

No. 23-74

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In The  
**Supreme Court of the United States**

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DEBRA A. VITAGLIANO,

*Petitioner,*

v.

COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER,

*Respondent.*

—◆—  
**On Petition For A Writ Of Certiorari  
To The United States Court Of Appeals  
For The Second Circuit**

—◆—  
**BRIEF AMICUS CURIAE OF  
CHRISTIAN LEGAL SOCIETY  
IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER**

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## QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Second Circuit erred in upholding Westchester County's selective exclusion law under the First Amendment, both on its face and as applied to Petitioner.
2. If *Hill v. Colorado*, 530 U.S. 703 (2000), permits enforcement of this law, whether *Hill* should be limited or overruled.

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**INTEREST OF *AMICUS CURIAE*<sup>1</sup>**

**Christian Legal Society** (“CLS”) believes that pluralism, which is essential to a free society, prospers only when the First Amendment rights of all Americans are protected, regardless of the current popularity of their beliefs, expression, and assembly. CLS is an association of Christian attorneys, law students, and law professors, with student chapters at approximately 160 public and private law schools. Like many religious and other groups, CLS relies on the First Amendment rights of assembly and speech to protect and advance core beliefs and ideas.

**SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT**

The Westchester County law challenged here abridges constitutionally protected speech and assembly, and this Court should reverse the lower court’s decision concluding otherwise. This case also presents another opportunity<sup>2</sup> for the Court to reconsider its decision in *Hill v. Colorado*, 530 U.S. 703 (2000). Because *Hill* stands in deep tension with longstanding First

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Rule 37.6, no counsel for a party authored this brief in whole or in part, nor did any person or entity, other than *amicus* and its counsel, make a monetary contribution to the preparation or submission of this brief. Counsel of record received timely notice of the intent to file this brief under Rule 37.2.

<sup>2</sup> *McCullen v Coakley*, 573 U.S. 464 (2014). “One-on-one communication” and “[l]eafletting \* \* \* on matters of public concern are classic forms of speech that lie at the heart of the First Amendment.” *Id.* at 488-489.



Amendment values and is an outlier in this Court’s jurisprudence, the case should be overruled.

This brief makes two arguments as to why both the Westchester County law and *Hill* offend the First Amendment. First, both violate the core of the public forum doctrine that is rooted in the right of assembly. Second, both conflict with the balance of this Court’s free speech jurisprudence, which recognizes the protections of the First Amendment for even emotionally charged expression directed toward possibly unreceptive listeners—protections that unquestionably extend to the peaceful civil discourse in the traditional public fora in *Hill* and by the petitioner in this case.

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## ARGUMENT

### **I. The County Law and *Hill v. Colorado* Violate the Core of the Public Forum Doctrine That Is Rooted in the Right of Assembly.**

The iconic image of a sidewalk protest epitomizes our “profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.” *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254, 270 (1964). That commitment is undermined by the County law, which indefinitely closes a public sidewalk to peaceful expressive activity in the absence of any exigent circumstances. A similar problem plagues this Court’s precedent in *Hill*. As Justice Kennedy explained in his dissent, *Hill* leaves unprotected core political expression conducted “in a

peaceful manner and on a profound moral issue, to a fellow citizen on a public sidewalk.” *Hill*, 530 U.S. at 765 (Kennedy, J., dissenting).

*Hill*'s analysis charts a course for government manipulation of the public forum to suppress unwanted expression. It exalts form over substance. As Laurence Tribe has observed, *Hill* is “slam-dunk simple and slam-dunk wrong.” Laurence Tribe, *quoted in Colloquium, Professor Michael W. McConnell's Response*, 28 Pepp. L. Rev. 747, 750 (2001). *See also* Kathleen M. Sullivan, *Sex, Money, and Groups: Free Speech and Association Decisions in the October 1999 Term*, 28 Pepp. L. Rev. 723, 737 (2001) (“*Hill* showed a striking readiness to accept the Colorado legislature’s effort to draw a facially neutral statute to achieve goals clearly targeting particular content.”). Three Justices have since recognized that intervening precedents have “all but interred” *Hill*'s analysis, leaving it “an aberration in [the Court’s] case law.” *City of Austin v. Reagan Nat’l Advert. of Austin, LLC*, 142 S. Ct. 1464, 1491, 1484 (2022) (Thomas, J., joined by Gorsuch & Barrett, JJ., dissenting). And the Court has observed that *Hill* was a “distort[ion]” of “First Amendment doctrines.” *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Org.*, 142 S. Ct. 2228, 2276 & n.65 (2022). And as Justice Kennedy also noted in his *Hill* dissent, the opinion “contradicts more than a half century of well-established First Amendment principles.” *Hill*, 530 U.S. at 765 (Kennedy, J., dissenting). In fact, the principles that *Hill* contradicts extend much earlier, to the genesis of the First Amendment.

