

**Old Matches, New Flames**  
**Modern Book Banning and the Politicization of Education**  
**E-Book**

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# Old Matches, New Flames: Modern Book Banning and the Politicization of Education

## Catherine O'Donnell

### Introduction

Education is the root of America's national identity and historical narrative. Since 2020, controversy over library books and school curriculums has skyrocketed and grabbed national attention. Through legislation and book banning efforts, content regarding critical race theory, sexuality, BIPOC experiences, and LGBTQ identities are being restricted from schools and libraries across the country. The controversy appeals to the deep political divide in America, fueling the fears of voters on both sides of the spectrum. When education is used as a political pawn, American culture as a whole is on the line. As librarians fight for relevance in the modern world, book challenges present an additional obstacle.

In 2020, there was a sudden spike in book challenges (efforts to ban books, whether or not they were successful) across the United States. According to the American Library Association, there were 332 challenges in 2019. In 2020, 3,926 books were challenged, mostly by parents and political groups. In 2023, this number jumped to 9,021 challenged books, a 230% increase in just two years. This is happening across the United States, but Texas and Florida are the clear epicenters.<sup>1</sup>

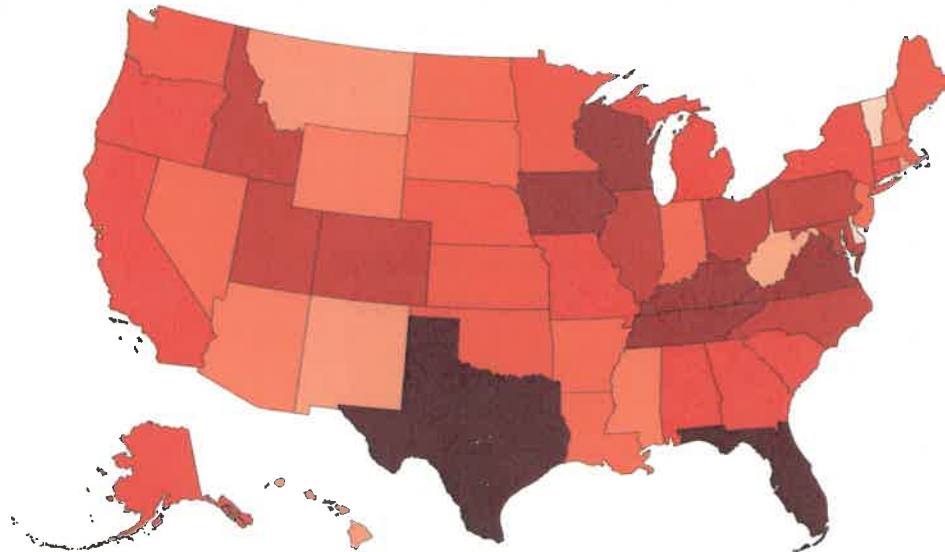
### Titles Challenged in Public Schools and Libraries During 2023

Attempts to censor books during this period: 938. Total titles challenged in those attempts: 9,021. Unique titles: 4,240.

A challenge may result in access being retained, restricted, or revoked at a school or public library.

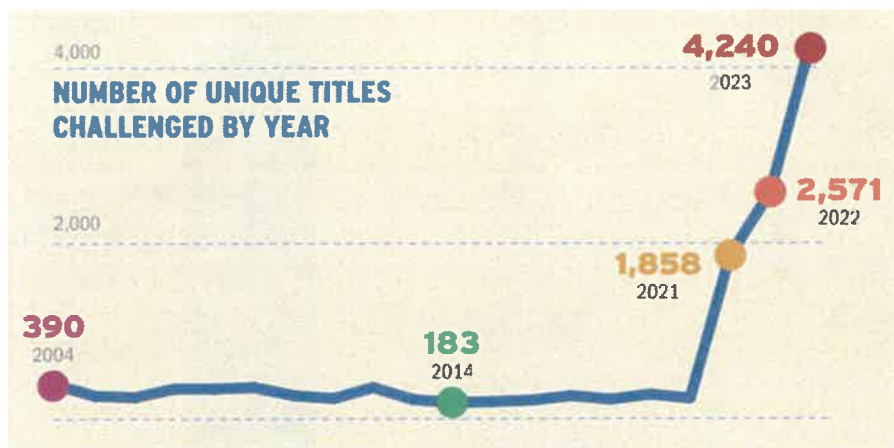


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*Map of challenged books in each U.S. state in 2023, according to data from the American Library Association. Texas and Florida have the highest number of challenges, with 1470 and 2762 respectively.<sup>2</sup>*

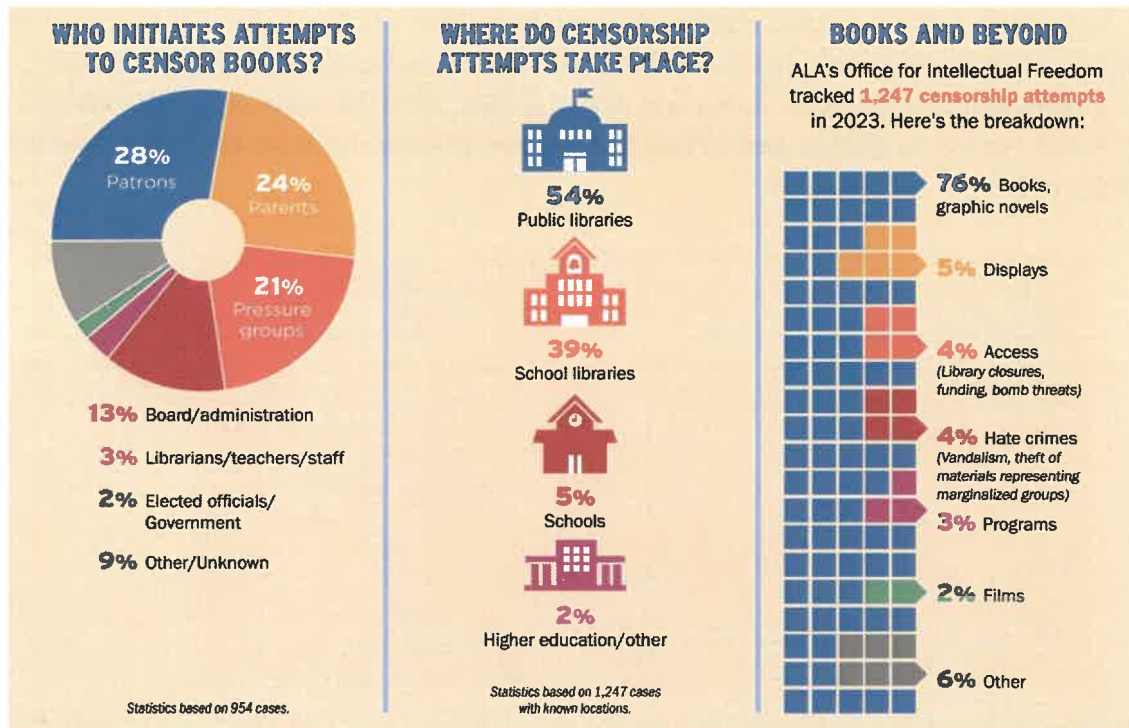
The sudden uptick in book challenges and bans in 2020 was likely due to the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the “culture war” that ensued in the following years. The most common subjects of banned books are: racism or race, LGBTQ+ characters, violence or abuse, health, sexuality, grief or death.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of banned authors are members of the LGBTQ+ or BIPOC communities.<sup>4</sup>



*The number of book titles challenged in America from 2004 to 2023. The graph shows a clear spike from 2020-2021, which continues through 2023.<sup>5</sup>*

Since 2020, liberals and conservatives have battled over American identity in terms of racial equality. Amidst the culture war, book bans are typically used to appeal to conservative voters. Although bans remove valuable information from library shelves, they are not an effective form of censorship for several reasons. Libraries have been in steady decline as community centers for the past decade.<sup>6</sup> Public libraries struggle to compete with bookstore giants. Amazon, one of the most dominant players in book publishing, has stopped selling over 10,000 of its Ebooks to libraries.<sup>7</sup> Widespread internet access renders most book bans ineffective at completely censoring these kinds of topics. Additionally, studies show that the most highly targeted books were not popular to begin with.<sup>8</sup> These factors diminish the actual effectiveness of the removal of library books. Therefore, the primary goal of book challenges is creating fear of children receiving too liberal of an education, bolstering conservative arguments as a result.<sup>9 10</sup>

It is unclear how book bans become successful when small groups lead the charge. According to a 2023 study from Every Library Institute, the vast majority of American voters were opposed to removing books with controversial or uncomfortable topics. When a book is challenged, it is typically led by small parent groups. 90% of Americans reported to have a favorable view of librarians, though many of these controversies are fueled by online attacks of librarians.<sup>11</sup> These statistics suggest that small populations and communities are leading book bans, and yet legislation is still passed. The actual process of book banning presents unanswered questions.



*Data from the American Library Association's yearly library report. Library patrons, parents, and pressure groups are the most likely individuals to drive book challenges. Most attempts at book bans take place in public libraries.<sup>12</sup>*

Media coverage surrounding the issue has incited fear from both ends of the political spectrum. There is fear of children being “indoctrinated,” as most conservative-leaning outlets put it, by liberal education. On the other side, there is fear of books being banned and children being deprived of a diversified education.<sup>13</sup> The opposing narratives around the issue reflect the wider issue of filter bubbles, and the motives behind the framing of a story. The question is: What is real and what is part of the dominant political narrative? Media frame issues differently depending on the response they are looking for from their audience, which is often related to political affiliations of the news outlet. Additionally, the promotion of fear and negative emotions is proven to draw attention and readership.<sup>14</sup>

## Working Arguments

My first working argument is that the most significant impact of book bans is not censorship or restricted access to books. Instead, the quieter consequences are the most significant. First, book challenges contribute to the diminishing trust in librarians and educators. According to Beth Cuddy, the librarian at Auburn High School in New York, facing book controversies in her community did significant damage to her mental health.<sup>15</sup> This is a shared experience among many librarians who face book challenges. Both their professional status and personal morals are questioned publicly, most prominently on social media. Amanda Jones recently published *That Librarian*, which details her experience with community members attacking her online.<sup>16</sup>

Another indirect impact of book bans is the message that they send to marginalized communities. Dr. Jason Aukerman, the director of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies and clinical assistant professor in English at Indiana University Indianapolis, said “What it is communicating especially to our LGBTQ+ youth is, ‘You’re not welcome here, we don’t like you.’”<sup>17</sup> Even when book challenges are not successful, and in communities not facing book bans, the issue as a whole still sends the message that certain identities are not accepted.

