

# Warwick Think Tank

Arts & Culture

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**BOOK**

~~**censorship**~~

***in the US***

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# About the authors



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# Introduction

This report aims to shed light on attempted and successful efforts of book censorship in the US, and recommend realistic and sensible policies to combat these concerning developments. This topic was selected because it is extremely pertinent to the current political situation within the US; the recent and ongoing attempts to restrict access to book titles acts as a microcosmic commentary on the fraught and deeply-partisan nature of US politics at the present time. But aside from providing analogous links to wider political contexts, commentary on book censorship is important in and of itself because it highlights the inherently unjust and authoritarian nature of book banning. Literary censorship is often the first step in the restriction of individual freedoms, and the introduction of fascist governments, echoing the actions of, say, the Nazi regime in the late-1930s. At the time of writing, political office has witnessed a surge in right-wing and far-right occupation, demonstrated by the recent elections of Javier Milei in Argentina and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. It is, therefore, crucial that those who wish to limit access to literature are not allowed to succeed. Through the policies recommended in this report, we aim to effectively repel the efforts of those who wish to dictate who has access to books.

The first section in this report is the Briefing. This section will provide readers with an overview of the general context regarding book censorship in the US and draw attention to three main areas of interest within the topic. Next, in the Insight, we develop on points raised in the Briefing by explaining why they are occurring. The Policy Recommendation section subsequently suggests realistic and innovative policies to rectify the problems discussed in the preceding sections. Finally, the conclusion of the report recaps what has been explicated in the report as a whole and emphasises once again the importance of taking action against the silencing of literature.

# Arts & Culture

## briefing note

### Overview

The aim of this Briefing is to provide a sketch of the historical and current landscape regarding book banning, focusing on three main areas.

**Section 1:** ‘The Landscape of Book Banning throughout the Decade’.

This section examines the proliferated efforts to challenge the presence of books within public libraries between 2013-2023, focusing on content, the somewhat paradoxical relationship between states’ apparent political alignment and the intensity of conservative literary movements within them, and intended audiences.

**Section 2:** ‘State Autonomy in Literary Censorship’. Secondly, this section explicates the extent to which states can freely dictate and legislate on which books are to be censored, without fear of intervention on a federal level.

**Section 3:** ‘The Powers and Shortcomings of Media on Book Banning’.

This final area of emphasis discusses how media both has been, and is being, utilised to foment and strengthen conservative book banning movements. It also explores the uneven nature of media coverage surrounding book censorship efforts, alongside the disparity between the virtual and physical spaces that host debates on this issue.

# The Landscape of Book Banning throughout the Decade:

## *A decade of book banning throughout the USA.*

- In Texas in 2013, there were 104 attempts to restrict book access, with each request concerning a different book title.<sup>1</sup>
- In Texas in 2022, there was a slight decrease in the number of attempts to censor books (93), but there was a major increase in the number of titles that were sought to be banned (2,349).<sup>2</sup>
- In 2022 the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom documented 1,269 demands to censor library books in 2022.<sup>3</sup> There were 2,571 unique titles challenged within those demands, representing a 38% increase from the 1,858 titles targeted for censorship in 2021.<sup>4</sup>
- Preliminary data from the ALA in 2023 suggests that this record is soon to be broken, with 531 attempts to censor books during this period and 3,923 total titles challenged in those attempts.<sup>5</sup>
- In total, the number of successful attempts to ban books within the most recent American academic year (2022-2023) was 3,362, with 1,557 individual titles banned through these efforts.<sup>6</sup>

## *Fluctuations in targeted content have meant a wide variety of books have come under attack.*

- The most banned book in 2013 was the 'Captain Underpants' series, with complaints citing that the books contained "offensive language" and "partial nudity".<sup>7</sup> The second-most challenged book in this year was Toni Morrison's *The*

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<sup>1</sup> The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Challenges to the Freedom to Read 2013-2022](#), 2013 graphic

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2022 graphic

<sup>3</sup> The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Censorship by the Numbers](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Book Ban Data](#)

<sup>6</sup> PEN America, 2023, [Banned in the USA: The Mounting Pressure to Censor](#)

<sup>7</sup> The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Challenges to the Freedom to Read, 2013-2022](#), 2013 graphic, and Pamela Engel, *Business Insider*, 2013, [Why Captain Underpants is the most banned book in America](#)

*Bluest Eye*, which was criticised for its apparent “underlying socialist [and] communist agenda”.<sup>8</sup>

- In 2018, the ‘Captain Underpants’ series fluctuated in and out of the top five banned books list.<sup>9</sup> What was clear, though, is that by this time the focus of groups and movements that sought to ban titles from public libraries was more clearly on LGBTQ+ content within books, as illustrated by the feature of *Melissa* by Alex Gino, *A Day in the Life of Martin Brando* by Jil Twiss and *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier within the top five list.<sup>10</sup>
- By 2021, the targeting of ‘Captain Underpants’ had been totally superseded by efforts to censor titles that included either LGBTQ+ subject matter or ones that challenged racism. Emphasis was especially placed on content that related to the Black Lives Matter movement. These books included *The Hate U Give* by Toni Morrison, and *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Conservative challenges in liberal states.***

- In 2013, Texas was the standout state in terms of book banning (as shown in Action Statement 1); the state that had attempted to censor the second-most amount of books in that year was Oregon, with 27 challenges.<sup>12</sup>
- But by 2021 and 2022, the ALA’s map that charts censorship attempts began to paint a more mixed landscape, most notably highlighting that such efforts were particularly prominent in states that returned Democratic senators to Congress and contained major cities which have consistently voted Democrat.
- These states include Illinois, Philadelphia and California, with the number of censorship challenges to books in 2022 in these states being 43 (67 titles), 56 (302 titles), and 32 (87 titles) respectively.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2013, [Field Report 2013: Banned and Challenged Books](#), and The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Challenges to the Freedom to Read 2013-2022](#), 2013 graphic