One of the most famous precursors to the sidewalk protest involved the arrest and trial of William Penn. On August 14, 1670, Penn was arrested after delivering a sermon to Quakers gathered on Gracechurch Street in London. Irving Brant, *The Bill of Rights: Its Origin and Meaning* 55 (1965) (hereinafter, “Brant”). After one of the most celebrated trials in history, a jury acquitted Penn and another Quaker of the charge that their public worship constituted an unlawful assembly. *Id.* at 59.

News of Penn’s story was not contained to London—it played a pivotal role during the framing of the First Amendment. During the House debates over the language of the Bill of Rights, Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts criticized the proposed right of assembly as redundant in light of the freedom of speech: “If people freely converse together, they must assemble for that purpose; it is a self-evident, unalienable right which the people possess; it is certainly a thing that never would be called in question; it is derogatory to the dignity of the House to descend to such minutiae.” *Annals of Congress*, vol. 1 (1790), 759 (Statement of Representative Sedgwick). John Page of Virginia responded with an oblique reference to Penn’s trial that reminded his colleagues of the real threat to liberty which the right of assembly holds at bay. *Id.* (Statement of Representative Page). Historian Irving Brant notes that “the mere reference to it was equivalent to half an hour of oratory.” Brant, *supra*, at 55. After Page spoke, the House defeated Sedgwick’s motion to strike assembly from the draft amendment by a

“considerable majority.” *Annals of Congress*, vol. 1 (1790), 761. On September 24, 1789, the Senate approved the amendment in its final form, and the subsequent ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791 enacted “the right of the people peaceably to assemble.” U.S. Const. amend. I.<sup>3</sup>

William Penn’s legacy attests to longstanding connections between religion and assembly in public places—connections that extend to the religious petitioners in *Hill* and in the present case. The persistent witness of religious groups in public places has contributed significantly to our nation’s civic vitality. Some of

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<sup>3</sup> The right of assembly is a stand-alone right not wedded to the separate petition right. *See generally* John D. Inazu, *Liberty’s Refuge: The Forgotten Freedom of Assembly* 21-25 (2012) (tracing textual history). We know this in part from Congressman Page’s reference during the House debates: “Penn’s gathering had nothing to do with petition; it was an act of religious worship.” *Id.* at 25. This Court has on one occasion suggested otherwise. *See Presser v. Illinois*, 116 U.S. 252, 267 (1886) (indicating that the First Amendment protects the right of assembly only if “the purpose of the assembly was to petition the government for a redress of grievances”); *see also* Inazu, *supra*, 39-40 (critiquing *Presser*’s interpretation). Scholars have repeated that erroneous interpretation for decades, but this Court has never reinforced it. *See Thomas v. Collins*, 323 U.S. 516, 530 (1945) (referring to “the rights of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition for redress of grievances”) (emphasis added); *McDonald v. Chicago*, 130 S. Ct. 3020, 3031 (2010) (referring to “the general ‘right of the people peaceably to assemble for lawful purposes’” (quoting *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. 542, 551 (1875))); *cf. Chisom v. Roemer*, 501 U.S. 380, 409 (1991) (Scalia, J., dissenting) (the First Amendment “has not generally been thought to protect the right peaceably to assemble only when the purpose of the assembly is to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”).

that witness is reflected in the pages of this Court's opinions. See, e.g., *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943). Far more is captured in the pages of history. See, e.g., Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (2005).

Fifty years ago, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., led “the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation” and delivered his historic words that grounded the Civil Rights Movement in unmistakably religious terms. Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream* (August 28, 1963), reproduced in Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings & Speeches That Changed the World* 102 (James M. Washington ed., 1992). The liberty for religious assembly in public places was indispensable to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. As King himself pronounced five years later, in remarks delivered on the eve of his assassination: “If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn’t committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly.” Martin Luther King, Jr., *I See the Promised Land* (April 3, 1968), reproduced in King, *supra*, at 197.

