Censorship and Narrative Control: A Textual Analysis of Florida’s Banned Books

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**Abstract**

*This research study examines the increasing censorship of books in Florida, identifying key themes among banned books applying computational text analysis methodologies. Drawing from full texts and metadata, the study employs term frequency (TF), TF-IDF, bigram co-occurrence, dictionary-based theme classification, and supervised machine learning classification, this research aims to uncover the socio-political motivations behind book banning practices. Florida’s banned texts are characterized by affective and identity-based language, while Iowa’s reflect greater emphasis on historical specificity and scientific vocabulary. Dictionary-based analysis consistently identified gender, violence, and religion as the most prevalent themes, while metadata and descriptions rarely captured these features. Classification models trained on theme vectors confirmed these as significant predictors of censorship, though generalization performance was limited. The divergence between thematic content and stated justifications indicates that censorship operates as a targeted response to narratives challenging social, political, and educational norms. These results demonstrate that censorship decisions are structured, regionally distinct, and linguistically traceable.*

**Keywords:** censorship, banned books, educational policy, identity and representation, regional censorship, metadata limitations, linguistic analysis, thematic suppression

# 1. Introduction

Book banning has become an increasingly pressing issue across the United States, with Florida standing out as a focal point for literary censorship in educational institutions. This phenomenon reflects deeper ideological struggles over access to information, identity representation, and political discourse. Throughout history, book bans have served as mechanisms for controlling narratives, limiting exposure to controversial ideas, and reinforcing dominant social ideologies. The 2021–2022 school year saw an unprecedented rise in book challenges, prompting widespread debate about intellectual freedom, educational equity, and the role of politics in shaping curriculum decisions (Goncalves et al., 2024).10 This study aims to examine the themes of banned books in Florida, identifying recurring patterns of censorship and assessing their broader implications. By analyzing the justifications for book bans and exploring their sociopolitical contexts, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on censorship, education, and democratic access to diverse perspectives.

# 2. Problem Statement

The problem is that there is a significant research gap in how book censorship is analyzed. While thematic analysis offers insight to the most dangerous trend – judging a book by its cover and discovering the reasons why banned books are often banned or objected to before they even leave the shelves, there is a limited amount of research connecting the cover themes and summaries to the textually analyzed themes between the covers. Decisions to ban are frequently based on the cover text, including the title, summary, and keywords that appear on the front or back cover raising critical concerns about the motivations behind censorship and how superficial judgments dictate access to literature. This project aims for a full textual analysis that can provide insight into the themes of banned books and compare them to those in the summary and online, shedding light on linkage between the themes that may cause many of these books to be banned without ever being read.

Book bans have become a widespread phenomenon in the United States, with Florida emerging as a critical battleground for literary censorship. The issue extends beyond the removal of individual books; it reflects deeper ideological conflicts regarding race, gender identity, and historical narratives in education. Knox (2020)15 highlights that book bans often suppress perspectives that challenge dominant cultural norms, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Lycke and Lucey (2018)17 argue that such censorship limits students’ ability to engage critically with democratic principles, reducing their exposure to diverse viewpoints. Florida’s censorship policies have disproportionately targeted works by authors of color and LGBTQ+ themes, raising concerns about the erasure of marginalized voices in educational settings (Goncalves et al., 2024).10

This study seeks to address this research gap by identifying the keywords and themes that trigger book bans before the books are even opened. Using text mining methodologies, this project will analyze patterns in book descriptions to determine the linguistic elements most associated with censorship decisions. By shedding light on the role of superficial language in book bans, this research will contribute to the broader discourse on intellectual freedom, educational equity, and the sociopolitical mechanisms behind literary censorship.

**3. Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to conduct a textual analysis of Florida’s banned books to identify thematic trends in censorship and explore the socio-political motivations behind these restrictions. By leveraging text mining methodologies, this study will systematically categorize recurring themes in descriptions and summaries of banned books and assess how these themes align with broader discussions on censorship, anti-intellectualism, and political mobilization. This research aims to provide empirical insights into the narratives that are being systematically excluded and to contribute to the broader discourse on intellectual freedom and educational equity.

