



AN IMPORTANT INVESTMENT IN OUR FUTURE

By Sam Reed, *Washington Secretary of State*

Imagine that the sum total of your knowledge of democracy had been pulled from recent headlines. This limited perspective could lead you to conclude that political posturing, partisan bickering and stunts intended to embarrass one's opponents are the defining characteristics of the legislative process.

The high-minded debate envisioned by our Founding Fathers has too often been replaced by grandstanding and personal attacks. The debt ceiling debate in Washington, D.C., and the public employee compensation gridlock in Wisconsin are just two recent examples of government effectively grinding to a halt.

Given such triumphs of posturing over governing, it's no surprise that a recent poll found only 12 percent of the American public approving the job that Congress is doing.

Citizens so skeptical of government's effectiveness are less likely to invest themselves in the political process. Even in our state, where we have thankfully avoided the complete meltdowns seen elsewhere, fewer than 30 percent of registered voters filled out ballots for our most recent primary election.

These are disturbing numbers whether you're a Democrat, Republican or independent. In the long run, no democracy can survive and prosper if large numbers of its citizens are disenfranchised.

That's why I have long supported the **YMCA Youth & Government program**, both in my official capacity as the state's chief elections officer and as an individual contributor.

For more than six decades, Y&G has helped young people gain a better understanding of how our government works, built their skills and confidence to be active participants in that process, and developed relationships with existing leaders in our communities.

Through Y&G programs, teens across our state have the opportunity to experience the judicial, legislative and executive branches of our government. Last year alone, more than 1,200 Washington students from across the state took part in the program's Youth Legislature and Mock Trial activities. Private fundraising ensures that the program remains available to all students regardless of social, economic or geographic barriers.

Youth Legislature delegates build confidence and hone their research, writing and public speaking skills while developing a better understanding of their power as citizens in a democracy. They learn about some of the most challenging issues facing our state as they discuss potential solutions to the problems facing their own communities.

Mock Trial teams work with local legal professionals to understand real-life case law and the role of the courts in our society. Students develop stronger relationships with their peers, and improve their skills in research, critical thinking and oral advocacy.

Both programs challenge students to learn and practice tolerance of other points of view, develop a deeper understanding of the problems facing their communities, and provide mentoring and support to their peers.

The next generation will have to make informed judgments and important decisions regarding challenging issues facing society.

As I wind down a 45-year public service career, I can't think of a more effective program than Youth & Government to help today's students develop real-world skills for a lifetime of productive civic involvement.

Sam Reed is Washington's secretary of state. He will retire when his term ends in January 2013.