Lastly, the financial impact of book bans is not part of the conversation. Based on a study from the advocacy group Every Library, proposed legislation in Texas would cost taxpayers at least \$3.6 million in 2023.<sup>18</sup> In Florida, school district spending increased significantly in order to follow state law that requires them to review all challenged books.<sup>19</sup> This diverts funding away from beneficial and enriching school or library programs.

My next working argument is that mainstream news media frame book bans differently depending on their political sway. Conservative outlets typically frame book bans as a hoax, and publish stories that discount their impact. On Fox News, the words “regulation” and “relocation” are frequently used in place of “ban.”<sup>20</sup> More liberal and neutral news outlets frame book challenges as censorship issues, freely using words like “ban” and “censorship.”<sup>21</sup> An example of opposing media frames happened in 2023, Amanda Gorman’s book “The Hill We Climb,” which calls for racial equality, was the focus of controversy in a Florida school library. One parent complained about the book, which led to it being moved from the elementary school section to the middle school section. Headlines from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *NPR* announced that Gorman’s poem was being targeted by book bans. On *Fox News* and *USA Today*, this issue was classified as “relocation.”<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the narrative being pushed, most news coverage incites fear among readers and villainizes the opposing side.

Next, I am arguing that book bans are ineffective efforts for censorship, and are therefore rooted in the advancement of political parties. Libraries have been in steady decline as community centers for the past decade.<sup>23</sup> Public libraries struggle to compete with bookstore giants. Amazon, one of the most dominant players in book publishing, has stopped selling over 10,000 of its Ebooks to libraries.<sup>24</sup> With widespread internet access, young people will always have open access to the types of topics being banned. Additionally, studies show that the most highly targeted books were not popular to begin with.<sup>25</sup> These factors diminish the actual

effectiveness of the removal of library books. Therefore, the primary goal of book challenges is bolstering the conservative argument that a so-called liberal education is dangerous.<sup>26 27</sup>

Another working argument is that parents and community members should have less control over library books and school curriculums. In 2023, 24% of book challenges in America came from parents.<sup>28</sup> In many instances, even small groups of parents and community members influence books to be relocated to different sections or removed completely. Moms for Liberty is one of the most prevalent organizations that leads the push for book bans. Their messaging is based on “parental rights in education.” In my conversation with Moms for Liberty founder Tiffany Justice, she explained that parents should be given full control over what their children learn in school. She called the National Education Association “corrupt,” and expressed full distrust in teachers and school boards.<sup>29</sup> This mindset is eroding the public perception of teachers, librarians, and public education as a whole. Parents should have some sort of input on their child’s education, but not the full control to remove content from curriculums.

Those who push for parental rights in education are often motivated by the conservative belief that school curriculums are too liberal and progressive. The 2022 Florida Parental Rights in Education Act (also known as “Don’t Say Gay”), “prohibits classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3 classrooms, and requires such conversations after 3rd grade to be age-appropriate, which the state board of education has yet to define.” It gives parents the power to sue school districts if they think the rule has been violated.<sup>30</sup> This level of parental control is dangerous, and opens the door for political agendas to influence school decisions.

Finally, my fifth working argument is that there needs to be a more solid system in order to define what kind of content is inappropriate or obscene. Banned or challenged books are typically argued to be “obscene” and therefore not protected under the First Amendment.<sup>31</sup> Books with sexual content are a typical example. According to new laws in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee and Indiana, librarians and teachers are faced with fines and even jail time if they provide books deemed obscene or harmful.<sup>32</sup> However, what qualifies something as obscene is generally subjective. With such strongly divided views on what is inappropriate for children, lack of firm guidelines and language will continue to fuel book ban debates.

The Miller Test was introduced in 1973 and is still the primary way American courts define obscenity. An offensive depiction of sexual conduct results in test failure. The overall value of the work, whether that is educational, artistic, or scientific, is also taken into account.<sup>33</sup> Even with the Miller Test, the label “obscene” is thrown around loosely. Groups who use obscenity laws to justify book challenges often fail to use the test in its entirety, and use the test’s vague language to their advantage.<sup>34</sup> Although I am arguing for a better system, I am unsure of the possibilities for improvement. Therefore, I aim to speak with law experts who have an understanding of the limitations and possibilities for obscenity laws.

## **Context & Timeline**

### 1993

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education introduced the Safe Schools Program, which educates school staff and administrators on topics related to gender identity. The program is still active in Massachusetts.<sup>35</sup>

### April 2003

The Cleveland Public Library was the first to launch a digital collection of e-books. This opened the door to other libraries expanding their digital access. Today, digital collections of e-books and audiobooks are included in about 90% of public and private libraries across America.<sup>36 37</sup>

### November 4, 2005

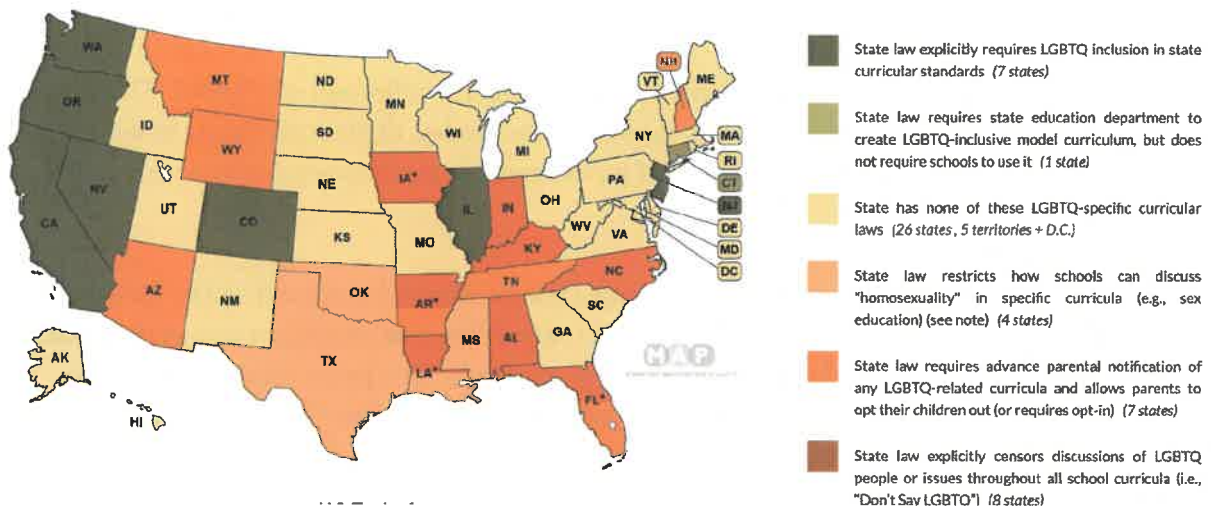
Kitzmiller v. Dover, a court case between a Pennsylvania school district and eleven parents, concluded. Parents had sued the school district for mandating that intelligent design (the idea that God created humans) be taught as an alternative to evolution. The judge ruled that teaching religious material violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.<sup>38</sup>

### 2009

After the Great Recession in 2008, libraries across America suffered significant budget cuts. Universities in particular were cutting millions out of library funds.<sup>39</sup>

July 14, 2011

California passed the FAIR Education Act, or Senate Bill 48, which “mandates that instructional content be fair, accurate, inclusive, and representative of minoritized communities, including LGBTQ+ populations.” California was the first state to create this kind of legislation.<sup>40</sup>



*Map of U.S. state laws regarding LGBTQ inclusion in education as of 2024. Dark green states require LGBTQ inclusion in curriculums, and dark orange states explicitly bar the teaching of LGBTQ issues. The majority of states do not have specific laws regarding these topics.<sup>41</sup>*

2014

Major book publishers began selling e-books directly to libraries, which expanded the digital collections across America. This opened a hostile relationship between libraries and publishers, because publishers were not seeing full revenue for book sales.<sup>42</sup>

September 1, 2021

The Texas House of Representatives passed House Bill 3979. The bill is aimed at limiting the teaching of critical race theory. The bill states that teachers can not require students to learn that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex,” or that someone is “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive” based on their race or sex. This pushes the narrative that America has always had racial harmony.<sup>43</sup>

May 4, 2021

The Tennessee House of Representatives passed House Bill 580, which outlaws public schools from teaching certain concepts regarding race and sex. It specifically bans lessons that make students feel “discomfort, guilt, or anguish.” This is a direct attack on critical race theory in curriculums.<sup>44 45</sup>

### May 29, 2021

Nevada passed Assembly Bill 261, which requires schools to provide diversity and inclusivity in their curriculums. This made Nevada the sixth state to mandate the inclusion of LGBTQ people in history and social studies across grade levels.<sup>46</sup>

### 2021

Book challenges, or efforts to get a book removed from a library, increased significantly. There were 3,926 challenges in 2021, which was about a 1,300% increase in just one year.<sup>47</sup>