# 4. Conceptual Framework

This study draws upon theories of censorship, political sociology, and critical pedagogy to examine the phenomenon of book banning. The analysis considers the themes of banned books, focusing on recurring topics such as race, gender identity, historical accuracy, and political ideology. These themes often reflect broader societal tensions, revealing how censorship operates as a means of controlling discourse and restricting access to certain narratives. Furthermore, the study investigates the stated justifications for banning books, which include reasons provided by school boards, policymakers, and parents. These justifications often cite concerns about age-appropriateness, offensive language, or controversial subject matter, yet they may mask underlying ideological motives. Additionally, the study examines demographic patterns, analyzing the identities of authors and the targeted readership of banned books. A significant proportion of censored works are authored by individuals from marginalized communities, suggesting that book bans disproportionately impact diverse voices. Lastly, this research explores the political and social contexts that influence book banning trends at both local and state levels, considering the role of legislative policies, community activism, and political affiliations in shaping censorship practices. By understanding these dynamics, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive perspective on the intersection of literature, power, and societal control.

Fig. 1 – Conceptual Framework

# 5. Methodology

To systematically analyze the themes of Florida’s banned books, this study employs text mining and machine learning techniques. The following methodologies will be used:

* **Key Word Frequency (TF/TF\*IDF)** – Individual words from book descriptions will be analyzed using Term Frequency (TF) and Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF\*IDF) to identify the most prominent terms while correcting for any commonly used words to prevent inadvertent data skewness.
* **Key Phrase Frequency** – Bigrams (N-grams) will be used to detect frequent multi-word phrases within book descriptions.
* **Subgroup Comparisons** – A comparative analysis will be conducted between banned books in Florida and those in Iowa to identify regional differences in censorship patterns.
* **Dictionary-Based Analysis** – A dictionary will be developed in R to categorize and interpret themes based on their frequency of appearance.
* **Classification Model** – A machine learning classification model will be trained to predict whether a book is likely to be banned based on its description, using features extracted from text analysis.

# 5.1 Research Questions

Understanding the underlying themes and patterns of book censorship is crucial for framing this analysis. By examining linguistic trends in banned book descriptions, this study will uncover recurring motifs that may indicate broader sociopolitical influences on censorship decisions.

1. How do TF/TF\*IDF measures highlight key themes in censored books compared to non-censored books?
2. How do the themes of banned books in Florida compare to those in Iowa, and what regional differences emerge from this comparison?
3. How do the stated justifications for banning books align with the actual themes detected through text analysis?
4. What textual characteristics are most predictive of a book being banned?

# 5.2 Data Collection

**5.2.1** **Data Types**

This study uses two primary types of textual data: full-text book content and thematic metadata. The full-text data comprises books that have been banned in Florida and Iowa, sourced from the public domain repository, Project Gutenberg. These texts provide the raw material for computational analysis, allowing for comparisons of linguistic structures, themes, and keyword frequencies. In addition to full-text analysis, thematic metadata is collected from Google Books. This metadata includes assigned themes, genres, and summary descriptions, providing additional context for understanding the reasons behind book censorship. The combination of these data sources enables a comprehensive investigation into censorship trends, allowing for statistical and machine learning-based text analysis.

**5.2.2 Data Description**

The dataset consists of 59 books split into training and testing data – 39 and 10, respectively. All banned books were identified by publicly available publication of the lists (PEN America, 2023).23 The training data consists of 10 books selected from each state’s banned books list and 20 books not banned in either state (one book is common between the Florida and Iowa banned book samples). The testing data set consists of 10 books, some of which are banned. The books from Florida include Wuthering Heights, The Taming of the Shrew, Helen of Troy, Leonardo Da Vinci, The Road, The Pirate, The Dark Tower, Redeemed, Monster, and The Heir. Similarly, the Iowa dataset contains The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Talisman, The Great Return, Smoke, The Best Man, Glass, Redeemed, The Bridge, Monster, and Dead End. The selected titles represent a mix of classic literature, contemporary fiction, and young adult novels, reflecting diverse genres and themes. This sample allows for a comparative analysis of censorship patterns across different literary styles and subject matters.

