AN OPEN LETTER REGARDING ACADEMIC FREEDOM

June 9, 2011

Chancellor Biddy Martin
University of Wisconsin, Madison
500 Lincoln Drive
Madison, WI 53706-1380

Dear Chancellor Martin,

The American Political Science Association has been following with keen interest the complex issues surrounding the use of state open records laws to gain access to the private correspondence of university faculty. The records request relating to professor William Cronon is illustrative of these issues. We write in appreciation and endorsement of your response to the request, and of your statement to the campus community.

The political science community overlaps widely with that of historians. We work closely with the American Historical Association, for which Professor Cronon is president-elect. The protection of robust academic freedom and ensuring the existence of what you call a “zone of privacy within which to conduct and protect” research work are values shared across the scholarly community, and we wish to add our affirmation of these values to statements made by the American Historical Association and other scholarly societies.

We are not troubled by the fact of an open-records request in itself; we are strong supporters of the public’s right to know what its government is doing and consider open-records laws to be a valuable democratic instrument. Nevertheless, we are troubled that the request for Professor Cronon's records can only realistically be understood as an attempt to read the private e-mail of university faculty as a means to chill political discussion or to discourage participation in vigorous public debate by faculty.

The only appropriate response is yours—to speak loudly and clearly, as you have, about academic freedom, about protecting the space for scholarly discourse, and about complying with public responsibilities, while respecting and valuing laws about freedom of information. Thank you for your voice and leadership.

Yours sincerely,

Carole Pateman, President
American Political Science Association