

Pro-Israel group to hold mock elections By Jessica Musikar

Boston University students will get the opportunity to cast ballots in a mock Israeli election before Israeli citizens go to the polls Jan. 28, according to BU Students for Israel Officials.

Students can vote online or at tables in the George Sherman Union Link Monday and Tuesday or online anytime before Jan. 28, according to BUSI vice president Manny Benhamou. BU is one of 50 colleges nationwide and in Canada to participate in the mock elections.

The nationwide initiative hopes to “raise awareness about Israel” and its democratic government, Benhamou said.

“We want to bring Israeli democracy to life here on campus,” he said. “It’s an education initiative. We want to raise awareness about the real issues.”

Though students’ votes will not affect the real Israeli elections, votes will be tallied nationally, regionally and for each college, BUSI officials said. All students, faculty and staff can vote in the mock election, regardless of religion or nationality, Benhamou said.

Of the 50 participating colleges, nearly 30 are in New England, including Brandeis University, Boston College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Massachusetts. Students from New England colleges can vote at www.israelvotes.com/newengland.

“It’s also kind of a show of solidarity because of the number of colleges that are participating,” Benhamou said.

Benhamou said he hopes to reach “thousands of kids” at BU with the elections.

The elections will take place in Israel next week, after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called elections in November when his leading coalition government collapsed.

The Israel Votes website has biographies of politicians, descriptions of each party and background guides to issues ranging from the peace process to social welfare, Benhamou said.

BUSI president Jackie Belkin said the elections will be a good exercise for college students in America because it can educate them about Israel’s system of government.

“It’s a different system from ours,” Belkin said.

If students fail to gain a complete understanding of coalition politics and proportional representation, at least they will understand that Israel has a parliamentary system, she said.

Benhamou said he began thinking about bringing the mock elections to campus in early December. He began planning the event on campus during a trip to Israel over winter break, he said.

The “ultimate goal” of the mock elections is to “bring Israeli democracy to campus” and “bring these issues to life,” Benhamou said, adding that in Israel, terrorism and suicide bombers are the reality.

“In Israel, they face Sept. 11 equivalents on a daily basis,” he said.