To add richer context to this analysis, thematic metadata from Google Books was collected and assigned to corresponding variables within the dataset for each of the 59 books. This metadata includes the themes of each book and the book description directly from the Google Books website. The final raw dataset includes the titles, authors, text, themes, and descriptions for all 59 books - creating a structured representation of the books for further analysis.

**5.2.3 Data Retrieval Process**

The full-text books were obtained from the Project Gutenberg library using the gutenbergr package in R, which allows for seamless access to public domain texts. Initially, an attempt was made to retrieve a completely random sample, but due to limitations in full-text availability, the selection process was adjusted to include only books from each state’s banned books list that were available in the library[[1]](#footnote-1). 6 out of the 20 books from the Florida and Iowa samples were retrieved directly using gutenbergr. The decision was made to pivot to use custom functions to download the texts directly from the Project Gutenberg website for the remaining texts (Project Gutenberg, 2025).25 While this additional step introduces complexities in data downloading and cleaning, it ultimately enhances the analysis by providing a more comprehensive dataset.

Given the importance of thematic metadata in my analysis, multiple retrieval methods were used to ensure comprehensive data collection. The initial approach involved developing a custom web scraping function to extract book descriptions and assigned thematic categories from online sources. This method aimed to automate data extraction directly from publicly available book repositories. However, security measures, dynamic page loading, and inconsistencies in site structure rendered this technique unreliable, preventing complete retrieval of the necessary metadata.

The secondary retrieval option was an API-based solution, using an API key with structured query parameters to access thematic metadata programmatically. Despite successful authentication and data requests, the API responses either lacked the required level of detail or restricted access to critical fields due to licensing constraints. After repeated query adjustments and attempts to refine data retrieval, it became evident that this method would not yield the comprehensive dataset needed for my analysis.

The final step in retrieval – before resorting to by hand search methods – was to query ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025).21 With carefully structured prompts, ChatGPT successfully extracted detailed thematic metadata, including book descriptions, assigned categories, and keyword associations. This proved to be a very effective tool, reducing my retrieval time to mere minutes after using several hours using the first two methods. The data were validated by selecting a sample of 6 books (~10%) to vet against the Google Books website. The samples were all validated and the technique of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) with the human in the loop proved effective and efficient at this task. By leveraging multiple methodologies, I was able to secure a complete and structured dataset, allowing for a more robust examination of censorship themes in banned books.

# 5.3 Data Preprocessing

The data preparation process is data cleaning, involves several key tasks to ensure the dataset is structured and ready for computational analysis. The following data preprocessing steps were performed on the Florida, Iowa, and non-banned training book texts and descriptions. The testing data was not preprocessed at this stage – there will be a modified preprocessing step added during testing to prepare the model pipeline to receive and process data that has not been preprocessed to simulate the real-world application of this model. The only modification to the testing data set was to add the “banned” and “not banned” labels.

**5.3.1 Data Cleaning**

Effective text analysis requires a structured preprocessing pipeline, and in this study, multiple iterations were necessary to refine the data. The initial steps involved normalizing the text—converting it to lowercase, removing punctuation, special characters, and unnecessary whitespace. Stopwords were then filtered out to reduce noise and improve the relevance of the extracted terms.

The first data cleaning pass includes removing HTML spacing left over from direct web downloads, eliminating unnecessary whitespace, stripping chapter numbers and labels, and filtering out stopwords, punctuation, and other extraneous symbols that could distort the analysis. Once the text was tokenized and lemmatized, a preliminary analysis of the cleaned dataset exposed several persistent issues. The Gutenberg boilerplate text, which contains licensing information and non-relevant metadata, remained embedded in several documents. Additionally, chapter headings and excessive whitespace disrupted the dataset’s structure, interfering with pattern recognition.

The second data cleaning pass, performed over several runs, reduced white space, removed Project Gutenberg boilerplate text, then normalized text formatting to maintain consistency across all documents, converting all words to lowercase to standardize frequency counts, and segmenting sentences to ensure optimal phrase extraction. To address these issues, the text-cleaning function was modified and re-run. After each iteration, manual inspection of the output was conducted to ensure the adjustments effectively removed unwanted elements. It took three full iterations before the dataset reached a suitable state for analysis. Each revision involved refining regular expressions and improving filters to strip residual noise while preserving meaningful text. After the second cleaning pass, Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) was conducted and brought forth another issue that needed to be addressed before full analysis – the names within the books were skewing the data causing TF and TF-IDF to be misleading. This would lead to an incomplete analysis and had to be addressed before the datasets could be viable.

