

THE STATE PROGRAMS IN THE HUMANITIES

A WHITE PAPER

Office of State Programs

National Endowment for the Humanities

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This white paper describes the circumstances which require the conduct of programs in each state designed to share the substance and methods of the humanities with the public. The paper argues that the state programs should play a clearly defined role in an overall plan for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and that the plan should be based on a careful analysis of the current condition of the humanities in each state and in the nation. The state humanities program should be focused on projects serving the adult population, and should carry the enthusiastic endorsement of the National Endowment. A number of specific suggestions are made that would facilitate and strengthen the work of the state humanities committees, including the development of a continuing process of evaluation.

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The Context of the State Humanities Programs

The state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities began as an experiment in a context that has not fundamentally changed in the seven years since the program began--except for the increasing impact of the program itself. The Endowment made certain assumptions in 1970 that continue to be valid today; features of the program designed in response to those assumptions continue to be necessary and effective features today. The Endowment assumes that:

- the fundamental knowledge of people and society contained in the humanities is not adequately understood or accessible to society at large;
- no substantial sum of money anywhere in the nation, either in the public or private sectors, is dedicated to making the humanities available and useful to the adult out-of-school public;
- the scholar in the humanities can share the methods and substance of the humanities disciplines with the public, but neither the scholar nor the public generally understand this to be true;

- the national life is impoverished and the quality of life is endangered by the lack of continuing intercourse between scholars in the humanities and the public on matters of long-term concern;
- neither the public nor the scholars will participate in a program that appears to lie outside their interests, to be frivolous or inconsequential;
- there remains unfulfilled a recurring hope for American education, a hope expressed by Jefferson, the Lyceum and Chautauqua movements, and by a portion of modern adult education policy: that there would be new resources and projects in the humanities serving the adult public not formally in school.

The Endowment's state program, then, began in this context. It began with nothing but raw material and the idea of the program. There was no identifiable constituency for the humanities in the public sector. Apart from institutions which understood their relationship to the public in terms of very specific definitions (e.g., museums and public libraries), there existed no institution, organization, or group dedicated to creating bridges between the academic world of the humanities and the out-of-school public. There was no pre-existing, broadly-based entity in each state that could be used to create and carry out a humanities program for the general public.

The Endowment, therefore, helped create in each state an organization devoted to one encompassing but clearly articulated task: increasing public understanding and appreciation of the humanities. There are now 1100 persons serving on state committees, and thousands more former committee members, familiar with the goals of the program, its strengths and weaknesses, and its unique position in American life. There are tens of thousands of individuals who have served in the planning and implementation of state committee-sponsored projects.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the state program is an unparalleled contemporary achievement based on voluntarism and private energy. Without belaboring aggregate statistics, the achievement of the program can be measured by noting the creation of a public constituency which, for the first time in American history, expects service from the humanities, and expects to have a program speak for it within the state and nationally. The success can be measured also by the number of scholars who have an enlarged vision of what their role in society might be. This new vision appears to have been provided to many at just that moment in the development of American graduate education when it is sorely needed and widely sought.

Nevertheless, the need for a program based in each state, responsive to state and local proposals, and dedicated to making links between the humanities and the public, is manifest every day and in every community.

The evidence of that need, in the absence of the state humanities program, includes:

- The difficulty experienced by every state's citizens when seeking humanities programs outside of educational institutions;
- Recent uncertainty about the value of formal education in the humanities;
- Public unfamiliarity with the ideas, perspectives, and methods of history, literature, philosophy, etc.;
- The negligible level of private or state support for public humanities programming;
- The fact that the public does not link history, literature, philosophy, jurisprudence, ethics, as part of a single national resource;
- The fact that the state programs of the Endowment are the only programs of their kind in the nation;
- The dramatic underutilization of existing humanities resources by the public;
- The absence of clear coordination of programs in the humanities at the local, state, and national levels to insure the most efficient and effective allocation and use of humanities resources.

The Basis for Planning for the State Program

This paper is based on the assumption that the National Endowment for the Humanities will act as a national leader and advocate for the humanities. The Endowment's role is not to be the director of national efforts in the humanities, but to support and encourage worthy existing and proposed efforts; to provide a catalyst for new developments and new cooperative arrangements among persons, institutions, and organizations active in the humanities; and to provide direct and indirect support of all of the areas prescribed by legislation and Congressional intent.