<sup>9</sup> The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Challenges to the Freedom to Read 2013-2022](#), 2018 graphic

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 2018 graphic

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 2021 graphic

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 2013 graphic

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 2022 graphic

***The focus of book censorship efforts both oscillate and remain the same.***

- A report by PEN America, which mapped censorship challenges to books between July 2021 - March 2022 found that the overwhelming majority (47%) of successfully banned books were those intended for a 'young adult' readership, or from ages 13-17.<sup>14</sup>
- The second most-targeted titles were ones relating to a 'picture book' category, or from ages 0-5, which constituted 18% of banned titles.<sup>15</sup>
- The remaining categories, comprising the remaining 35% of titles, were 'chapter books' (ages 6-8), 'middle grade' (ages 9-12), and adult (post-18 audiences).<sup>16</sup>
- Yet in a subsequent report by PEN America which tracked successful challenges to titles between July-December 2022, saw the 'picture book' category become superseded greatly by the 'adult' category, with 24% of banned titles stemming from the 'adult' classification and only 4% of titles belonging to a 'picture book' categorisation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> PEN America, 2022, [Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights](#)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Statista, 2023, [Distribution of book titles banned in school classrooms and libraries in the United States from July 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022, by intended readers](#)



## **State autonomy in literary censorship:**

***The legislative autonomy of states makes book banning unmanageable.***

- In Missouri, a law originally meant to protect sexual assault survivors, SB 775, was amended to include a provision making it a Class A misdemeanor for librarians to provide “explicit sexual material” to the public.<sup>18</sup>
- A new law in Texas was introduced in October that requires booksellers to “rate” their books based on their depictions and/or references to sex.<sup>19</sup>
- In Florida, the state delayed creating training for librarians about compliance with new censorship guidelines from the state, rendering librarians unable to purchase books for more than a year until the training was finally made available.<sup>20</sup>
- Bills put forward to state legislatures have been backed by far-right groups, who identify the autonomy of state law-making powers as ways to further their cause. Groups such as Moms for Liberty back book banning legislation.<sup>21</sup>

***Books are being politicised on a state-by-state basis, and this politicisation is difficult to tackle.***

- Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico (1982), was a case in which the United States Supreme Court debated the right of states to remove books from public libraries. Four justices ruled book banning to be unconstitutional, four disagreed, and one said the court should not debate the case based on merits. The split decision in the case has led to lack of clarity regarding the constitutional right to censor books.<sup>22</sup>
- The definition of ‘obscenity’ established in the Supreme Court case Miller vs California is too vague, as the court had difficulty in defining the term, relying on two hypothetical entities, “contemporary community standards” and “reasonable persons”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rockwood School District, n.d., [Response to Library Legislation](#)

<sup>19</sup> Schwartz, J., 2023, [Book bans in Texas spread as new state law takes effect](#)

<sup>20</sup> Natanson, H., 2023, [Florida School Advise Teachers to Hide Their Books to Avoid Felony Charges](#)

<sup>21</sup> Factora, J., 2023, [These are the far right groups leading the book ban explosion](#)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, 1982, [Island Trees Sch. Dist. v. Pico by Pico, 457 U.S. 853](#)

<sup>23</sup> Huston, WA., 2005, [Under Color of Law: Obscenity vs. the First Amendment](#), pg 78

- The American Library Association accuse Republican state officials of using book banning to carry out anti-gay political activism, as 7/10 of the ALA'S "Top 13 most banned books" feature LGBTQ+ themes.<sup>24</sup>

***American Libraries have come under attack from both the left and right.***

- When state legislatures such as Texas began to debate new censorship laws, new book orders by schools and libraries significantly decreased due to the uncertainty about what will be banned and what will be allowed.<sup>25</sup>
- The Illinois State Senate passed a bill that allows the state to withhold funding from public libraries that ban books, some have said this will only escalate the problem further as public institutions will still be defunded.<sup>26</sup>
- Libraries must certify to Missouri's secretary of state that they have policies in place to allow parents to dictate what books their children read. If this is not done, Missouri libraries face defunding.<sup>27</sup>
- Laws in Idaho and Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri, North Dakota and Oklahoma were passed that allow for criminal punishments to be issued against librarians who allow children to access 'obscene' materials - although these laws have been vetoed by governors and state judiciaries in some states. For example librarians face up to one year in jail and a fine of up to \$2,000 (£1,754) if new laws are broken.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> American Library Association, 2023, [Top 13 most banned books of 2023](#)

<sup>25</sup> Natanson, H., 2023, [Florida School Advise Teachers to Hide Their Books to Avoid Felony Charges](#)

<sup>26</sup> Illinois General Assembly, n.d., [Bill Status of HB2789](#)

<sup>27</sup> Keller, R., 2023, [Missouri rule takes effect putting library funds in jeopardy over 'obscene' material](#)

<sup>28</sup> Riley, J., 2023, [Judge blocks Arkansas law to jailbird librarians for "Harmful" Books](#)

# The Powers and Shortcomings of Media on Book Banning:

***Since 2021, conservative book-banning campaign groups have been on the rise, and social media is their primary source of support and medium so as to circulate their viewpoints.***

- PEN America has found more than 50 groups working at national, state, and local levels to push for book bans nationwide. PEN America has found that 70% of these groups have been formed since 2021.<sup>29</sup>
- These groups advocate their views primarily through social media and news outlets. Using their social media presence, they amplify their issues about literature taught in schools with ‘objectionable content.’<sup>30</sup>
- ‘Moms for Liberty’ is a Florida-based campaign group and is one of the loudest voices in favour of book banning in the United States. They have a large audience on social media, with over 69.2 thousand followers on Instagram, and 1,500 followers on their public Facebook group from Sarasota County, Florida. Brookings has estimated that ‘Moms for Liberty’ has around 103,000 members across 45 states using the number of members on Facebook group pages.
- ‘No Left Turn in Education’ is an example of another advocacy group with similar intentions.<sup>31</sup> They have a book list which spotlights titles that are supposedly used “to spread radical and racist ideologies to students” including titles such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Parents have seen book lists like this circulating Google Docs and Facebook posts by the following groups and local chapters of organisations like ‘Moms for Liberty’.

