

February 7, 2017

An Open Letter to the UW Community from Concerned Political Scientists*

We write as professional political scientists who feel compelled to speak out about troubling developments in national politics and their effects on our local campus community. Transitions in partisan control of government often occasion rancor. However, we are concerned that a more fundamental erosion of democratic institutions and values is under way.

Our primary endeavor as political scientists is to study all forms of government, present and past. We document the harms and deprivations of undemocratic government and the grievances they impose on citizens near and far, especially on the least powerful among us. We also study the large gap between democratic ideals and the actual practice of democracy in the US and elsewhere. Perhaps most important, we analyze the fragility of democracy, the conditions under which democracy can thrive, and how easily it can deteriorate into authoritarian or even fascist rule.

Thus, we are alarmed that the new national administration and its allies at many levels have displayed a remarkable lack of commitment to and understanding of the basic values and institutional arrangements that form the foundations of the American polity. In particular, we identify four key norms now in jeopardy: *democracy*, including fair elections; *the rule of law*, including constitutional checks and balances; respect for *rights* of all persons; and commitments to fundamental norms of fairness and *justice*. In a stunning departure from past presidents of both parties, the new president rarely affirms these foundational norms; his “America First” inaugural speech did not mention *any* of these core values or institutional norms.

Moreover, the president’s actions have mirrored his corrosive rhetoric. The new administration’s policies, some simply proposed but many already enacted, threaten: to muffle the press; to stifle free speech; to discriminate openly on grounds of race, religion or country of origin; to denigrate women; to condone arbitrary violence; to challenge the legitimacy of federal judges; to undermine the integrity of the electoral process by lying and disseminating rumors in routine disregard for factual truth; and to stoke fears about national security threats in order to bypass or trample institutional processes long viewed as essential to constitutional governance. In terms of policy effectiveness, most experts predict that the administration’s policies will exacerbate economic inequalities and harm the most vulnerable, strain relations with allies critical to U.S. welfare and world stability, and increase rather than mitigate vulnerability to terrorist attacks. The recent ban on travel by people from predominantly Muslim nations and other refugees in particular is as unsound in its policy logic as in its reckless violation of basic constitutional principles.

Policies can be reversed or at least revised, though. The deeper and more lasting damage is to the core infrastructure that is critical to the possibilities for democracy and justice. The palpable erosion of democratic institutions, practices, and norms is neither entirely new nor exclusively a product of the nascent administration. Indeed, much of our teaching and research has addressed how enduring inequalities have long compromised democratic promises and excluded large

segments of our population from meaningful opportunities for equal participation. The modes of overt racism and sexism that politicians now display openly are hardly novel in our history. But the sheer scale of the new administration's derision toward vulnerable citizens, distortion of demonstrable facts, dismissal of science, undermining of democratic norms, and disdain for legal processes has demonstrated a threat to civilized practices and principles that is unparalleled in the last half century, at least.

The manifestations and impacts of these radical shifts at the national level are inciting and licensing corrosive, harmful relations at every level of our society, including on the University of Washington campus. Incidents of hateful speech, racist invective, intolerance for religious minorities, bullying, and physical violence have become more common in recent months. The perpetrators of this violence borrow from national – including white nationalist— discourse designed to strike fear in other students, making the most vulnerable among us feel more unwelcome, unequal, and unsafe. Some undergraduates, graduate students, and even faculty in our own department have been threatened for speaking out. The result is that, just as political civility and respectful dialogue necessary to democracy have deteriorated, so too have our cultural commitments to comity been seriously ravaged. These developments imperil free exchange, rigorous inquiry, enlightened thought, and respect for diversity in our campus community. Universities have always been havens for privilege, but they can and should also promote egalitarian inclusion. Recent developments have upset this complex tension, threatening to elevate the standing of more powerful groups over those who have been the casualties of unequal social power relations.

We conclude by making clear our position on matters that, we think, have been muddied by much recent discourse. We support the constitutional right to free speech but recognize that platitudes regarding a marketplace of ideas oversimplify the challenge of advancing meaningful exchanges of ideas. Like all markets, our public spaces, physical and virtual, are structured by and expressive of highly unequal power, including deeply rooted racial, gender, religious, and economic hierarchies that long have marked our society. Those who lie or insult to inflict harm may be legally protected, but they can also silence competing voices through intimidation. These actions do serious damage, to individuals and civic culture, and thus must not go unchallenged by citizens committed to truth, equality, and justice.

As analysts of democracy, as policy experts, as classroom teachers, and as public intellectuals, we commit our knowledge and voices to exposing, naming, and challenging all manifestations of injustice and intimidation, falsehood and fraud, that use legal freedom for cover. We will be unrelenting in identifying the harms that such acts impose on democratic possibilities, a just legal system, and the community committed to educational quality and intellectual integrity for which our campus is famous.

What took so many years to build, locally and nationally, can be undone all too quickly. Sustaining, much less expanding and improving, democratic forms of governance requires deep commitment and constant vigilance. We must not and will not be intimidated; we will continue to speak out.

George Lovell
Michael McCann
Jim Caporaso
John Wilkerson
Christine Di Stefano
Sean Butorac
Mathieu Dubeau
Emily Kalah Gade
Emily Christensen
Megan Ming Francis
Christopher Parker
Bree Bang-Jensen
Milli Lake
Ellis Goldberg
Jonathan C. Beck
Ellen Ahlness
Sebastian Mayer
Jared Stewart
Amanda M. Fulmer
Filiz Kahraman
David Lucas
Vanessa Quince
Erin Adam
Nora Webb Williams
Rebecca Thorpe
Jamie Mayerfeld
Mark Smith
Jack Turner
Joel Migdal
Anna Zelenz
Riddhi Mehta-Neugebauer
Elizabeth Chrun
Chelsea Moore

Jeffrey Arnold
Rachel Cichowski
Jennifer Noveck
Elizabeth Kier
Jon Mercer
Stephen Winkler
Sarah K. Dreier
Jason Lambacher
Karen Litfin
Meredith Loken
Lance Bennett
Christianna Parr
Jeffrey Grove
Will Gochberg
Geoffrey Wallace
Travis Nelson
Laura Back
Steve Majeski
Susan Whiting
Sophia Jordán Wallace
Wesley Zuidema
Sabine Lang
Craig Thomas
Scott Radnitz
Walter Parker
Carolyn Dapper
Caterina Rost
Jennifer Driscoll
Kylie Clay
Calvin Garner
David Lopez
Carolina Johnson

*This statement does not represent an official position of the University of Washington Political Science Department. Rather, it was written by a small group of political scientists at UW and voluntarily endorsed by the listed signatories.