While this Court has not delineated the outer limits of the right to peaceable assembly, it has recognized that the core of the right protects peaceful expression on matters of public concern within traditional public forums. In *Hague v. Committee for Industrial Org.*, 307 U.S. 496 (1939), Justice Roberts explained that

“[w]herever the title of streets and parks may rest, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and, time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions.” *Id.* at 515 (opinion of Roberts, J.). And as this Court observed a few months after *Hague*, “the streets are natural and proper places for the dissemination of information and opinion; and one is not to have the exercise of his liberty of expression in appropriate places abridged on the plea that it may be exercised in some other place.” *Schneider v. State*, 308 U.S. 147, 163 (1939). Harry Kalven underscored this theme a generation later: “[I]n an open democratic society the streets, the parks, and other public places are an important facility for public discussion and political process. They are in brief a public forum that the citizen can commandeer; the generosity and empathy with which such facilities are made available is an index of freedom.” Harry Kalven, Jr., *The Concept of the Public Forum: Cox v. Louisiana*, 1965 Sup. Ct. Rev. 1, 11-12 (1965).

A line of cases culminating in this Court’s decision in *Perry Education Association v. Perry Local Educators’ Association*, 460 U.S. 37 (1983), has shifted the moorings of the public forum doctrine from the Assembly Clause to the Speech Clause. The speech-focused doctrines play a critical role in conserving public forums as spaces for public discussion, debate, and dissent. One of the most important principles arising out of these cases is that “the government may not prohibit all communicative activity” in traditional public

forums like streets and sidewalks. *Id.* at 45; *see also United States v. Grace*, 461 U.S. 171, 180 (1983) (invalidating restrictions of expression on public sidewalk near Supreme Court building and holding that government cannot alter traditional public forum status of a sidewalk); *Greer v. Spock*, 424 U.S. 828, 835 (1976) (noting “the long-established constitutional rule that there cannot be a blanket exclusion of First Amendment activity from a municipality’s open streets, sidewalks, and parks”).

At the same time, more flexible standards for content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions acknowledge and accommodate important governmental interests in maintaining order and safety within the public forum. But the speech-oriented aspects of *Perry* and other cases *complement* the original contours of the public forum doctrine; they do *not* replace or obviate them. *Cf. De Jonge v. Oregon*, 299 U.S. 353, 364 (1937) (“The right of peaceable assembly is a right cognate to those of free speech and free press and is equally fundamental.”).<sup>4</sup>

One problem with shifting the public forum doctrine wholly into a free speech framework is that relying exclusively on the content neutrality inquiry misses the expressive connection between speech and

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<sup>4</sup> This Court has recognized the right of assembly as “fundamental” and insisted that it “cannot be denied without violating those fundamental principles of liberty and justice which lie at the base of all civil and political institutions.” *De Jonge*, 299 U.S. at 364. “[I]t is, and always has been, one of the attributes of citizenship under a free government.” *Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. at 551.

the time, place, and manner in which it occurs. Content-neutral *time* restrictions can sever the link between message and moment. Consider, for example, the consequences for political dissent of a content-neutral time restriction that closed a public forum on symbolic days of the year like September 11th, August 6th (the day the United States detonated an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima), or June 28th (the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots). Content-neutral time restrictions that closed the public sidewalks outside of prisons on days of executions, outside of legislative buildings on days of votes, or outside of courthouses on days that decisions are announced, would raise similar concerns. And yet all of these formally satisfy the content neutrality inquiry.

Content-neutral *place* restrictions can be similarly distorting. As Timothy Zick observes, “[s]peakers like abortion clinic sidewalk counselors, petition gatherers, solicitors, and beggars seek the critical expressive benefits of proximity and immediacy that inhere in such places.” Timothy Zick, *Speech Out of Doors: Preserving First Amendment Liberties in Public Places* 21 (2009) (hereinafter, “Zick”). Content-neutral restrictions that deny access to places of symbolic significance undermine the expression that depends upon connection to place. *Hill*’s assertion that the Colorado statute was not a regulation of speech but simply “a regulation of the places where some speech may occur,” 530 U.S. at 719, misses this fundamental connection: the location of the speech can be indispensable to its message and its efficacy.



Content-neutral *manner* restrictions can drain an expressive message of its emotive content. A ban on singing could weaken the significance of a civil rights march, a funeral procession, or a memorial celebration. Content-neutral manner restrictions can also eliminate certain classes of people from the forum altogether. Imagine, for example, a public forum that required all expressions to be conveyed on notarized documents or gold-embossed stationery. *Cf. City Council v. Taxpayers for Vincent*, 466 U.S. 789, 820 (1984) (Brennan, J., dissenting) (“The average cost of communicating by handbill is therefore likely to be far higher than the average cost of communicating by poster. For that reason, signs posted on public property are doubtless ‘essential to the poorly financed causes of little people,’ and their prohibition constitutes a total ban on an important medium of communication.” (quoting *Martin v. Struthers*, 319 U.S. 141, 146 (1943))).

