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Panelists reflect on low college voter turnout

By Spencer Kent / Contributing Writer | Posted: Thursday, November 10, 2011 12:00 am

Panelists took the microphone at Eagleton Institute of Politics' "Morning After" conference yesterday to express their concern over the low voter turnout, especially among college youth during this year's state elections.

Speakers — Assemblywoman Joan Quigley, D-32, Associated Press political reporter for the New Jersey Statehouse Bureau Angela Delli Santi, political columnist for Bergen County's The Record Charles Stile and former chair of the New Jersey Republican State Committee Tom Wilson — voiced their concerns over absentee college votes.

"The turnout [in the state elections] was very low," Wilson said. "In these low-turnout elections, it's the true activist who shows up, the truly engaged voter that brings home elections on a district level."

Democrats held on to the 2nd and 38th districts in the south part of the state, which saw highly competitive races this election, Delli Santi said.

"Essentially the message of the day is that nothing is really going to change in the Legislature, [and] in terms of representation, nothing will be much different," Delli Santi said.

Some University students said the results could have been different if more young voters submitted a ballot.

"Should college students care about this election? I helped register students all over campus, [but] no one in my dorm or even anyone I know voted except for me," said Connor Montferrat, a School of Arts and Sciences junior.

Wilson said he would not sympathize with college students protesting the results because they generally do not take the initiative to vote.

"The way campaigns work is we talk to people we think are listening. The way we know whether you're listening is by voting," he said. "You can continue to not participate and thumb your noses at the process and go to Wall Street and occupy that, but it's at your own peril."

Wilson said students who want greater state support for education and tuition could only blame themselves if they choose to do nothing.

"You have a huge voting block and you choose not to be a part of it," he said.

But Delli Santi said she does not think it is the appropriate time for students and younger citizens to be concerned with local level issues.

"I think that students are in fact passionate. ... They are engaged politically, [but] are they engaged at the local level?" she said. "Students don't know where their legislative district is because it doesn't matter to them. The issues their parents are engaged in are not the same issues they care about."

Montferrat, president of the Rutgers College Republicans, said instead of chastising the youth for their low turnout, the panelists should have focused on encouraging them to vote.

“[The panelists] didn’t address how we can get students engaged, how we can get them out to vote for things other than the presidential election and how they can make these elections more attractive to us,” he said.

Some students said they are genuinely interested in politics on the local level, but fear their vote is useless and unworthy.

“I am interested — I just don’t think my vote really matters,” said Matt Dionisio, a School of Environmental and Biological Sciences junior. “I don’t think voting for some guy I know nothing about and who I’m never going to meet will make any difference.”

Dionisio said politicians should target college-aged voters because many students do not adequately understand candidates’ political views and therefore do not see why their vote should count.

“Students should be better informed, whether [by] the media, school — any area of education with minimal bias,” said Sean McGowen, School of Arts and Sciences senior. “But politicians should definitely try harder to get students involved.”

Wilson said at the end of the day it is up to people to execute their rights as American citizens, because no amount of arguing can make a significant difference.

“This is your democracy. This was the genius of the founding fathers. They put the people in charge to do with it what you will,” he said. “You can either figure it out and make it work or not.”