

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

U. coalition collaborates for '08 votes

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During the New Jersey primaries, the political frenzy on campus reached a high point and the RU Voting Coalition want to make sure students continue to actively participate.

The coalition, consisting of diverse University student groups like New Jersey Public Interest Research Group Student Chapters, the Eagleton Institute of Politics' RU Voting and student government associations, is kicking off their Vote 2008 Week, scheduled for April 1 through 7, with events to motivate University students to vote in November's presidential election.

NJPIRG board chair Sarah Clader, a Rutgers College senior, said the coalition is made up of many different student groups ranging from greek organizations to student government councils because they are all thinking about November's election.

Clader said although they are doing voter registration, that is not the focus of Vote 2008 Week.

"It's this idea of training all of us to get ready for the fall election and mobilizing our peers," she said. "The buzz is still [present] on campus. The elections are on lots of students' minds no matter what their political ideologies because this is something that's going to affect all of our lives in different ways."

Clader said college students are following the election differently than most.

"We are the Facebook Generation, watching debates on YouTube," she said. "I think young people are still engaged in the election even though Super Tuesday is behind us."

NJPIRG media coordinator Mohit Bhake, a School of Arts and Sciences first-year student, said the coalition was created the week before Spring Break. They decided to hold different events this week to raise political awareness on college campuses, he said.

"It's important for students to register to vote because we are the future of America," Bhake said. "College students should vote because we can't just take things lying down. We have to be proactive. If you're complaining [about the way things are now], you should do something about it and vote for a candidate who can lead the nation."

Bhake said the campaign goal of NJPIRG's New Voters Project is to register as many college students as possible and make sure they actually vote.

Bhake said because there is such a big gap between the primaries and November's election they wanted to create another reminder so that students would not forget.

"Student voting has been increasing since Super Tuesday, and we just wanted to keep up the momentum," Bhake said. "We hear from a lot of people that they aren't sure how to register to vote so if they have any questions about it we're here to help them."

Clader said one of the reasons the coalition formed was to call on University President Richard L. McCormick to sign on to the College and University Presidents Commitment to Civic Engagement, which would mean the University supports voter registration and civic engagement on campus by providing information about voter registration at New Student Orientation and in the residence halls.

Bhake said they have been discussing the possibility of having voter registration packets given to incoming first-year students.

"Hopefully that will help us get more registered voters," he said. "Ideally, it would be great if every student was registered."

Eagleton Institute of Politics' RU Voting Project coordinator Martha Guarnieri, a Rutgers College sophomore, said the project is part of the Youth Political Participation Program, which works to educate students and coordinate events on campus.

Guarnieri said the coalition wants students to know it is important for them to keep up with the news and stay informed with what is going on in politics.

Vote 2008 Week began last Friday when the New Brunswick Chapter of the Roosevelt Institution, a student-run think tank at the University, hosted Newark Mayor Cory Booker, who gave a motivational speech about youth leadership and being politically active.

Bhake said the coalition will have different events like today's voter registration where members will be tabling at Brower Commons on the College Avenue campus. The group will be registering peers to vote, handing out student-aimed voter information and holding voting-related games and activities.

A "How to Run a Voter Registration Drive" workshop will take place Thursday on the fourth floor of the Rutgers Student Center on the College Avenue campus from 7 to 9 p.m. It is geared toward student group officers, government representatives, resident hall advisers and student leaders, according to an NJPIRG press release.

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