The third and final data cleaning pass focused on the removal of names using Name Entity Recognition (NER). All books were processed through a series of functions to identify, extract, normalize, and lemmatize any names. This took several iterations of NER and included Parts of Speech (POS) tagging to refine the names list enough to filter out the necessary noise while not sweeping away useful data. Names were identified through capitalization in tandem with using POS tags of proper nouns and subject – this assured that we caught any names that were not capitalized based on POS tags normally associated with names. However, there were a small number of non-name words that were included, but the benefit of this filtering outweighed this small collateral effect. The effective use of this step was confirmed after performing another phase of EDA and comparing the positive effects of removing the names through NER and POS tagging in TF and TF-IDF.

By carefully validating each cleaning pass, the dataset was transformed into a structured format, enabling reliable feature extraction, machine learning classification, and visualization. This continuous cleaning tactic underscores the importance of iterative refinement in text preprocessing, ensuring that only relevant content remains for analysis.

**5.3.2 Deductive Data Preparation**

After these transformations, bigram vectors are generated to capture meaningful word pair sequences, allowing for deeper thematic exploration. All textual data from the Florida, Iowa, and non-banned training data sets were processed to build bigram pairs.

A theme dictionary was developed for key themes that were associated with my research with keywords that would be enumerated for thematic analysis. These themes included: gender, race, sexuality, violence, politics, history, religion, education, identity, and anti-intellectualism. Extreme care was taken in the selection of the terms in this dictionary, so the minimal amount of noise was collected from the data by collecting keywords erroneously. For example, “race” could not be used for the race, politics, history, or identity themes because any mention of a horse race, foot race, or making someone’s heart race would be an incorrect thematic label. The theme keywords were selected from a variety of sources including websites and publications that were used for research and educational purposes.1-16, 18-20, 22, 24, 26-30

This detailed, iterative process ensured the dataset was adequately prepared for thorough and accurate analysis. By carefully validating each cleaning cycle, the dataset was transformed into a structured format, enabling reliable feature extraction, machine learning classification, and visualization.

# 6. Data Analysis and Visualization

**6.1 TF and TF-IDF**

To examine how banned books vary linguistically across Florida and Iowa, comparative analysis using TF and TF-IDF metrics was applied. These techniques reveal not only which terms appear most frequently, but also which terms carry the most signal at the individual document level. The results offer insight into the types of content that may trigger censorship in each state.

In Florida, high-frequency terms were consistent across banned titles. Words such as eyes, hands, told, looked, and mind dominated the word cloud and TF heatmap. These are not just filler terms – they reflect stories driven by interpersonal connection, emotional experiences, and embodied subjectivity. Many of these books – like The Pirate or Wuthering Heights – foreground relational dynamics and psychological complexity, suggesting a pattern in which emotionally evocative content may be deemed controversial. The heatmap underscores this thematic consistency, showing strong overlap across documents for key terms, particularly those connoting observation (looked, eyes), emotional state (heart, mind), and action (told, leave).

The TF-IDF results for Florida expand this interpretation. Chain Reaction surfaces scientific language (math, calculations, inverted), while The Pirate and Native Son highlight terms suggestive of conflict and identity. Notably, Native Son includes urban familial terms (dad, mom, android, freak), suggesting possible targeting of contemporary racial or dystopian themes. These results suggest that Florida’s banned books are often linguistically rich with emotional, political, or identity-oriented content – either broadly distributed or concentrated in specific controversial narratives.

In Iowa, the pattern shifts. While terms like day, eyes, and voice appear frequently, their distribution is far less uniform. The TF heatmap shows sharp lexical divides between documents. Some titles (The Bridge, Smoke) emphasize military or tactical terms (platoon, cigarette, vapor, radio), while others like Glass emphasize material culture and European history (enamelled, engraved, seventeenth). The Great Return includes rare geographic and ethnic names, hinting at a different form of cultural regulation. Iowa’s TF-IDF profile reflects this: its most important terms are highly document-specific and often align with niche historical, speculative, or foreign cultural themes.