### March 2022

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Parental Rights in Education bill, also known as “Don’t Say Gay.” It bans discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools if the content is deemed age inappropriate. It gives parents the power to sue school districts if they think the rule has been violated. The bill marked a cultural shift in educational control and attacks on LGBTQ communities.<sup>48</sup>

### August 2022

Amanda Jones, one of the most prominent librarians speaking out against book bans, filed a lawsuit against community members defaming her on the internet. Social media posts were circulating that framed Jones was showing pornographic and obscene content to children. The case was dismissed in January, 2024.<sup>49 50</sup>

### September 21, 2022

The Chicago Public Library declared Chicago a book sanctuary city, and became the first city to do so. All public library branches in Chicago provide access to banned books. This began the book sanctuary movement, which provides libraries with materials and steps to make their own book sanctuaries. There are currently over 4,000 across America.<sup>51 52</sup>

### November 28, 2022

Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry created a “Protecting Minors” tip line, which was for people to report inappropriate content in schools and libraries. In the week following, the tip line received thousands of spam complaints with the intent to delegitimize the tip line.<sup>53</sup>

### April 6, 2022

A law passed in Virginia that schools must notify parents when there is any sexually explicit content being taught. If parents oppose the content, there must be alternative material provided. The law drew backlash from LGBTQ support groups who believe the law will restrict students from learning about LGBTQ themes.<sup>54</sup>

April 2022

The Brooklyn Public Library announced the Books Unbanned program, which issues library cards to anyone across America, granting them access to the Brooklyn Public Library digital collection. The intention was to allow access to banned books no matter where someone lives. The program has been successful, with 52,000 checkouts by 2023.<sup>55</sup>

March 17, 2023

The Parent Bill of Rights Act was passed in Congress. This legislation expanded the rights of parents within the school curriculum, allowing them to review classroom and library material. House representatives said the goal is transparency, not the censorship of schools.<sup>56</sup>

July 2023

The Digital Public Library of America launched the Banned Book Club, which creates e-book versions of banned books. It ensures access to these books in areas where libraries and schools restrict them.<sup>57</sup>

June 8, 2023

President Joe Biden announced a “banned book coordinator,” a new position in the Education Department. The coordinator would train school districts on the impact of banning books in an effort to curb the increase in bans. The federal government does not have much direct power in this crisis, and this was an effort to take some control. The role still has yet to be filled.<sup>58 59</sup>

August 2023

In Texas, House Bill 900 was suspended by a judge because of its vague definitions of inappropriate content. The bill would require school library vendors to rate their books based on appropriateness before selling them to schools. It would also require vendors to recall books previously sold that are rated as too sexually explicit. Despite controversy, the bill went into effect in September.<sup>60 61</sup>

September 28, 2023

The Boston Public Library joined the Unbanned Books program, joining Seattle and Brooklyn public libraries. They grant statewide access to their digital collection.<sup>62</sup>

April 2024

Idaho House Bill 710 passed in court, requiring public and school libraries to move books with “harmful” material into the adults only section. With any claim of inappropriate content, the libraries are required to move the books within 60 days. The bill sparked the move vs. remove discussion, which questions whether or not moving books qualifies as banning.<sup>63</sup>

### March 2024

Suzette Baker, a Texas librarian, filed a lawsuit against her country for wrongful termination. She was fired in 2022 for refusing to remove books from the library that were claimed to be pornographic. The library stated that she was allowing her personal opinion to interfere with her job. Baker claimed that the original order to remove the books was wrongful.<sup>64 65</sup>

### September 2024

A group of book publishers and authors filed a lawsuit against the Florida Board of Education, opposing the 2023 law that allows anyone to object to material in classrooms and libraries. The law (HB 1069) also states that students can only be taught the gender binary in sex education. The law is an extension of the “Don’t Say Gay” agenda. The lawsuit claims that the definition of “sexual content” is vague, resulting in broad interpretations and increased book challenges.<sup>66</sup>

### November 6, 2024

Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. He pledged to close the Department of Education once in office. The goal is to give the states control over their own education departments. There would no longer be a member of the Cabinet advocating for educational issues. Trump has criticized the Department of Education’s push for critical race theory and LGBTQ inclusion, bolstering the argument of groups like Moms for Liberty.<sup>67</sup>

### November 19, 2024

The Texas State Board of Education voted in favor of an elementary school curriculum that incorporates content from the Bible. The curriculum sparked protests from both Christian and non-Christians who do not want the state to determine what their child learns about religion.<sup>68</sup>

## **Terms & Concepts**

### Book challenge

An effort to get a book removed from a library or school district. Challenges most often come from parents or organized groups. A challenge is not the same as a ban, which is the actual removal of the book. Most challenges are overturned by the school boards or politicians who review them.<sup>69 70</sup>

### Miller Test

The three-pronged test used in court to decide if creative work is “obscene.” If the work portrays or describes sexual conduct in an offensive way, it fails the test. The overall value of the work, whether that is educational, artistic, or scientific, is also taken into account. The test is named after the 1973 Miller v. California case, which decided that obscene materials would not be protected by the First Amendment.<sup>71</sup>

### Title IX

The federal law that prohibits schools from discriminating on the basis of sex. Since 2020, the law has expanded to further include the LGBTQ community. Title IX is part of the book banning conversation because the majority of books removed from shelves are regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2023, the Biden administration investigated a Texas school's removal of all books with LGBTQ characters, suspicious of violation of Title IX. <sup>72 73 74</sup>

### Weeding

The removal of materials from a library collection based on relevance, accuracy, physical condition, available space, etc. All librarians periodically go through the weeding process to develop their collection and keep it up to date. There are clear weeding guidelines that must be followed. There have been claims of librarians weeding books simply because of their content. <sup>75 76</sup>

### Wholesale ban

When a library is closed or emptied of a book collection, either temporarily or permanently. This is typically the result of legislation that punishes libraries for not complying with book bans. In other cases, the pressure of book ban legislation pressures voluntary wholesale bans. These types of bans are difficult to quantify because they are not necessarily reported. <sup>77</sup>

### First Amendment

The section of the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution that guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Many believe that banning books violates the First Amendment, and therefore contradicts one of the pillars of American society. However, unprotected speech includes "obscenities," a quality that is up for debate in court. <sup>78</sup>

### Shadow banning

The removal of books from circulation without prompting from the government or challenges from community members. This includes moving a book out of reach, such as behind the front desk or on a high shelf. These types of bans cannot be traced. <sup>79</sup>

### Book sanctuary

Any place, physical or digital, that provides banned books. The Chicago Public Library was the first to declare itself a book sanctuary, and holds banned book collections in its branches across the city. Book sanctuaries exemplify the tendency for banned materials to become more popular, drawing more attention to these specific books. <sup>80</sup>

### Critical race theory

The idea that persistent racial discrimination in the United States has created a hierarchy on the basis of race. This hierarchy is woven into all elements of American society and behavior. The

term was first introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at the U.C.L.A. School of Law and Columbia Law School. Critical race theory is one of the most prominent elements of the content being removed from libraries and schools.<sup>81</sup>

### Relocation

Rather than banning a book completely, it is moved to a different section of a library. Most commonly, books are moved from a kids section to an adults only section.<sup>82</sup>

### Streisand effect

The concept that restricting information only brings more attention to that information. Statistics show that banned books saw increased readership amongst the controversy.<sup>83 84</sup>

### DEI

An acronym for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The DEI mindset is about promoting a fair, welcoming environment within workplaces and schools. This is primarily exemplified in a workplace's policy for hiring, as well within higher education admissions. People who oppose DEI claim that it is discriminatory because it favors certain races over others.<sup>85</sup>

### Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association (ALA) has upheld a Library Bill of Rights since 1939. Most significantly, it states that libraries must be dedicated to the education of society, welcome all community members, and fight censorship. All libraries in the United States are expected to follow these guidelines.<sup>86</sup>

### **Mainstream Media Patterns**

Book bans are frequently covered in news media, presumably because it is a politicized and sensational story. Over the past few years, there have been a significant amount of news stories about book bans put in place and concerns related to educational content. Across news platforms, articles have a fearful, tense tone, contributing to fear, outrage, and polarization around the topic. Depending on the political tilt of the news source, the framing of the story is different.<sup>87</sup>

On typical left-leaning news outlets, such as The New York Times, CNN, and ABC News, the issue is often framed as a crisis of censorship. They present stories of schools and libraries leaving children without access to any banned materials. The focus is on teachers and librarians who are negatively impacted by the events. The word "censorship" frequently appears in these articles. Challenged books, with themes of race or LGBTQ characters, are described as "inclusive" as opposed to the "woke" description from more right-leaning sources.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, efforts against book bans are more likely to be highlighted. A typical example is the ABC News article titled "School culture wars push students to form banned book clubs, anti-censorship groups." The effort to challenge books is labelled as censorship. The groups and

individuals fighting book bans are portrayed in a positive light. Additionally, statistics from the American Library Association are used to support the story.<sup>89</sup> Left-leaning news outlets are more likely to detail these groups' efforts, providing a complete view into their motivations and perspectives.

On right-leaning news media, the issue of book bans is framed differently. Fox News headlines such as “The book ban lie” and “Perverted curricula has no place in our schools” are examples of the typical language and narratives around the conflict. Words like “perverted” and “pornographic” are often used to describe the books being banned or challenged. This extreme language incites fear among audiences. The fear around the issue is fueling book bans and the typical conservative outlook on public education.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, right-leaning news outlets are more likely to publish the voices of parents and groups leading the controversy.

The opposing narratives and politicized reporting in mainstream media become dangerous when considering the filter bubbles that exist in the broad media landscape. Social media and search engines have been proven to prioritize content that aligns with a user's existing beliefs. The 2017 study “My News Feed is Filtered?” Elia Powers reported that Google and Facebook play a direct role in filtering news content provided to users. Powers found that people are largely unaware of this bias within their media intake.<sup>91</sup> When people are only exposed to one side of these media narratives, their perception of book bans and libraries will be influenced.

