Friday, October 26. 2007

Why a strongly defined elections system is important

On the Activeworlds newsgroups, there is currently a debate raging over whether AWTeen's upcoming election should be strongly organized, or whether the election should be a loose affair. The "strongly organized" system involves slowing down the election process so that it takes place over the course of several weeks to a month, publicizing the election, setting up a timetable, and making sure that all candidates are on the same page at all times. Proponents of the "loosely organized" solution argue that all the candidates are already known, and that no additional controls are needed, adding that Flagg should set up a bot in AWVote soon and accept candidates by E-Mail.

I vehemently support the "strongly organized" method of elections. I have posted in the AW forums how such an election could be held, and will repeat it here first, and then provide a story supporting this reasoning. First the original suggestion:

First, a timeline is decided upon that lists the dates for important events in the election process. This timeline includes the registration date, the election day, and so on.
Second, the election is advertised, and a deadline for registration is set. Candidates must submit their names before the registration deadline to be included on the ballot. This step is necessary to determine who is actually running.
Third, the candidates submit their official statements, which are posted in some public place so that everyone knows what each candidate stands for.
Fourth, debates are held. The debates must be well-organized, planned in advance, and there must be a consensus on who will be involved in the debates.
Fifth, the election day arrives, and everyone votes.
Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, the voting totals for each candidate are fully disclosed so that the process is transparent.
What I didn't state in the newsgroup post, however, is why I believe that such a system is necessary. I do not believe that excessive controls are needed; just some rules to maintain order and slow down the process.

A few years back, I watched a student government election take place as the organization's current public relations officer. The student government organization's constitution specified quite a few procedures about how the election would be conducted, and left room open for a committee to set any rules that were missing from the constitution. Several members of the current administration were running either for reelection or for promotion. As a result, the election was overseen by two members of the government who were not running for any positions, thus making up the committee referenced in the bylaws.

The committee decided upon several additional rules for that year's campaigning. Among them were the following:
Nobody was to hang posters or signs in the building where the voting would take place, or distribute stickers or paraphernalia within a certain distance of the building
The vote totals would not be disclosed to the public; only the names of the winners would be disclosed
Removing or destroying other candidates' literature would result in disqualification
Nobody was to "campaign" more than two weeks before the election.
Four weeks out from election day, I heavily advertised the election, and encouraged a number of candidates to sign up. But the "campaign" itself began immediately, and the word "campaign" wasn't well-defined. Did "campaigning" mean sending E-Mails to people? What about posting signs, or organizing people together? Was talking about running defined as "campaigning?" Since nobody knew, the rule was blatantly disregarded. Once one person broke the embargo, then the others were left with a moral dilemma: should they follow everyone else, or should they maintain what they thought was their own definition of "campaigning?" Those who decided to be conservative were left at an initial disadvantage.

Later, the literature of some candidates began to advance on the prohibited building, but again: was covertly handing out stickers to people at lunch considered "campaigning?"

However, these incidents stayed underneath the surface until the day after the election, when the results were to be announced. As public relations officer, I was called downstairs at 9:30am and informed of who had won. All of the incumbent officers had won the election, with one exception. My job was to go upstairs to the main lobby and create a large banner congratulating the winners. I did so, and posted the banner around 10:00, then left to do something else. I returned to the building around 11:00 and was immediately pulled aside by one of the losing candidates, who was very

distraught. Apparently, she hadn't even known that she had lost until she read the banner in the lobby congratulating her opponent. Nearby, a room of 15 people demanded that I do something about the situation.

Not sure what could be done, I nonetheless decided to investigate what had happened to cause so much distress to everyone. I asked the leader of the elections committee who had been notified of the results. I was told that they had pulled aside the victor in this particular race, as well as two others, and had informed them that they had won prior to the banner being posted. Of course, these people were friends of the committee members and were also all incumbents. The outsiders were not notified in this manner and didn't find out until the banner had been hung in the lobby.

Angry and suspicious, I demanded to see the vote totals to confirm that the election had been conducted properly. The committee leaders refused to disclose the totals to me or to any of the other 15 or so people who were protesting in the other room. I walked out and went home, debating whether to even return to the organization.

The end result was, of course, that the same people more or less were sworn in as officers the following year. While that would not have been bad normally, people did not trust the results to be fair and honest. As a result, they lost faith in the organization and its ability to represent them, and what was already generally regarded as a clique now became even more so, enough so that qualified people disdained the organization. After all, who would want to risk their reputation running next year when something like that might happen again? Furthermore, would anyone want to even represent an organization that had so much lost prestige through this botched election and was headed towards irrelevance?

AWTeen shares many similarities to this student government organization. There is currently a clique of "insiders" who want to gain control of the world. Of course they would support a loosely organized election system, because it benefits them greatly. Fewer others would know about the election, so they are less likely to be opposed. Their friends will make up a greater percentage of the constituency, ensuring their victory. But those who don't participate in the election or don't know about it would continue to see AWTeen as a laughingstock that is run by a small clique of inept people, regardless of the qualifications of those elected.

Imagine if, as some suggest, registrations are simply sent by E-Mail. Strike Rapier is tied for the lead with Jaguar Hahn. But an E-Mail comes in at the very last minute, adding a new person to the ballot and drawing a vote from Strike, throwing the election. Do you think that Jaguar is going to sit back and relax after losing by one vote in such circumstances? Instead, every member of his party could decide to boycott AWTeen, claiming they are the real Governors, leading to months of more power struggles and bickering. It's happened in the real world countless times. And as I said before, such a botched election will be the "end of the world," because that will be three strikes (after JerMe and Tony M/digigurl), and AW certainly won't want to try citizen-based leadership again.

I say that we need to give as many people as possible the chance to run and be elected. We need to have organized debates scheduled well in advance. We need to set a registration deadline for candidates to get their names on the ballot. We need to publish statements and platforms in one place so that people can get unbiased information. Most importantly, we need to let people know the vote is being held and publish the results openly and honestly. We need to remove the impression that AWTeen is a clique of teenagers who bicker amongst themselves and open up this process to everyone in the community who wants to participate - both within AWTeen and outside, in the greater AW universe. Rushing a poorly organized vote does not accomplish these objectives.

The student government organization was lucky in that it was still respected as a useful organization to everyone at the college even after the election. AWTeen does not have that luxury, and I hope that the community gets this right, because we only have one chance.

Posted by Brant in Procedures at 11:51

I agree that organized elections are important, although I guess we must have different ideas of "organized". For me, the current system is organized enough. It is clear who the candidates are, and what their platforms are. All we need now is the actual vote in AWVote, which, in my opinion, should be open for no longer than a week.
Anonymous on Oct 26 2007, 20:17