Junior State of America
Pacific Northwest Fall State Convention
November 15, 2014
Doubletree Inn Hilton SeaTac
15 to 20 minutes (as prepared)

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to join you at the Junior State of America Fall Convention. I commend you for your strong interest in government. I suspect that many of our future leaders within the Pacific Northwest and possibly from the nation are in this room.

I would also like to pay a special tribute to all of your parents who have no doubt worked tirelessly behind the scenes on your behalf and offered their support and encouragement along the way. The participation, dedication and commitment of parents is immensely important.

I was asked to say a few words about my own journey in politics but I do not wish to dwell on that. I have held one elected office or another since 1976 when I made my first foray into local politics. That of course was a long time before any of you were born, and like all of you I was also active in student government as I was growing up.

The short story is that back then I looked around me and didn't like everything I saw. I had some very strong opinions about the way things should be, and was not afraid to share those opinions with others. People started encouraging me to run for office and, perhaps because I didn't know any better back then, I took them up on it. The rest has been quite a ride.

I like that your organization, Junior State of America, is about addressing apathy in politics because that is an extremely important and timely issue.

As you know we just had an election. Even though called a "mid-term" election there were many important issues on the ballot across the nation and especially here in Washington state.

We had two opposing and highly debated initiatives concerning gun control. We had an initiative about reducing class size in our schools, an issue that I'm sure strikes a chord with many of you. We had several important races that would determine whether Republicans or Democrats would control our state's Legislature. We had several hotly contested races for Congress. Several judgeships were on the line too, from our state Supreme Court down to many on the local level.

Because of all of this, our Secretary of State, who is our top elections official, had predicted a turnout of 62 percent, which she felt was a conservative but realistic number. The actual turnout was closer to 53 percent. Think about that for a moment. Just a little over half of the eligible voters were able to set the course for everyone else, including youth under-18 who were not eligible to vote but who will be impacted by many of the decisions that came out of this election for many years.

And we in the state of Washington were not alone. The New York Times in an opinion piece this week noted that the Nov. 5 election yielded the worst turnout in 72 years, back when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was in the middle of his third term in office.

Conventional political wisdom says the Democrats suffer more from low voter turnout than Republicans.

The New York Times took note of this, saying:

"The abysmally low turnout in last week's midterm elections — the lowest in more than seven decades — was bad for Democrats, but it was even worse for democracy. In 43 states, less than half the eligible population bothered to vote, and no state broke 60 percent."

The Times went on to quote all kinds of stats from the election, then concluded:

"Showing up at the polls is the best way to counter the oversized influence of wealthy special interests, who dominate politics as never before. But to encourage participation, politicians need to stop suppressing the vote, make the process of voting as easy as possible, and run campaigns that stand for something."

I trust part of your deliberations today will be to discuss ways that youth can strengthen their numbers at the polls. There have been many elections in the past – especially during the height of political activism by youth back when I was your age in the 1960s – when the vote by the younger generation made a tremendous difference. Eighteen-year olds won the right to vote in 1972. Perhaps it was the newness and novelty of it all, or the fact it was a presidential year and the Vietnam War was still in play brought the youth vote out in droves that year, perhaps more so than any election since.

Since that time the turnout of 18-year-old voters has roughly followed that of older voters. U.S. Census records tell us that the youth vote was at an all-time low in 1996 but then started to make an upswing in 2004, noted a big uptick in 2008 and was off a bit, but still fairly high, in the 2012 presidential year.

We know that youth who feel engaged with their community, those who volunteer and get involved in local civic matters are the ones who also tend to vote at a higher rate. Most of you here in the room today undoubtedly fall into that category and I thank you for that. I also challenge each and every one of you to engage your peers and to get them to understand that one simple act they can do – that is to cast a ballot – is one of the most important contributions they can make to this nation. I hope that each and every one of you votes as soon as you are eligible to do so and encourage all of your friends to do the same.

