewise, students are often puzzled as to why Avogadro's constant has such an odd numerical value and it is also of interest to challenge them to invent a new macroscopic mass unit for laboratory use that will yield a more aesthetic numerical value, such as 1.0×10^{24} for the value of N_A .

Literature Cited

- Jensen, W. B. How and When Did Avogadro's Name Become Associated with Avogadro's Number? *J. Chem. Educ.* **2007**, *84*, 223.
- Estimates of the number of molecules per given volume (though not the number per mole) were made by various 19th-century physicists and can be retrospectively used to calculate estimates of N_A . See, for example, Hawthorne, R. M. Avogadro's Number: Early Values by Loschmidt and Others. *J. Chem. Educ.* **1970**, *47*, 751-755.
- Based on the values reported in Becker, P. History and Progress in the Accurate Determination of the Avogadro Constant, *Rep. Prog. Phys.* **2001**, *64*, 1945-2008. The author would like to thank Juris Meija of the Institute for National Measurement Standards of Canada for bringing this report to his attention. Readers should be aware, however, that the author of this report makes numerous incorrect historical statements about the origins of Avogadro's work and related concepts, such as the false implication that Avogadro derived his hypothesis from the kinetic theory of gases.

Do you have a question about the historical origins of a symbol, name, concept, or experimental procedure used in your teaching? Address them to William B. Jensen, Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172; jensenwb@ucmail.uc.edu.