In order to carry out these roles, the Endowment needs to understand the current condition of the humanities in the nation. A survey of current resources devoted to the humanities, public and private, state by state, is essential to the development of a plan for agency activity in the future. This survey would also be extremely useful to many groups outside of the Federal government in their planning efforts. The survey information is essential to any advocacy, state or federal, for increased governmental support of the humanities.

Until the survey is complete, and as an interim strategy, the Endowment, and particularly the Chairman, should more actively encourage greater government understanding of the nature and significance of the humanities. We should advocate increased state and local support of all humanities

activity, including the activity of the state committees. Support by state and local governments need not be limited to financial support. The governor and legislature of every state, for example, give priceless assistance to their state committee simply by understanding its purpose, by referring potential applicants to it, by taking part in regrants, and by valuing the activities of this group of citizens.

State Committee Structure, Program, and the Law

The 1976 reauthorizing legislation envisages autonomous state committees that determine independently what sort of humanities program they should establish for the citizens of their states. The legislation authorizes the committees to carry out any program that the Endowment could carry out; the committees are not limited to either the past programs or to the programs currently in existence within NEH. The legislation, therefore, has created the potential for 55 atomistic efforts, unrelated to each other or to the Endowment except through a common source of funds and common interest in the humanities. One state might offer support of scholarly research, one emphasize media production, still another grants to strengthen the secondary curriculum in the humanities.

Fifty-five atomistic programs mark one end of a spectrum. Another extreme might be an effort to limit the focus of state programs by amendment of the legislation. Somewhere in between would be efforts to give special focus to the state programs by means of NEH policies or by means of persuasion on substantive grounds. The Endowment might support or lead

an effort to amend the law if it concluded that a coherent and complementary relationship with other agency programs required a clearly defined focus for state committee efforts.

The possibility of 55 atomistic efforts would appear to have Congressional sanction. The legislative history, at least insofar as it reflects the thinking of the Senate committee, implies a pass-through program in which the recipients are free to make their own programmatic decisions--as is the case with revenue-sharing, CETA funds, or HUD's Community Development Block Grants. Federal (i.e., agency) guidelines could still be used for such a program, and would seem to have public and Congressional support as protections against waste, so long as the guidelines were reasonable and easy to understand.

A pass-through program would involve distribution of funds to the state committees by formula, and a redesigned Endowment state program staff. That redesigned staff would be concerned with mechanical matters primarily; travel would be less important; and there would be some tempering of Congressional and public expectation with respect to Endowment responsibility for state committee activity. A pass-through program might be established whether the committees remain private groups, as at present, or become state agencies, or represent some mix of the two.

The great strength of 55 distinct programs can be associated with the values of decentralization. The great weaknesses can as well. Although decentralization was enthusiastically embraced as a panacea for the ills of bureaucracy a few years ago, it is being re-evaluated by this administration, especially to determine what kinds of programs are truly well-suited to this structure.

With a relatively limited Federal budget for the humanities, one dollar out of five should not be cast upon the waters. If nothing else, 55 self-directed entities are potentially inefficient. The inefficiency may be a cost offset by advantages, such as committee autonomy, but this paper does not advance that conclusion. A fundamental agency plan, in which the state programs play a part that is essentially not duplicative of other Endowment programs, makes better sense for the Endowment than a pass-through state program. A national plan makes better sense politically and substantively, particularly in terms of the most effective use of Federal dollar to support the humanities.

The current program is at an intermediate place on the spectrum bounded by complete programmatic autonomy and legislative program definition. The state programs are presently engaged almost exclusively in support of projects which are designed for an adult, out-of-school audience, and which attempt to make links between the humanities and issues of general public interest and concern. The rationale for this approach is in part the theory that a diverse public is attracted to programs on issues

of general concern, and, if these programs are humanities programs, the incremental effect will be to increase public understanding and appreciation of the humanities. Even more basic, the program assumes that the humanities have an important contribution to make directly to the general public, as well as indirectly through the research and education programs elsewhere in the Endowment. This assumption of the value of direct public contact is not reflected in any other funding agency, public or private, in this, or to our knowledge, any other nation. It should be noted by way of contrast, that all arts activities (save only the creative process) are public activities.

