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Book Bans in the U.S. Attempts to censor library materials as a warning sign of antidemocratic movements

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Abstract

Starting in 2021, book censorship attempts in the United States increased dramatically. While not initially apparent, these censorship attempts were part of a broad antidemocratic movement driven by extremist organizations with significant political ties. As the rhetoric and tactics utilized by U.S. groups spreads internationally, monitoring efforts to censor library materials can provide warning of a political shift towards authoritarian rule.

Keywords: Intellectual Freedom, Book Challenges, Book Bans, Censorship, Libraries, Education, Democracy, Antidemocratic Movements

Buchverbote in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika Zensurversuche von Bibliotheksmaterial als Warnzeichen für antidemokratische Bewegungen

Zusammenfassung

Ab 2021 nahmen die Versuche, Bücher zu zensurieren, in den Vereinigten Staaten dramatisch zu. Diese Zensurversuche waren zwar zunächst nicht offensichtlich, aber Teil einer breiten, von extremistischen Organisationen mit bedeutenden politischen Verbindungen vorangetriebenen, antidemokratischen Bewegung. In dem Ausmaß, in dem sich die Rhetorik und die Taktiken dieser Gruppen international verbreiten, kann die Beobachtung von Zensurversuchen in Bibliotheken als Warnzeichen für einen politischen Wandel hin zu einer autoritären Herrschaft dienen.

Schlagwörter: Intellektuelle Freiheit, Buchverbote, Zensur, Bibliotheken, Bildung, Demokratie, antidemokratische Bewegungen

1 Background

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) maintains a database of domestic censorship attempts targeting library materials and services from 1990 to the present.¹ This historic record provides a statistical baseline of the anticipated annual volume of attempts to censor library materials. Censorship attempts within this normal range reflect a small extremist response from across the political spectrum to societal changes.

An unprecedented movement to censor school, public, and academic library material in the United States began in 2021 and continues into 2025. From 1990-2020, most challenges to books on library shelves or in school curricula came from parents and library users. The majority of censorship efforts now come from members of organized pressure groups and government officials influenced by them.² Since 2021, OIF has documented the direct involvement of over 100 organizations acting to pressure library workers and government officials to censor books with specific topics, viewpoints, and representation. The most prominent of those working to censor library materials are anti-government extremist groups such as Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn in Education, hate groups including the Proud Boys and MassResistance, and Christian nationalist groups, like Christian Perspective Representatives and Focus on the Family ([Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.](#)).

2 Evidence of Organized Censorship Activity

Historically, book challenges were primarily made by individuals to a single title they had at least partially read. From 2001–2020, OIF documented an average of 268 unique titles challenged each year, with those titles receiving a total of 361 challenges. During the current endemic censorship period (2021–2024), OIF documented an average of 2,778 unique titles targeted for censorship with 6,431 challenges to them each year.³ This deluge was driven by challenges made to multiple titles simultaneously, often identified using partisan pro-censorship book rating sites.⁴ The need to review so many books drains staff time and diverts resources away from supporting the public good. These rating sites equip activists to press for book

1 OIF's database is compiled from confidential reports from library workers, administrators, and users; media accounts; and public records. Most censorship attempts go unreported. Year to year comparisons with data obtained through FOIA requests to Texas school districts by the Texas ACLU from 2009–2019 indicate that we documented an average of 23.12% of the titles challenged with year-to-year variance ranging from 6.25% to 33.33% of titles challenged at Texas school districts ([ACLU of Texas n.d.](#)).

2 Pressure groups and government officials challenged 4,190 titles in 2024, accounting for 71.6% of the total documented book challenges. From 2001–2020 an average of 46 titles per year were challenged by this constituency, accounting for 12.8% of the total documented challenges during those two decades ([Stroshane 2025](#)).

3 For additional details, see: [Office for Intellectual Freedom 2022](#); [Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023](#); [Stroshane 2024](#), and [Stroshane 2025](#).

4 BookLooks, the most prominent pro-censorship book rating site, was created by Emily Maikisch, a founding member of Moms for Liberty ([Carless 2023](#)). According to USA Today, it quickly "became the go-to resource for anyone seeking to ban books – especially books about gay people or sexuality – from school and public libraries" ([Carless 2023](#)).

censorship by compiling excerpts that appear offensive and unethical when taken out of context. Utilizing these compilations, the same titles are targeted at libraries nationwide with copied and pasted objections to the same passages.⁵ By focusing on seemingly objectionable excerpts, these groups craft a false narrative that books are dangerous and reading them could harm young people.⁶ They foster distrust in educators, library workers, and academics.⁷ Talking points from these pressure groups spread through social media influencers, conservative media outlets, and religious websites. Through repetition, extremist talking points filter further and further into the mainstream.⁸ Baseless attacks on schools, libraries, and higher education are now parroted in the news. Politicians are introducing an ever-growing number of bills to limit what can be taught and read.

