



Capitol Crackdown an Abuse of Power ACLU of WI Supports Citizens' Right to Silently Dissent and Document Government Activity in Galleries

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MADISON, WI – The citations issued during this legislative session by law enforcement to protesters holding signs and videotaping events at the Capitol represent another chapter in an almost year-long story of the suppression of citizens' access to government and the right to free expression and assembly, said the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin today.

"The arrests of peaceful demonstrators in Capitol hearing rooms and galleries bring public attention to the ongoing abuses of power in our state government," said ACLU of Wisconsin Executive Director Christopher Ahmuty. "And while rules against flash photography and other disruptions may be sensible, the authorities have turned an interpretation of rules into a tool to suppress individuals' rights to videotape and document our government's activities. Whether people are videotaping a hearing or documenting arrests by police, a ban on non-disruptive video and camera use makes no sense in the 21st century."

"There is no doubt the legislature has a legitimate interest in conducting its business efficiently," said ACLU of Wisconsin Legal Director Larry Dupuis, "but the Constitution demands that First Amendment activity receives the highest degree of protection. It is hard to see how a ban on silently holding signs or peacefully recording activity in Capitol galleries or hearing rooms is necessary to the efficient operation of the legislature. The mere fact that legislators find criticism and transparency inconvenient does not justify the suppression of speech and the gathering of information by Wisconsinites."

Dupuis said that our country and the State of Wisconsin have always been committed to protecting political dissent to the greatest possible extent. He points to the Supreme Court decision in *Terminiello v. Chicago* which stated that "speech is often provocative and challenging. It may strike at prejudices and preconceptions and have profound unsettling effects... [T]he alternative would lead to standardization of ideas either by legislatures, courts or dominant political or community groups."

Wisconsinites who care about the First Amendment should contact their legislators and demand modernization of Capitol photography rules and an end to suppression of silent, peaceful

protest in the galleries of the “People’s House.” The ACLU of Wisconsin will also continue, as it has in the past, to dispatch trained legal observers to document announced demonstrations, as resources permit. The next legal observer training in Madison will be on November 16th – contact (608) 469-5540 to find out how to volunteer.

For updates on what civil libertarians in Wisconsin can do to stop the abuse of power, visit our [webpage](#), like us on [Facebook](#) or follow us on Twitter [@ACLUofWisconsin](#) and [@ACLUMadison](#). Read more news and opinion on civil liberties in Wisconsin on the [Forward for Liberty](#) blog. The ACLU of Wisconsin has approximately 6,500 members who support its efforts to defend the civil liberties and civil rights of all Wisconsin residents.

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