Most committees are now reviewing their programs and the possibilities for new program designs for their states. The cautious committee response to "liberation" from Endowment policy constraints is a reflection of several factors: the committees are made up of responsible citizens; these citizens are engaged in work of the program because they accept its basic premises; and alternative programs bring with them considerable complications of administration and of basic equity. A committee considering the granting of fellowships, for example, must consider how it will judge applications, and whether or not the benefits of such a program would be out-weighed by difficulty in explaining why one sort of fellowship project is acceptable when another is not.

The likelihood is that the cautious first steps taken by state committees will, over time, produce 55 very different programs. As states experience

success with new programs, they will expand them. As more powerful constituencies are aroused in the state, they will begin to shape committee programs. Finally, because the persons serving on the committees obviously shape the program, with or without clear guidance from the Endowment, we can expect even greater diversity of focus as committee membership changes.

In the context of limited Federal dollars to support the humanities, therefore, it seems reasonable to attempt to amend the legislation in order to focus state committee grant-making. The suggested amendment is based on common sense and retains a very substantial range of possibilities for committee choice.

We suggest amendment to limit state committee grant-making to projects designed for the benefit of adults, chiefly those not in school.

The proposed limit would prevent direct duplication of almost all present NEH programs. The exceptions might be small museum and historical organization grants, grants in public radio, and some activities in public libraries.

In the interval before legislative amendment, the Endowment should articulate its rationale for this focus, perhaps in another Council paper. The weight of such a paper would depend in large measure on the cogency of the argument, but the paper would be welcomed by the committees as an expression of how the Endowment regards such policies as focus on

the adult out-of-school public and support of projects on basic social problems. The paper would not be an expression of policy, but an articulation and amplification of the National Council's judgment on these matters.

Office of State Programs Staffing

The state program involves at least this many elements:

- large sums of Federal and private money
- volunteers and voluntary activity
- scholars in the humanities from institutions of all sizes and shapes
- private citizens from the corporate, labor, and agricultural worlds; professionals; civic leaders; patrons of the arts; local and state politicians; representatives of educational and cultural institutions
- relations with state and local institutions and organizations
- relations with local, state, and federal governments
- relations with arts activities, federal and state
- knowledge of the Endowment's other programs.

The proper staff for this program is critical and always has been.

In January of 1972, John Barcroft described the staffing circumstances of the state program. His summary seems as valid today:

Staffing, both in terms of number and in terms of quality is going to be a serious long-term problem. This is not a cheap program to run. If we are going to have these groups develop in a way that is compatible with the national objectives of the agency, and is of good quality in itself, we have to have enough staff in the program so that each state-based group really has good liaison with the agency. Our rough rule of thumb is that a staff person can handle ten states. So number of staff are really important. More important is kind of staff. I really do believe that unless the staff can convey conviction about this endeavor, we have to wrap it up. That means we are looking for the exceptional person who ideally meets the following criteria:

- 1) he or she believes in and understands the academic humanist;
- 2) he or she believes in programs aimed at the public (what some of my snottier friends in academia like to drily call "the folk;")
- 3) he or she believes the humanities have something to contribute to public understanding of real concerns of the society;
- 4) he or she believes that groups within the states can be at least as smart about figuring all this out as a NEH staff member or Council member can be. Beyond this, it would be nice if the person were articulate, personable, not particularly personally acquisitive, and absolutely hard-nosed and analytical about the substance and procedures in this program--so that he or she can't fall into the trap of thinking that intentions are results.

There are several factors that will have an impact on improving the quality of state committee grants. They include peer comparison and evaluation (through shared information among state committees), sharper competition for grants, increased public and scholarly understanding of the program, and close relationships with the Endowment. The latter can only be achieved through a staff of sufficient numbers and of exceptional quality. The Endowment staff must be committed to the humanities and extremely

sensitive to the political context of each committee and of the Endowment. This work cannot be accomplished with junior people.