There is a lack of questioning across platforms of mainstream media. The standard approach is fact-based, reporting on the amount of books being challenged and what their content is. The reporting does not typically explore specific groups leading the charge, which creates an element of mystery as to how this is happening. A *New York Times* article titled, “New state laws are fueling a surge in book bans” is a standard news story surrounding the topic. It lays out the facts of the story with little detail about the actual bans being put in place, where they are coming from, and how they are being approved.<sup>92</sup> It sends the message that people should be worried about the issue without telling them what they can do.

Efforts against book bans are not frequently covered in mainstream media. While there is news coverage of some protests and uproar, there is not much information about actual steps being taken. Book sanctuaries are a growing movement in libraries across the United States. These are sections of the library that display books that are being banned, guaranteeing access regardless of the consequences. There are 4,210 book sanctuaries across the country.<sup>93 94</sup> Additionally, there are efforts being made on the digital front. The Digital Public Library of America is making banned books free on their website as a way to make them “unbannable.”<sup>95</sup> In 2021, the Brooklyn Public Library announced the Books Unbanned program, which grants access to their digital collection to anyone in America. The intention was to allow access to banned books no matter where someone lives. The program has been successful, and was adopted by the Boston Public Library and the Seattle Public Library.<sup>96</sup> Thousands of people have open access to books that are banned or restricted in their area.<sup>97</sup> The way digital media plays into the issue of book banning is not often addressed.

### Liberal Arts Perspectives

The significance of the book banning issue lies in the threat to American culture. America was built on the spirit of individual freedom. When applying the Anthro-Socio-Cultural perspective, this foundational element of American identity is the most significant part of the issue. The First Amendment guaranteed freedom of speech and freedom of the press in 1791. This freedom is not only part of federal law, it is woven into American identity.<sup>98</sup> When freedom of speech is threatened or called into question, it is taken seriously by citizens. Much of the conversation around book banning touches upon the First Amendment debate, and whether or not bans violate basic American freedoms. David L. Hudson Jr., a First Amendment law expert, is quoted in an article titled “Does Banning Books Violate the First Amendment?” Hudson says that book bans “deprive children or students of the right to receive information and ideas,” and therefore violate basic American freedom.<sup>99</sup> However, there is the argument that book bans rightfully restrict obscene or inappropriate content. The overarching question is: does America actually reflect the culture of freedom it represents?

Book banning and efforts for educational control reflect the culture war that has been raging in America. Those with conservative and traditional values are clashing with liberal progressives, which motivates the effort for control over educational narratives. In this polarized environment, American identity is at the heart of the debate. The kinds of materials young people have access to will determine which side of the culture war wins. The recent election of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States will bolster the effort for LGBTQ themes to be banned from schools and libraries. Trump has disparaged the transgender community throughout his campaign, and has consistently pushed the “anti-woke” effort. Most book-challenging organizations align themselves with Trump and the Republican party. With Trump at the helm, the culture war that fuels book bans will lean toward conservative values.<sup>100 101</sup>

Like the First Amendment, democracy is another pillar of American society and identity that is being called into question. According to a 2022 study, the majority of voters oppose book bans and trust educators and librarians.<sup>102</sup> Still, groups of parents and community members are consistently successful in getting books restricted. In my research, it has been difficult to uncover the actual processes that allow for book bans to be executed by what seem to be minorities.

Although book banning is currently on the rise in America, it has always been a global issue. Around the world, books with content deemed inappropriate are being removed from libraries and school curriculums. The content within the banned books reflects the culture of the country banning them. In America, books with LGBTQ, sexual, and racial themes are the ones most frequently banned.<sup>103</sup> Marginalized groups (LGBTQ and BIPOC communities) are threatened by the removal of books that represent them. Regardless of the specific motivation, these themes being on the chopping block in educational spheres exemplifies discrimination in American society. It exposes a mentality that these identities, stories, and themes should not be accepted as part of history. The implications of this for young generations is difficult to quantify, but must be explored.

The coverage of book bans in news media reflects the tendency of news to push attention-grabbing, fear-inducing stories. These stories attract audiences.<sup>104</sup> News media coverage pushes a fearful narrative surrounding book bans, regardless of the outlet's support or opposition to them. In this sociological context, I wonder how this culture of fear can make problems worse. Furthermore, is media attention and framing only increasing book bans and polarization?

Looking at book bans through a Political-Economic perspective highlights the power dynamics that drive the issue. News media coverage focuses on the surface level threat of censorship. However, there is a strong link between the controversy of book bans and political gain. Most groups that advocate for book bans are politically affiliated, aligning themselves with the Republican party and conservative ideals. The University of Colorado Boulder study, "Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools" argues that "book banning primarily serves as a reaction to increasingly contested, local political contexts... We identify censorship as a strategy potentially used to mobilize conservative voters, rather than an authoritarian, top-down approach of suppressing information in the perceived interest of the state."<sup>105</sup> When voters feel threatened by the "culture war," or political "other," they are more likely to vote for candidates on their side. This has resulted in politicians pushing extreme language surrounding book banning (such as "pornography").<sup>106</sup> The polarized nature of American politics is on full display within this issue. This perspective begs the question: why are libraries and schools allowed to be on the political chopping block? How can we free educational spaces from political agendas? Additionally, the circulated media narratives perpetuate the polarization and fear from both political sides of the issue. To what extent are politicians utilizing media platforms to further mobilize their voters?

The economic impact of book banning is not often part of the conversation. The cost of book banning legislation will have an impact on taxpayers. An article titled "The costs of banning books" highlights specific examples from states with increased book restrictions. Based on a study from the advocacy group Every Library, proposed legislation in Texas would cost taxpayers at least \$3.6 million in 2023.<sup>107</sup> In Florida, school district spending increased significantly in order to follow state law that requires them to review all challenged books.<sup>108</sup> My question is: how are libraries being impacted by increased financial burdens, especially those with already low funding?

### **Critical Literature Comparisons**

I analyzed literature on the topics of book banning as well as media narrative strategies. Within these sources there is conclusive evidence that book bans in libraries have increased substantially since 2020, and specifically target LGBTQ and racial themes. The way the bans are interpreted varies, considering the nuanced arguments from both sides. There is support for increased control in education, as well as arguments for a freer educational landscape. In the general realm of digital media, academic journals explore the ways news, social media and search engines shape cultural narratives through both language and algorithms.

The 2024 study titled “Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools,” analyzes data from approximately 2,500 book bans across America in the year 2021. It found that 37% of banned books were children’s books with diverse characters (both LGBTQ and BIPOC characters). 22% were about historical figures and social movements. Other banned categories included fantasy and science fiction, young adult romance (specifically with LGBTQ themes), and violence or drug use. The study found that 19% of banned authors identify as LGBTQ, and 39% of authors are BIPOC. The concept that books with LGBTQ themes and authors are disproportionately banned is widely undisputed. The central argument of the study is that book bans are not actually intended to censor ideas. Instead, bans are politically motivated, with the goal of mobilizing voters who align with conservative values. The bans appeal to the “culture war” in American politics, which the study traces back to 2020 with the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. The study comes to this conclusion based on the fact that the majority of contested books were not popular to begin with. Additionally, 97% of children in America have internet access. Therefore, the removal of books from libraries and schools does not necessarily bar this demographic from accessing materials online. In most mainstream media coverage of the issue, book banning is portrayed as a threat to education rather than a mere political tool.<sup>109</sup>

This idea contrasts with the argument of another 2024 academic journal, “Mice, Slurs, and Freedom Fries: American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans.” The primary argument is that book bans will directly influence and reframe American history and identity, and whether this is considered positive is up to interpretation. Books have always been a reflection of American culture and experience, and the study emphasizes the connection between a literary education and American identity. It reads, “universal education in this country was justified by the argument that schooling made good citizens, good American citizens; and when American literature started to be taught in our schools, part of the aim was to show what it was to be an American.” As the American narrative evolves to include more diverse voices, classic literature is seen to promote a whitewashed and one-dimensional version of American history, often painting white characters as “white saviors.”<sup>110</sup>

The study focuses on classic American literature such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Bans of these books come from two perspectives: those who do not want slavery or racism discussed in schools (the primarily conservative belief system), and those who think the books push a one-dimensional version of racial issues. Progressive groups oppose the stereotypical portrayal of Black characters, and reinforcement of the “white savior” trope. The study highlights the complexities of book bans, which is often painted as a black and white issue. Furthermore, it touches upon the progressive effort for book bans in education, which are much quieter in news media.<sup>111</sup>

“Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools” argues that the problem with book banning lies in the political influence rather than the actual bans themselves. However, the direct impact of book bans is illustrated in *That Librarian*, a book by Louisiana librarian

Amanda Jones. Jones has been on the front lines against book bans since 2018. In 2022, she spoke out against book challenges in a local public hearing, and became the target of social media attacks calling her a groomer and a pedophile. Jones filed a lawsuit against those who harassed her. The book outlines her experience fighting book bans, and argues that the bans are a movement toward a censored America. Jones writes, “It is about marginalizing and erasing cultures and groups of people, it is about defunding public institutions, it is about dumbing down society for a more easily led population, and it is about using libraries for political gain.”<sup>112</sup> Jones does not deny the political side of the book banning issue, but also acknowledges the actual implications on public education. Jones describes the emotional toll that the harassment had on her and her fellow librarians. She was afraid for her life among the widespread hateful rhetoric toward her. The personal element of the book provides insight into the damage book bans are causing.