This contrast suggests that Florida’s censorship operates on a broader affective level – targeting emotionally intense, identity-focused, or socially challenging content – whereas Iowa’s censorship seems to reflect concern over specificity, including foreign cultures, political terminology, or complex scientific language. The linguistic heterogeneity of Iowa’s banned titles may reflect more localized disputes or curriculum gatekeeping tied to district-level policy. Taken together, this analysis indicates that term usage within banned books is not incidental. The frequency, distinctiveness, and clustering of certain terms correlate with the kinds of discourses – emotional, scientific, historical, or identity-based – that states choose to regulate.

**6.2 Key Phrase Analysis - Bigrams**

Bigram analysis offers insight into how themes materialize in textual structure. In Florida, the most frequent bigrams include “gray eyes”, “locked door”, “shut door”, and “dark sky”. These phrases cluster around motifs of visibility, surveillance, and confinement, echoing identity-based and domestic settings frequently observed in earlier dictionary-based analysis. The sparse and disconnected nature of the Florida bigram graph further reflects the narrative-driven style of these texts, with thematic cues embedded in descriptive or introspective scenes.

In contrast, Iowa’s bigram network reveals a densely connected semantic structure. High-frequency pairs such as “hydrofluoric acid”, “engraved glass”, “technical evidence”, and “seventeenth century” suggest cohesive thematic domains—particularly focused on scientific, historical, and artistic discourse. The presence of multiple interconnected nodes supports the earlier finding that Iowa’s banned books tend toward encyclopedic or reference-style content, where lexical cohesion and topic density are more pronounced.

This divergence in bigram patterns supports a broader hypothesis: censorship in Florida appears driven by perceived ideological or identity threats embedded in narrative fiction, while censorship in Iowa may disproportionately affect educational or reference texts that discuss controversial histories or scientific facts. Bigram analysis not only validates the thematic dictionary approach but also sharpens our understanding of how textual structure differs by region, audience, and perceived risk.

**6.3 Thematic Analysis**

**6.3.1 Sub-Group Comparisons**

Analyzing the shared and diverging words from Flori A cross-regional comparison of book characteristics reveals both shared foundations and key thematic divergences between Florida and Iowa. Subject metadata (Fig. 2) indicates that Florida’s banned titles are more concentrated in fiction, classics, young adult, and gothic fiction, while Iowa’s selections skew toward psychological, philosophical, and mystery fiction. This suggests that Florida’s bans lean more heavily on canonical or educational texts, while Iowa targets books that introduce abstract or moral ambiguity.

A screen shot of a graph

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Fig. 2 – Radar Chart Comparing Theme Emphasis

Florida’s unique words emphasize characters, maritime adventure, and youth (pirates, crew, child, girls, train), reflecting narrative-driven fiction. In contrast, Iowa’s lexicon is defined by artifact-oriented, historical, or technical terms (glass, process, eighteenth, gold, material), aligning with nonfiction or disciplinary genres. These differences may point to contrasting rationales for censorship – emotional and identity-based content in Florida versus epistemological or socio-political critique in Iowa.

Quantitatively, while over 12,000 terms are shared between the two states, Iowa and Florida each also have thousands of unique terms – highlighting distinctive textual ecosystems. This suggests that while censorship practices often target similar themes (as shown in dictionary analysis), the narrative vehicles and linguistic registers differ considerably. These distinctions support the hypothesis that regional ideology influences not just which books are banned, but the kinds of stories that are deemed threatening.

**6.3.2 Dictionary Based Analysis**

A dictionary-based approach was applied to identify the presence of 11 predefined social and political themes in banned books, comparing results between full texts and public descriptions. This analysis reveals a meaningful divide between the content that books contain and the way they are presented to the public.

The bar chart showing theme prevalence in full book texts (Fig. 3) reveals that violence and sexuality are the most frequently occurring themes in both states, followed by religion and race. Notably, Iowa books exhibit higher textual prevalence of anti-intellectualism, identity, and history, while Florida texts show more frequent references to sexuality and gender. These results align with broader sociopolitical discourse in each region and suggest that banned books often center around topics of identity, bodily autonomy, and systemic critique.

