

Tip O’Neill Was Right: The Power of Local Politics

SHARI HENRY

ABSTRACT

“All politics is local” is a phrase coined by Tip O’Neill, the 47th Speaker of the House, and then expanded on by President Biden who wrote, “all politics is personal.” A growing number of states and local municipalities have worked locally and personally to wage a war against the freedom to read, removing books from shelves, whitewashing history, criminalizing making certain titles available, and codifying censorship. This article offers theoretical underpinnings supporting the library as the fifth branch of government, an overview of the quick and aggressive rise in book banning over the past decade, and practical ways we might use the lessons we’ve learned from our opponents to win back the freedom to read while elevating the critical nature of the library.

In September 2023, I stood alongside representatives from several pro free speech organizations as congressional representatives and our various CEOs addressed the crowd gathered outside the U. S. Capitol in support of Representative Raskin’s and Senator Schatz’s Resolution Recognizing Banned Books Week. In September of this year, Senators Murphy and Blumenthal joined Raskin and Schatz introducing the resolution again¹ and I hope they will continue to do so each year until it passes. The arc of history is long, after all.

EveryLibrary joined PEN America, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and several other national organizations endorsing this year’s resolution. In EveryLibrary’s statement,² John Chratska, the organization’s Executive Director, said, “Book bans undermine the First Amendment, limit access to diverse perspectives, and threaten our democratic values. Our libraries are essential spaces for learning, reflection, and the free exchange of ideas.”

A flurry of activity, much of it national in scope, arises each year during Banned Books Week. Statements are issued, Banned Books buses tour, articles are written, interviews aired. But in recent years, the subject has risen to prominence beyond this one week. The 2024 Democratic National Convention featured several speakers, including the Vice-Presidential candidate, who referenced the acceleration of book banning. The most prominent example was Tim Walz saying, as Minnesota’s governor, he chose to ban hunger (through a school meals program), not books.

While I’m glad this fundamental threat to democracy is being spotlighted on the national stage, the truth is that our First Amendment rights are being stripped at the state and local levels.

According to PEN America, 565 books were removed from school shelves during the 2021-22 school year,³ mostly by local school districts and municipal boards. Removing books doesn't sate the authoritarians' appetites for First Amendment restrictions. Florida, an oft-used worst case example prohibits teachers from discussing systemic racism,⁴ denies high school students the option to take Advanced Placement African American Studies (a policy followed by South Carolina and Arkansas),⁵ throwing hundreds of books away in the process.⁶ Several bills threaten to criminalize making certain titles available.⁷

The codification of limiting free expression at state and local levels makes it difficult for those on the front lines to keep up, but state and national organizations have responded to help. Those organizations that understand one size does not fit all support local communities best, since they know people from outside offices based in large American cities cannot message for local change better than people who live in those communities. They grasp that we need to follow the censors' playbook and undo the havoc they have wrought city by city, county by county, state by state.

All politics is local. Tip O'Neill, the 47th Speaker of the House, was right when he coined that phrase. President Biden expanded the theme, writing "all politics is personal. . . and unless you can establish a personal relationship, it's awfully hard to build trust."

Both are correct. All politics is local and personal. The lessons learned from local groups unraveling our 1A rights haunt those of us who have been watching across America as books have been pulled from shelves and censorship is put into law by state and local governing bodies.

Thankfully, libraries are local and personal. As cornerstones of democracy, we are rising to preserve, protect, and advocate for free speech as a fundamental tenet of democracy. When we step into our roles as guardians of free expression, we are able to provide the free and open spaces, learning resources, and programming that cultivate an engaged citizenry.

If the press is the fourth branch of government, then now is the time for libraries to embrace our role as the fifth. Because we have local presence people can find us, rely on us, trust us, and feel as committed to our success as we to theirs.

As Bryan Stevenson says, there is power in proximity.

When proximate, it is harder to dehumanize and dismiss people. When we see one another at the grocery store, church, and back-to-school night, we see their humanity. When we show up at town halls among neighbors, our voices aren't competing with masses, which makes it easier to identify those with whom to build coalitions. Our representatives are accessible, and a tiny handful of votes can turn an election. We have power.

In our own communities, it's not hard to find political figures as we go about our daily business. Since my local mayor, city council members, and state legislators are often at the same community events I attend, I make it a point to speak with them each time. They are, after all, working for me.

We can make a regular practice of communicating with these officials to share our gratitude for supporting a good policy or facts that refute a bad one, propose a new idea, or request to meet. It's easy to sign up to speak at local board and council meetings. Scripting and practicing messages help, but we trust that we, after all, know our audience. Who better knows how to speak to our neighbors than we do?