Jones advocates for librarians and educators to freely choose the books they provide their communities. She believes that community members who challenge book bans should trust librarians to maintain appropriate and educational collections. Conversely, the book *Reframing Decision Making in Education: Democratic Empowerment of Teachers and Parents*, by Perry R. Rettig, argues for more parental involvement in education. The book specifically discusses school curriculums, and critiques the system that puts the majority of control in the hands of school administrators. In public schools, teachers are required to follow the textbooks and curriculum provided by the school district. Rettig argues that this reflects an effort to standardize American education. Teachers are not involved enough in decisions regarding classroom material as well as the school functions as a whole. Rettig also argues that “students—in reality—are treated as passive sponges soaking up knowledge. They have very little say in where they are placed, what they learn, how they learn, and how their progress be evaluated.” When mapping a solution to the bureaucratic school model, Rettig introduces the Democratic School Governance model. Within this model is a “Site Council,” which would be made up of parents and teachers. Rettig explains that the teachers and parents would be voted in, and not appointed by the administration. These Site Councils would establish the “mission, vision, and values of their individual school.” Although furthering parent involvement in curriculums opposes Jones’s argument in *That Librarian*, giving more power to educators is in line with Jones. Rettig’s emphasis on democracy reflects the spirit of librarians fighting against book bans. Additionally, although Rettig argues for increased community involvement, he lays out a plan for organized and democratic participation. Therefore, his argument does not necessarily support the type of parent involvement that book banning groups are displaying, in which they forcefully remove content from schools and libraries.<sup>113</sup>

In the book, *Beyond Banned Books: Defending Intellectual Freedom Throughout Your Library*, author Kristin Pekoll dives into the challenges facing modern libraries. Pekoll is a librarian like Jones, and brings a similar perspective in defense of free books. She argues that libraries are under attack from censorship efforts, and librarians need to prepare to fight back. Pekoll includes personal stories about her reputation being tarnished in the community when she

provided books with LGBTQ or racial themes. Unlike Jones, Pekoll speaks directly to librarians and moves away from her personal story. The book serves as a guide for librarians to navigate today's environment of frequent book challenges. Pekoll bolsters libraries as a significant part of communities. She writes, "Today's librarians understand the much larger role of libraries in their community. That role involves much more than just literacy. It is about lifelong learning, community-building, and affirmations of identity. The library is the one place left in our culture where all people are welcome to loiter, to browse, to explore, and to be with no ulterior motive or agenda."<sup>114</sup>

Pekoll explains the digital expansion within libraries. As of 2019, over 70% of libraries were using social media in some capacity. 30% of librarians post daily on their social media accounts. Digital databases have become a major resource for libraries, and make materials easier to access.<sup>115</sup> *The Future of Library Space*, a book by Samantha Schmehl Hines and Kathryn Moore Crowe, expands on the concepts of digitization of libraries. Hines and Crowe, in collaboration with contributing authors, outline the framework for successful libraries in a digital world by citing examples of successful library evolution. Schools like the University of South Florida, for example, have transformed areas of their library into media studios for creative work. Authors argue that the repurposing of library space is essential to the continued success of libraries in the future. This expansion, according to the authors, stems from "a recognition at a societal level of the value and necessity of creativity and related skills and attributes; the philosophies, values, and missions of libraries; the rise of participatory culture benefiting from inexpensive technologies and improved communications; and library experience and historical practice in matters related to creativity."<sup>116</sup> Overall, the argument is that the technological advancement of libraries is related to historical library values of creativity and community.

The academic journal, "U.S. Book Banning as Radicalized Political Strategy," expands on previous arguments that book banning is inherently political, and concludes that book bans are rooted in white supremacy. Author Barbara Becnel pushes for the reframing of book bans as a political strategy with the goal of mobilizing voters for a particular party, rather than a censorship crisis. She defines framing as "a way of purposefully establishing a perspective to direct how a group acts and reacts in their environment." The anti-woke political narrative is the result of the framing from conservative politicians and news media. Liberal views are framed as the enemy, and LGBTQ and racially diverse themes fall into that category. There is framing within book banning legislation as well. In regards to the 2022 Florida Individual Freedom Act, Becnel writes: "Both of the legislation's titles – "Stop WOKE" and "Individual Freedom" – are also examples of politicized framing. Positing the circumscription of what is taught in schools as a matter of protecting individual freedoms and child safeguarding serves to obscure its true, racialized, intent and render it palatable for public consumption." Becnel calls for a reframing of the American political narrative.<sup>117</sup>

The concept of framing is supported by the journal article "How media narratives can be used in Decision Making under Deep Uncertainty practice?" Rather than focusing on political framing like the previous article, these authors focus on the journalistic framing of news events.

Although in different contexts, the idea that news stories are strategically framed for public consumption is consistent between both sources. Here, authors explain that “the inherent tension in journalism between the pursuit of accuracy and the creation of compelling narratives is amplified when reporting on complex and uncertain phenomena. The dilemma lies in the fact that achieving absolute accuracy can sometimes lead to stories that are too technical or complex for a broad audience to follow, diminishing their appeal and impact.” Authors cite COVID-19 and distrust in polling systems as two “uncertain” issues that were difficult to cover, but covered successfully by certain outlets that employed “Decision Making under Deep Uncertainty,” or DMDU, strategies. To put this in context, the majority of mainstream news coverage of book banning has been shallow and simplified. It is difficult to find the technical, behind the scenes elements beyond the general facts of the issue. This has built the media narrative that book bans are beyond public control. This study supports the idea that readership is the motivation behind overly simplified stories.<sup>118</sup>

The 2024 study “Politics and Children’s Books: Evidence from School Library Collections” examines the relation between a county’s local politics and likelihood to ban books. Researcher Kristen Slungaard Mumma studied 6,631 public school libraries across America. They concluded that high school libraries in counties with conservative leaning local politics provide approximately 45% fewer books with LGBTQ themes. They provide over 50% fewer books that deal with race or racism. The study suggests that schools experiencing book bans do not experience a major decrease in provided LGBTQ content, because the numbers were already low. Still, most libraries contained at least a few titles from the researcher’s list of controversial books. This supports the notion that libraries are still providing access to materials that even local decision makers object to.<sup>119</sup>

This study found that schools subject to book challenges were “more likely to be located in states with laws that restrict curricular content and in areas covered by conservative groups.” In this study, conservative counties were those in which the majority of the population voted for Donald Trump in 2020. 56% of schools with book challenges were in a county with a local chapter of one of the conservative groups that call for book bans.<sup>120</sup> This data contradicts with the findings of the 2021 study “Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. schools,” which found that counties with a lower share of Republican votes in the 2020 presidential election have higher levels of book bans. This was not the case from 2000 to 2016, when counties with Republican majorities were more likely to ban books. The study concludes that tighter political races account for the increase in book bans. Fewer share of Republican votes means that Republicans make a stronger effort to mobilize voters, and therefore ban more books.<sup>121</sup> The time difference between these two studies could account for the difference in data (2021 vs. 2024).

Two studies examine the topic of media filters within digital platforms, specifically search engines like Google. This relates to my topic because people’s perceptions of the book banning issue is largely dependent on the news media they consume. One study from 2024 titled, “Can biased search results change people’s opinions about anything at all? A close replication of the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME)” tests the power of search engines to influence

people's opinions. Researchers Robert Epstein and Ji Li explain that search engines like Google and Yahoo filter, order, and customize content in order to match the interests of the user. They presented subjects with biased search engine results about two controversial issues, fracking and artificial intelligence. They were polled about their views before and after reviewing the search results. For both issues, there was a 20% shift in subject viewpoints after viewing the skewed results. Authors write that "a search algorithm will always, or nearly always, tend to favor one perspective over another," and the one it favors will inevitably influence people's opinions.<sup>122</sup>

In the 2017 study "My News Feed is Filtered?" Elia Powers explores the public awareness of these kinds of search engine filters. Powers conducted an experiment with college students, interviewing a wide range of students and discussing their knowledge of filtered news. The study discusses the concept of journalists as "gatekeepers," and their power to influence public opinion by shaping the flow of news. It echoes the points of the previous study, explaining that digital platforms, Google and Facebook in particular, play a direct role in filtering news content provided to users. Based on the interviews, Powers concluded that the majority of college age students are unaware of the extent that Google and Facebook filter their news feeds. Powers argues for increased media literacy education, explaining that it would make people less susceptible to the media bias.<sup>123</sup>

"The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear" is the final journal article I have examined in my research. Professor and sociologist David L. Altheide argues that American news media manufactures public fear. Altheide writes, "The mass media in general, and especially the electronic news media, are part of a 'problem-generating machine' geared to entertainment, voyeurism, and the 'quick fix' rather than the understanding and social change..." Altheide introduces a theory of the "problem-frame," which is how news media presents current events as threats worthy of fear or panic. The definition of framing is the same as Bencel's definition in "U.S. Book Banning as Radicalized Political Strategy." One of the problem-framing tactics is simplification. Bencel similarly argues that news media frame issues in order to influence the audience's response. Altheide echoes the political argument, writing, "by priming certain aspects of national life while ignoring others, television news sets the terms by which political judgments are rendered and political choices made."<sup>124</sup> However, Altheide takes this concept a step further with the problem-frame and the idea that fear is the primary goal. Altheide relates the problem-frame to the entertainment element of news media. Fear-based stories attract audiences. Altheide writes, "A key strategy to develop audience identification and interaction with the message is to provide 'new information.' For example, 'here's what's happening now,' within a familiar context of meaning."<sup>125</sup> The previous article, "How media narratives can be used in Decision Making under Deep Uncertainty practice?" supports the argument that issues are simplified in order to maintain viewership.

