

Opinion: Kids don't know democracy

By Ming W. Chin

To those of us who care about preserving America's democracy, a recent report on civics is cause for alarm. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 3 out of 4 U.S. students lack a basic understanding of democracy.

The study adds to a disturbing body of research showing that most people cannot identify the three branches of government and that, of the three branches, the public least understands the judicial branch and its role in our system of government.

Our Founding Fathers realized that an impartial and independent judiciary is necessary to serve as a check on the other branches of government, to promote equal justice and the rule of law and to protect individual and minority rights. In appointment letters to our nation's first Supreme Court justices, President George Washington described the judiciary as "the chief pillar upon which our national government must rest" and "the keystone of our political fabric." The late Chief Justice William Rehnquist once remarked that "it is not enough to have an impressive catalogue of individual rights in the Constitution if the judges who are called upon to enforce these rights are not truly independent."

About 12 years ago, the truth and wisdom of these words were brought home to me when I met Emil Constantinescu, then the president of Romania. At the time, he was in the midst of forming a fragile democracy. He told me he once had been a judge under former President Nicolae Ceausescu but quit to become a geologist because he got tired of Ceausescu telling him how his decisions ought to come out.

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Court.

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