A graph of a number of people

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Fig. 3 – Theme Prevalence in Book Texts

Meanwhile, the theme prevalence in book descriptions (Fig. 4) is nearly nonexistent. Only one theme (race) appears in a single Florida description. This near-total absence of thematic content in descriptions highlights how publisher or database metadata systematically obscures the underlying reasons a book might be banned. Descriptions are effectively sanitized, stripping out controversial themes that are clearly embedded in the full narrative. As such, relying on summaries or catalog data would dramatically underestimate the presence of themes tied to censorship.

A graph showing a number of people

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Fig. 4 – Theme Prevalence in Google Books Descriptions

**6.3.4 Classification Model**

In developing a predictive framework for book banning, two classification models were constructed to evaluate the discriminative value of text-based themes: a ridge logistic regression model and an XGBoost gradient boosting model. The ridge model was chosen for its ability to manage multicollinearity without eliminating predictors, using L2 regularization to reduce the influence of less relevant themes while maintaining a complete feature set. XGBoost was selected for its nonlinear modeling capacity and potential to capture higher-order interactions among thematic dimensions.

Training results were promising. The ridge model delivered an AUC of 0.882, while XGBoost trailed slightly with an AUC of 0.875 (Fig. 5). Both models performed strongly on sensitivity and F1 metrics, reinforcing that the thematic feature set captured meaningful variance in the banned vs. not-banned classification. XGBoost’s feature importance chart revealed a hierarchical pattern of influence, with gender, religion, and violence themes exerting the most substantial predictive weight, followed by history, sexuality, and race. This ordering reflects prevailing public discourse around bans, which frequently target narratives involving nonnormative identities or challenging content.

A screenshot of a graph

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Fig. 5 – Model Training Comparison Summary Table

Despite these results, the models’ performance on unseen test data exposed critical limitations. The ridge model’s AUC plummeted to 0.524, and XGBoost’s to 0.571 – both hovering near random chance (Fig. 6). This decline may reflect both overfitting and the test data’s thematic divergence from the training set. Importantly, the results suggest that while theme indicators are useful in describing patterns of censorship, they may be insufficient alone for high-confidence prediction. These findings emphasize the importance of expanding future models to include contextual, regional, or sentiment-based metadata that can better account for the latent factors driving censorship decisions.

A screenshot of a graph

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Fig. 6 – Model Testing Comparison Summary Table

**7. Conclusions**

This study addressed four central questions related to the thematic and linguistic dimensions of book bans in Florida and Iowa. Through a layered text mining approach, it offers insight into both the substance of censored content and the patterns underlying its suppression.

First, TF and TF-IDF measures highlighted the linguistic scaffolding of banned texts, with common high-frequency terms like eyes, mind, told, and looked indicating a focus on introspection and interpersonal conflict. These terms were more prominent in banned books than non-banned samples, reflecting a thematic preoccupation with identity, embodiment, and power. TF-IDF scores further distinguished books with STEM, religious, or classical literary vocabulary – content often underrepresented in metadata but central to narratives that provoke censorship.

Second, regional comparisons exposed distinct patterns of thematic regulation. Florida’s banned books were more likely to involve emotionally charged, socially expressive content, while Iowa’s included a broader range of technical and historical vocabulary. Dictionary-based theme detection reinforced this split: sexuality and violence were prevalent in both states, but Iowa books more often contained themes of anti-intellectualism, identity, and history, suggesting greater discomfort with critical discourse in education. Florida bans aligned more with identity-based narratives, particularly related to gender and LGBTQ+ content.

Third, stated justifications – such as “age-inappropriate” or “explicit content” – were not supported by the thematic analysis of book descriptions. Description-level theme detection returned almost no matches. This disconnect suggests that public rationales for banning are often vague or intentionally sanitized, obscuring the ideological basis of censorship. Full-text analysis proved far more effective in surfacing underlying themes, revealing the gap between stated and actual content concerns.

Finally, the supervised classification models identified the most predictive thematic features of banned books. Ridge regression and XGBoost both performed well during training, with AUC scores above 0.87. However, generalization was limited on test data (AUCs ~0.52–0.57). Despite this, feature importance analysis consistently identified gender, religion, and violence as top predictors (Fig. 7). This confirms that these themes are central to contemporary censorship efforts, even when not explicitly cited in bans.