Partnerships with our colleagues across librarianship and with library organizations are critical but are insufficient. We need to build deeper relationships with other free speech advocates, diversity organizations, community groups, churches, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials in our own zip codes and across our states. My state library organization built a strong relationship with a state senator, who has since spoken at webinars for us and has been a

steady voice inside our legislature. We can each scale to our sphere of influence, find our people, host gatherings, and spur one another to action.

Few are impartial to censorship, yet as librarians we must remain nonpartisan. Our messaging should never waiver from the idea that free and open access to ideas and information is nonpartisan because we are representing all equally. We should refuse to treat it as anything else.

Though each of us needs to assess whether activities can be done professionally or personally, there are several ways we can use our library positions to model democracy in action, encouraging participation, and elevating civil discourse. Urban Libraries Council's Declaration of Democracy⁸ outlines five broad ways libraries may promote free expression. We can provide the widest range of resources possible, use our spaces to host programs that encourage civil dialogue and promote civic education and engagement, and use our display spaces to highlight national holidays and historical events, providing texts of documents and resources that provide context. Libraries across America are doing all these things and more. EveryLibrary's Libraries 2024⁹ provides resources and pathways for individuals to participate in the political process that can be shared with patrons and be adapted for library programming.

Our positions or jurisdictions may dictate how outwardly focused we can be. Those of us who can do more bear a responsibility to do so, and none of us are without support. EveryLibrary¹⁰ and Red, Wine & Blue¹¹ offer ongoing training and step-by-step guides to fight book banning, and EveryLibrary Legislation of Concern's¹² map helps track anti-free speech legislation. These two organizations model how large organizations best support local efforts because they honor proximate power and understand the risk of impeding in the relationships we have built with our neighbors or taking action that undermines our work.

Remember, 71% of people oppose book bans,¹³ so numbers are on our side as we reclaim the right to read from those who have decided what books we may read and how we might otherwise freely express ourselves.

Who better to usher back in the hope and promise of America embedded in the First Amendment – an America where all people see themselves represented in books, freely access a world of information, grow in confidence and participate fully in the civic world around them, where they have power to make change – than America's greatest learning treasures, our libraries?

The stakes are high - we are keenly aware of the suicide rates among transgender teens, the achievement gap among youth of color, and the growing disregard for human rights in general. We've lost some battles, but we can't lose the war. And we can take heart in the good news that, though fighting these laws and policies in court takes time and money, many cases are being won, and the absolutist and restrictive policies do not stand.

Personal politics invites all; local politics provides the channel to create change. As we commit to focusing on the personal while working locally, we will create an America where everyone belongs, everyone is armed to contribute, and everyone enjoys the blessings of liberty as signed into a promise to us all nearly 240 years ago.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-blumenthal-schatz-raskin-introduce-bicameral-resolution-condemning-right-wing-censorship-as-book-bans-nationwide-top-10000>
- 2 <https://www.everylibrary.org/statementbannedbooksweek>
- 3 <https://pen.org/florida-book-bans-not-a-hoax/>
- 4 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/florida-moves-to-restrict-what-schools-can-teach-about-systemic-racism>
- 5 <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/22/1150259944/florida-rejects-ap-class-african-american-studies>
- 6 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2024/08/20/florida-college-library-dean-books-trashed/74872815007/>
- 7 <https://www.slj.com/story/As-Bills-in-Multiple-States-Threaten-Librarians-with-Criminalization-Advocates-Are-Fighting-Back>
- 8 <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/democracy/declaration-of-democracy>
- 9 <https://www.libraries2024.org>
- 10 <https://www.fightforthefirst.org/>
- 11 <https://redwine.blue/bbb/>
- 12 https://www.everylibrary.org/billtracking?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI84fU7IPoiAMVQ1xHAR07zyOcEAYASAAEgl1oPD_BwE
- 13 <https://www.ala.org/news/2022/03/large-majorities-voters-oppose-book-bans-and-have-confidence-libraries>

Author

Shari Henry has worked in libraries at all levels, developed curriculum and presented via webinars and in-person at conferences on the essentiality of libraries to the hope and promise of America. She's trained staff and worked with executives on topics ranging from centering ourselves and our libraries in values, to crafting policies, and taking personal political action. She served as Director of Roanoke County Library System for five years and oversaw the development of Urban Libraries Council's democracy portfolio as their Director of Democracy and Community Impact. She now enjoys being on the front lines of libraries where she spends her days interacting with the public and a large staff as the manager of a large public library in Fairfax County. She is committed to food justice, climate resilience, gardening and baking, rescue dogs, and her friends and family.