



With Election Weeks Away, Political Speech Under Attack on America's Campuses

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FIRE Press Release

PHILADELPHIA, October 15, 2008—With the presidential race between John McCain and Barack Obama the focus of national attention, political speech on our nation's campuses has come under sharp attack. In recent weeks, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has investigated open and blatant attacks on political expression at colleges and universities across the country, from a previously unreported case at Oklahoma, to better-known cases at Illinois and Texas, to cases at smaller schools across the country. This alarming trend towards silencing political expression has prompted FIRE to release a Policy Statement on Political Activity on Campus today.

At the University of Oklahoma, students and faculty were [notified last month](#) that "the forwarding of political humor/commentary" using their university e-mail accounts was prohibited. In [response](#) to a [letter](#) from FIRE, the university has modified its stance, stating that the prohibition is only applicable "to the extent discussions are attributable to the University as endorsing or opposing a political candidate." However, the university has not communicated this change to the community at large, leaving many under the impression that such private e-mail forwards are forbidden. At the University of Illinois, the university Ethics Office issued a [newsletter](#) warning faculty against engaging in political expression on campus, including attending political rallies, wearing buttons, and even placing bumper stickers on cars. After widespread criticism and a [letter](#) from FIRE, President B. Joseph White issued a [clarification](#), assuring faculty members that the university would allow them to engage in such expression.

"Political expression is exactly the speech the First Amendment was designed to protect. Our nation's colleges and universities do their students and faculty a grave disservice when they stifle the ability to engage the crucial issues of the day," said FIRE President Greg Lukianoff. "While colleges and universities may not institutionally endorse candidates, they have a societal duty to foster and encourage debate and discussion about those issues most important to our nation. Any blanket ban on 'political speech' betrays one of the academy's most important functions."

In addition to the situations at the University of Oklahoma and the University of Illinois, FIRE has monitored bans on political expression at several other institutions in the past few weeks. At the University of Texas at Austin (UT), two students were threatened with disciplinary action for refusing to remove political signs placed in their dormitory window. In the face of nationwide criticism, UT President William Powers Jr. waived that prohibition, pending a policy review. Iowa Western Community College has banned individual students from distributing campaign handbills and has banned postings of campaign materials while other postings are allowed. FIRE has also received reports of censorship at Fresno Pacific University, Louisiana State University, and Cuyamaca College.

In response to the numerous instances of censorship of political expression on campuses nationwide, FIRE today releases its [2008 Policy Statement on Political Activity on Campus](#). The policy statement details the freedom of political expression that students, student groups, faculty, and staff at public and private universities should expect at their institutions. The statement also reminds university administrators of their legal and moral obligations to ensure the protection of the political expression of students and faculty.

"FIRE's Policy Statement on Political Activity on Campus is our attempt to end the widespread confusion about the fundamental right to political expression we're witnessing at schools across the nation," William Creeley, FIRE's Director of Legal and Public Advocacy, said. "Either out of ignorance or out of sheer disregard for the rights of students and faculty, university administrators are too often implementing absurd bans on political speech this election season. FIRE's Policy Statement is designed to inform members of the university community about their right to join in the national political discussion in the final weeks before the election."

FIRE is a nonprofit educational foundation that unites civil rights and civil liberties leaders, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals from across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of individual rights, due process, freedom of expression, academic freedom, and rights of conscience at our nation's colleges and universities. FIRE's efforts to preserve liberty on campuses across America can be viewed at thefire.org.

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