I do not know why voter apathy persists in our elections, especially since voting by mail is now a widely accepted practice and in many states you can register to vote online. Voting is more convenient than ever before. And, given that we are all subject to a constant barrage of information from a variety of electronic devices that are rarely more than a few feet away, you'd think we would all be better informed and ready to participate in the democratic process. But

apparently that is just not so – perhaps we are all just way too distracted by our busy lives to vote.

Let's look at what can help turn out the vote along with reasons why people don't vote.

The county with the highest percentage of voters in this last election was in fact, our least populated. Garfield County, located way off in the southeast corner of Washington, has less than 2,500 people, yet 1,232 of the eligible 1,541 voters, or a full 80 percent, voted. So what does tiny Garfield County show us about why people show up to vote?

We made a call over to Donna Deal, who as county auditor is in charge of Garfield County elections, to get her take on voter turnout there. Donna tells us that voter turnout is always high in Garfield County, typically among the top five counties statewide.

First, being such a small county it is easier to maintain voter address information. If a mail-in ballot is returned as undeliverable it can be quickly updated. Election staff know their voters so well that when someone new makes the address list they take note.

So maintaining accurate and current voter registration can help maximize participation.

However, in this particular election there was a levy for a small, rural hospital on the ballot. Having a hospital in a community that is far away from a major population center is crucial, often a matter of life and death. But unless the levy passed, the hospital would close. Thankfully, in Garfield County the hospital levy passed by a margin of 70 percent.

Also on the ballot were three hotly contested races that, in a county where it could be said that everybody knows everybody, pitting neighbor against neighbor. This included countywide races for commissioner, treasurer and sheriff. Despite being small, residents of the county were besieged by signs, fliers and mailers - to the point that, according to Donna Deal, the mid-term election felt to locals much more like that of a Presidential year election.

Clearly the voters in Garfield County felt heavily engaged in this election. Having issues that people cared about passionately – and worked hard on – helped to turn out the vote.

By the way, if you ever happen to drive through Pomeroy, the county seat of Garfield County, you will see one of the more beautiful and historic courthouse buildings of any that exist anywhere. One can only think that this courthouse stands as a symbol of enormous civic pride and encourages even greater participation in local electoral processes.

Conversely, our state's most populated county, King, which includes the cities of Seattle, Bellevue, Renton, Federal Way and the city where are now, Sea-Tac, posted one of the lower turnouts at just under 51 percent. That's out of a registered voter pool of one million, one hundred and eighty one thousand.

So what causes people not to vote?

A recent analysis of Census data by the Bipartisan Policy Center lists a few reasons people give for not voting, stating 8.6% were out of town, 18.9% were too busy, 12.7% did not like the candidates or campaign issues, and 15.7% reported not being interested. In my opinion none of those reasons for not voting are insurmountable. We just need to find reasons to more actively and continually engage our voters, especially in counties where turnout is historically low. Our democracy is really at stake here.

Now I would like to switch to the topic of democracy, which I am sure is very near and dear to all of you otherwise you would not be giving up a weekend to be here.

From my platform of being an office holder for nearly 40 years, so that I can speak with some knowledge to a theme used by our own YMCA Youth Legislature, that is that "Democracy Must Be Learned by Each Generation."

I am certain that all of us here are well aware that a democratic society can be as fragile or as solid as the strength, knowledge, and understanding of its citizens.

That's why experience is so critical. The lessons learned in understanding the *true* inner meaning of democracy are a direct result of becoming involved in the process. Some people become involved by voting, some are activists, and some run for office.

Some pay taxes and simply live according to their own moral and spiritual choices. All of these are active parts of the democratic process and reflect the will of the people in one way or another.

We can also draw valuable insight from strong leaders of the past, and learn from the experiences they had. As Governor of New York state (*prior to his presidency*), Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed the state legislature in 1931, saying:

"The cave man fought for existence unaided or even opposed by his fellow man, but today the humblest citizen of our State stands protected by all the power and strength of his government. Our government is not the master but the creature of the people. The duty of the state toward the citizens is the duty of the servant to its master. The people have created it; the people, by common consent, permit its continual existence."