## Central Issues from Critical Literature

### 1. Political motivations

Book banning appeals to the culture war between liberal and conservative groups. The majority of banned and challenged books have racially diverse or LGBTQ characters and themes. Groups that challenge these books are frequently aligned with conservative values and the Republican party.<sup>126</sup> Republican political figures emphasize concerns around challenged books in order to mobilize voters.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, across America, countries with chapters of conservative organizations are more likely to encounter book challenges.<sup>128</sup>

### 2. Level of impact

The vast majority of children in the United States have internet access. Additionally, books that are challenged and banned were not popular to begin with, and increase in popularity after they are challenged. Therefore, library book bans are not an effective censorship tactic. However, in schools, classic literature provides students with a cultural and historical understanding of America. Whether or not these books are banned has a significant impact on their view of historical elements like slavery, racism, and religion.<sup>129 130</sup>

### 3. Librarian experience

In many cases, book banning controversies result in personal attacks of librarians. This takes a significant toll on those targeted. Additionally, librarians argue that the public should trust them as professionals to select appropriate books for collections.<sup>131 132</sup>

### 4. Parental involvement in education

Some argue for increased parent involvement in selecting the curriculum for schools. Currently, decision making lies in the hands of school administrators. There is room for more balance between teachers, parents and administrators. This would have to be organized and democratic.<sup>133</sup>

### 5. Library relevance and modernization

Libraries have always been revered as the informational epicenter of a community. In an increasingly digitized society, libraries must evolve in order to maintain relevance. Libraries have expanded digital databases and grown social media presences. Many have increased programs that open their offerings beyond books. Overall, library values of community and creativity are being fostered in new ways, which tend to be successful.<sup>134</sup>

### 6. Media framing, narratives, and filters

News media tend to lean into what makes a story compelling, rather than the complicated facts of a situation. The book banning controversy is often portrayed in simple terms,

grabbing the audience's attention with the sensational aspects (protests, etc.). The details of how bans are approved or quantified are rarely included.<sup>135</sup> News sources also tend to put news in the “problem frame,” generating fear among audiences.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, various media platforms and news outlets frame book banning in different ways, using language that either supports or opposes the books. Google is proven to filter results in order to appeal to the user, so the types of news narratives one is exposed to can be bias-confirming.<sup>137</sup>

## Major People & Organizations

### *People*

#### Martha Hickson

A New Jersey librarian named 2023 Librarian of the Year for her efforts against book banning.<sup>138</sup>

#### Safiya Noble

The author of *Algorithms of Oppression*, the book about search engines and their ability to shape people's perceptions.<sup>139</sup>

#### Suzette Baker

A Texas librarian who was for refusing to remove banned books from the collection. She sued the county for wrongful termination.<sup>140</sup>

#### Amada Jones

The author of *That Librarian*, who is one of the most prominent librarian and activist voices in news media. She is known for receiving heavy social media attacks for speaking out against book bans, and subsequently filing a defamation lawsuit.<sup>141</sup>

#### Nadine Farid Johnson

The managing director of PEN America Washington, as well as director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University. She is a professor of law and political science, and advocates for First Amendment rights in court cases.<sup>142</sup>

#### Lee Joyce

Member of the public library board of trustees in Bedford, New Hampshire, who advocates for library freedoms.<sup>143</sup>

#### Beth Cuddy

2022 New York Librarian of the Year, awarded for her successful fight against the book challenge against *All Boys Aren't Blue*.<sup>144</sup>

Kirsten Slungard Mumma

Assistant professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She studies education programs and their impact on students. She wrote the journal, "Politics and Children's Books: Evidence from School Library Collections."<sup>145</sup>

Elia Powers

Associate professor of journalism at Towson University. He wrote the study "My News Feed is Filtered?" which explores the extent of media literacy among young adults.<sup>146</sup>

David Altheide

Sociologist and former professor at Arizona State University. He wrote "The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear," and studied fear in mass media.<sup>147</sup>

Cindy Hohl

The president of the American Library Association, which conducts significant research on book banning and advocates for library freedoms.<sup>148</sup>

Barbara Becnel

Author and social justice activist. Founder of the Institute for Cognitive Justice. She wrote the journal article, "U.S. Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy," which explored the political factor of book bans.<sup>149</sup>

Tina Descovich & Tiffany Justice

Co-founders of Moms for Liberty, one of the most prominent groups leading the book banning effort. The group has approximately 285 chapters across 45 states. It is defined by conservative political values and anti-LGBTQ efforts. Both Justice and Descovich served on Florida school boards for several years.<sup>150</sup>

Becky Calzada

A librarian and founding member of the Texas Freedom Fighters, a group that advocates for libraries and educates about the dangers of book bans.<sup>151</sup>

Michael Colford

The Director of Library Services at Boston Public Library. He is on the Public Library Association Board of Directors, which works to improve public library programming and resources.<sup>152</sup>

Justin Marsh

The co-founder of the Vermont chapter of Drag Queen Story Hour. They perform under the stage name “Emoji Nightmare.” Drag Queen Story Hour is held at numerous library locations across Vermont.<sup>153</sup>

Kelly Kendall

The Children’s Librarian at South Burlington Public Library. She advocates for controversial topics in the children’s section, such as critical race theory and LGBTQ themes.<sup>154</sup>

*Organizations:*

American Library Association (ALA)

A nonprofit organization that represents American libraries and advocates for their success. The ALA brings awareness to issues facing libraries, and promotes legislation that protects them. It was founded in 1876.<sup>155</sup>

PEN America

A nonprofit organization with the goal of protecting freedom of expression. It was founded in 1922. There are over 4,500 members of PEN America across the country, all of whom are writers. Their research on book bans is highly referenced in news media, and has contributed to awareness of the issue.<sup>156</sup>

Moms for Liberty

A conservative political organization founded in 2021 with the goal of increasing parent control within school curriculums. They are a major advocate for the removal of books that explore LGBTQ and racial themes. As a nationwide group with about 300 chapters, many of their efforts to ban books have been successful.<sup>157</sup>

No Left Turn in Education

A parent group that opposes the teaching of critical race theory in schools. The group keeps a running list of books that teach “radical and racist” ideas to students. The group is known for leading the social media conversation regarding control of curriculums and panic surrounding book bans.<sup>158</sup>

Texas Freedom Fighters

A group organized in 2021 by librarians in Texas. They lead campaigns in support of librarians, libraries, and the right to read all books. They host events that highlight the importance of the themes in banned books, and lead a social media conversation to spread awareness of the issue. Texas has some of the highest numbers of banned books in America.<sup>159</sup>

### Americans for Prosperity

A conservative Christian organization founded in 1977. Their goal is the promotion of “traditional family values,” and eliminating LGBTQ visibility. Although the group has been vocal about book bans, their primary focus is the broader culture of America as a whole. They deny that they are a hateful group promoting censorship, and claim the distinction between book bans and “filters.”<sup>160</sup>

### Knight First Amendment Institute

A non-profit organization that operates out of Columbia University. They advocate for freedom of speech in digital realms. They focus on public education, legal protections, and research. They have done extensive research on social media freedoms and the algorithms within digital social platforms.<sup>161</sup>

### American Civil Liberties Union

A non-profit civil rights organization that was founded in 1920. They handle a broad scope of issues, including freedom of speech, LGBTQ rights, and racial justice. The ACLU challenges book bans in court, and has been successful in defeating book challenges across America.<sup>162 163</sup>

### Digital Public Library of America

An organization founded in 2013, based on the collaboration between libraries, museums, archives and universities across America. The DPLA is the digitized version of collections from these sources, making it a public resource for education. They launched the Banned Book Club in 2023, with the goal of collecting digital versions of banned books and making them accessible everywhere.<sup>164</sup>

### Human Rights Campaign

An LGBTQ advocacy group that was established in 1980. There are 3 million members across America. Through programs like the National Day of Reading, the HRC promotes LGBTQ stories reaching youth.<sup>165</sup>

### Drag Story Hour

Drag queens go to local libraries and read books to young children. The program was started in San Francisco in 2015, and now there are 35 chapters in the United States and 5 international chapters. The program is celebrated by libraries and communities, but draws controversy as well.<sup>166</sup>

### Authors Against Book Bans

An organization launched in 2024 that advocates for the freedom of books and works against book bans across America. There are over 1,500 members, all of whom are authors of book contributors. They support schools, educators, and organizations that defend banned books.<sup>167 168 169</sup>

### National Education Association

The labor union that represents public school teachers and staff. It has about 3 million members, and is the largest labor union in the United States. They advocate for a diverse education. Parents' rights groups have criticized the NEA for its typically liberal positions.<sup>170</sup>

## **Interview Analysis**

### Interview #1

- Beth Cuddy
- November 12, 2:00 p.m.
- Zoom video call

My first interview was with Beth Cuddy, the librarian at Auburn High School in New York. She was named Librarian of the Year in 2022 by the New York Library Association. Beth became the school librarian in 2021. The Librarian of the Year award was for actively fighting against book challenges in her library, as well as dealing with online attacks from community members. The controversy was about the book *All Boys Aren't Blue*, which is one of the most heavily challenged books nationally. In the end, Beth successfully saved the book from being removed. She recommended I read the book myself to understand its themes and controversial points.

First, Beth explained the role of the library in the Auburn High School community. She said it is primarily a study hall for students, and a place where both students and teachers gather. Students play games and meet their friends to do work. School librarians are often used to teach students how to research for projects and use online databases. Overall, the library is an active center of student and faculty activity.

For my project, it is important to talk to librarians who have directly dealt with book challenges and controversies. Additionally, a school librarian perspective is different from a public librarian perspective. Beth gave great insight into the whole experience, both personally and on a technical level (how the book challenge process actually works). She explained that at a school board meeting in December 2021, a community member saw that the book *All Boys Aren't Blue* was on display. They told a school administrator that they had a problem with it being in the library. The next day, the school principal came to the library to speak with her about taking the book off the shelves. Beth felt that the original book challenge was "inorganic" because nobody had previously checked it out. The book was on lists of books to "look for" that were being circulated by conservative groups.