State Committee Programs and Endowment Programs

For the proposed legislative limitation to programs designed for an adult public to be deliberate, the Endowment will want to consider its other programs and their adequacy as sources of support for humanities activities in every state. For example, a state committee is pressed to support traditional scholarly work if the Endowment has no record of support for such work in the state. A state committee cannot in conscience refer an applicant to NEH if the pattern of NEH grant-making over the past decade has shown no significant number of awards to the state's scholars. Some state committees, to cite another example, are not satisfied with the scope and amount of current NEH programs in elementary education, but they would prefer to see the NEH take a greater role in this field rather than allocating their limited resources to compensate for a perceived inadequacy in Endowment programming.

Limiting the use of Endowment dollars to programs for the adult public would be well received to the extent that committees would welcome the development of a plan for a national effort in the humanities within which the committees had a clearly defined and capacious part. Politically, the presence of a comprehensive plan would make "restriction" seem a logical aspect of a carefully thought-out national effort. The plan

would also aid committees in resisting pressures to spend their money with the traditional constituencies (colleges and universities) for traditional programs (such as research), and instead support them as they remain a unique source of funds for humanities activity which would not otherwise be possible.

The role of the state committees, whether defined by the proposed limitations or left as general as the present legislation, would be enhanced if the Endowment had some method of systematic consultation with the committees.

The Endowment has occasionally been asked by Congress whether such a consultative procedure was in place, and we have acknowledged the existence of an ad hoc group, but this group was focused primarily on state committee activities, such as the agenda for a national meeting. Our present recommendation is that a method be devised to obtain systematic consultation with representatives of state committees. We do not want to seek advice when we do not want to guarantee that we will take it, and establishing policy for the whole Endowment involves more dimensions than the perspectives of state programs alone can provide. Nevertheless, state committee perspectives are unique and often imaginative, and should be sought in a systematic way.

One means would be the occasional solicitation of comment from chairmen and executive directors on new programs or policies. This would be quite different in tone from the mandatory period for comment required

of regulatory agencies, but the solitication would give evidence of the agency's eagerness to understand state opinions. The file of these opinions would also provide a valuable record for future questions regarding agency responsiveness to state opinion.

State Committees and Other Humanities Activity in the State

The state committees were created in the first instance as a means to provide public humanities programs in the states. The chief interest of committee members has always been the process of deciding upon applications. The mechanics of the program and the challenge of creating bridges between the academy and the public have completely absorbed the attention and energy of the committee members. They have only recently begun to raise private funds with vigor, with their efforts strengthened by the record of accomplishment they have created to date with Federal funds. But there is still more the committees might do.

They are potentially a great resource in the conduct of several activities related to an over-all agency plan. Committees could be encouraged to seek more opportunities to act as a broker and coordinator of humanities activities. A sense of common interest is not well developed among museums, historical organizations, public libraries, literary societies, and so on. Co-sponsorship of projects has created some mutual interests, and committees have sometimes brought these institutions together to

discuss their relationship to public humanities programming. More such catalytic work is natural for the committees, as is their encouragement of such organizations and institutions to see themselves as constituents of the NEH and as sharing an important role in making the humanities available to the public.

Accountability in the State Program

The forms of accountability for a state agency are familiar to Congress and to the public. Governors and other state elected officials are accountable to the public through the ballot, and public dissatisfaction with the operation of a state agency can be expressed in a number of familiar ways, including through the courts. The citizens' committees in the humanities, on the other hand, are accountable to the NEH. While the state committees are not accountable politically through state government mechanisms, they conduct their business in accord with NEH guidelines and Congressional intent, in a reasonable and open manner. So long as the committees act responsibly the question of their structural relationship to systems of accountability is unlikely to be raised.

The Endowment should prepare a paper for distribution to the state committees on the subject of accountability within the state program. The paper should supplement the advice given by the National Council in the fall of 1976 in response to the new legislation, and explain why

the subject is of critical importance. It should suggest means and objectives for committee operations that appear reasonable and responsive to legitimate public concern. The paper should be straightforward and systematic. It should probably stand as advice to the committees, and not as mandatory policy. It needs to be sufficiently detailed to go beyond the implicit objectives of the provisions of the legislation, but not so specific as to imply that only one procedure will answer reasonable public expectation.

Program Purpose, Committee Structure, and State Agencies

The only substantive considerations affecting committee structure have to do with defining program purpose. If the purpose of the state program is simply to make money available to the states in support of the humanities, then perhaps either a specifically designed state humanities agency or a citizens' committee will serve. On the other hand, state agencies are part of the bureaucratic structure of state government, and responsive to changes in state administrations in a way that citizens' committees are not.

