

A Love Letter to Libraries in Our Darkest Hour: An Introduction to a Special Issue of *The Political Librarian*, “Libraries After the 2024 Vote: The Future of Libraries in a Divided America”

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Values. A set of universalizing concepts that were once so much a given in that it nearly felt provincial to discuss them within librarianship; of course, we all supported access, inclusion, and the freedom to read; of course, the American public “just loved libraries” and would support our work. And yet, here we are—our pretense of shared values has been shaken to its core, and the foundations of librarianship are crumbling beneath our feet.

From local boards and councils to state legislatures and governors to the White House and Congress, power in many places is now in the hands of people who support book bans and censorship, devalue information access and literacy, and seek to undermine or outright destroy libraries. While much anti-library activity occurred during the first Trump administration (Douglass et al. 2017), the second Trump administration has a clear and public plan, *Project 2025*, to dismantle fundamental democratic norms and institutions, including all government support of libraries, archives, and museums.

To those still attempting to serve and uphold values-based democratic norms and defend libraries and other cultural heritage institutions, the current political moment is demoralizing, threatening significant emotional burnout of librarians, civil servants, and concerned citizens. *Project 2025* is being implemented with an efficiency heretofore unheard of in American history, as a small, vocal, concerted group of ideologues are flooding the zone with discriminatory and hateful policies that seem likely to bring shame to our nation for generations.

Rather than succumbing to helplessness, the response is to do something, take a step, find your work, and commit to it. In librarianship, some part of that work is uplifting voices, educating ourselves, and sharing strategies for change in writing and in conversation in each of our workplaces. We (Allison and Paul) became the guest editors of this special issue after we approached the wonderful folks at the EveryLibrary Institute with the idea of harnessing our networks and the existing deep wealth of expertise and passion in libraries in order to

offer a timely and practical issue of the journal that would serve library workers, scholars, and academics alike. In the wake of the election, library workers immediately began to approach each of us with questions like, “How did this happen? Why now? What can I do?” And perhaps most tellingly, heart-wrenchingly, “How do I not lose hope and slip into despair?”

When we put out the original call for proposals, we sought hope and perhaps some small remedy to the despair and cynicism plaguing American library workers today. We do not blame those who are losing hope in these turbulent times and know that, ultimately, “cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart” (hooks, xviii). Librarians have every right to feel disappointed and betrayed—by the larger political sphere, our institutions, and our communities—but there is a path forward, both in the wise words of those who carved out the time to contribute to this special issue and in the utterly essential work performed by librarians across the country every day.

In responding to the CFP for this issue, our esteemed contributors are offering their best ideas and insights for libraries—despite the burnout, demoralization, personal attacks, and sometimes very real threats to their safety and mental and professional stability. There were those whose voices we would have loved to foreground who were unable to contribute because of the above conditions or because they were just too darned busy doing the work and serving their communities and the American public to write. To those who contributed here and to those who are contributing every single day to the field, we are beyond grateful.

In admitting and recognizing the real-world toll on our contributors, we do not wish to advance savior narratives or claim stolen library valor from the workers on the front lines of increasingly perilous conditions. Rather, we seek to highlight the very real human toll of this kind of work in America in 2025. Library workers across the country and the spectrum of cultural heritage institutions are struggling to find the courage to face the enormous real-world consequences of the extreme—and often legally questionable—political decisions of the new administration a mere two months into its four-year term.

The paths before us are rocky and perilous. There are absolutely no guarantees that we will be able to preserve and protect libraries in a form that we would recognize as true to our shared mission. As such, “values-based librarianship is vital now. Solidarity around our mission, our role in society, and our partners that share that mission is essential, and is the source of the infectious passion that libraries are capable of inculcating” (Anonymous/Liberator 2025, 179). We need to move through despair and into the kind of passionate, determined, and sustained work that will be required to protect the very idea of the public good in the United States.

Librarians and their supporters who are struggling to maintain energy and passion would do well to remember that “the opposite of love is indifference. Apathy. Giving into emotional fatigue. Being somewhere on the denial spectrum (turn your eyes away; don’t look), and not being courageous enough...” (Nunez and Teng 2019). Library workers, scholars, advocates, allies, and accomplices need to recommit to the work and each other in ways that will be mentally and emotionally sustaining for the long struggle ahead. Libraries simply will not survive if we succumb to our exhaustion and let those who would destroy our institutions have their way.

We, as guest editors, wish to reiterate our gratitude to our contributors for digging deep in the wells of their mental and emotional reserves to help us put forward a truly exceptional special issue. As editors, we have the privilege of knowing—at least for now—that our careers are not endangered by sharing our positions. However, the same cannot be said for each writer willing to share their perspectives and serve the public good. While this may be a

journal in the technical sense, in pulling this together and working with the contributors, we have come to envision this issue as a multifaceted love letter to libraries in their remarkably embattled conditions. A vibrant reminder of what they are at their best and what they can be for their patrons, their communities, and library workers themselves.