The levels of democratic government that exist in this country are a reflection of the commitment the people have to freedom. The many checks and balances are safeguards that protect and enhance our way of life.

And these democratic rights are guaranteed to all without regard to social class, race, or religion. All who live under the umbrella of democracy are equally protected. They also share equal responsibility for its protection. This requires that the people keep not only an active interest, but also a solid understanding.

But what is the aim of a system that requires our citizens to be involved to such a great degree? The model of a free society that existed during Roosevelt's time does not necessarily exist today in the same form.

The great responsibility that comes with democracy is that it is a collective, dynamic system. Laws are made not for control, but to mold to the ideal and purpose of the moment. Thomas Jefferson once said, "The equal rights of man, and the happiness of every individual, are now acknowledged to be the only legitimate objects of government."

People, ideas, values and ways of living change with the changing times. The flexibility of democracy is the reason why it has remained the ideal governmental form since the time of the Romans.

Milton Friedman, the Nobel prize-winning economist, said: "Governments never learn. Only people learn." I agree, and since we are a government by the people and for the people it is up to us to learn, to teach and to live by the democratic principles to which we all hold dear.

Each and every generation retains the responsibility to clearly evaluate their ideals and values so that the state can be molded into one that is most suited to their generation and their times. A healthy democracy is an accurate reflection of the will of the people. It could even be compared to a river—fluid, swift, and perhaps rough in places. But with an overall course that is steady and purposeful.

Mistakes will be made along the way—that is certain. Those who founded this country understood with a clear conscience the imperfection of man.

It took Thomas Edison 2,004 attempts to successfully invent the light bulb. When asked by the media why he failed 2,004 times, he said, and I paraphrase, that he did not fail, because each attempt was a learning experience. So the key to success lies in acknowledging that change is inevitable and experience is necessary.

Each generation must determine how they use democracy not to put shackles on the freedom of their fellow human beings, but to respond to the ever-changing social, political and technological environment we live in.

A classic debate has been over the second amendment to the Constitution, the "right to bear arms." Would this amendment have been written the same way had there been grenade launchers and machine guns at the time of the Constitutional Convention? Did they know that someday people with ill-intent would walk into homes, offices, schools and university campuses with guns blazing? I don't know, but these types of shootings over the past 10 years have occurred not only nationally, but within the borders of Washington state!

I am not here to advocate for or against gun control. I am just pointing out that changing times generate pages of new debate over issues that reach to our very soul.

It's the freedom of discussion that is the backbone of democracy but it is also the spark of danger. Does a person have a constitutional right to teach bomb making, terrorist techniques or to yell "fire" in a crowded theater? Should there be tighter controls and restrictions on the amount of online gambling? Should corporations be able to use any medium available to market adult messages to children about things like smoking and alcohol?

The messages that influence each generation are under constant review and change. With that, each generation must consider the uniqueness of its changing environment in order to continue improving the lives and opportunities for generations to come. We must live day to day with freedom in our hearts, for it is your lives that will be the mirror for our democratic society tomorrow.

In this great and free country you have both the power and responsibility to form your own opinions and express yourself in a way that will make America a better place, not only for yourselves but for future generations.

To make a difference, you must get involved. What I have found in my time in the political world is that overall, the ones who stand on principle, those who act based on their own convictions over party preferences, are the ones who rise to the top.

Be yourself, care for others, set goals. Be a visionary like John F. Kennedy who challenged America to land a man on the moon within less than a decade when to most of us it seemed impossible. Perhaps as a nation we can set that same kind of goal to find a viable and practical form of energy that will free us of our dependence on foreign oil. Little is impossible it just takes a little time to accomplish it.

Fortunately for you there is a lot of time ahead to accomplish great and miraculous things. I, for one, am confident that the future is secure in the hands of young leaders like you. I only hope that I am around to witness your success.

Your voice counts. Your participation counts. I urge you to learn from others, keep your convictions, stand up for yourself and carry your head high. Get out the vote. Engage others and help them become passionate just as you are. Make democracy matter.

Thank you.