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<sup>29</sup> Friedman, J. & Johnson, N.F., 2022, [Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools](#)

<sup>30</sup> Wallens, D., 2023, [Moms For Liberty: The Use of Facebook to Spread Far-right Propaganda and Change Public School Curriculum](#)

<sup>31</sup> Sinha et al., 2023, [Moms for Liberty: Where are they, and are they winning?](#)

***Not all books receive the same amount of media representation to be individually dealt with and quashed.***

- The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom outlines that up to 85% of book challenges go unreported.<sup>32</sup> This means that discussions over book censorship do not go beyond local institutions. The books that are getting the most attention in the media are books that are already pretty well known.
- The increased negative attention brings more awareness to the book. For example, the book *Gender Queer* by Maia Kolbabe saw a 130% increase in U.S. print sales in May 2022 after major media attention.<sup>33</sup>
- Typically, books are challenged by the local community. An article written by Anna Merod quotes, “Democrats and Republicans on the committee generally agreed that there is not much of a role Congress should play in deciding whether a school or district should withhold a book from classrooms and libraries.”<sup>34</sup>
- Book Banned Week highlights certain pieces of literature to “give some authors a boost in sales, even if their works are removed from some shelves.”<sup>35</sup> This year from September 15th to October 15th, Amnesty International USA has been spotlighting 6 cases of individuals or communities because authors/filmmakers/publishers are “under attack.”<sup>36</sup>

***Social media provides a digital space for debates about book bans to occur. However, groups still prefer physical forums to bring forward their cases. The media is influential in ensuring that these events are publicised:***

- Local book-banning debates have now moved nationally, as the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing entitled ‘Book Bans: How Censorship Limits Liberty and Literature’ this September.
- The advocacy group ‘Moms for Liberty’ are highly involved in school board elections. For example, school board candidates endorsed by this group won

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<sup>32</sup> ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom Staff, 2013, [Field Report 2013: Banned and Challenged Books](#)

<sup>33</sup> Ali, S., 2022, [How banning books can actually increase their sales](#)

<sup>34</sup> Merod, A., 2023, [Senators debate Congress’ role in school, library book bans](#)

<sup>35</sup> Ali, S., 2022, [How banning books can actually increase their sales](#)

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International, 2023, [Banned Books Week 2023](#)

seats at higher rates in politically purple (51%) and red (46%) counties than blue counties (35%).<sup>37</sup>

- Since July 2021, PEN America has tracked 6,000 cases of banned books.<sup>38</sup> This is just one example of a group that is tracking the movements on book banning in the United States.

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<sup>37</sup> Sinha et al., [Moms for Liberty: Where are they, and are they winning?](#)

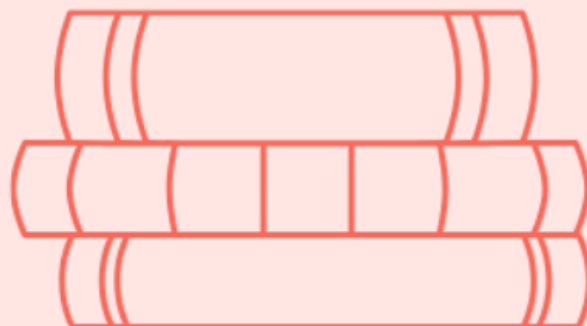
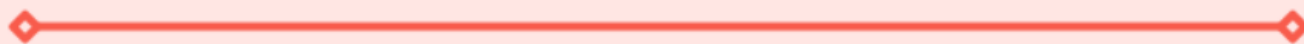
<sup>38</sup> PEN America, 2023, [New Report: Book Bans spike by 33% over last school year](#)

# Insights

## Overview

The earlier briefing section of this report explicated what the key problems are within the overall issue of book censorship within the US. This subsequent component elaborates on these issues and why they are occurring.

The first element that this insight develops on is the observation of book censorship movements within certain states that returned both senior and junior Democratic senators to the US Senate in the 2020 US election, and illustrates why book banning attempts in Republican states are largely redundant aside from Texas and Florida. Secondly, this section examines the issue of the lack of legislative clarity as a reason for why states have been allowed to have almost-unimpeded autonomy in book censorship efforts and decisions. It then discusses the bi-partisan view of the library as an institution diametrically opposed to political convictions on both sides of the American political divide, before finally providing an account of why media coverage of book bans is extremely narrow.



***Democratic states face the brunt of censorship attention because they are more likely to maintain uncensored libraries.***

Texas and Florida, both staunch Republican states, unquestionably saw (and continue to see) the highest number of book ban challenges throughout the country. It would be fair to assume that these efforts would be mimicked in other southern conservative states. But the ALA's statistics deviate from these expected focal points; Oklahoma, for instance, witnessed only 15 attempts to censor books in the entirety of 2022, whereas Pennsylvania saw 56 efforts, with 302 individual titles challenged within those attempts<sup>39</sup>. Using Pennsylvania as a case study, it is the aim of this section of the report to uncover why.

