

Eagleton seminar addresses voters in the Asian and Latino communities

November 19, 2014

Of the 1.7 million New Jersey voters who participated in the 2014 midterm election, Asian American and Latino voters had a larger impact on the results than most people realize, Sayu Bhojwani said.

Bhojwani, a visiting scholar at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, brought Glenn Magpantay and Julissa Gutierrez to Rutgers to address their respective ethnic communities with a panel discussion at the event, "Asian and Latino Vote in the 2014 Election" yesterday.

Bhojwani brought the two panelists to Eagleton primarily to speak to her class, "Topics in American Politics: Politics and the New Majority."

Many people are unaware of the impact Asian Americans and Latinos can have on national and local elections. Bhojwani hoped her students would hear the "untold stories" of these two ethnic groups that are not heard often in mainstream media.

"[The class has] been talking a lot about how the demographics are changing and how democracy is being affected by [it]," Bhojwani said. "For me, it's about the students and the general audience understanding the impact these communities are having on the political process."

Gutierrez, director of National Programs and Community Relations and Northeast director of Civic Engagement at the NALEO Educational Fund, discussed the need to engage the Latino community during election season.

The primary reason Latinos are underrepresented in Congress is due to "The Great Unengaged." This portion of the Latino population consists of individuals who are eligible to vote but never turn out on Election Day.

The existence of "The Great Unengaged" can be attributed to various barriers to participation in civic activity, such as the naturalization process for immigrants, which can last more than six months.

The need for administrative relief from fraudulent scams makes a direct path to citizenship difficult to achieve. This facilitates the creation of an unequal American society.

"We would like to see [a direct path] because if there is no path to citizenship, that creates a second-class citizenry," Gutierrez said. "You can't really be a democratic state [with] a second-class citizenry."

Magpantay, director of the Democracy Program at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, presented the legal element of minority voters by analyzing the violation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, but Magpantay said Asian Americans in particular have been overlooked both by the political process and by most candidates.

On a grand scale, the elected officials within the United States have failed to represent the diversity of contemporary American society.

"I think that we need a greater appreciation for the need for more diversity in the electorate and in institutions of government," he said. "America has become much more diverse in the last 40 years ... politics has not necessarily kept up."

In addition to presenting his statistical findings on Asian American voting patterns, Magpantay spoke about different obstacles to voters from a legal perspective.

He cited a polling location in Norwood, New Jersey, where a considerable number of Korean voters were not provided an interpreter upon request. This scenario was an overt violation of the VRA's Language Assistance Provision, Section 203.

"I enforce the Constitution of the United States and the Voting Rights Act in order to guarantee that the right to vote fully applies to all American citizens," Magpantay said. "I don't work in the political arena. I sue the political arena."

Bhojwani then opened up the floor to her "Topics in American Politics" students to ask questions concerning the Asian American and Latino voting patterns.

"We've talked about politics more generally — who are the people that turn out at the polls and the reasons for [why] they turn out?" Bhojwani said. "It's about understanding both the challenges and the opportunities."

Even though Asian Americans and Latinos are separate in terms of race, both ethnicities share the same struggles, live in similar environments and need to be further assimilated in political practice.

"Many of our challenges are the same, and we are [living] together in many communities," Gutierrez said. "I think that we would love to see more examination of how we can better alleviate the issues of [voters]."