Beth told school administrators that there were guidelines in place, and they could not just take a book off the shelves because people did not like it. Beth feared that the process would be circumvented in order to appease community members. However, they went through the correct steps. A review board was formed with faculty and community members. The woman who originally challenged the book was put on the review board. The members had to read the book and decide whether or not it fit the outlined criteria for what belongs in the library. In the end, everyone voted to keep the book except the original challenger. There has not been another challenge since.

My major takeaway from our conversation was the measures people went to to stir up anger in the community. Beth was personally attacked by community members online. People said that she was trying to “ruin” children’s education and push disturbing content onto them. Also, people were printing out excerpts from the book and posting them around the library. Beth said that the personal attacks did considerable damage to her mental health. This is an important impact of the book controversies that gets overlooked in the mainstream conversation.

Lastly, we talked about the actual motivation behind book banning. Beth believes that the goal is to keep marginalized groups on the outside of the narrative and to perpetuate division in America. This is because bans and challenges are not an effective mode of censorship. After the *All Boys Aren't Blue* controversy, there was a form placed on the school website for parents to report books they did not want their child to check out. Beth said that nobody has filled out this form. She thinks that the group of parents have moved on from book banning after this failed attempt.

### Interview #2

- Kirsten Slungaard Mumma
- November 13, 12:30 p.m.
- Zoom video call

Kirsten Slungaard Mumma is an assistant professor of Economics and Education at Columbia University. She studies the intersection between politics and education. Her study, “Politics and Children’s Books: Evidence from School Library Collections” is a central resource in my project. The study explores the connection between book bans and local politics. She looked at hundreds of library collections across America and whether they had content that was causing controversy: LGBTQ themes or characters, racism and critical race theory, sexual themes, etc. Our conversation helped make sense of this study. It is dense and complicated, so getting to ask questions about it was very helpful for my understanding.

Kirsten said she conducted the study in 2021, at the height of the book banning crisis. Amidst the loud media conversations, she wanted to contribute data that could help make sense of everything. She said that she does not have extensive expertise in libraries specifically, but wanted to bring her research skills to this topic. The goal of the research was to find how libraries were politicized to begin with, even before books were being banned.

In conservative communities, school libraries were less likely to have queer main characters or themes involving racism. Kirsten hypothesized that this could be due to the conservative values of the librarians in these areas. These librarians could be less likely to choose books with controversial themes. Or, this could be because librarians in conservative areas do not want to make waves in the community or get in trouble. Overall, she said it is hard to know the exact reason. Kirsten emphasized the fact that libraries in conservative areas still had content with controversial material even though it was less. Therefore, libraries remain a center for students and community members to learn about these topics.

Kirsten explained that the counties with the most book bans were those that were leaning conservative, but not the most conservative. I was unsure about this conclusion and was glad to clarify. She said that the reasoning behind this finding could be the fact that conservative groups in these areas have more motivation to use book bannings as a political weapon. In other words, people could be using book banning to mobilize voters and get people riled up about something.

I asked Kirsten about her thoughts on how this issue is actually affecting communities, and whether or not it can be classified as censorship. She said that the difference between book challenges and book bans is an important distinction. She also said that typically, books that are taken off shelves were not being checked out to begin with. Kirsten said it is hard for her to see the issue as anything other than political opportunism. There are people who do not truly care about what children are learning, and are simply fanning the flames of polarization. Still, she said that having genuine concerns about what children are learning is appropriate.

Kirsten talked about the chilling effect of book banning. In districts that experienced book banning and controversies, libraries were less likely to add books LGBTQ themes to their collections the following school year. This does not fall under the category of “book bans,” and cannot be quantified by stats or data. This indicates the unseen effect of the situation.

It is unfortunate that Kirsten’s study is now a few years old because so much has changed since then. With several points, she concluded by saying that things are different than when she wrote the study. For example, she was unsure about the current guidelines for librarians to select books for the collection. I will have to follow up on these areas of discussion and see if her research is still relevant.

We discussed media coverage of the issue. Kirsten said that the prevalence of conservative groups in media coverage plays a role in eroding trust between parents and schools. These groups (she used Moms for Liberty as an example) perpetuate the idea that libraries and schools cannot be trusted by parents. This fuels the fire of book challenges.

We ended our conversation by talking about the future of a depoliticized education. I was hoping for some theories about what can be done to create a more balanced and democratic system within education. However, she said that she is unsure how to undo the current situation.

Interview #3

- Lee Joyce
- November 14, 3:30 p.m.
- Zoom video call

Lee Joyce is a member of the Bedford Public Library Board of Trustees in Bedford, New Hampshire. As I learn more about public libraries and how they are organized and run, I wanted the perspective of someone who works in a library on a higher level. Lee works less directly with the library than I had expected, which was an unfortunate drawback of this interview. She has extensive knowledge of the behind the scenes of the library, but not the day-to-day. However, she said she will give me the contact of the head librarian to give me a more complete understanding of their library.

I first asked Lee how she got her position on the Board of Trustees. She said that she worked in the library for several years, and eventually wanted a larger role. She explained that the Board of Trustees is in charge of library politics, budget, building maintenance, and hiring the director. The library director is in charge of the day-to-day work, and is actually in the library all the time. As a member of the board, Lee does not work directly in the library.

I asked Lee about the politics surrounding book content and what the library considers appropriate. She said that the Bedford Public Library takes a freedom-centric approach to book content. Their policies do not require politically balanced collection because they are supposed to be non-political. She said that restricting or banning books is completely against the mission of a public library. In Bedford Public Library there are no filters put on the internet access. Lee said that their job is not to censor content in any way. She described it as a “free for all.”

The library has had community members report books, specifically in the children’s section, that are against their beliefs. In these situations, the library director is in charge of having a conversation with that person. The librarians argue that if the person does not like a book, they do not have to check it out. That person’s beliefs cannot dictate what is available to others. Again, freedom is the central mission. Lee chalked this up to being in New Hampshire, where the overall culture tends to be “you do you, I’ll do me.” Lee emphasized the difference between a school library and a public library. She said a school library cannot have this same spirit of freedom because parent contributions and opinions are more valid within schools.

In the case of a book challenge, there is a process in place that must be followed. There is a form in the library for someone to fill out and make a formal challenge. The library director would bring the challenge to the Board of Trustees, which would collaborate with other community members and come to a decision about the book. In Bedford, there has not been a formal challenge yet, even though community members have made complaints. Lee told a story about a parents not liking a book that was being taught in a Bedford school. From then on, there was a policy that made teachers get their curriculum approved by the school board. She used this as an example of book “banning” not being actual bans. In my opinion, this added layer of difficulty may have discouraged teachers from including controversial books in their lessons.

I learned a lot from Lee about library budgets. She has to fight for the library budget and convince the town to contribute more money. She explained that this is a difficult job because it is hard to convince people of the library's priority over other things. The Bedford library recently asked for more money in a town council meeting in order to add more staff. The request was turned down. She said that people often view the library as optional, and assume that the library can make do with a small budget. This is a point of frustration, because the library is in need of more funding. Lee said that tax dollars contribute to the maintenance of the library. The "Friends of the Library" organization, as well as other support groups, contribute to the funding of the library. Lee explained that library programs and expansion of offerings is an important part of library funding. When the library provides useful services, people will want to put their tax dollars into it.

### Future Interviews

Moving forward, I will continue interviewing librarians. Their personal experiences dealing with book challenges is a key element of my project. Their stories give me a clearer view of the overall impact of this controversy. I need to interview notable librarians on the front lines of the issue, such as Martha Hickson and Suzette Baker. Hickson was the 2023 Librarian of the Year for her efforts against book banning in New Jersey. Baker was fired for refusing to take books off shelves, and the story was the subject of multiple news headlines. Amanda Jones, author of *That Librarian*, is my most essential interview. With her book, she has become the face of librarians fighting book bans. I want to learn how things have changed in her library and community since the book's release and subsequent popularity. Although these prominent librarians are my major goal, other librarians also have important perspectives. Furthermore, I need to extend beyond librarians and into teachers and school administrators. Those who are directly dealing with controversies over curriculum will have essential insight and experiences to share. School administrators have an understanding of who creates school curriculums and determines school values.

I need to continue interviewing leaders of organizations on both sides of the arguments (challenging books or defending books). PEN America and the American Library Association (ALA) are the two most prominent organizations in the fight for librarians and free books. Both conduct significant research on book bans and challenges, and most of my data comes from these sources. Cindy Hohl, the president of the ALA, is an ideal interviewee. However, another representative on the executive board would be useful as well. From PEN America, I want to interview the managing director, Nadine Farid Johnson. Farid Johnson is also the director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University. She fights for First Amendment rights in court. The First Amendment and freedom of speech is a key element of the book banning controversy, so her perspective is highly valuable.

Finally, there are more scholars who have conducted research on modern book bans, media filters, and politicization of education. The most crucial interview for my project is Barbara Becnel, who wrote the study "U.S. Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy."

Becnel argues that book bans are rooted in racism and are intended to erase Black history from schools and libraries. She writes that politicians use book bans to push a white-washed national narrative. The study is a key part of my research and draws conclusions that are rarely presented or explored.

## Site Visit Analysis

### Site Visit #1

- Windsor Public Library (Drag Story Hour)
- November 16, 10:00 a.m.

I went to Windsor Public Library in Windsor, Vermont to see the Drag Story Hour event. Drag Story Hour is a program that sends drag queens to libraries and schools to read picture books to children. There are chapters of the program across the United States. Because LGBTQ themes are the primary target of book bans and challenges, Drag Story Hour is highly relevant as I explore the way libraries are navigating the tense political climate. Aside from Drag Story Hour, I wanted to learn more about the Windsor Public Library. Windsor is a very small town, so I thought it would provide an interesting perspective on the role of libraries in different types of communities.