Moms for Liberty (M4L), an organisation purportedly “dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government”<sup>40</sup>, spearheads the book banning movement in the USA. Pennsylvania has the second-highest number of M4L chapters in the country, aside from Florida.<sup>41</sup> There are three potential reasons why this is the case. The first could be that Pennsylvania is characteristically a ‘swing state’ during US Presidential elections, meaning that the state could fall to either the Democrats or the Republicans. Hence M4L, which has close ties with the Republican Party, could be working to turn the state Republican in 2024.<sup>42</sup> However, though they are backed by the Grand Old Party (GOP), this objective is likely supplementary to other reasons since their primary aim is one of book censorship, not electoral matters. A second reason may be that due to Pennsylvania's status as a swing state, M4L receives a large degree of automatic support within the state due to the high number of GOP voters while simultaneously bolstering their presence within more Democrat- aligned counties. This answer may certainly be a complementary factor for why M4L has focused so heavily on the state. But the authors of this report hold that the most plausible explanation for M4L's strength within the state - and therefore, the reason why book censorship efforts are so high in Democratic states such as Pennsylvania - is that these states are the most likely to maintain uncensored libraries. In March 2023, Alabama Republican Party chairman John Wahl stated that he supported removing obscenity law exemptions currently applied to Alabama libraries, claiming that “they're abusing their status here in putting explicit

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<sup>39</sup> Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023, [Challenges to the Freedom to Read 2013-2022](#), 2022 graphic

<sup>40</sup> Moms for Liberty, n.d., [Who We Are](#)

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich, S., 2023, [Moms For Liberty: Who Are They? What Do They Want?](#)

<sup>42</sup> Swenson, A., 2023, [Moms for Liberty rises as power player in GOP politics after attacking schools over gender, race](#)

sexual material in front of children in children's sections".<sup>43</sup> Support is thus evidently readily available for book censorship in GOP strongholds such as Alabama, reflective in the mere three chapters that M4L has within the state. But due to the political leanings of Pennsylvania, this degree of support, especially from the chair of the incumbent party for the state, is highly unlikely.

Examining where M4L's chapters are located in Pennsylvania, they are largely clustered in the south-east of the state, with the remainder dotted around the west and north-west. Cross-referencing this with the 2020 electoral map, the Democrats' victories were largely in the south-east of Pennsylvania, with Montgomery, Philadelphia and Chester counties turning out particularly high levels of support for Biden.<sup>44</sup> Attempts to censor titles have undeniably been mostly focused on these counties. In August 2023, four books belonging to the Oxford Area High School's library in Chester County - *The Hate U Give*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *Lucky* - were subject to complaints claiming that they were "indecent" or "profane", with one member of the public claiming that the school was "sexually abusing" her grandchildren by holding the titles within its library.<sup>45</sup> Although the advisory committee of the Oxford School District initially rejected these complaints, an appeal later overturned their conclusion and the titles were subsequently either moved to a restricted section of the library or removed altogether.<sup>46</sup> Similar cases in Montgomery County have occurred over the past two years with challenges to books in the libraries of North Penn and Wissahickon school districts, as well as Pennridge School District in Bucks County, another county both won by the Democrats in the 2020 election and home to a M4L chapter.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, this is by no means a neat picture of book targeting; for example, a number of challenges in the past two years have been directed to schools in the Central York School District of York County.<sup>48</sup> York County voted overwhelmingly for Trump in the 2020 election and has been a Republican stronghold since 1952<sup>49</sup>. Yet the display of conservative grassroots activity in Republican counties does not diminish their efforts in Democrat areas. It merely demonstrates that although they largely target 'Blue' counties, their focus is not strictly limited to these regions.

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<sup>43</sup> Poor, J., 2023, [ALGOP chair Wahl: Legislature could move to strip public libraries of obscenity law exemptions](#)

<sup>44</sup> Pennsylvania Department of State, 2020, [Official Returns for the Election of President of the United States, Statewide](#)

<sup>45</sup> Hunt, K., 2023, [After rejecting a request to ban books, one Chester County school district now hears an appeal](#)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> PEN America, 2022, [PEN America Index of School Book Bans - 2021-2022](#)

<sup>49</sup> USElectionAtlas, n.d., [2020 Presidential General Election Results](#)



***A bi-partisan attack on US libraries has occurred because the American left see libraries as a problematic institution too.***

Book censorship is not a partisan, one-sided matter. Nor is it an effort that is restricted to one set of actors. In a Guardian article in 2022, Maeve Higgins wrote that “the right wing is really afraid of libraries not because libraries promote any one type of information but because libraries promote information itself”.<sup>50</sup> That may indeed be true. But the right has accused the left of censoring books as well, for example, books containing racist themes or images such as *Of Mice and Men*. Moreover, some Dr Seuss books have ceased publication in America after pressure from left-wing groups.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, the American Right still remains very much at the forefront of censorship efforts. In Wisconsin - a traditional Democrat voting state - Moms for Liberty members have been growing, and multiple chapters in various counties have popped up over the past few years.<sup>52</sup> The heavily Republican-controlled Missouri House of Representatives also recently voted for a state operating budget with a \$0 line for public libraries in the area<sup>53</sup>, purely on political grounds. Moreover, the recurring pattern of ‘housewife populism’ has always been highly politicised, as librarians are portrayed as the liberal boogeyman at the end of a child’s bed. There may be fact in this, as according to an analysis of campaign donations by Zippia, 91 percent of political contributions from library directors went to Democrats candidates in the 2020 Presidential Election.<sup>54</sup> This pattern is no new thing: a 2005 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education noted that, in 2004, librarians donated to Democrat challenger John Kerry over the Republican incumbent US President George W. Bush by a ratio of 223 to one.<sup>55</sup> This would add some clarity to the reason why right wing groups have targeted librarians in particular, as they perceive librarians as a cultural demagogue. Furthermore, Kentucky recently passed a law that would allow state officials to appoint whomever they want to library boards and the ability to block major library spending.<sup>56</sup> Right-wing legislatures use their power and exert it on cultural officials, opening libraries up to the power of partisan figures and influence.