Ties to the state's bureaucratic structure are advantageous in terms of accountability to the state government. They are disadvantageous in terms of flexibility, economy, and focus, when compared to a private, single-purpose group. In fiscal terms alone, a state agency has more complex forms, systems, procedures, and thus higher overhead, than does a citizen's committee.

The membership of the committees at present is hostile to considerations of momentary political advantage or position. Committees, sometimes stubbornly, will take on projects they judge to be of pressing interest and of sufficient quality, despite a clear sense that the state government might prefer that the issue lie dormant, or that one point of view be emphasized.

State committees are now subject to the direct lobbying of humanities interest groups--libraries, museums, archives, secondary and post-secondary education--but they are not obligated to these constituencies in the way that a state agency would be. The structure of the current committees is such that most interest groups either have, or can obtain, representation on the committees, but that membership creates a situation when decisions are made that is radically different from the situation that prevails when an agency of state government is deciding on possible support for another agency of state government, with the members of both agencies tied in direct ways to the same appointing officials and both serve as part of the same administration. Note that there is every likelihood that state governments would move to abolish or consolidate humanities councils into other, more inclusive state agencies (e.g., the Department of Cultural Affairs in North Carolina) if the government found one state agency funding another. At that point, because there is not yet a strong public constituency for the humanities, we could reasonably expect the impact of our money to be dissipated under pressure from stronger, better focused interests.

To put this distinction another way, a state agency is responsive to the state administration. The citizens' committee is responsive to its applicants. Both distinctions are high order generalizations, of course, but both can be easily exemplified in the operation of a state humanities program. If our legislation is amended to focus the state program on the adult out-of-school public, then we can expect this goal to be more directly sought, on the average, by a citizens' committee than by a state agency. It is reasonable to expect that a state agency would explore how this legislative goal to serve the public might be met while also serving the different priorities the state may have set for itself in education or in the humanities. The state might, to take a current example, be stressing vocational education. NEH legislation would accommodate such an emphasis to some extent, and the state agency might then set out to serve both the state and federal program goals--rather than petitioning the Endowment to develop a program to meet the need.

The citizens' committee, on the other hand, exists to serve the goals of the program. It has no other general allegiance or obligation. We see today the state committees persisting, even after reconsideration, to devote the largest part of their money to public humanities programs. This is so not because the Endowment has insisted on this preference, but because the committee members think it is a worthwhile and sensible use of the money.

On balance, the Endowment can be more assured that (1) the humanities, and (2) national humanities policy as articulated in Endowment legislation will be served with single-mindedness through grants to citizens' committees than it can through grants to state agencies. For these reasons primarily, the agency should prefer the citizen's committee structure, and work to preserve it. Other reasons to support the current structure include the facts that:

- there are 51 mechanisms for citizen decisions about humanities programs already in place;
- state committees are proud of their achievement and willing to defend it;
- the program is experimental, and has not been in existence long enough to evaluate with satisfaction;
- the committees build on the peculiar strength of American voluntarism.

Endowment Support of the State Committees and Their Programs

The Endowment should adopt a policy designed to give national support to the committees and to the program concept itself. For example, the Chairman, Division Directors, and others of the staff who are called upon to speak publicly about the agency should include references, with pride, to the state committees. Selected regrants of the state

committees should be publicized nationally, through the efforts of PIO and/or special consultants employed for a year or more with the assignment of increasing agency "visibility." The OSP should contract for the design of a logo for the program that would be required in all state program regrant publicity. A brochure describing the state program should be developed for automatic distribution with other materials sent in response to public inquiry. State committee chairmen should be invited to take part in or be guests at Endowment events such as openings of exhibitions, special conferences, and the Jefferson Lecture and banquet.

Evaluation of the State Program

A procedure for continuous evaluation of the program should be instituted as soon as possible. No such continuous program has yet been established, with the consequence that the record of six or seven years of activity is scattered and incomparable. With a specific purpose for the program, its activities can be measured against the goals implied by the purpose.

