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Issues, Fears and Hopes Push Lamorinda Voters to the Polls

By Jennifer Wake

With the political campaigns heating up and Super Tuesday looming, Lamorinda residents rallied together to discuss the issues, spread the word and get out the vote.

More than 200 people (ranging in age from 16 to 90) attended the Lamorinda Democratic Club's election discussion and straw poll on Jan. 25 at the Orinda Community Church.

"It was the biggest meeting we've had since 2004," said Gerri Field, the club's vice-president.

Representatives for each of the major Democratic presidential candidates outlined their candidate's positions, and answered questions from the audience. The evening finished with a straw poll, where attendees (including the few high school students who came) voted for the "winning" candidate. Barack Obama took first, Edwards placed second, and Hillary Clinton landed third.

"The energy in the room was so high. There were a lot of young people there, and supporters waved bumper stickers and wore t-shirts with the candidates names on them," Field said. "The overwhelming issues on people's minds were healthcare, the war in Iraq and the environment."

Lafayette resident Steve Richard, who is the president of Sustainable Lafayette, shares the concern about these key national issues – issues he believes the White House can influence.

"I'm more interested in areas where the president and his team can make a dramatic difference through legislation and policy," he said. "The War is very pressing since we're losing lives every week and spending a phenomenal amount of money (over \$8 billion per month) that is desperately needed in other areas."

Not surprisingly, Richard believes that climate change should be one of the top issues being discussed in the campaign.

"The federal government needs to lead with bold action similar to what the State of California has done (with AB32)," he said. "We need to think beyond the candidates themselves to consider the type of team that a candidate would likely assemble."

Like many Americans, Richard says he badly wants to feel that the country is going in the right direction and that we will truly leave a better world for our kids. "I became highly involved in the 2004 election due to extreme concern over continuing with the current administration," he said. "This time, I hope to be pulled in by excitement versus concern."

For others, like Saint Mary's history student Scott Cullinane, the war on terror is of the utmost importance in the coming election.

"I think that fighting radical Islam is the great war of our generation," he said. "It is all of militant Islam against the West and we have no choice but to win that fight."

He hopes the new president will "make sure to secure the gains made by the surge in Iraq," so there is no backsliding.

Saint Mary's student Michael Antonopoulous, who oversees all of the college Republican clubs in the Bay Area, believes this next election is important because of the great uncertainty in the world.

"The next President needs to be able to manage foreign policy," he



Students hand out campaign information and voter registration cards at Saint Mary's College

Photo Jennifer Wake

said. "The fate of the war on terror, the war in Iraq and the potential for a nuclear Iran and North Korea all falls in the lap of our next president."

Overall, more people are realizing the importance of being informed and expressing their views in the voting booth on election day.

Saint Mary's students Michelle Delgado, Lorena Gutierrez and Emily Rodas spent last week sitting in a rain-soaked, wind-chilled causeway at the college handing out information about the candidates to inform students, and to get more young people registered to vote.

"This election is huge because [President] Bush is finally going to be out of office and there are two Democrats running who are not the norm," Delgado said. "A lot of college students don't think their voice will be heard, but our vote does count. If we don't care about it, who is going to?"

Saint Mary's sociology professor Cynthia Ganote, Ph.D., says many young people feel taken seriously this time. "The candidates are trying to reach out to young voters and inspire them to take action to transform society."

"If young voters educate themselves on the issues in this election and closely examine the front runners' policies, they can make their own judgments about what kind of America they would like to see in the future," she said. "All we have to do is teach them the critical thinking tools necessary to evaluate the candidates and the issues, and have a dialogue with them about what they think is important in the world."