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<sup>50</sup> Higgins, M., 2022, [The Right in the US has a new Bogeyman: Libraries](#)

<sup>51</sup> Watts, A., 2022, [6 Dr. Seuss books won't be published anymore because they portray people in 'hurtful and wrong' ways](#)

<sup>52</sup> Hale, R., 2023, [Moms for Liberty is growing in Wisconsin as critics call them extremists](#)

<sup>53</sup> Woodcock, C., [Missouri Reps Just Voted to Completely Defund the State's Public Libraries](#)

<sup>54</sup> Morris, K., 2023 [Democratic Vs. Republican Jobs: Is Your Job Red Or Blue](#)

<sup>55</sup> Durant, D., 2005, [The Loneliness of a Conservative Librarian](#)

<sup>56</sup> Albanese, A., 2022, [New Kentucky Law Hands Control of Libraries to Local Politicians](#)

However, it's not just right wing groups and states that have attacked libraries. Left-wing legislatures have been highly influenced by the polarisation of the book banning issue. The emotional current it has produced has led blue legislatures to launch counter attacks, in the form of defunding libraries which ban books. In short, left-wing states have launched a ban on book bans. For example, Illinois responded to a surge in book bans last summer, as the state legislature passed a law that allowed funding to be cut from any library that carried out book censorship.<sup>57</sup> Libraries in Illinois were harassed and threatened in particular by a right-wing group called “The Proud Boys” leading the state’s decision which aims to tackle the threat to libraries.<sup>58</sup> However some have criticised the legislation and stated that it adds more pressure on libraries to conform to community standards, saying that the left has given in to ‘reverse psychology’ utilised by right wing groups.

What is also interesting is the influence left wing groups have had on policies of left wing states regarding their treatment of book censorship in libraries. The policy of Illinois, which may actually be at the detriment of libraries physically threatened by right-wing groups, was highly influenced by the left-leaning American Library Association. Illinois introduced the law in accordance with the ALA’s ‘Bill of Rights’ which states that reading materials “should not be removed or restricted because of partisan or personal disapproval”.<sup>59</sup> The ALA’s influence on states is one example of the polarisation of the issue, and the difficult position of libraries who are attacked from both sides.

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<sup>57</sup> Yee, A., 2023, [Illinois Becomes First State to ‘Ban’ Book Bans](#)

<sup>58</sup> United States Attorney Office, 2022, [Illinois Proud Boys Member Pleads Guilty to Assaulting Officer During Jan. 6 Capitol Breach](#)

<sup>59</sup> American Library Association, 2006, [Library Bill of Rights](#)

## ***The lack of legislative clarity has exacerbated state autonomy.***

State autonomy is fundamental to the US Constitution. Until the Federalist Papers of 1788, where the need for national cooperation between states became more obvious, states acted largely independently.<sup>60</sup> The strong Federalist belief within the US in the division of State and Federal power explains why a book that is banned in Texas would not necessarily be banned in California. And while it is true that federal law supersedes state law, there has always been friction between states and the federal government<sup>61</sup>, especially since certain provisions of the Constitution do not allow the federal government to pass laws that exceed federal power or infringe upon state sovereignty.<sup>62</sup>

To give Federalism its due diligence would be to go beyond the bounds of this report. But this report finds another, less fundamental, explanation to account for the problem of state autonomy with regards to book banning - namely, the lack of historical legislative clarity. For instance, the Supreme Court hearing 'Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico' was concerned with the constitutionality of book banning in relation to the First Amendment right to free speech, yet the resulting split decision has left a deep hole for state legislatures to enforce successive book banning laws. The decision was split 4-4, leaving no long lasting precedent for current events. Chief Justice Berger argued that if the court rules book banning unconstitutional "this Court would come perilously close to becoming a 'super censor' of school board library decisions".<sup>63</sup> The hesitancy of Berger as well as the other judges to restrict states from carrying out book bans has given free reign to legislatures across the country.

Another aspect of vagueness which exacerbates states' ability to ban books is 'The Miller Test'. It attempts the impossible, in trying to establish and quantify an overall definition of what is 'obscene'. Used by the Supreme Court, it is a tool to establish what forms of speech and text can be protected by the First Amendment; anything deemed obscene cannot be protected by the constitution. The test has three parts to determine obscenity. First, whether "the average person, applying contemporary community standards"<sup>64</sup>, would find that the work could be seen as sexually arousing; second, whether the work depicts or describes, in an offensive way sexual conduct; lastly,

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<sup>60</sup> National Archives, n.d., [Declaration of Independence: A Transcription](#)

<sup>61</sup> Caminker, E.H., 1995, [State Sovereignty and Subordinacy: May Congress Commandeer State Officers to Implement Federal Law?](#)

<sup>62</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2023, [Federalism-Based Limitations on Congressional Power: An Overview](#)

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, 1982, [Island Trees Sch. Dist. v. Pico by Pico, 457 U.S. 853 \(1982\)](#)

<sup>64</sup> Legal Information Institute, 2017, [obscenity](#)

whether the work in question lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.<sup>65</sup> What is clear from this criteria is that it is highly subjective. For example, ‘contemporary community standards’ is by nature an ever-changing climate, therefore the fact that the Supreme Court uses the test at all legitimises the politics at play within American book banning. States will feel what they deem obscene can be protected through this legislative vagueness.