The antidemocratic organizations advocating for censorship have significant legislative influence due to strong ties between these antidemocratic organizations and far-right Republican politics. Moms for Liberty, the most prominent group advocating for the censorship of library books, was founded by Tina Escovich, Tiffany Justice, and Bridget Ziegler, whose husband is the vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party ([Jensen 2022](#)). Moms for Liberty also has close ties to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Fox News hosts, and state legislators ([Jensen 2022](#)). Both DeSantis and President Donald Trump attended a Moms for Liberty conference in Philadelphia while campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 2023 ([Swenson and Colvin 2023](#)). Justice has appeared in photo ops with President Trump, attended the signing of the Executive Order dismantling the U.S. Department of

5 Titles identified on book rating sites were challenged 15,876 times from 2021–2024 (53% of the total censorship attempt volume). During the preceding two decades, titles that would later appear on these sites were targeted a total of 1,366 times (18.5% of the total censorship attempt volume from 2001–2020). The 120 most frequently challenged titles in 2024 were all targeted for censorship on book rating sites ([Stroshane 2025](#)). These sites also helped focus censorship efforts on specific titles. The most frequently challenged title each year from 2001–2020 was targeted an average of 10.2 times. The most frequently challenged title each year from 2021–2024 was targeted an average of 113 times.

6 In Decision No. 18,402, the Office of Counsel for the New York State Education Department thoroughly dismantled arguments made by the Wayne County chapter of Moms for Liberty and the research cited supporting their claims that books with LGBTQIA+ characters or with developmentally relevant information on sex, sexuality, and gender identity were harmful to minors. “Petitioners’ argument rests upon the assumption that fictional works describing or portraying human sexuality are per se objectionable and subject to exclusion from school libraries. Petitioners cite no authority for this contention. [...] Petitioners also argue that ‘early exposure to sexual content’ is harmful to children, citing several academic studies. While this argument was not raised below, I note that the studies have no bearing on the instant dispute; for example, one surveyed Swedish high school seniors and found that sexual experiences prior to age 14 were ‘associated with problematic behaviors during later adolescence’ while another surveyed with and ninth grade Finnish students regarding the ‘associations between pubertal timing, sexual activity and self-reported depression....’ No academic study, in any event, could abrogate students’ ‘right to receive information and ideas’ through school library materials” (Commissioner of Education of the State of New York, Decision No. 18,402 of 25 April 2024).

7 Eroding trust in public schools and libraries appears to be a key goal of the people responsible for these book rating sites. After Executive Orders were issued to dismantle the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Department of Education, BookLooks removed their content proclaiming their “mission has been largely accomplished.” A functional clone of the site operating under a different name continues to promote discriminatory censorship using the same rating scale and targeting the same titles ([BookLooks 2025](#)).

8 The Propagandist’s Playbook provides an extensive breakdown of the far-right media network, and the methods employed to push extremist propaganda into mainstream outlets and acceptance ([Tripodi 2022](#)).

Education ([Montesano 2025](#)), and was quoted in the press release announcing a web portal to end diversity, equity, and inclusion in public schools ([U.S. Department of Education 2025](#)). After leaving Moms for Liberty, Justice joined the Heritage Foundation to push state legislative initiatives ([Goldstein 2025](#)).⁹

3 Extremist Tactics and Goals

Starting in 2021, antidemocratic groups promulgated a radical change in domestic censorship tactics and rhetoric. Their tactics to censor library materials include:

- efforts to subvert library material reconsideration processes through social media pressure and public comments at local governance meetings instead of through the process prescribed by policy;
- targeting titles en masse instead of individually;
- willfully conflating the location of titles within libraries (such as by claiming high school titles are in elementary school libraries, that teen or adult titles are in the children's section of a public library, or that books the library doesn't own are available for circulation);
- claiming the presence of LGBTQIA+ characters makes a book sexually explicit;
- claiming the use of crude slang and colorful insults constitutes illegal obscenity;
- claiming that making certain books available in the library is tantamount to child abuse;
- misapplying legal terms such as "obscene," "harmful to minors," and "child sexual abuse material" and using them interchangeably with subjective terms like "inappropriate" and "pornographic";
- asserting that one parent has the right to deprive other parents of the opportunity to guide their own children's reading;
- using social media to harass and threaten library workers, administrators, educators, and board members who oppose censorship and defend the freedom to read;
- threatening library conference attendees and presenters;
- filing police reports against library workers and administrators over the availability of certain titles and threatening to arrest library workers for

⁹ For more information on trends in legislation, administrative rules, and executive orders adversarial to libraries, see The state of America's libraries: 2023 ([American Library Association 2023](#)), The state of America's libraries: 2024 ([American Library Association 2024](#)), The state of America's libraries: A snapshot of 2024 ([American Library Association 2025](#)), and Adversarial legislation in the states ([American Library Association n.d.](#)).

