

Meretz the winner... at Queens College, TA University

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Meretz may not win more than a few seats in the March 28 elections, but at Queens College last week the social democratic party's campaign to gain new first-time voters had an entire room of American Jewish college students giggling.

The mailer, which asks, "Are you ready for your first time?" comes attached with a condom.

That a Meretz ad tickled a handful of students at the Flushing, Queens, campus won't help make Yossi Beilin prime minister. But it might do wonders for him in the mock elections taking place in dozens of American universities in the weeks leading up the vote.

Sitting around their frat-like Hillel House headquarters - complete with empty pizza boxes and stained couches - the students listened to a presentation on the various political parties and posed questions like, "Why was Kadima established?" That was all in preparation for the moment when they would click onto a Web site, www.Israelvotes.com, and make their choice among 31 parties, from Alexander Radko's Leeder Party to Boaz Wachtel's Green Leaf Party (with its demand for marijuana legalization, a particularly popular choice among students).

The idea behind the Web site comes from Upstart Activist, a Jerusalem-based firm focused on developing materials and programs for Israel advocacy. Founded by two Americans who made aliya in the early nineties, the mock election has been one of their most successful programs.

IsraelVotes was launched for the first time during the 2003 elections and 16,000 American college students voted on-line. Interestingly, the results almost mirrored the real election outcome, with the students giving 50 seats to Likud and 16 to Labor. The Green Leaf Party won six seats - more than Meretz, which only gained four. The results occurred despite the fact that at a number of universities pro-Arab and Palestinian students actively got involved, voting for Arab parties and at least at one campus, Boston University, managed to win a majority.

Michael Eglash, co-founder of Upstart Activist, said that over a hundred campuses had already signed on to participate in the upcoming on-line vote and he predicts that 50,000 students will take part. Polls close 24 hours before the Israeli elections, and the overall results will be announced at a press conference in Jerusalem on March 28.

"This is a chance to leverage the Israeli elections," Eglash said, "to use them as a way of showing off Israel's democracy."

Eglash and other college activists believe that the mock elections present an opportunity to engage not only those students already involved in pro-Israel activities but also those who will be interested in the political implications of the vote for the Middle East and American foreign policy. Through the voting, Eglash said, these students will be exposed to the vibrancy of Israel's democracy.

"There is real power in being able to vote, in letting your voice be heard, something almost therapeutic," said Victor Shikhman, 23, chief of staff of the Campus Organization for Israel at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Shikhman said his group had considered the possibility that pro-Palestinian students could, if they wanted, outnumber the votes for Jewish parties, and said, "it's not necessarily a bad thing." He added that "the important thing is that people are involved, the process and the dialogue it will spark are much more important than the outcome."

Most pro-Israel advocacy on campus has tended to move away from the political in the years since the start of the second intifada. Preferring to stick to activities that are less potentially polarizing, college activists have focused on the culture of Israel as opposed to its politics.

The mock elections, however, take Israel's raucous political scene head-on, without trying to anesthetize or soften the bitter divisions between Right and Left.

At Queens College, students received a pamphlet that placed all the parties and their prime ministerial candidates along an ideological line, with the United Arab List to the far left and the National Union/National Religious Party on the far right.

Dorit Ziv, 19, a freshman at Queens College and president of the Israel Club, who was in the middle of her midterm exams and not getting much sleep, said that the mock election was an important addition to her club's activities. More than just watching Israeli films or eating felafel, voting forces students to understand the complex tensions in Israeli society.

"Many students are just generally Zionist but don't really know why," Ziv said. "This actually forces them to look at Israel fully and then make a choice."



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