Quantifying the origins and impacts of book bans in U.S. public schools

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A rapid rise in U.S. book bans

Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S.
Challenges to books about sexual and racial identity are nothing new in American schools, but the tactics and politicization are.
A concerning & rapid rise in U.S. book bans

Book banning, like other forms of censorship, has serious consequences for public expression & student learning

A rapid rise in U.S. book bans

Main organizations: PEN America and the ALA

Goals: Track & raise awareness about the rise of book bans in schools and libraries in the United States.

But many questions remain unanswered, like the origins of recent book bans & whether they censor the material.

What is missing is a systematic study of book bans.
Where are books banned?

What books & authors are banned?

How does interest change after books are banned?
Data

<table>
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<th>Banned Books</th>
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<td>2532 book bans from 2021-22</td>
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**Where are books banned?**

**What books get banned?**

**How does interest change?**

- NCES
- United States Census Bureau
- MIT Election Data + Science Lab
- goodreads
- Google Books
- Amazon
- mechanical Turk
- Bookshop
- Google Trends
- Seattle Public Library
Where are books banned?

What books & authors are banned?

How does interest change after books are banned?
Where are books banned?
Where are books banned?

Possible sociodemographic factors:

- Income
- Education
- Employment
- Diversity
- Migration

**Resource hypothesis:** are book bans more common in counties with highly-resourced parents?

**Migration hypothesis:** are book bans more common in counties with a recent increase in immigration or diversity?

However, observable *demographic* changes in the last two decades are similar for both groups of counties.
Where are books banned?

In 2020, counties that banned books became less conservative regions and more electorally competitive than those without bans.

Figure displays 95% confidence intervals.
Where are books banned?

What books & authors are banned?

How does interest change after books are banned?
What books are banned?

The “top” banned books are popular – but are they representative of the “average” banned book?
What books are banned?

41 bans

Goodreads genres (~130 total)

- Nonfiction
- Biography
- Autobiography
- Sequential art
- Comics
- Graphic novels comics
- LGBT
- History
- Social issues
- Gender
- Gender and sexuality
- Humanities
- Adult

Goodreads determines a book’s genres by crowd-sourcing user shelves.
What books are banned?

We grouped books into clusters based on how similar their Goodreads genres were.

- **37%**  Children’s books with diverse characters
- **22%**  Non-fiction, social movements & historical figures
- **10%**  Fiction fantasy / sci-fi
- **10%**  YA fiction queer romance novels
- **10%**  Women-centered fiction
- **7%**   Fiction mature themes (not romance)
- **4%**   Un-clustered (outliers)

Feature space reduced with UMAP and HDBSCAN, and a range of hyperparameters was tested. We settled on 6 final clusters based on a tradeoff between specificity of clusters and redundancy of clusters.
What books are banned?

The most commonly banned books are not the ones we would think of…
Which authors are banned?

Self-identified gender and race/ethnicity information was collected for ~1100 authors via Mechanical Turk (Wikipedia, authors’ websites, bios, interviews, etc.)

Elizabeth Acevedo

Elizabeth Acevedo is a Dominican-American poet and author. In September 2022, the Poetry Foundation named her the year's Young People's Poet Laureate.

Acevedo is the author of the young adult novels The Poet X, With the Fire on High, and Clap When You Land. The Poet X is a New York Times Bestseller, National Book Award Winner, and Carnegie Medal winner. She is also the winner of the 2019 Michael L. Printz Award, the 2018 Pura Belpre Award, and the Boston-Globe Hornbook Award Prize for Best Children's Fiction of 2018. She lives in Washington, DC.
Which authors are banned?

Women are slightly overrepresented vs men, queer authors overrepresented, but POC are very overrepresented

Writers and authors in the U.S., 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics); N = 277
Banned authors in the U.S., 1950-2018 (Richard Jean So, 2020); N = 3,471
Banned authors in the U.S., 2021-2022; N = 1,139

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Women of color make up 24% of banned authors (vs 12% men)

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Where are books banned?

What books & authors are banned?

*How does interest change after books are banned?*
How does interest in the books change?

**Bookshop**

- **Monthly sales**
  - 326 bans
  - 13% of sample

- **Monthly checkouts**
  - 1220 bans
  - 48% of sample

- **Weekly Google searches**
  - 1566 bans
  - 62% of sample

**Pro:** sales are the strongest interest

**Con:** represents ~1% of U.S. sales

**Pro:** libraries mimic the book-banning environment most closely

**Con:** Seattle is a different population than book-banning regions

**Pro:** highest coverage

**Con:** weak interest – we don’t know why people are searching

Many books in our sample don’t have sales, checkouts and/or searches because they aren’t popular books.
How does interest in the books change?

Interest doesn’t seem to change either way, for any of our indicators!
(But again, interest is low to begin with)
Implications

Where are books banned?
Counties that ban books are more likely to be electoral battlegrounds vs neighboring counties

What books & authors are banned?
Children's books featuring diverse characters, written by diverse authors, are heavily targeted

How does interest change after books are banned?
We find no evidence of either backlash or censorship of individual books at the national level

Takeaways:
• Book bans seem to be more of a political strategy, since they are not successful censorship tactics.
• Enough with Harper Lee! Banned books are often less popular, and written by less famous authors from marginalized communities.
• Where is all the data about books?!
Thank you!

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