- circulating books on certain topics;¹⁰
- removing elected officials who defend First Amendment rights and replacing them with extremist pro-censorship candidates through recall elections and political action committee funding, including at the hyper-local school board level;
 - board members introducing unconstitutional policies or going around existing policies, in many cases resulting in costly litigation against the school district or public library; and
 - attacking library associations to disparage library workers' professionalism and cut off their access to colleagues, training opportunities, and anti-censorship resources.

Once put into play, these tactics had devastating impacts on library workers, educators, and the communities they serve, including:

- fostering distrust of public education, public libraries, and professionally trained librarians and educators;
- reducing resources of library associations to train and assist professionals;
- forcing schools and libraries to expend significant resources managing the inundation of complaints, requests for reconsideration, and threats they're receiving;
- contributing to fear-based decision making and chilling effects on materials selection, displays, and programming;
- spurring involvement of even more extremist groups, including Proud Boys and neo-Nazi organizations like NSC-131;
- driving workers and trustees from their positions through intimidation and harassment;
- termination of some professional librarians, educators, and administrators over their work defending intellectual freedom;
- elimination and de-professionalization of staff positions, closing of school library media centers, and reductions in funding to public libraries; and
- costly lawsuits for violating the First and Fourteenth Amendment rights of students, parents, and other library users.

¹⁰ The idea of filing police reports against librarians over the availability of books reflecting the voices and lived experiences of those who are LGBTQIA+ originated with the hate group MassResistance. It had never been acted upon prior to 2021. To date, prosecutors throughout the U.S. have summarily dismissed all cases against library workers and administrators and no actual charges have been filed. In one instance, Take Back Our Schools and Advocates for D20 Kids filed criminal complaints against Academy School District 20 in Colorado, alleging that seven titles violated state and federal obscenity laws. The titles were identified using the partisan pro-censorship book rating site BookLooks. The District Attorney's Office determined their claims were not supported by evidence and it would be unethical to prosecute over the books. The office issued a statement that, "The criminal justice system in the United States should not be weaponized against political or social opponents based simply on disagreements, and the misuse of the prosecution process only erodes trust in an essential function of our shared government" ([O'Dell 2023](#)).

These impacts illustrate why such “parents’ rights” groups are categorized as anti-government extremist organizations by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

It is also worth noting that Moms for Liberty has documented ties to the Proud boys, Three Percenters, and other White supremacist and Christian nationalist hate groups ([Gilbert 2023](#)). Their employment of threats, intimidation, and falsehoods to stoke fear and prejudice is unsurprising in this light and evidenced through the reasons provided by those seeking to censor books. The most common rationales for censorship documented by OIF from 2021–2024 were:

- false claims of illegal obscenity for minors (used in objections to 65.82% of titles challenged);
- inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters or thematic elements (used in objections to 59.67% of titles challenged); and
- covering topics of race, racism, equity, and social justice (used in objections to 33.07% of titles challenged).

Extremist groups like Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn make false claims to play on biases and fears about child safety. Whenever their false claims are repeated, prejudice and fear spread. Threats against library workers and other civil servants are one result.¹¹ No school or public library book has ever been determined by a court of law to meet the legal definition of obscenity for minors.¹² Despite this, complainants included allegations that books contained illegal obscenity for minors in their attempts to censor 4,316 titles in 2024. Of the unique titles targeted, 43.72% prominently feature the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals or persons

11 Rhetoric accusing library workers and educators includes describing them as “groomers,” “pornographers,” “pedophiles,” supporting “gender ideology,” supporting “divisive concepts,” teaching “critical race theory,” and engaging in “indoctrination.” According to the Office of Counsel of the New York State Education Department, “such objections are emblematic of a ‘dangerous nationwide trend of accusations used to intimidate and threaten schools and librarians into denying access to books on the basis of their content and the identities of their authors’” (Commissioner of Education of the State of New York, Decision No. 18,402 of 25 April 2024). It is also worth noting that indoctrination cannot be accomplished by providing access to a spectrum of different viewpoints and ideas, rather it can only be accomplished through strictly limiting what viewpoints and ideas are permissible.