Furthermore, ‘Roth Vs United States’ ruled that obscene material wasn’t protected by the First Amendment and could be regulated by the States rather than by a single federal standard/ruling.<sup>66</sup> Roth also established a new judicial standard for defining obscenity which used the average person’s application of contemporary community standards to judge whether or not the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest, much like the Miller Test.<sup>67</sup> Although the precedent of Roth was later replaced by the Miller Test, the importance placed on local standards can still be witnessed today. However, what did remain is the lack of constitutional protection that obscene material is allowed. This has certainly motivated right wing groups to use the state judiciaries to pursue book censorship, as they know that once a book is banned, the constitutional gateways for it to be placed back on the shelves is extremely limited.

Lack of clarity breeds interpretation, and interpretation is what allows states to pursue their political vendetta through the banning of books in local libraries. The question of ‘value’ is the most interpretative of them all, and falls into endless cultural categories that will vary from state to state, and in particular will vary in the minds of the judiciary that interprets it.

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<sup>65</sup> Find Law, 1973, [MILLER v. CALIFORNIA, 413 U.S. 15 \(1973\) United States Supreme Court](#)

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, 1957, [Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476 \(1957\)](#)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

***The media’s targeted, and thus exclusionary, approach to coverage regarding book censorship is because of fears surrounding making such efforts public.***

One particular issue highlighted earlier in the report was that, as outlined by the American Literary Association, 85% of books receive little to no media attention.<sup>68</sup>

The director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, said that the books that received the most backlash and attention in 2020 were titles with themes of racism, Black American history and diversity in the United States. A PEN America report has found that 30% of banned books include characters of colour, and 30% represent LGBTQ+ characters or themes.<sup>69</sup> Topics such as these gain a lot of media attention. Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe, All Boys Aren’t Blue by George M. Johnson and The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison all featured on the American Literary Association’s top ten list of banned books for 2023. Furthermore, press attention on certain books perpetuates further attention and readership on such books. The resulting media attention meant that Gender Queer saw a 130% increase in US print sales in May 2022.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, a study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that the press attention surrounding certain books in one state led to an 11% rise in book circulation in states that did not ban the book.<sup>71</sup>

American Experience spoke to the editor of the ALA, Robert P. Doyle, about the role of media in book banning and censorship in the United States. Doyle was asked how the ‘Banned Books Resources Guide’ came about and mentioned that incidents reported in the press are documented. As censorship controversies can become emotional, many librarians who reported incidents wanted to keep information confidential as they feared losing their jobs. Therefore, most cases do not receive high-level media attention. Many book challenges mean that schools or librarians will remove the materials, and “no one hears about it, or they just come to some quiet resolution.”<sup>72</sup> Moreover, a Guardian article (‘How to beat a book ban: students, parents and librarians fight back’) highlights how violent these debates can become and how librarians can potentially not have the confidence to speak out about book censorship, ultimately leading to fewer challenges being reported on. For example, in a school board meeting in September 2021 about

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<sup>68</sup> ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom Staff, 2013, [Field Report 2013: Banned and Challenged Books](#)

<sup>69</sup> Mechling, L., 2022, [‘We’ve moved backwards’: US librarians face unprecedented attacks amid rightwing book bans](#)

<sup>70</sup> Ali, S., 2022, [How banning books can actually increase their sales](#)

<sup>71</sup> Carnegie Mellon University’s Heinz College, n.d., [Book Bans May Have Unintended Consequences in Increasingly Polarized United States](#)

<sup>72</sup> American Experience, 2017, [Books behind bars](#)

removing books that addressed LGBTQ+ experiences, Martha Hickson (school librarian from New Jersey) found she was called out by name and was described as “a paedophile, a pornographer, and a groomer of children” simply because she had contacted organisations such as the ALA and student-led groups to create a safe space for students.<sup>73</sup> This case, though, also demonstrates the power of media attention. Their school board meeting in the next month found 400 people opposing the bans, and subsequent meetings included young people showing their support.<sup>74</sup>

Both the censorship and the lack of coverage regarding such censorship of literature are detrimental to underrepresented and misrepresented minorities. Schuyler Bailar, an author, swimmer, and LGBTQ+ rights advocate affirms in the Harvard Gazette that “I wanted to write about kids like me because kids like me exist... writing this story would be a way to help remind other kids like me that they’re not alone.”<sup>75</sup> Additionally, Bailar says, “My book isn’t allowed in a lot of states right now that ban talking about gender identity.”<sup>76</sup> A lack of representation and information about different perspectives and experiences, especially in literature, can affect children and young people because it can make people feel unimportant and invisible. The lack of attention on, say, Bailar’s book (as opposed to more familiar or well-discussed titles) could perpetuate precisely this sense of invisibility that he is concerned about. Although 75% of all banned books had been written for young audiences, without the accompanying media coverage to call attention to these injustices, their target audience may be simply led to conclude that the titles that they love - and, by virtue, themselves - are unimportant.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Gabbatt, A., 2022, [How to beat a book ban: students, parents and librarians fight back](#)

<sup>74</sup> Gabbatt, A., 2022, [How to beat a book ban: students, parents and librarians fight back](#)

<sup>75</sup> Perfas, S.L., 2023, [Who's getting hurt most by soaring LGBTQ book bans? Librarians say kids.](#)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Creamer, E., 2023, ['Eating away at democracy': book bans in US public schools rise by a third in a year](#)

## **Conclusion:**

- Though Texas and Florida, both Republican states, are easily the frontrunners in terms of book censorship efforts, this trend does not continue; it is Democratic states which largely bear the brunt of attempts to ban books due to the likelihood of their maintaining uncensored libraries.
- Literary censorship is not merely restricted to the American Right. The Left, too, have sometimes endeavoured to block access to certain titles.
- Republican states have been permitted to restrict and outrightly ban titles since there is a distinct lack of legislative clarity surrounding the issue, an issue which cannot merely be boiled down to Federalism.
- Book censorship has become an extremely short-sighted issue, with coverage pertaining only to a select few titles, thereby running the risk of blinding oneself to the holistic and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon.

