

U.S. democratic power hinges on youth public service and leadership says Former Secretary of Defense Panetta

The future of the U.S.'s domestic and global democratic strength, lies in the next generations' commitment to public service and leadership, said Leon Panetta former Secretary of Defense, Director of the CIA, and co-founder of The Panetta Institute for Public Policy in a press conference Tuesday.

Panetta has spent the last couple of decades investing in this future through his policy institute, founded by him and his wife, Sylvia. The couple established the center located at California State University, Monterey Bay out of concern over young people's disinterest in public service, and the hopes of preparing the next generation of leaders.

The institute is currently carrying out this work during its 25th annual weeklong Leadership in Education Seminar this week.

Panetta emphasized today as a critical moment for democratic leadership.

"There are more flashpoints in the world today than anything since World War II," he said.

The program brings together student leaders from the California State University System, to educate on best practices and principles of leadership and governance.

"I tell the students here at the institute, that we govern in a democracy by leadership or by crisis," said Panetta during the press conference.

"But if leadership is not there, then we will govern by crisis," he said. Too often in recent years, we've been largely governed by crisis."

This form of governance has left Americans – and especially young people – distrustful and dissatisfied with current leadership and democratic structures, Panetta said.

He hopes to transform not only young people's indifference to public service, but dissatisfaction with the quality of current leadership into the engine of inspiring new leaders, according to [an interview with the Monterey Herald last year](#).

These circumstances have only intensified, Panetta confirmed Tuesday.

The most recent annual poll taken by the Panetta Institute for Public Policy found that, "for the first time in a long time, a majority of young people don't believe they're going to have a better life than their parents," said Panetta.

This is reflected in views of political leadership. An April [poll conducted by the Harvard Political Review](#) found that of the youth surveyed, only 20% trusted the president to do the right thing all or most of the time.

Beyond the work being done at the public policy institute, the former secretary stressed the need for a national service system in which young people are asked to serve in some capacity in our democracy.

“I don’t care whether it’s in conservation, health care, dealing with senior citizens dealing with other issues or in the military,” Panetta said. The ability to serve this country in some capacity is important.”

This basis of service can strengthen democracy by allowing for both stronger leadership domestically, and a stronger military on the global scale, Panetta said.

But beyond youth, ensuring the democratic future of the country comes down to the ballot box in November, Panetta said.

“The ultimate neck in a democratic system is the American people,” Panetta said.