

In December of 2014 I was sworn into the West Virginia House of Delegates, becoming the youngest elected official serving in the United States. I first filed to run at age 16 after attending a program known as Youth in Government, in which approximately 300 students from across West Virginia visited the state capitol for a weekend to write bills, debate them in committee, and present them on the chamber floors. A few months later I officially filed candidacy. Still to this day I often get asked how I was able to give up my high school proms or Friday nights at West Virginia University just to hold a public office. The answer is simple, I am scared for not only my own future, but of what lies ahead for my entire generation.

I've watched friends and family receive their high school and college education in West Virginia and then leave the Mountain State to find meaningful jobs elsewhere. Our large exportation of youth is one of the greatest reasons we are the only state with a declining population. For new graduates with a degree in the STEM fields, it makes sense for them to work in a different state, or even country, where they can specialize in their discipline. With each new enhancement of technology, our world becomes smaller and smaller. I am concerned that with the amount of globalization taking place, in the next 50 years we could face a challenge of keeping young minds and fresh ideas to stay here in America. I don't think it's a long shot to predict that more of our GDP than ever will be lost to other countries that offer serious competition in developing fields that our citizens are studying. We need to do our best to prevent placing a heavy burden of debt from trying to maintain failed federal programs on the backs of our citizens. If we aren't proactive now and the problem becomes irreversible they're going to easily relocate to a place offering them better opportunities and a higher quality of life. We need

to teach the importance of civil engagement at a young age to keep people cognizant of their own futures so when they're ready to build their careers here and settle down with a family, they feel confident and secure in the role of our government.

Throughout the past few months I've had the opportunity to travel across the country to speak to various organizations that are cultivating our leaders of tomorrow. I've been to Boston, Denver, Columbus, Ontario, Montreal, Charlotte, Austin, and done several Skype calls to even more cities, and the one question that I'm always asked is how to get the younger generation actively involved in politics. I've noticed that learners understand concepts better by looking at a visual aid, so I either pull up the [USdebtclock.org](http://USdebtclock.org) or I suggest that they download the new app. It's amazing to look in a crowd of faces that are seeing for the first time how they're affected by the decisions of government.

The current debt per citizen in this country is just below \$58,000. What is even more concerning though is that the debt per taxpayer is just short of \$155,000. It's hard for young Americans to be both optimistic and eager to enter the workforce when they're faced with an overwhelming and disheartening obstacle from day one.

In order to remain competitive, I believe that it's important for our federal expenditures to be primarily discretionary. As someone who believes strongly in the power of economic freedom and growth, I struggle with how much of the budget is mandatory spending. In the 2014 fiscal year, mandatory spending accounted for about 60% of the budget. Out of that, the two largest mandatory spending programs were medicare and social security, which it's no surprise that the demographic utilizing those funds is primarily the elderly. According to the Congressional Budget Office, mandatory spending will increase from \$2.2 trillion in 2014 to \$3.6 trillion, about

14 percent of GDP, by 2023. Young Americans are facing a time of hopelessness where they feel as if it'll be impossible to get ahead and that they're paying into programs in which they've heard over and over again that will inevitably fail.

Some may believe that Millennials lack compassion but I disagree. My peers are overwhelming empathetic when it comes to social issues, however, when it comes to the workforce, they want to be rewarded for the work that they put in. It's not that they don't want to work or pay into these programs, it's that they don't believe they'll ever see the return on their investment. I asked several of my friends whether or not they believed Social Security would still be around for us to collect. I received mixed response. Most of them felt the way that I did, that our current system has too many beneficiaries and not a strong enough workforce to support them. A few others felt that lobbying groups such as the AARP would fight too diligently to keep the program alive, accompanied with the sheer size of our country alone, was enough to keep the program afloat.

It's important to note that the debt we're facing isn't the only challenge Millennials have encountered. Just like every generation prior, we are going to have to battle several major issues. Not only is there a high unemployment rate, but those who are lucky enough to have a job aren't displaying the same amount of effort as prior generations. Now we face the question of how to fix the problems of this era?

The solution is not and never will be raising taxes. Simply stated, raising taxes is how the government encourages you not to partake in an activity. Sin taxes are a perfect example, we raise the tax on tobacco in order to encourage less smoking. Raising gasoline taxes is a strategy

to protect the environment by consumers switching to more energy efficient vehicles to save money. Therefore, raising payroll taxes is a punishment for those that choose to work hard.

Raising the taxes may not be the solution but neither is raising the minimum wage. In the short run, yes, this would be a way to reward the workforce for their labor. Just about any Economics 101 textbook will tell you though that this a short-term solution that will result in a loss of jobs and inflation. A 16 year old friend of mine brought this up to me the other day after she got off work saying, "I'm tired of young people wanting to raise minimum wage, why would I want to go to college if I could make an equal living flipping burgers?" We need to focus on promoting innovation and encouraging self sufficiency, not rewarding behaviors that should be expected.

It is clear that our system needs improvement. What can a state legislature do in order to fix a problem that the entire country is facing? One of the greatest aspects of our governmental system is that we're able to engage in federalism, state governments can be used as petri dishes to test the potential of future national legislation. If we truly want to see a change, we need fresh, new ideas and we need to test them in state legislatures now so that they can be implemented nationally as soon as possibly.

Say for example we eliminate our current Workers' Compensation program. We could require all employers to provide higher deductible health insurance with disability for every one of their employees instead of Workers' Comp, thus providing 24/7 coverage and lower cost to the employers. Employees would no longer pay health insurance premiums but instead contribute to a mandatory 401-K medical savings account program. When the deductible amount is met, employers would match the any further employee contributions. The money employees accrue

over time could later be taken out to cover their \$2,500-\$5,000 deductibles if needed. I've spoken to Joshua Lafazan, the youngest elected official in the state of New York, and he agrees that rather than penalizing unhealthiness, think the big soda tax in New York City, we need to instead incentivize healthiness. We should be focusing on self responsibility, not only financially, but expanding it to other aspects of life as well. If you choose not to smoke, maintain a healthy diet, exercise regularly, as well as refrain from drug use, you're more likely to have fewer doctor visits, which means less of one's own money being drawn from this medical savings account. Once the time to retire rolls around, the funds will be available to withdraw offsetting needed changes to Social Security.

This is just one example of an innovative idea that younger generations are willing to accept. We simply do not have the time to sit around and wish for better results if we aren't willing to make a change with our actions. The Federal Government's unrestrained spending is leading to higher taxes, slower wage growth, and lower standards of living. Now is the time to be both creative and realistic about what this means for the future of our great nation. Please give serious consideration into restoring the trust that my grandparents and parents cherished, the trust that I hope my children will be able to take pride in.