# Policy Recommendations

## Overview

This final section draws on what has been discussed in the Briefing and Insight by recommending policies to counteract such problems.

**Action 1: Establish organised grassroots movements to counteract the presence of their conservative counterparts within their area.**

**Action 2: Distance library workers away from both the AFSCME and the ALA.**

**Action 3: Enable students to establish a media presence themselves in the face of insufficient mass media coverage.**



***Action 1: Establish organised grassroots movements to counteract the presence of their conservative counterparts within their area.***

The previous section of this report noted that Democrat states, and the counties within them, faced the brunt of book banning efforts because they maintained uncensored libraries. Conservative grassroots movements thus focused their attention on these states and counties to push for a greater extent of book censorship across these areas. This subsequent section recommends a policy that may help to counteract the presence and influence of such bodies - namely, to increase the number of counter-censorship grassroots movements within states that are most notably affected by book ban attempts.

After students of Central York High School received an email detailing a list of books, films and other teaching materials that were due to be banned, they began encouraging other students to wear black t-shirts and create various signs in protest of the board's decision. This quickly evolved; "one local woman created a free library outside her house featuring many of the books", and when the school board reconvened to review the list "about 100 people protested outside". A petition also circulated, and a resident posted a video of herself on TikTok reading some of the books and tagged the authors who in turn began encouraging their followers on social media to buy the books and send them to York County. Eventually, the board decided to reverse the freeze, albeit temporarily.<sup>78</sup> This is a perfect illustration of an effective counter-movement, constituted by those both directly and indirectly affected by book censorship attempts, toward conservative efforts. No Left Turn (NLT), such a group that may have more influence than M4L in York County but still shares its core principles, undoubtedly has influence within the area; Veronica Gemma, a member of the school board, is also a member of NLT.<sup>79</sup> By pushing back against book censorship efforts raised by often multifaceted institutions such as school boards, these movements strike at motions orchestrated by M4L and NLT.

However, such a counter-conservative grassroots drive is not to be found in Democrat counties within Pennsylvania. This is not to say that protests against book bans have not been left wanting; in Chester County, an advisory committee consisting of librarians, teachers and parents voted almost unanimously to reject book censorship efforts.<sup>80</sup> But in order to emphatically replicate successes seen in York County, organised movements

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<sup>78</sup> Paz, I.G., & Cramer, M., 2021, [How Students Fought a Book Ban and Won, for Now](#)

<sup>79</sup> Yang, J., 2022, [PA Education Administrator and Lawmaker: 'Gender Education Is Responsibility of Family, Not School'](#)

<sup>80</sup> Hunt, K., 2023, [After rejecting a request to ban books, one Chester County school district now hears an appeal](#)

need to be established to reject and protest attempts to ban books. To bring this into effect, this report proposes that grassroots groups are formed in local communities, with county and statewide representatives. Anyone will be able to join, though major emphasis will be placed on youth membership as the power of young people (especially within book censorship efforts targeted at school libraries and classrooms) has been demonstrated through the case study of York County. Moreover, though the groups will contain a degree of thought-out methodology such as organised protest marches and the availability of certain resources to aid protest, it will also be important to enable creativity within protest.

This policy recommendation is clearly sustainable. It requires few resources, and materials that are required will be relative to every movement. Moreover, it is evidently innovative, drawing on existing examples of successful counter-attacks on book censorship attempts and recognising the need to implement them in counties where this degree of intense and organised pushback is not especially present. Its implementability is also a notable feature; much like its sustainability, it mainly requires dedicated individuals across a wide spectrum of ages and professions who are willing to come together to fight back against the injustices they are facing. As displayed in York County, this is clearly not wishful thinking. Lastly, this policy also intertwines with the other policies put forward by this report. For instance, the establishment of a dedicated librarians' union would help protect the rights of library workers when involved in movements to counteract book censorship efforts.

## ***Action 2: Distance library workers away from both the AFSCME and the ALA.***

Earlier in this report, we outlined issues faced by librarians in local areas across America, in particular the threat of defunding from both the Democrat left and the Republican right. Most recently the political angst has boiled over into physical violence, as librarians have been targeted in some states by far right groups. Events such as these raise issues over worker protection and job security for librarians. This report therefore recommends that workers rights for librarians be strengthened through a proper Library Union. Moreover, we also recommend that this union distance itself from the American Library Association (ALA).

Vulnerable library workers lack real political power. When libraries are defunded by right and left wing states alike, they fall back on mere campaign groups such as the ALA, which although an effective organisation in lobbying governments and promoting the issues that Library workers face, does little to offer job security to librarians. We recommend that a proper national union of Library workers/librarians is established in order to provide a stable base for librarians to access. Whilst it is true that organisations such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) have established a subset library union of 25 thousand workers<sup>81</sup>, this is only one of the many layers of AFSCME as the organisation has many other devolved unions specifically for public employers including firefighters, police officers and correctional officers. It is clear that current worker representation for librarians is insufficient, as no autonomous and individualised body exists for them. The scale of the policy would be national, as each state would be represented and would come together through a national congress, which currently librarians are lacking. This would also improve levels of collective bargaining amongst workers who find their specific libraries threatened.

