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Harvard University poll claims youth vote to have major role in presidential election

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NEW BRUNSWICK — The youth vote is poised to play its most prominent role yet in a presidential election, according to a poll by Harvard University's Institute of Politics.

And this week, a nonpartisan "RU Voting Coalition" aims to tap even further into that unprecedented interest by holding several events tied to the presidential campaign.

"In this election, much more than in other elections, the candidates have actually been going to colleges and talking about issues that matter to young people, and in return young people are engaged and we're showing up and we're voting," said Sarah Clader, a Rutgers senior and NJPIRG's College Avenue Campus coordinator. "Young people have a sense that they could impact the election."

"Vote 2008 Week" officially kicks off at 11 a.m. today at Brower Commons Dining Hall on College Avenue with a registration drive where voter information also will be distributed. Voting-related games and activities continue until 3 p.m.

The student-led effort — part of the Eagleton Institute of Politics' Youth Political Participation Program that is run in partnership with the Rutgers University Office of Student Affairs and student organizations — seeks to build on the momentum gained early in the election season, Clader said.

"Young people during the lead-up to the primaries did a really good job of engaging candidates in our issues," Clader, a political science major, said.

Hot issues on campus

Clader and Martha Guarnieri, the coordinator for the RU Voting Project, said that issues of special interest to young voters are the cost of higher education, the war in Iraq, the global warming debate and energy policy. But more perennial topics such as jobs, the economy and health care and also on youths' radar screens, they said.

"Hot issues . . . that matter to our generation are being brought to the table and are being spoken about in a way we can kind of understand them. That makes a lot of people feel as though they're part of the political process and not removed from it," said Guarnieri, a sophomore pursuing a double major in political science and gender studies. "It's kind of a fresh election."

According to the the latest Politics and Public Service poll by Harvard University's Institute of Politics, 61 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds said they will "definitely be voting" this November, 15 percent more than cast ballots in the 2004 general election.

Should that prognostication hold, the percentage of 18- to 24-year-old voters this year would eclipse the record 52 percent that showed up to the polls in 1972, the first year 18-year-olds had voting rights.

The authors of the Harvard survey noted that, according to the poll, 35 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds consider themselves politically engaged or active.

"We are the Facebook generation and YouTube generation and we have new ways of getting information, we're following the election," Clader said. "Young people are excited to get their voices heard, they're excited that there is buzz around the youth vote."

And a somewhat longer election cycle this year leaves time for people to cull through issue platforms and to come up with questions that are not lost on the candidates, Guarneri said.

"There is a sense that the candidates are paying attention," she said. "Students from across the political spectrum are involved. It's really exciting to have that much enthusiasm."

Other "Vote 2008 Week" events in New Brunswick include:

A "How to Run a Voter Registration Drive" workshop, on Thursday from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., on the 4th floor of the Rutgers Student Center on College Avenue

A conference on service and civic engagement sponsored by the state Commission on Higher Education, the Governor's Office of Volunteerism and Rutgers University, on Friday, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Cook Campus Center at Biel Road

A "Vote Slam," or political open-mic, Monday, April 7, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the Lion Cafe in the Rutgers Student Center basement

A screening of "Mr. Schneider Goes to Washington," on Monday, April 7, at 7:30 p.m. at Traves Hall in the Douglass Campus Center, 100 George St.

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