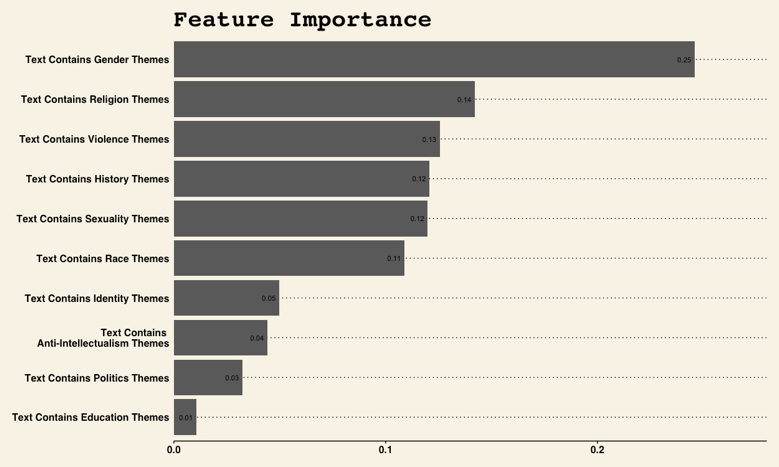


Fig. 7 – Feature Importance Analysis

Together, these findings suggest that censorship is shaped by regional ideologies and expressed through targeted linguistic and thematic markers. Books are not banned at random, but through a structured response to content that challenges normative assumptions about gender, history, knowledge, and power.

In addition to regional and linguistic distinctions, the analysis revealed a striking gap between the perceived themes of banned books and those identified through full-text mining. Publisher-provided subject labels, such as those aggregated through Google Books, often failed to reflect the actual narrative content driving censorship. This mismatch may be the result of protective omission – an attempt to shield books from preemptive bans by minimizing references to controversial themes. Alternatively, it may reflect a deeper reluctance within publishing or distribution platforms to foreground narratives centered on marginalized communities. The result is the same: a systematic underrepresentation of race, gender, identity, and other socially contested themes in official records. Such omissions obscure the ideological drivers of censorship and complicate efforts to hold institutions accountable for the narratives they suppress.

The classification models, while limited in generalizability, succeeded in validating the thematic patterns identified through earlier methods. Recurring signals across both ridge and XGBoost models reinforce that certain themes – particularly those relating to gender, violence, and religion – as structural markers of censorship. Although the predictive strength of these models is not yet sufficient for deployment, the foundation they provide demonstrates the feasibility of more complex modeling approaches in the future, particularly as data becomes richer and more politically contextualized.

**8. Future Research**

In recognizing this is a very limited analysis in scope and breadth, several advancements in methodology are recommended to strengthen the accuracy, generalizability, and contextual relevance of future iterations of this research. First, expanding the dataset to include more recent and regionally diverse banned books will improve model sensitivity to emerging censorship trends. As new bans are introduced and contested, real-time ingestion of contemporary texts will ensure the analysis remains aligned with current political and cultural conditions.

Second, theme detection can be refined by expanding the existing dictionary framework to include more dimensions such as disability, immigration, reproductive rights, and economic justice. These categories are increasingly central to public discourse and may help explain newer waves of book bans that extend beyond traditional race or gender-based censorship. Integrating political metadata – such as school board composition, voting behavior, and regional education policies – would enable multilevel modeling capable of accounting for contextual variation in censorship logic. Capturing this data may be challenging due to the volume of municipalities with banning powers – constraints may be required to keep the data focused and appropriate.

Finally, this research should adopt semi-supervised or weakly supervised learning frameworks to extend its predictive reach. By leveraging large volumes of unlabeled text, the model could better identify ambiguous or borderline cases and adapt to theme interactions not captured in the initial training set. This approach would facilitate the development of a more flexible, scalable model capable of supporting real-time monitoring and policy analysis. The challenge will be collecting data due to copyright laws but would be a fruitful avenue of analysis.

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1. This is a key study limitation that will be addressed in the Future Research section [↑](#footnote-ref-1)