

Student Elections

“They are nothing more than popularity contests.” This one of those statements that is usually aimed at high school students and it comes close to making my blood boil. It is a statement that is used to diminish the importance, validity or results of a class or student government election. It is also used as an excuse for an adult to appoint a student or committee of those the adult would rather work with to assume the duties and responsibilities that should belong to an elected leader who has a legitimate constituency.

Before we can discuss ways in which class and student government elections should be conducted, we must deal with the damage caused by the “popularity” statement. Has any candidate on any level ever won an open honest election if he or she was not popular with the electorate. It is axiomatic that the winning candidate, again in an open and honest election, is more popular than the loser. The bottom line is that when the “popularity” statement is made, it usually means that the “wrong” candidate (in the opinion of someone else) won. As adults we would scream bloody murder if an outside group decided to appoint someone to do the job of leaders we elected as commissioners, mayors, governors, etc. Why do some adults presume that they can do the same thing to elected student leaders when they don’t like the results of a student election?

What are the real differences between our high school class and student government elections and or local, state and national elections? The first notable difference is the issues. Students are interested in electing officers that will help them have a better school year or overall school experience. I don’t think students would vote for a candidate who they think will do a poor job of planning the Prom, Homecoming, service projects, etc. Obviously, adults don’t rank these issues up there with local taxation, inflation, the economy, national defense, etc but, that doesn’t mean that student voters don’t consider the issues that are important to them when they cast their votes.

The second obvious difference is the percentage of the potential electorate that votes. In a good national election we are overjoyed with at 70% voter turnout. Somehow we tend to ignore the fact that a 70% voter turnout means that 30% of the eligible voters can

determine who the leaders are. In many local elections the voter turn out is 15% or less. I won't even go into how the Electoral College can distort a Presidential election. In most student elections the voter turn out is close to 100% and, again in most cases, a majority not a plurality of votes cast decides the election.

The third major difference is the ease at which a person can become a candidate. In national and state elections, and in a growing number of local elections, the amount of money that it takes to campaign discourages many from giving consideration to running. Most schools put limits on what kind of campaigning can be undertaken or how much can be spent. As a result, for the most part, whether or not a student becomes a candidate is determined by the attitude of the student not by his or her wealth or lack thereof.

In short, the differences between student elections and state and national elections are the issues, voter participation and stricter election rules. None of these differences diminish the validity of a student election. In fact, I maintain they enhance it.

In preparing for student elections the first things to find out and commit to memory are your school district guidelines or policies, and the constitutional mandates of the student organization. Many school districts, especially those containing more than one high school or middle school, are instituting district-wide guidelines to insure equality of treatment from school to school. If your school district has guidelines, do not vary from them. They are your best defense in the event of a controversy. The mandates of the organization's constitution should be in line with any district guidelines or policies. If they are not, immediately report the discrepancy to your principal. Remember, district guidelines and policies trump school guidelines and policies. In the event there is no conflict, make sure your election adheres strictly to the organization's constitution.

Next is the issue of scheduling. What time of year should we hold student elections? Usually elections are held sometime in the spring or prior to the dismissal of school for the summer break. If this is the case at your school, check for the dates of state, regional and national conventions or leadership workshops. Scheduling elections early enough for students to register to attend these events should be a consideration. In addition, SGA

elections in late February or early March gives the advisor time to train incoming officers before their actual term of office starts. Some schools have instituted SGA elections at the end of the first semester. This schedule allows seniors who served as officers to be free to concentrate on senior concerns i.e. prom, graduation, college prep, etc. and allows the advisor to use the second semester of the school year to train the officers. This type of schedule usually works best in a school on the 4x4 block schedule.

Once the date is established the process of getting candidates should begin. This involves advertising the election, the offices open to be won, and the qualifications. Every advertising resource of the school should be used. Bare in mind, students who are elected represent the students not you. Advisors should have no role in determining candidates beyond encouraging students to run and enforcing district rules and the organization's constitution.

The next issue is who is eligible to run? The ability to seek office whether it be class, club, or SGA, should be open to all group members, and limited only by district guidelines or policies. For example, it might be acceptable to require an unweighted 2.50 G.P.A. to be a candidate based on the possibility of officers being called from class from time to time. However, 3.0 or 3.5 unweighted G.P.A. may be unreasonable. Remember, to become president of the U.S. a person has to be 35 years old and a natural born citizen of the U.S. That's it! There is no mention of intelligence, military service, college degrees, sex, etc. Let's face it, the determining factors are not in the eligibility requirements. They are in the job description.

Each potential candidate should have to submit an office candidacy form. In addition to the candidates name, grade and other pertinent information, the form should contain a complete list of the duties and responsibilities of the office being sought. This list of duties should be specific and should include and go beyond those required by the organization's constitution. These duties and responsibilities should be spelled out. This form should be signed by both the parent/guardian and the student. A very specific date should be set for the due date of office candidacy forms. There is no reason to change this date after it has been announced or to accept forms late.

Once all of the candidates have been established there should be a mandatory candidate Meeting. Not attending or at least being represented at this meeting should result in immediate disqualification. Election rules and the consequences of violating those rules should be explained at the meeting.

The type of campaign rules that may be considered include but are not limited too:

- a. Length of campaign speeches
- b. Number and size of posters and banners
- c. Type of handouts/buttons etc.
- d. Campaign clean-up

Ideally, the process of conducting the election should mirror, as close as possible, the process of conducting a national election. Whenever possible regular voting machines should be used at an established polling place. Student identification lists (SID Lists) can take the place of the voter registry and student I.D. cards can be used as voter registration cards. This process can be used even if you don't have voting machines, paper and pencil and ballot box can suffice. The closer you can come to mirroring the state or national process, the easier it will be to convince teachers to bring their classes to the polling place. There are many ways to conduct the actual election, school computers, Scantron sheets, etc., but what should be remembered is that every eligible student should be given a legitimate opportunity to vote.

However the election is conducted, the tabulation of votes should be accurate without question and the winner should be announced no later than the day following the election. Once counted, the ballots should be kept in a secure place (the school safe, perhaps) for a designated period of time (usually a month) so that they can be recounted if the election is challenged.

Advisors should be aware that elections, when poorly conducted, can cause a great deal of negative controversy. Proper planning, communication and organization can avoid such controversy.