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Alexander Yankov looks on as Edison Mayor Jun Choi answers his question during the open-ended portion of yesterday's event, RU Voting 2008? hosted by the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Prime time for politics

Group hosts representatives of seven different presidential candidates

By: Cait Callahan / Staff Writer

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With the primaries just one week away, students got up close and personal with the campaigns of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, Rudy Giuliani, John Edwards and Mike Huckabee last night at RU Voting 2008?

The student-run organization RU Voting? hosted representatives from the top presidential campaigns of 2008 for a question-and-answer session about the nominees' stances on the issues young people care about most.

Moderators kicked off the evening by giving each representative two minutes to answer four prepared questions on the topics of funding for higher education, national poverty, global warming and the Iraq War.

"They are questions that [the organizers] developed based on what research has shown are some of the issues that are most important to young people across the country," said Randi Chmielewski, an administrative assistant for the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Representatives' answers to the questions varied greatly, not only along party lines, but within the parties as well.

On the topic of the Iraq War, Republican representatives Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani made it clear that if elected to the presidency, their candidates plan to see the war through to its end. Neither Romney nor Guiliani has plans for immediate withdrawal. Murray Sabrin, representative for Romney and Guiliani's fellow Republican Ron Paul, said his candidate has a very different take on the issue.

"Ron Paul says we won," Sabrin said. "Saddam Hussein is gone. A democratically elected government is in place. Now it's up to the Iraqi people."

Rutgers College sophomore Martha Guarnieri, and Rutgers College juniors Avi Smolen and Joseph

Shure organized the event in Traves Hall of the Douglass Campus Center with the help of many student organization sponsors. The three belong to RU Voting? - branch of the Youth Political Participation Program at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus.

The main focus of RU Voting? is to register student voters, educate them on the issues and the candidates, and encourage them to get out to the polls and vote.

Guarnieri, Smolen and Shure said they decided to hold the event because they wanted to get students interested in politics.

"We thought maybe we could get representatives from the campaigns because it was doable, but also interesting," Guarnieri said.

Smolen said another aim of the project was to educate students about each campaign and increase voter turn out.

"We were trying to think of ways to increase youth voter participation, especially here at Rutgers," he said. "This was our culminating event so that we could show the students at Rutgers what the candidates stand for and really ask them to come out to speak to youth and youth concerns."

Smolen and Shure both agreed if the youth comes out to vote in large numbers, they could completely change the results of the election. For that reason, they felt it was important the youth be educated on the candidates' stances.

"The elections and caucus that have happened thus far this campaign season have shown that the youth are really serious about getting their voice heard, and we want to build on that momentum and make sure that our fellow students can make an informed decision next Tuesday," Shure said.

Chmielewski said since the event was aimed toward young voters and the issues they care about, she hoped mostly students would turn out for the event.

"All of our outreach has been on campus and really trying to push for a large student turn out," she said. "I hope that it will be overwhelmingly students and that there will be a large turn out. Of course, we have to see what actually happens."

What actually happened was that students, along with some adults, filled nearly every seat in Traves Hall, suggesting there are at least some students on campus interested in the campaign issues at hand.

Students came to the event for a number of reasons. RU Democrats member Charles Wasserman, a Rutgers College sophomore, said he came to get straight answers from the candidates, but felt unsure of whether he would actually get what he was looking for.

RU Dems President Brett Tinder, a Livingston College junior, said the event most likely gave the students their best chance to get straight answers to their questions.

"We're not going to be able to meet with Clinton or Obama themselves," he said. "And if they try to dodge around [the questions], then everybody can see they were trying to dodge the questions."

Carmen Rao, a School of Arts and Sciences sophomore, said although he is an Obama supporter, he wanted to hear from all of the representatives.

"I want to hear what everyone has to say," he said. "I think it's important for people to get involved. I told a couple of my friends about it, and we're all here to give everyone a chance to say what they have to say."

At the audience question-and-answer portion of the event, students formed a line in front of the microphone that stretched all the way to the back of the hall. They asked questions about funding for higher education, the economy and tax plans.

A question on the candidates' stances on Blackwater, the private military company employed by the United States to aid in Iraq, prompted a heated debate among the campaign representatives, especially between representatives for Giuliani and Paul.

Chmielewski said one of the reasons RU Voting in 2008? provided students with such a great opportunity is because it gave them a forum to tell the candidates what issues are important to them and influence the country's political situation.

"We hope that any of the representatives coming would go back and talk with some of the staff members on the campaign and say, 'Hey listen, these are the questions I got asked. This is what seems to be important to the students that I spoke with,'" she said.

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