As much as we hope that dissent is the highest form of patriotism, logically, we can assume that one of the highest forms of love is thoughtful critique. Holding our institutions accountable is uncomfortable, and there are challenging positions within the digital pages of this issue, but we invite you to sit with those challenges and consider them in the spirit with which they were offered. Libraries will only survive if we truly wrangle with the internal and external threats to our institutions AND if each library worker feels empowered enough to keep showing up, mentally and physically.

There is no love without accountability, and love is the antidote to injustice (Nunez and Teng 2019), and we mean that very seriously. We need to love our communities and the people we serve enough to rumble with the legacies of oppression, political missteps, and mistakes that have contributed to dismantling the institutions that only exist to serve their communities. Understanding the ways in which this hate-fueled and unforgiving new political reality will impact libraries, archives, and museums is the goal of this special of *The Political Librarian*. “The 2024 Election and the Future of Libraries” provides twenty-one articles discussing and analyzing what the 2024 election may indicate for the future of libraries and library work, offering a wide range of perspectives and ideas from educators, researchers, administrators, and professionals.

After this introduction and the thoughts of *The Political Librarian*’s editor, Andrew Sulavik, the issue intentionally opens and closes with the voices of those on the metaphorical “front lines” of the battles of the war on libraries and public institutions. “On Moving Forward,” an impassioned and thoughtful piece submitted by an anonymous public librarian working in a county where over 75 percent of their community chose to vote in favor of the Trump administration, closes the issue and resituates the reader in the values-based principles that may likely be our only path forward. Each of the pieces that build to that final article offers us perspectives on the innumerable, but not unsolvable, problems facing libraries in the aftermath of the 2024 election.

The issue opens, with intention, with the perspective of a recently fired federal librarian (Price), as we want to ensure that we do not lose sight of the immensely destructive consequences of these policies on the committed library workers who seek to serve the public good. From there, the issue does not have a rigid structure either in sectioning out articles by style or content; rather, we arrange the pieces to move through thematic (and very loose) categories. There are thoughtful and interesting perspectives that speak to those who teach librarians and librarians who teach (Bibealt, Durney, and Kiel). The next series of articles includes clear-eyed analysis from advocates and policymakers who will help us collectively make sense of the legal and political battles we are facing (Klosek, Culliss et al., and Halperin), and the issue moves into perspectives from political strategists who offer ideas for library leaders and advocates facing organizing challenges (Chrastka, Crowley, Carpenter, and Jaeger and Jennings-Roche).

Each section is porous, and there are overlapping and complementary themes, but we next see the articles flowing into deep and reflective analyses of the legacies of anti-intellectualism, race, class, gender, and Western homogeneity on the destabilization of the field (Buschman, Williams and Cooke, Mehra, Jennings-Roche, and Ndumu and Park). Specific forward-thinking notes of strategy and hope from librarians and scholars who have dedicated

their careers to access, inclusion, and the freedom to read offer some resolution and provide direction to the work we all must do if we want libraries to survive until the next election (Kranich). Closing the issue is first the voice of a working public librarian reaffirming our original vision of offering grounded hope to all library workers seeking to hold on to their values in these bleak times (Anonymous), and then an article from Paul Jaeger provides both a high-level view of the current reality grounded in his decades of advocacy and a hopeful path forward with specific suggestions for steps each kind of library champion could take to protect their institutions, freedom, and democracy. He reminds us that “The processes of rebuilding trust of and respect for cultural heritage institutions, information professionals, and the values so central to the field will require those working in the field and those who care about the institutions to commit to this work for the very long haul” (Jaeger 2025, 192).

Our hope is that this issue of *The Political Librarian* is both practically useful and thought-provoking for the long term as we all attempt to strategize and prioritize our attention for the next few years of likely unending attacks on libraries, archives, and museums. Ultimately, we hope that each person reading this remembers that your voice matters and that every small action can build a larger social change for the better.

Library workers: Your voice matters, your work matters, your community matters, your agency matters. Ours is a profession driven by kindness, compassion, and education; each action of kindness, compassion, and education is a refutation of the hatred, book bans, and threats to send librarians to jail. As editors, we do not have all the answers, or even many answers, but we do hope some part of this issue is usable, hopeful, or interesting—and perhaps all three—to you as you fight, advocate, and show up for your communities every day. As you keep showing up, remember to find your community, use your voice, and protect the values you hold dear; only by that may we ever hope to achieve the kind of cultural transformation necessary for beating back the rising tide of authoritarianism.

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