

## Rishi Hazra, WA – 2023

It's incredibly easy to lose faith in the institution of our democracy when we regularly see highly polarized headlines and clips on social media and news networks. I had fallen into this spiraling belief that our government was failing at its most fundamental duty – to serve the interests of the American people.

The United States Senate Youth Program opened my eyes to the true inner workings of our American government and restored my faith in our democracy. We heard from esteemed speakers across the political aisle from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. With doors closed to media, we received a unique insight into the nature of politics as a strategy. I realized also the big-name Senators I had been “familiar” with before the program, made up a very very small portion of the 100-member Senate, with which it is easy to lose the sense of scale.

Hearing from Senator Hickenlooper of Colorado, a Co-Chair of the program, I truly believe a number of our Senators genuinely advance the best interests of their people, and this revelation alone was sufficient for me to change my perspective on our government. I also learned there is an incredibly strong apolitical backbone in our government that ensures the institution survives. We spoke with Senate Secretary Sonceria Ann Berry and Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough. I was inspired by their incredible commitment - as individuals whose lives were in danger from the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot – to their critical roles in facilitating fair civil discourse necessary to the functioning of a proper democracy. It is this faith in our institution that I will now carry in my future leadership, as I genuinely believe it can help our nation realize unity.

The greatest and most inspiring element of the Senate Youth Program truly lay in the 103 other delegates and our Military Mentors, who were with us every hour of every day throughout the week-long program. I know will remember my most memorable experience for many many years. We were walking to the Library of Congress for our luncheon, and I was discussing random policies with my roommate JT, a delegate from Texas. After wrapping up our debate on affirmative action, I mentioned in passing the concept of unrealized capitalized gains taxation, which I had previously come across in a reading. I already knew JT would be opposed based on our past discussions, and he did. Almost as if on cue, one of the Military Mentors walking alongside us interjected, challenging me to elaborate on the policy. He posed various considerations and challenged me to address how the policy would accommodate them. I couldn't. But I expressed why I believed the policy was important and which problem it would solve, and JT came to my side in agreement. Over the next few days, I researched the policy and relevant information. JT and I gradually came to a modified policy that both of us agreed on. We then spent every breakfast, lunch, and dinner, sharing our ideas with the other delegates, Military Mentors, and other distinguished guests and hearing their perspectives. With each new perspective (of which there were many diverse takes, thanks to the structure of USSYP), we modified some portion of the idea. For me, this entire process was the best part of my Senate Youth Program as I got to experience how policy development works and how feasible compromise truly is.

We often take for granted everything we see around us as normal. But it is not. It's the product of decades and decades of legislation, and it can be changed. We often complain about our government and corrupt politics and politicians. Perhaps rightfully so. We often ignore what happens in our government, escaping behind the ideology that it doesn't affect our day-to-day

lives and therefore doesn't necessitate our actions. But we have a duty to stand up for what is right, whether an unjust policy influences us or not. It is part of the same social contract we enter when we're born and follow the laws in front of us. Even if it feels like an impossible battle to become involved in the government and fight for what we believe in, that very perspective makes it a losing game. I remember still when I expressed my intention to become involved in government and eventually run for public office, the people around me were skeptical, questioning why I should involve myself in something that they perceive to be corrupt.

I firmly believe that change starts from the heart. If there is anything you are ever passionate about, care about, or something close to your heart, then fight for it. One of the avenues is there, in our government. And if the government isn't the right path for you, that's no excuse not to exude your leadership. Pursue other avenues, such as nonprofits, research, or education. If you care about anything enough, you can be a leader. And those are the kinds of leaders we need to shift the connotation of our government, so we can be proud and united as a nation. To encourage those of you impassioned about something close to you, I leave you with a maxim: beat the system to break the system.