

Taking Action in Your Community

Speaking at Public Forums on Book Bans and the First Amendment

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I. Introduction

In communities across Illinois, loud and activated groups are attempting to limit First Amendment rights and silence marginalized voices. They do this by showing up to meetings of local community library boards, school boards, and other public bodies and pushing elected officials to ban books, events, and other protected expression based on its content. But when the government bans speech based on its content, that is censorship and it is unconstitutional.

Even with newly passed protections against book bans in Illinois, this pro-censorship movement continues to predominantly target LGBTQ+ and BIPOC voices in attempts to erase them from public discourse.

Your local elected officials should be defending free speech rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. The ACLU of Illinois issued an [open letter to local public officials](#) explaining their responsibilities as elected officials to protect everyone’s rights – even when faced with loud opposition.

But it can be difficult for local elected officials to uphold these fundamental rights when the groups calling to limit speech and equal access are the only ones who speak out and show up at public meetings, often claiming to speak for an entire community. Each of us needs to show up whenever free speech rights are being threatened in our communities, as any attack on a marginalized community can open the floodgates and establish precedent for an attack on all of us.

We have created this guide in the hopes that it empowers you to show up to public forums and stand up against censorship in our communities. The following talking points and resources are for you to use and share with your friends, family, and neighbors – we understand how daunting showing up alone to these forums can be, so we hope this guide also helps build solidarity around protecting free speech in your community.

P.S. If you encounter attempts to limit speech in your community, please let us know by emailing ACLUofIllinois@aclu-il.org.

II. Personal Reflection

To begin with, we encourage you to reflect on the following prompts and your “why” for engaging in this advocacy in your community:

- Why do you care about fighting against book bans and content censorship?
- How do book bans and content censorship impact you and the people you care about?
- What is the impact on your community?
- Why should a person oppose book bans and content censorship?
- How has reading books that are commonly challenged impacted you or changed your perspective?
- How would you talk to others about this issue? What do you think is the most persuasive argument to convince people not to ban books or censor content?

III. Steps You Can Take

- ❑ Contact the ACLU of Illinois. We want to know where you are seeing attempts to limit speech across Illinois. And we may be able to assist you and others you recruit to fight back against any efforts to limit free speech and free expression. If you’re seeing specific issues in your community please email us at ACLUofIllinois@aclu-il.org.
- ❑ Host your own Speaking at Public Forums Workshop. If you are interested in partnering with an ACLU representative to host the workshop in your community, please fill out our [Request for Speaker form](#).
- ❑ Attend public meetings to show your commitment to free speech, whether by [preparing your own remarks](#) (see pg. 4 for examples and tips), standing in solidarity with those who do, making signs, or by otherwise showing your support in a peaceful and respectful way.
- ❑ Write emails, make calls, or speak directly to your local officials (see pg. 5 for examples and tips).
- ❑ Write an op-ed or letter to the editor in your local paper.
- ❑ Start your own Banned Books Club. The best way to combat book bans in your community is by defending your own rights to read and learn. [Hear from Ella Scott and her journey starting a Banned Books club in her Texas high school](#).
- ❑ Learn more about the types of books being challenged. Check out our partners at the American Library Association and [their list of most challenged books](#).
- ❑ Activate people to take action along with you.

IV. Talking Points to Use when the Government is Considering

Limiting Community Speech Based on Content

- The First Amendment prohibits government at the federal, state and local level from banning or restricting speech because they disagree with its content – or because they fear others in the community may disagree with it.
- Banning or limiting speech because others raise objection or government officials disagree is censorship.
- A person or a group cannot be denied the ability to host their event in a public space – or have special conditions imposed on the event – just because government officials or some members in the community disagree with its content.
- Voices of exclusion do not speak for our community, which values diversity and inclusion.
- Anyone can decide which speech and ideas they want their own family to access but they cannot make that decision for other families or other members of our community. For example, if a parent objects to an event, they can simply choose not to attend it. But they cannot make that decision for other parents, their children, or for the rest of the community.
- Limiting speech because part of the community disagrees with the speaker’s or group’s message denies other community members access to programs and gatherings in which they may want to participate and interferes with their own choices about how they want to think, learn, and grow.
- Censoring speech denies members of our community access to new, different ideas from which they could benefit. Everyone deserves the opportunity to see themselves in different stories.
- Censoring speech hurts our communities by limiting discussion of differing ideas and challenging topics. This denies our community an opportunity to understand one another’s perspectives, and to learn and grow from a community discussion.
- Banning free expression that positively affirms marginalized identities based on sexuality, gender, or race, is unconstitutional. We all have the right to be ourselves fully in public.
- Any form of censorship is anti-democratic. Democracies are supposed to allow anyone to advocate for themselves in public, not censor them based on their identities.

V. Talking Points to Use When the Government is Considering

Book Bans in Public Schools and Libraries

- Everyone has the right to read and learn free from censorship.
- Education is only made stronger when students can both feel affirmed and included by their community and are able to study a wide range of diverse perspectives and issues.
- When elected officials ban books based on their personal views or those of particular community members, it is unconstitutional censorship, and it is harmful.
- Librarians are trained in deciding which books should be included in library collections based on the needs of the community the library serves. Educators and other school officials are trained in deciding which books should be available to their students based on their age and educational needs. The government should let these professionals do the jobs they were trained to do, not substitute their own views.
- Illinois recently adopted a measure that protects library collections from efforts to ban books for ideological or political reasons. The law would block state grants to local libraries that ban books and take decisions about library collections away from the professionals. No community – including ours – should risk cuts to critical library services in order to placate loud voices who wish to dictate what others can and cannot read.

