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We are just days before an historic election in American history. It's the first election since 1952 in which no incumbent president or vice-president is on either party's ticket. It's the first election ever in which an African-American man is running as a Presidential nominee on a major party ticket. It's the second election ever in which a woman is running as a Vice-Presidential nominee on a major party ticket.

Another historic change is happening before our eyes this week, as well. Young Americans – far from being the disaffected youth we hear about – are truly driving this election. Trends from the last two elections indicate that they're going to vote, these young people, in record numbers – three and four times greater than ever before.

Teenagers and people in their twenties are also re-energizing the political process with the tools of their own generation. Young people are bringing new ways of doing things in political campaigns. Emails, text messages, blogging, social networking, and other new kinds of media have become very important in the political process. And thanks, in large part, to the young people who do these things routinely. And these new methods open up endless possibilities for sharing information, for discussing problems, debating issues, and taking action. These media are powerful tools. They can be leveraged to change the way things are done. And experts – those who hold the key to all that potential – are the youth of our nation.

Young people are now the teachers, and their parents or grandparents, like me – are the students. And that's an exciting prospect. I have a lot to learn, but this doesn't mean that we older generations are totally off the hook. We still have a big job left to do – to be sure our children and our grandchildren have the information and the skills they need to use these new tools wisely.

We're lucky in the United States to have a stable and a durable democratic form of government. But we can't be complacent in assuming that this is going to continue. It is the citizens of our nation who have to preserve our system of government. We can't forget that. With youth spending more time on the computer and in watching television than in school or time with their parents, there's greater and greater competition for the fertile minds of young Americans. And we have to be sure that we equip them with the information and the tools they need to make thoughtful and informed decisions as they come on these new ideas.

This younger generation has more information at its fingertips than any previous generation. But you know what? We are failing to educate them in the basic lessons about our democracy. In the last National Assessment of Educational Progress, in civics, only five percent of twelfth-graders could describe the checks and balances built into our constitution among the three branches, such as the Congress's power to override a President's veto. Fifty-seven percent of twelfth-graders did not understand the division of power between the federal government and the states.

Now without basic information like this, we cannot expect our nation's young people to make wise decisions for the future of our democracy. Without basic information like this, they can't be expected to foster and protect a free and independent judiciary, a free press, and the protections in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights that make us the envy of millions of people around the world. So it is of utmost importance that we revitalize civics education in our nation's schools.

Our teachers are really the gatekeepers of our democracy. It is our teachers who, in part, we must thank for the surge of youth interest and involvement in political affairs. And it is our teachers whom we now have to ask to take advantage of this momentum, and use this landmark time in American history to reach out and to equip the next generation with the tools they need to make serious choices about the future of our democracy.

This generation of young Americans is a generation with responsibilities our forefathers never envisioned. Their children, and their children's children, will live in a more diverse democracy than ever before. Minority children under five years of age are already nearly a majority nationally. These are all our children, and many of them will become our nation's leaders. So I ask our teachers to prepare them for leadership. In only thirteen years, they will all be eligible to vote. To become and stay engaged, they have to know the story of a country – our country – that has constantly expanded its freedoms from the days when the only voters were free, white, property-owning men over the age of 21. Now, today, any child born in America can grow up to be President – male or female. And we have seen that civic engagement – when we're young – makes a huge difference in our participation when we get older.

Our teachers must lead our children into the future and understanding the power of civic engagement. They have to actively engage each new generation, so that they in turn will cherish and protect democratic action, no matter who tries to distract them. Whether your strategy for civic engagement is the excitement of a National Student Parent Mock Election, in which millions of American students and their parents are casting mock ballots in every state and all around the world, or whether it's a video game about our courts that millions are going to want to play. Or whether you find new, creative ways to engage these children, I ask our teachers today to find the time and take the trouble to invest in the America of tomorrow. Whether you're teaching civics and government, or science or math, or English or history, I urge you to engage today's children, and their parents too, and enable them to become active participants in our own democratic system. So that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this earth.

And to the members of the next generation, this is the first of many elections that belong to you. You're going to lead us into the future. So learn all you can, and make your decisions carefully. Your future and our future depend on it.

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