

*Freedom of Speech Keeps Our Republic Whole*

As someone who was born and raised in the United States, I have always been afforded certain rights and liberties including freedom of speech. Many Americans, myself included, take this right for granted at times. The First Amendment guarantees freedoms concerning religion, assembly, speech, press, and the right to petition. The rights protected by the First Amendment allow citizens to enact change within the government and preserve the republic by ensuring that sovereignty remains with the people.

The most basic right in the First Amendment is freedom of speech. If our First Amendment right was a flower, speech would be the stem, with the other rights being the petals supported by that stem. Freedom of speech is essential for all of our other rights to be effective. We are allowed, with certain limitations, to say whatever we want. Speech is a powerful tool. Speech allows people to share their opinions, on any given topic, whether they be positive, negative or unorthodox. The right to freedom of speech, allows us to discuss and form ideas that otherwise might be kept under wraps. Freedom of speech allows people to hear opinions from many different sources and to think for themselves. This is key to having a fair republic because without freedom of speech, the public would have less access to information. As a result, the public would be less educated and less able to make informed decisions when voting. That is dangerous because choosing the wrong representatives can have serious consequences for everyone.

The right to petition is one of the oldest rights, dating back 800 years to the Magna Carta. Its age implicates its importance. Petitions are still common today with an entire website being dedicated to creating petitions and obtaining signatures. Petitions have power. They communicate an issue and prove that there is a collection of people backing it. Documents similar to petitions can be used to allow a candidate who was not on the ballot to be written in. Petitions are powerful communication tools, they allow the public to directly communicate an issue and its magnitude to a representative. Freedom of speech allows people to share ideas and information about new petitions so that larger groups can come together and have greater influence on decisions about important issues. Petitioning is how we keep control, in a sense. Assembly is also a valuable communication tool, but it too would be ineffective without the freedom of speech. Silent assemblies would do little to educate or influence others. Similar to the right to petition, freedom of assembly allows people to demonstrate to their representatives

their issues and illustrate the scale of their effect. Protests and demonstrations can be used to help get a message beyond a specific affected community and into the broader public's awareness. Once the wider public is aware of an issue, action can be taken to resolve it. By having such powerful tools, people are able to enact change in the government.

Freedom of the press is powerful in its own right. By having an open press, issues that might otherwise be covered up can be shared with the public. This also allows for people to be informed on certain things that they might have never otherwise known about. An effective media that has freedom of speech can ask important questions and critique our government officials, acting as a further check on the government's powers. The press can bring issues to light and the viewers are able to act according to their beliefs. Honest journalism is key to having an educated public. The press can also help with education on the actions and intentions of representatives, which can be crucial to an individual's voting decisions.

The United States government is heavily based on the decisions of representatives elected by the people. If people want political action to take place, they must vote carefully. Voting carefully means educating oneself on the available candidates, but you can not educate yourself if information is being suppressed. This is where the importance of our First Amendment rights comes in. Between freedom of speech, assembly, petition, and press; citizens can easily find a plethora of valuable information on candidates and current issues in the government both local and federal. To maintain a fair republic, the public must be educated and representatives must be chosen carefully, otherwise people will be unhappy and civil unrest could ensue. Education and awareness would not be possible without our First Amendment rights, and without education and awareness our republic would fall apart or be taken down.

When people know that they are free to speak against their government, free to assemble and petition for change and when they believe the press will do its part to offer honest and fair information about what their government is doing, they are much less likely to revolt in a violent way. Citizens being heard and feeling like they have the ability to change things without resorting to violence is the main protection against such violence. Because of that, it is essential that our government resist its own temptation, to censor or control speech. Ironically, enacting such measures will increase the likelihood of a violent revolt that would undermine any government much more than the criticism it would censor. Our Founding Fathers

understood these important concepts and that is why the First Amendment was the very first one that was included in the Bill of Rights.