VI. Tips for Making Public Comments at Public Meetings

Local councils and boards are increasingly the forum where critical civil liberties issues are addressed. A crucial tool for making your opinion known as a member of the community at meetings of these local entities is through public comment. Here are some tips on addressing a public meeting.

Before you go to the meeting:

- Find out what's on the agenda. For public meetings, you should be able to find the agenda online.
- Confirm there is a time for public comment and what is required to sign up.
- Arrive early, complete any process for making comment and be prepared to speak.
- If you are part of a group taking a position on a local issue, be visible. This could mean bringing signs, wearing the same color or wearing buttons – anything that makes it clear who in the crowd is there for the same reason.
- If you are planning to bring signs, check to see if they are permitted inside the meeting room or council chambers.

Tips for Public Comment:

- Keep your public comments brief to 2-3 minutes, or shorter if time is limited.
- Try to be clear and concise in the message you want to convey.
- Be courteous, yet direct toward the council members. Address your remarks to the board or council members, not to the audience, and do not respond to provocative remarks made by others.
- Highlight your support or opposition in a clear, direct way. Don't try to list multiple issues the council should address.

→ Part 1: Introduce yourself and the issue you want to make a public comment about

- Give your first and last name and share some information about your connection to the community and/or issue being discussed.
 - Ex. "My name is Jane Doe and I am a concerned resident of this town/a parent of children in the school district/expert on this issue."
- Tell them what issue you are addressing, and your position.
 - Ex. "I am speaking today in opposition to the proposed ban", "I am speaking today in support the council approving this measure."

→ Part 2: Explain why you felt the need to make a public comment

- Tell how this impacted you, your family or members of your community.
- Share a personal narrative if appropriate and you are able to share it in public.
- Explain why the board or council's actions might harm or improve the community.

→ Part 3: Close and thank the Council members

- Reiterate the action you hope the council takes.
 - Ex. "Please vote in opposition to this measure", "Please support this measure when it comes to a vote."
- Thank the members for listening to your public comment.
 - Ex. "Thank you for your time", "Thank you for hearing my comment today."

VII. Tips for Contacting Your Local Officials

Public meetings are not the only way your local elected officials can hear from you. Contacting your local officials through written messages or calls can have a large impact. Here are some tips for contacting your local elected official directly.

The contact information for your specific elected officials should be available through your town or community or local election authority. Try checking on their websites, or by calling village hall or the school district if you cannot find the information online.

When you contact your elected official:

- Keep your message brief.
- Try to be clear and concise in the message you want to convey.
- Share a personal narrative, or how this will impact you, your family, or your community.
- Use data or talking points to make your opinion stronger.
- Be courteous, yet direct toward the elected officials.
- Highlight your support or opposition in a clear, direct way. Don't try to list multiple issues that should be addressed.

→ Sample Call Script:

- Hello, my name is _____, I live in _____ [town/city] and am part of this community.
- I'm reaching out to speak to you to [support or oppose] [issue]. [Provide a short description of the issue].
- I'm asking you to [support or oppose] [issue] because _____. [Issue] matters to me because _____.
- Again, please vote to [support or oppose] [issue].
- [Optional] If needed, I can best be reached at _____ [preferred contact information].
- Thank you for your time.

→ Sample Email or Letter Script:

Dear [Elected Official Title and Name],

My name is _____, I live in _____ [town/city] and am part of this community.

I'm reaching out to ask you to [support or oppose] [issue]. [Provide a 1-2 sentence description of the issue].

I'm asking you to [support or oppose] [issue] because _____. [Issue] matters to me because _____.

Please [support or oppose] [issue] when it comes to a vote.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Address]

[Email or phone if you would like to be contacted]

VIII. Conclusion

We all have a role to play in the fight for our rights, whether it be as a speaker, organizer, or ally. We hope you feel empowered to take this guide with you and respond to emerging issues in your community.

If you are seeing any activity around book banning, content censorship, or First Amendment violations, please contact the ACLU of Illinois office by emailing ACLUofIllinois@aclu-il.org. If you would like for an ACLU representative to host our workshop in your community, please fill out our [Request for Speaker form](#). For general inquiries, contact us at P&E@aclu-il.org.

IX. Resources

- ACLU-IL Open Letter to Public Officials: <https://www.aclu-il.org/en/open-letter-local-public-officials-first-amendment>
- ACLU-IL Request a Speaker Form: <https://action.aclu.org/event/request-speaker>
- ACLU-IL Providing Public Comment: <https://www.aclu-il.org/en/providing-public-comment-public-meeting>
- ACLU-MO Ella Scott Starting a Book Ban Club: <https://www.aclu-mo.org/en/news/how-start-banned-book-club>
- American Library Association List of Most Banned Books: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>
- Illinois' New Banned Book Law: <https://ilga.gov/legislation/fulltext.asp?DocName=10300HB2789enr&GA=103&SessionId=112&DocTypeId=HB&LegID=147915&DocNum=2789&GAID=17&SpecSess=&Session=>
- Illinois Local Election Authority: <https://www.elections.il.gov/ElectionOperations/ElectionAuthorities.aspx?T%3D637770554253936098>
- ACLU-IL Protecting the First Amendment in Your Community: <https://www.aclu-il.org/FirstAmend>
- ACLU-IL Right to Learn: Fighting Book Bans and Censorship: <https://www.aclu-il.org/RightToLearn>