By citing these examples, *Amicus* does not mean to suggest that time, place, and manner restrictions are always impermissible. *See, e.g., Kovacs v. Cooper*, 336 U.S. 77, 87 (1949) (upholding ban of sound trucks on public streets “amplified to a loud and raucous volume”). But content-neutral restrictions can have debate-altering effects when they effectively exclude or undermine certain forms of expression. As Justice Kennedy has noted, the “public forum doctrine ought not to be a jurisprudence of categories rather than ideas or convert what was once an analysis protective of expression into one which grants the government authority to restrict speech by fiat.” *International Soc.*

for *Krishna Consciousness, Inc. v. Lee*, 505 U.S. 672, 693-694 (1992) (Kennedy, J., concurring in the judgment). This “jurisprudence of categories” is one of the fundamental problems with *Hill*, which created “a virtual template for developing passable government speech regulations targeted at the expression of unpopular views in public places.” Clark LeBlanc & Jamin B. Raskin, *Disfavored Speech About Favored Rights: Hill v. Colorado, The Vanishing Public Forum and the Need for an Objective Speech Discrimination Test*, 51 Am. U. L. Rev. 179, 182 (2001).

*Hill*’s failure to guarantee meaningful access to all speakers skews the forum in favor of a particular viewpoint. Cf. *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 831 (1995) (recognizing that the exclusion of religious viewpoints is debate-altering). Under the guise of neutrality, ideological policing of the forum operates like a classic prior restraint—excluding certain perspectives from the forum before their ideas and values are ever able to manifest. That is one way to win a contested cultural argument. But it comes at the cost of violating our commitment to diverse viewpoints in the public forum.

Consider the implications for the present case. The Westchester County law exempts from its absolute prohibition only facility patients, facility employees acting within the scope of their employment, the facility owner, the property owner, and law enforcement. Laws of Westchester County § 425.81c. It therefore criminalizes expressive activity concerning matters of

public concern on public ways and sidewalks near reproductive health facilities.

It is worth underscoring the sheer magnitude of these restrictions. The County law criminalizes any purposeful conversation depending upon its content and viewpoint and the willingness of the listener. If Debra Vitagliano approaches a nonconsenting listener to discuss abortion in a covered zone, she is subject to six months' imprisonment for a first offense, and a year's imprisonment for each subsequent violation. *Id.* at § 425.41. For that matter, the statute even prevents Petitioner from entering a covered zone to sing or pray quietly. These possibilities illustrate the striking dissonance between the First Amendment and the County law that Respondents argue is justified by *Hill*.

If Westchester County can close off the sidewalks surrounding reproductive health facilities to peaceful expressive activity, then the government can prohibit expression in a wide range of circumstances. A state might seek to undermine union strikes by closing off public sidewalks surrounding factories to peaceful expressive activity.<sup>5</sup> Or the state might seek to stifle criticism of a controversial legislative policy by excluding peaceful expressive activity from the public sidewalks near the state capitol. Similarly, the government might bar peaceful pacifists outside a military recruitment center or an animal rights protest outside a zoo. A state

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<sup>5</sup> The First Amendment right of assembly, independent of the right of free speech, offers important foundation for “the collective, group-based nature of labor activism.” Marion G. Crain & John D. Inazu, *Reassembling Labor*, 2015 U. Ill. L. Rev. 1791.

could offer high-minded justifications for these hypothetical regulations just as Westchester County has identified justifications for its law. In the end, however, these regulations fundamentally undermine the public forum.

This is not to say that the County is without any recourse for regulating a traditional public forum. The Assembly Clause protects only *peaceable* assembly. Longstanding First Amendment doctrine allows the state to regulate speech and expression that cross the threshold of violence—but the state bears the burden of drawing the constitutionally appropriate line. As this Court noted in *De Jonge*:

[First Amendment] rights may be abused by using speech or press or assembly in order to incite to violence and crime. The people through their legislatures may protect themselves against that abuse. But the legislative intervention can find constitutional justification only by dealing with the abuse. The rights themselves must not be curtailed.

299 U.S. at 364-65. *See also* *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444, 449 n.4 (1969) (“Statutes affecting the right of assembly, like those touching on freedom of speech, must observe the established distinctions between mere advocacy and incitement to imminent lawless action”).<sup>6</sup> There is no allegation in this case or in *Hill* of

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<sup>6</sup> Limitations on the public forum might also be permissible when they respond to exigent circumstances or are narrowly tailored to ensure free access to public spaces. A municipality might, for example, limit protests on public streets on mornings when

conduct that was, or would be, violent or disorderly. But *Hill* and the County law enable perpetual bans on the kind of peaceful expressive activity that lies at the core of the First Amendment and the right of assembly.

