

Hello and welcome to the 2015 Idaho Youth Legislature, sponsored by the YMCA. We are grateful to those who have contributed untold time or money for us to enjoy this two day experience. I ask that we make the most of it.

Almost 250 years ago, this country was founded on the belief that there should be “government by the people, for the people.” Colonists rebelled against being governed and taxed without having a voice in the process. Countless men and women have given their lives so that you and I could experience a democracy where we have the privilege of participating in the process of governing ourselves, our communities and our state. Throughout history, no nation has enjoyed the freedom, and democracy that we now enjoy.

Today, those hard-won privileges are being taken for granted. Over the past 40 years, the number of people voting in elections has steadily declined. Less than two out of three registered voters went to the polls last time a U.S. President was elected. (And more than one in four eligible Americans are not registered to vote!) In off years, when there is no election for president, approximately one half of voters turn out to vote for those people who will represent them at the state and national levels. And that number plummets by about 20 points among Americans aged 18 to 29. As we move from high school into adulthood, unless the trend is reversed, it is likely that only one in three of our peers will vote in a non-presidential election, and only two in five when the presidency of the U.S. is being decided.

Political scientists have many theories for why Americans appear to be taking the freedoms and rights we have for granted. Whatever the reason, political apathy – a lack of involvement in the government of the people, by the people – is not harmless. Eleanor Roosevelt stated that “passive sins, such as apathy and laziness” can have a more devastating effect in the long run than “aggressive sins, such as violence, cruelty, and greed.”

Our society faces many large problems; hunger, racism, sexism, violence, poverty, lack of education, financial crises, war...these are all issues that can only be resolved through will power and commitment; through a sufficiently large group of people who are willing to raise their voice and contribute their efforts toward fixing the problems society has created. Without committed, involved citizens, the problems we face in the state, the country and the world today, will grow, and expand. For the problems to be solved, each of us needs to be committed to becoming part of the solution. Klaira Tan stated “without the expression of real individuals and their concerns, government stops being a living entity of the people and becomes a mindless machine. What is left is a nation at a standstill and a society abandoned”.

So, as you enjoy the next two days away from schoolwork, and homework, and chores, I ask that you also learn about the political process, and develop skills and abilities that will help us, as we move into adulthood, to be contributing participants in the political process of “government by the people.” Have fun, but also make a commitment to doing your part to ensure that our great country continues to be a beacon of hope and bastion of self-government and stability.