In correlation, whilst it's true that groups such as the ALA can lobby both state and federal government, the ALA is in many ways too politicised and is seen by many state legislatures to be an abrasive force. For example, in August of this year eight states pushed to leave the ALA<sup>82</sup> on cultural and political grounds, as states felt the ALA's president had politicised the campaign against book banning due to her admittance that she was "a Marxist".<sup>83</sup> The report feels that decreased levels of politicisation would not

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<sup>81</sup> AFSCME, n.d., [AFSCME home page](#)

<sup>82</sup> Riedel, S., 2023, [8 States Are Pushing to Leave a National Library Group Because Its President Is a Marxist Lesbian](#)

<sup>83</sup> Mann, S., 2023 [Emily Drabinski, president of the American Library Association doubles down on tweet admitting she's a 'Marxist lesbian,' leading states such as Montana to cut ties with group](#)

only reduce physical risk to library employees but would help realign the political consensus of the right in regards to their perception of libraries. Moreover, given that the autonomy of states often negates the role of national lobbying programs, a new nationalised union could effectively lobby governments free from the stigma of ALA association. Furthermore, greater centralised unionisation would also create more effective methods of lobbying federal government. The report believes that if done effectively a new union could lobby congress to pass legislation that would create a well-constructed and well-administered pay plan based on systematic analysis and evaluation of jobs in the library which will assure equal pay for equal work.

This is certainly a realistic and implementable policy to recommend as a framework for library unionisation already exists via the AFSCME. The main challenge would be highlighting the benefits of entering into a separate, librarians-only union, but we believe that after the threats to the personal and job security of librarians, many will see the importance of joining together to ensure the welfare and livelihood of both themselves and their places of work. Moreover, this is not to say that this separate union would cut itself off completely from AFSCME - conglomeration and cooperation with unions such as AFSCME may provide additional security and bargaining power when pushing for legislation or similar.

***Action 3: Enable students to establish a media presence themselves in the face of insufficient mass media coverage.***

Finally, this report recommends that schools, universities, or the wider community should encourage and enable students to create a media presence through a variety of mediums - such as podcasts, school/college radio stations or newsletters/papers) to give these pieces a platform that would otherwise be denied to them. As noted previously, the mass media's short-sighted focus on an extremely discreet corpus of literary material has had deeply constricting effects on the reporting of a wide variety of censored titles. This policy aims to counteract this occurrence and provide alternative means for raising awareness of book censorship efforts. By focusing on raising awareness for localised censorship efforts within individual schools, if successfully implemented this policy will not just offer an alternative means to raise awareness for book banning attempts but will highlight a wider variety of titles than those being reported by national media.

In this digital age, podcasts and social media are rising as a form of news consumption, especially among younger generations. For instance, within the podcast 'Perspectives at Warwick' show on the University of Warwick's own radio station (Radio at Warwick – RAW), students invite guests, including fellow students and experienced professionals on particular episodes, to provide their own analysis of current affairs. In the same way, applied to an American context this outlet offers a unique means to highlight attention to censorship efforts that are not being reported by the mass media. This need not be merely focused on digital forms - the same outcome can be achieved via physical outlets such as school newspapers.

The willingness and ability that educational establishments possess in order to provide and encourage such outlets, whatever their form, is obviously deeply relative and will vary between schools. However, in the event that schools themselves (that is, as institutions) are not willing to support their students in such endeavours, this should not necessarily prevent students from being able to create these mediums. This policy nicely intertwines with the first policy recommendation; as demonstrated through the actions of students, parents, teachers and strangers in York County, the community often comes together in lieu of other structures (such as schools). Students, therefore, may often be able to create and publicise these means even if they are supported by their school. Moreover, the willingness of students to combat book censorship efforts is certainly not lacking, providing further support to the concern that a lack of school support will hinder the establishment of these outlets. For example, in 2022 the New York Times asked American teenagers, "What is your reaction to the growing fight over what young people

can read?”. Students expressed that their reading of banned books broadened their awareness of racial injustice, made them want to change the world in whatever way they could, and expressed that “without knowledge, we are destined to be blind”.<sup>84</sup>

As demonstrated by the actions of students in York County, sometimes the initiative will be taken up by individuals independent of any prompting by local politicians or authorities. But in the event that student or localised action is not adopted without any external support, politicians, charities and local trusts both on a local and state level should encourage students, parents and others to create and undertake such activities, as well as provide funding and resources to schools and/or local communities to enable outlets of this kind.

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<sup>84</sup> Learning Network, 2022, [What students are saying about the growing fight over what young people can read](#)

# Conclusion

This report began with highlighting the general landscape of book censorship efforts within the US, as well as drawing attention to both the power of states in deciding the degree of literary restrictions and the sporadic nature of media coverage on book banning. It then moved to tease out exactly why these issues existed, illustrating the power of conservative grassroots groups within Democrat states, the vagueness of legislation in ensuring that states are not limitless in their power to restrict access to books, and the targeted efforts of the US media to deeply limit the range of titles that are being reported on. To offset these problems, we suggested that organised grassroots movements be established to act as an equal force against groups such as M4L and NLT, that an individualised library union away from the existing AFSCME should be formed, and, finally, enable students and others within communities to create their own forms of media to spotlight titles that are not receiving due notoriety.

It is fundamental that action is taken in order to safeguard all books from censorship, enabling everyone, whoever and whatever they may be, to access all kinds of titles whenever they want. We hope that the policies suggested in this report will go some distance to ensuring that this becomes a reality, and that think tanks, governments and other bodies with the capability for implementing tangible change will consider our suggestions.

**Warwick  
Think Tank** 