Electronic balloting adopted for 2014 AUB student elections; results out in less than half the time

Beirut, Lebanon- 18/11/2014 - Instead of dropping a paper ballot, AUB students clicked "submit" on specially set-up computers, in order to cast their votes for their preferred candidates.

Electronic balloting was adopted this year in all six faculties, following last year's successful trial in the smaller faculties.

"The experience has been fantastic, despite some minor technical glitches that we resolved quickly," said Talal Nizameddin, dean of Student Affairs. "The system we used for the electronic balloting has proved to be very efficient, secure, and user-friendly."

Nizameddin explained that electronic balloting cut down the time needed for students to register at the polling stations, since polling officers would simply scan student ID barcodes to verify that their names were on voter lists, instead of poring over hard copies and manually locating a voter's name. Similarly, the electronic system allows for speedier ballot counting and results calculations.

More than 200 students ran for spots on the 81-member Student Representative Council (SRC), with students campaigning for one of two main coalitions--the red-and-white "Students at Work" against a coalition of the fluorescent yellow or orange "Student Service." In addition, independent, anti-political groups united under the banner of the white "Campus Choice," while the grey "Leadership Club," participated for the second year in a row. A group calling for boycotting the student elections emerged this year.

The number of seats on the SRC were reduced by 30 percent, in order to improve representation, competitiveness and fairness, explained Nizameddin.

About 12 seats were won by acclamation, and all results were out before 7pm, or nearly three hours earlier than previous years.

From 10 am to 5 pm, about 8000 students voted in their respective faculties, in a calm yet competitive manner.

"I am proud of you, all of you, for the great turnout and peaceful elections," Nizameddin told students, gathered around West Hall, after the polls had closed. "You showed to Lebanon what AUB students are capable of."

According to Nizameddin, 70 percent of voters participated in the elections – the highest voter turnout in AUB's modern history. Usually, voter turnout hovers around 60-65 percent.

For the third year in a row, students were invited to choose their SRC and University Student-Faculty Council (USFC) representatives during the same election, in an attempt to include more students in the selection of the USFC members. Traditionally only the newly-elected SRC representatives would vote in the week after Election Day for the 18 student representatives on the 24-member USFC.

Newly-elected SRC representatives are scheduled to vote for SRC cabinets in the coming days, while the 24-member USFC is expected to vote for its vice-president, secretary, and treasurer later.

Dean Nizameddin described the election process as "competitive yet calm."
"As usual the rivalry is intense but fully within the framework of democratic competition," he added. "What's important is that students partake in this annual tradition of electing their representatives, since the process itself is an excellent learning experience."

Students running on one platform or another all cited a laundry list of items affecting student life as the reason behind their campaigning.

Just like in previous years, observers from the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections oversaw Election Day on campus with about 15 observers weaving in and out of faculties and ballot counting areas. LADE Coordinator at AUB Samir Abdullah lauded the AUB student elections, describing them as "well-organized and peaceful, as usual." He also commended the adoption of electronic balloting which proved secure and efficient, even though he advocated greater voter education about the new system.

As in every election, access to campus was confined to students and staff with valid AUB IDs, in addition to the drove of print, radio, and TV reporters covering the event.

The Office of Student Affairs, which oversees elections every year, enforced voting rules in the strictest fashion. Moreover, Dean Nizameddin banned all political flags, posters, flyers, and photos on campus.

By 5:30 pm, shortly after voting had ended, one large computer-linked screen was set up facing West Hall's colonnaded porch. The screen broadcast several news reports prepared by AUB students of media studies, before beaming election results to spirited students over a two-hour period. Meanwhile, the vying groups taunted each other with boos and chants. Results per faculty started being released within an hour after the polls had closed.

Names of winners per faculty per class were tweeted within a few minutes of their being announced, and they were also published on AUB's official Facebook, Twitter and Google+ pages. AUB has around 30,000 followers on Twitter as well as over 100,000 fans on Facebook, around 5,000 followers on Instagram and around 2,500 followers on Google+. AUB also posted election news on its LinkedIn pages with its 40,000 followers. The University also posted photos from Election Day on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Twitter hashtag #aubelections was widely used by students and reached over 70,000 accounts with over 464,000 impressions.

Student elections at AUB have a long history that dates back to 1949, when the first general elections took place. This annual event was interrupted in 1982 at the height of the 1975-1990 Lebanese war, only to resume in 1994.

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Note to Editors
About AUB
Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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