This Court’s precedents have increasingly “focus[ed] on history” in “assess[ing] many \* \* \* constitutional claims.” *New York State Rifle & Pistol Ass’n, Inc. v. Bruen*, 142 S. Ct. 2111, 2130 (2022). This case affords the Court an opportunity to correct the history and tradition of the public forum doctrine by recognizing the neglected role of the right of assembly to that doctrine and the place of assembly within the First Amendment. *Cf. Americans for Prosperity Found. v. Bonta*, 141 S. Ct. 2373, 2390 (2021) (Thomas, J., concurring) (“the text and history of the Assembly Clause suggest that the right to assemble includes the right to associate anonymously”).

## **II. The County Law and *Hill* Wrongly Suggest That There Is a Right to Avoid Unpopular Expression in Public Places.**

*Hill* was premised on the novel proposition “that citizens have a right to avoid unpopular speech in a

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street cleaning occurs. Firefighters might disperse even a peaceful assembly if necessary to reach a burning building. And “[g]overnmental authorities have the duty and responsibility to keep their streets open and available for movement. A group of demonstrators could not insist upon the right to cordon off a street, or entrance to a public or private building, and allow no one to pass who did not agree to listen to their exhortations.” *Cox v. State of Louisiana*, 379 U.S. 536, 554-55 (1965).

public forum.” *Hill*, 530 U.S. at 771 (Kennedy, J., dissenting). The Westchester County law rests on similar logic. But this reasoning is at odds with the overwhelming thrust of this Court’s free speech jurisprudence, which protects the ability of speakers to communicate to unwilling listeners (absent exceptions not relevant to *Hill* or the instant case). *Id.* (collecting cases). There is no “right to be let alone” from “public expression in traditional public forums.” *Zick, supra*, at 87. As this Court made clear in *Edwards v. South Carolina*, 372 U.S. 229, 237 (1963), “[t]he Fourteenth Amendment does not permit a State to make criminal the peaceful expression of unpopular views.”

The peaceful expression engaged in by the petitioner here falls well within this Court’s free speech jurisprudence, which permits even *hurtful* speech, expression, and protest. As the Court observed in *Snyder v. Phelps*, 131 S. Ct. 1207, 1220 (2011), “[a]s a Nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate.” *Snyder*’s words reflect longstanding First Amendment principles:

[A] function of free speech under our system of government is to invite dispute. It may indeed best serve its high purpose when it induces a condition of unrest, creates dissatisfaction with conditions as they are, or even stirs people to anger. Speech is often provocative and challenging. It may strike at prejudices and preconceptions and have profound unsettling effects as it presses for acceptance of an idea. That is why freedom of speech,

though not absolute, is nevertheless protected against censorship or punishment, unless shown likely to produce a clear and present danger of a serious substantive evil that rises far above public inconvenience, annoyance, or unrest. There is no room under our Constitution for a more restrictive view.

*Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949) (internal citations omitted). See also *Hustler Magazine v. Falwell*, 485 U.S. 46, 55 (1988) (asserting that speech may not be restricted “because [it] may have an adverse emotional impact on the audience”).<sup>7</sup> These commitments are not cost-free, but they are costs that we as a Nation committed to long ago.



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<sup>7</sup> Even if our capacity to endure hurtful expression reaches an outer limit, neither the petitioner here nor the petitioners in *Hill* come close to that line. Nothing in the record in either *Hill* or the instant case evidences speech or expression “so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community.” *Snyder*, 131 S. Ct. at 1223 (Alito J., dissenting) (citations and quotations omitted). Nor can it be said that the speech and expression of the abortion protesters and sidewalk counselors in these cases form “no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality.” *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 572 (1942).

**CONCLUSION**

This Court has noted that “[w]e apply the limitations of the Constitution with no fear that freedom to be intellectually and spiritually diverse, or even contrary, will disintegrate the social organization.” *Barnette*, 319 U.S. at 641. Part of our assurance of this freedom rests in our shared commitment to peaceable assembly. But *Hill* and the County law go well beyond ensuring peaceability. They instead represent “text-book” content discrimination, *Hill*, 530 U.S. at 766 (Kennedy, J., dissenting), before and after *City of Austin*, and this Court should not allow them to stand.

*Amicus* urges this Court to reverse the lower court decision, overrule *Hill*, and restore “the proud tradition of free and open discourse in a public forum.” *Hill*, 530 U.S. at 765 (Kennedy, J., dissenting).

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