12 “Obscenity for minors” or “harmful for minors” statutes narrowly define speech not protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Established through the court cases *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973) and *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968), they codify a three prong test a criminal court can use to identify speech that is protected for adults but not for those under 17 years of age. No book in any school or public library in the United States has been found by a court of law to meet statutory definitions of being “obscene” or “harmful to minors.” Since 2021, there have been two trials regarding allegations of obscenity or content harmful to minors in library books. On August 30, 2022, the Circuit Court for the City of Virginia Beach determined that neither *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe nor *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas, contained obscenity and that both were fully protected speech in the United States. It also found that the law under which their legality was challenged before the court was itself unconstitutional and was stricken from the books. See Case No. CL22-1985. In 2023, a group called Parents and Taxpayers Against Pornography in Rockford Public Schools filed a lawsuit contending that 14 books in the libraries of the Rockford Public School District were “harmful to minors.” Judge George J. Quist dismissed the lawsuit ruling the books possessed literary value and therefore did not meet the statutory definition of “harmful to minors.” He cited the fact that the books had all received accolades or appeared on bestseller lists as proof. The case is currently undergoing appeal. See *Parents & Taxpayers Against Pornography v. Rockford Pub Schs Dist*: COA 369036.

who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC).¹³

The tactics of these extremist groups successfully intimidated library workers and administrators into engaging in censorship at a demonstrably higher rate and volume than ever previously documented by OIF.¹⁴ Pressure to eliminate certain voices and topics chills the purchase of new library books. Denying literary representation based on gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion not only denies free speech rights to those authors, but it also suppresses opportunity for literacy development among members of those groups and normalizes their exclusion from discourse, social and economic advancement, and governance. Suspicion is sown on any who speak, believe, or behave differently from a manufactured norm and the brutal punishment of non-conformity becomes socialized. Authoritarian rule requires scapegoats and creates them by exploiting lack of understanding and compassion to demonize alleged outsiders.

4 Conclusion

The freedom to read is not only essential for democratic society, but also a fundamental human right ([American Library Association 2014](#)). Without the freedom to read, we cannot consider different perspectives, we cannot speak or question freely, and we cannot learn. We gain understanding of one another by sharing stories. Stories cultivate compassion and dissolve artificial divisions between people. Communities are built upon shared stories and experiences. Stories and poems spark the imagination necessary to envision a better world.

Efforts to suppress the freedom to read are efforts to dictate which stories can be told and who gets to tell them. Removing or restricting access to information based on an individual or group's disapproval of the views expressed is censorship. Restrictions on access to books are restrictions on the ideas available for contemplation and discussion. Censorship is fundamentally antidemocratic, as voters need access to information and the opportunity to discuss it in order to understand candidates' positions and the issues on the ballot. Measuring threats to free speech subsequently provides one means of gauging the health of a democratic society. Significant

¹³ From 2001–2020, 709 of the titles targeted by censors had prominent representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals (9.73% of the total documented challenges during this time), and 498 had prominent representation of BIPOC individuals (6.84%). From 2021–2024, 11,515 titles targeted by censors had prominent representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals (38.79%) and 4,608 had prominent representation of BIPOC individuals (15.52%).

¹⁴ From 2001–2020, 31.56% of the 4,137 book challenges OIF documented with known outcomes resulted in censorship. Of those censored, 983 were banned from library collections, 94 were relocated to reduce access, 121 were removed from curricula, restrictions were imposed on accessing 148, and 5 were bowdlerized. From 2021–2024, 57.81% of the 21,750 book challenges OIF documented with known outcomes resulted in censorship. Of those censored, 10,213 were banned from library collections, 576 were relocated to reduce access, 40 were removed from curricula, restrictions were imposed on accessing 1,732, and 14 were bowdlerized. It is also worth noting that censorship efforts from 2001–2020 most prevalently targeted materials in school curricula. From 2021–2024, censorship efforts have focused almost entirely on materials available for voluntary inquiry. Only 4.13% of the books challenged from 2021–2024 targeted required reading and supplemental classroom materials.

deviation from the norm indicates a shift towards authoritarianism. Regulating information access is essential for authoritarian governance, as facts and information literacy threaten false narratives.

Library workers build bridges between people and stories, between individuals and communities, between curiosity and understanding. Libraries, schools, and universities are complementary institutions that are essential for democracy to flourish.

In 2021, library workers and educators in the United States were on the front lines of a culture war. Today, they are in occupied territory. The rhetorical and political threats to American democracy that were nascent in 2021 are now spreading throughout the world. Successful opposition requires a broad inclusive coalition working together to realize a shared vision of a better way to live and govern.

We must uplift storytellers, because stories unite us. We must listen to one another with open hearts and minds, so we can stand together. We must champion all who help others' voices be heard above the monotonous drone of propaganda. To oppose tyranny, we must defend our freedom to read.

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