A continuous evaluation should be supplemented by regular retrospective analysis. The first such analysis should coincide with the program's 10th anniversary in 1981. The first retrospective analysis should begin in that year, and report on ten years of regranting. It is critical, of course, to begin analysis immediately, or else no base will have been

established against which to measure change.

Several reviewers, as well as countless members of the public, have commented that the program was unlike anything else in their acquaintance, and have asked if we could provide a descriptive book or essay on the program's history and accomplishments. No such history is in existence, but we should contract for one in the near future. The contract might also coincide with the 10th anniversary of the program, although it should be separate from the evaluation mentioned earlier. The purpose of the history would be to set out the sources, growth, and evolution of this remarkable experiment. It would be a record, analogous to the Endowment's annual reports, of method and substance. It should be a narrative on such subjects as committee membership, staff, regrant activities, regrant sponsors, successes and failures. Such a history would be a public service if for no other reason than to record how nearly 100 million dollars will have been spent through an unparalleled national effort carried out by volunteer citizens' committees.

The Political Obligations of the State Programs

The agency should assist the committees in understanding their political circumstances--their opportunities and their obligations. At present, the law clearly states that committees are obliged to keep state government informed of their activities. As the committees strengthen their roles to include service in addition to grant-making, then the political

obligation of state and national support of all worthwhile efforts in the humanities, including the Endowment, will seem inevitable and understandable.

In an ideal circumstance, each state committee would be in existence in order to realize the interest of its members in support of humanities projects and activities in its state. Critical to this circumstance would be the explicit perception that the Endowment is a resource to the committee--not exclusively the other way around. In an ideal circumstance, the state committees would conceive of their role as free-standing, with perhaps less than a majority of their funds coming from the Endowment's Office of State Programs. Such committees would aggressively seek private, corporate, and foundation funds in order to support the committee's programs, and while they might conduct an imaginative and extensive program for adults with NEH money, they might simultaneously be publishing a magazine with paid advertising, and conducting a secondary school curricular project with foundation grant funds.

The long-term health of the state program is clearly dependent upon a defined purpose, a secure structure, and a sense of independent commitment to the humanities. Only in the short run is it possible to ask committees to consider the welfare of the Endowment as a favor to the Endowment. Only in the short run will that favor be extended, especially if the Endowment seems interested in the state programs only on

anniversary dates marked by Congressional hearings on appropriation and authorization. Once assured of a purpose and a procedure, the committees must make their own record of accomplishment and earn the kind of respect and satisfaction that they seek. No amount of Endowment effort can have much impact on a lethargic committee made up of members of limited energy, imagination, and pride. The Endowment can, however, define a place for the program in a national plan and provide a staff of sufficient size and exemplary qualifications, thus creating some of the circumstances with which the state committees can work to establish a record of accomplishments.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes the following recommendations regarding the future of the state humanities programs:

1. The state humanities programs should have a distinct role within an overall agency plan. (pp. 8, 13)
2. The agency should limit the mission of state programs to support of projects benefiting out-of-school adults. This should be accomplished either through amendment to the authorizing legislation or other mechanisms. (p. 10)
3. The agency should undertake a study of all of the resources currently dedicated to the humanities. (p. 5)
4. The agency should encourage increased State government participation in all humanities activities within the state, and should explore possibilities for local government participation as well. (pp. 5-6)
5. The agency should continue to provide a program staff that is senior, experienced, and capable of skilled and timely service to the agency and the state committees. (pp. 12-13)
6. The agency should develop a mechanism whereby the advice of the state committees is systematically sought as one contribution to overall agency policy planning. (p. 14)

7. The agency should encourage state committees to facilitate cooperation among existing humanities agencies. (pp. 15-16)
8. The agency should develop guidelines on the subject of accountability and the state programs. (pp. 16-17)
9. The agency should attempt to preserve the committees as private, non-governmental organizations. (p. 20)
10. The agency should develop strategies to increase the visibility of the state program and to provide continuous support to the effort at the national level. (This is not a reference to budget.) (pp. 20-21)
11. The agency should develop an evaluation program that is (1) continuous, and (2) capable of producing retrospective assessment, the first to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the program. (p. 21)
12. The agency should contract for a history of the state programs, and develop a plan for its dissemination. (p. 22)
13. The agency should encourage the development in state committees of an understanding of their political circumstances and of their political obligations and opportunities. (p. 22)