The library is extremely small and historic. It was built in 1902. Unlike more modern libraries, there are no separate rooms for studying, meetings, computers, or art. On the ground floor (the main part of the library), there are a few chairs on each side of the library, but those are the only places to stay and sit. When I was there, there were 3 women sitting in the chairs and chatting. The small circulation desk is in the middle of the room, right in front of the door. Behind the desk, I could see into a small office cluttered with books, papers, and boxes. There was a young librarian at the desk (the library assistant). The whole room is very quiet and creaky. The dark wood gives it an old, cozy feel that modern public libraries do not provide. On each wall of the ground floor, there are large black-and-white portraits of people. It is unclear who the people are, I was assuming they were authors. There are also portraits of children.

Behind the desk there is a staircase that leads to the basement, which is the children's section. The wall behind the staircase is painted with a big, vibrant rainbow, which implied the message of LGBTQ inclusion. This room has a completely different feel. The walls are yellow and bookshelves are green, which gives it a brighter, more modernized look. When Drag Story Hour was happening, all the parents and children were packed into the sitting area, which has small child sized chairs. The two drag queens, Emoji Nightmare and Nikki Champagne, were sitting at the front of the room. They read several children's books in a very theatrical way, which was met with laughter from the whole room. The room had a joyful energy, and mostly everyone was clearly enjoying the performance. Parents were smiling and clapping throughout each book reading. There were about 25-30 parents with children ages 2-8. There were other adults standing in the back, off to the side of the room. The basement was full.

During the performance, several of the small children in the audience waved to the drag queens, seemingly excited by their performance. There were many moments in which the performers invited participation from the kids, asking if they knew what happened next, for example. Also, there was one story that encouraged physical movements from the parents and children. The crowd was more participatory than expected. This participant was an informal rule. A formal rule was being quiet and attentive while the performers were reading.

The two drag performers were wearing elaborate costumes, wigs, and makeup. Emoji Nightmare was wearing a sparkly rainbow jumpsuit, and Nikki Champagne wore a black and white polka dot dress with a tutu skirt. Their costumes made them stand out as the performers. Everyone else in the room was in casual dress. Although the upstairs part of the library required hushed tones, the children's section was loud because of the event. Even after the performance, children were making crafts and running around. The rules of the children's section are much more lax.

In such a small space, I felt like my presence was extremely visible. Everyone else there was either a parent, performer, or library worker. This made me stick out. I did not feel that my presence had an impact on people's attention, except when I tried to move around to find new camera angles. This came down to the size of the room, and how awkward it was to be so close to everyone when I move around. I had to be aware of whether or not I was taking photos of kids, because the head librarian requested that I get permission from parents first.

After the show, I spoke with Barbara Ball, the library director. It was clear that she had the head role in the library. While the library assistant checked out books, Ball was speaking with people and answering questions. She had a very positive, warm energy. She told me that the library puts emphasis on diversity and inclusion. They were excited to host Drag Story Hour for the first time. The library has not experienced book challenges, even though their children's collection highlights several books with controversial and inclusive themes. This speaks to the community values. Additionally, Ball explained that one third of library funding is funded by the library itself. I also spoke with Emoji Nightmare, one of the drag performers. They explained that Drag Story Hour means a lot for representation within small communities like Windsor. They said that the acceptance of the program is up in the air. The next Drag Story Hour is expected to be met with protests and backlash. They fear that the 2024 presidential election has empowered people to fight harder against themes they do not accept.

### Site Visit #2

- South Burlington Public Library
- November 19, 3:00 p.m.

I went to South Burlington Public Library to look at an example of a public library. I wanted to see the different programs and features, the kind of books available, and how many people were there on a typical weekday. The library building is connected to the South

Burlington City Hall. The outside looks like an office building. On the inside, the library is colorful and modern. It was built in 2021. The first floor has the circulation desk and the children's section. The children's section has many different features, such as a craft room, two computer areas, and an activities room. There are many different sitting areas with couches and chairs. There were several parents in this section of the library, sitting with young children and reading aloud to them quietly. There were older children, probably aged 10-12, playing computer games in the "Hangout" section. The amount of crafts hung up in the craft room implied that children engage with that feature of the library as well. At this time of day, there were no children using that area.

The books in the children's section said a lot about the values of the library and the community. There was a wide range of diverse characters, with Black, LGBTQ, and disabled characters on top of book displays. I spoke with Kelly Kendall, the director of the children's section. She said that they make a strong effort to provide inclusive books that represent all different identities. They have not run into book challenges or complaints. Kendall said that every year, they have a banned book event where books are wrapped in paper, and the reason they were banned in other libraries or schools is written on them. She said this event brings more attention to these controversial books because kids become curious about them. This is the main way the library advocates for banned books.

Upstairs is the main part of the library. This is much larger than the downstairs children's section. It is colorful like the children's section, with bright green and blue walls and furniture. There is significant natural light from the big windows, and the space is overall appealing and clean. Aside from the large collection of books, there are many different rooms that offer other things to the community. There is a digital lab, a large "community room" for meetings, three small study rooms with desks, a small computer section, and a young adults room with couches and tables. There were many people using the library when I was there. It was mostly college-aged people, presumably from one of the Burlington area schools. The dress code is casual, with most people wearing jeans and sweatshirts. This code of dress adds to the comfortability within the library space. A large portion of the people there were working on laptops, using the library as a space for studying or other work. There were also people reading or looking through the book shelves. Two adult men were on the library computers in the computer section. In the digital lab, there seemed to be some kind of class being taught. When I asked a librarian, she said that there was a tech help session, where people could bring their devices and receive professional help with it. There were about six adults in this digital lab session.

All of the librarians I saw or spoke with were white women over the age of 40. Based on national statistics, the overwhelming majority of librarians are older white women. I am curious about the reasoning behind this. The librarians were not taking too active a role in the space. They were behind desks waiting for people to check out. Otherwise, they were not out in the library space doing work or speaking with people. Though the library was neat and simple in the

main areas, the offices I went into were pretty cluttered and busy. There were drawings and crafts all over the walls, personal items (like photos) on desks, and lots of stacks of papers and books.

Being quiet is a widely known and accepted rule of libraries. When speaking with the librarians, we were both speaking very softly. When walking around the library and taking photos, I felt like I was disturbing people working or reading. The sound of my camera seemed so loud in such a quiet space. Also, I was struggling with whether or not I could ask people permission for photos. So many people had headphones in or were engrossed in work. I did not want to disturb them because that goes against the rules of the space.

### Future Site Visits

The most essential site visits moving forward are libraries. The library visits I have done so far were extremely useful. I got a snapshot of that particular library's staff, popularity or place in the community, program offerings, funding, digital features and book collections. Speaking with library staff provides perspectives from those that are directly impacted by the issue. I must continue visiting both public and school libraries in a wide range of communities. My next priority is a school library because I have not been to one yet. The schools I visit should vary in size and financial status. I want to branch out beyond local Vermont schools. Over winter break, I will explore libraries in Massachusetts and surrounding areas. Furthermore, I am looking to attend specific library events, like Drag Story Hour, that exemplify a library's values of inclusion.

### **Survey Questions**

1. How often do you visit your local public library?
2. How important is your local public library in your community?
3. Where are you most likely to get a book? (Library, local or chain bookstore, Amazon, etc.)
4. Has there been controversy surrounding books in your local libraries or schools? If so, what kinds of books were controversial?
5. Do you see book bans and challenges as an issue of censorship and/or a violation of free speech? Why or why not.
6. Do you think librarians should be solely responsible for selecting books available in libraries? If not, who else should have input?
7. How do you feel about young children being exposed to diverse characters in books (racially/ethnically diverse, different gender/sexual identities, different abilities, etc.)
8. Do you think books with certain topics/themes should be kept out of *public* libraries? If so, why / what kind of books?
9. Do you think books with certain topics/themes should be kept out of *school* libraries? If so, why / what kind of books?
10. If a book were deemed inappropriate for students under 18, what topics or themes might it contain? List your top example.

11. When a book is removed from a library shelf, how does this impact the community?
12. How much influence should parents or community members have on school curriculums?
13. Do you think local and/or state politics influence the content taught in public schools? If so, how?
14. Does American education as a whole reflect a certain set of political values? If yes, explain.
15. Do you have concerns regarding the types of content children are taught (or not taught) in American public schools? Why?
16. Should schools be required to teach students about American slavery? If so, what grade levels should this apply to? If not, why?
17. Should schools be required to include LGBTQ identities in lessons of history and social studies? If so, what grade levels should this apply to? If not, why?
18. Where do you primarily get your news? (Online news outlet, social media, etc.)
19. Do you find your sources of news to be biased in any way?
20. Do you find that your social media media feed is curated toward your beliefs?
21. Generally, how does the news make you feel?

My survey has a broad audience because education and libraries are general concepts that most groups can speak to. It is aimed at understanding the public opinion on my research topics, and therefore I would like anyone over the age of 16 to respond. This will give me a clear vision of the way most people think of their local libraries and modern book bans. Ideally, the survey will reach a wide variety of communities and not stay local.

To circulate my survey, I plan on creating social media profiles on Instagram and Facebook. These are two of the most popular social media platforms, and they reach a wide variety of demographics. Facebook is popular among an older generation, which will contribute to the varied age range of my data. On Instagram, the Explore page provides users with posts from accounts they do not follow. This gives my posts a chance to end up on new users' feeds. The social media pages will be professional looking, with streamlined colors and logos. The biography section will provide a brief description of the project, as well as the link to the survey. Posts will provide further details of the project, as well as direct viewers to the survey.

Aside from social media, I plan on sending the survey through emails. I will send it to all the interviewee contacts I have acquired thus far, and request that they send it to their colleagues. I will use my on-campus connections to circulate the survey around the Burlington area. Additionally, I will utilize off-campus connections, such as friends who go to other colleges across the country. This will help expand the geographical parameters of my data.

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