Rutgers University Senate
Student Affairs Committee
Response to S-1616: Absentee Ballots in Special Student Organization Funding Referenda
February 2017

The Student Affairs Committee was issued the following charge by the Senate Executive Committee:

S-1616, Absentee Ballots in Special Student Organization Funding Referenda: Investigate changing University Policy 10.3.3 on Funding for Special Student Organizations to allow for absentee ballots in referenda conducted based on that policy. Recommend revisions, as needed. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by April 3, 2017.

Background

During the Fall Semester of 2016, NJPIRG held a referendum to renew its status as a Special Student Organization. As per University Policy 10.3.3, Section XII, paper or electronic methods of voting can be used. When an organization chooses to run its referendum via a paper method, all voting must be conducted on campus. The current procedures allow for petitioning organizations that conduct referenda for the University College Community and/or graduate schools to conduct their paper balloting by mail, but if this is done all ballots must be sent and received by mail. Individual students do not have an opportunity to request a vote by mail ballot, nor do the rules currently allow the petitioning organization provide vote by mail ballots for students who are not on campus.
During the fall semester, many units, particularly smaller units, did not have a sufficient number of students vote in the referenda. Some students, particularly online students, inquired with their student representatives for an opportunity to vote via an absentee ballot.

Discussion

Voting is an integral part of our society. It is important that students have a say in special student organization funding. With the rise of exclusively online students in this university, it is important that voting access is given to online students. As the current regulations allow for use of paper ballots, we believe it is important to include provisions that allow all students eligible to vote in the referendum to request a vote by mail ballot.

This can be accomplished by amending university policy 10.3.3 to allow for any student to request a vote by mail ballot. This amendment should allow all students interested in voting by mail to be able to vote by mail. In order to ensure a fair and open election the petitioning organization should be mandated to publicize the methods of requesting a vote by mail ballot. In addition, the Referendum Oversight Committee should continue to have oversight over the referendum and thus should be able to oversee how vote by mail is implemented in a particular referendum. The language enabling vote by mail should allow for students to request their ballot prior to the start of the referendum in order to allow for delays in transit; however, in order to ensure orderly elections, ballots should not be accepted after the conclusion of the referendum.

Below we recommend an amendment to the current policy that takes in regard the above concerns and closely mirrors the other provisions in Policy 10.3.3.

Whereas, the Senate considers it important to remove obstacles that prevent students from voting in special student organization funding referenda,

Be It Hereby Resolved, The University Senate Recommends that Rutgers Policy 10.3.3, Section XII.B be amended by appending a new section 6 to read as follows:

> *"All students eligible to vote in a referendum conducted via paper ballot may submit a request to vote by mail. Each petitioning organization shall provide and publicize a practical method of requesting a vote by mail ballot. The oversight committee shall ensure that each method is accessible to relevant eligible students. Requests to vote by mail will not be accepted later than two weeks prior to the start of a referendum. Mailed referendum voting packages shall contain the ballot, a ballot envelope, an explanation of the purpose and effects of the referendum items on the ballot (within the limits of restrictions outlined in Paragraph 4 above). The outside of each returned ballot envelope must be signed by the voter. All ballots must be postmarked no later than the last day of the referendum."*

Student Affairs Committee 2016-2017
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