

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

Katie Spoon, Isabelle Langrock, Jack LaViolette, Marcelo S.O. Goncalves

A rapid rise in U.S. book bans

TOP TEN MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2021

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Books Fiction Books Nonfiction Books Ron Charles Michael Dirda Carlos Lozada

Indian RL Klu

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LGBTQ • Posted 38 minutes ago

I Read The 5 Most Challenged And Banned LGBTQ+ Books Of Last Year — Here's What I Thought

Tl;dr: Stop banning books, you weirdos.

by Mary Colussi BuzzFeed Staff



(The Washington Post illustration; Sourcebooks Fire, Pantheon, OniPress, Balzer + Bray, Penguin Books, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, Farrar, Straus and Giroux Books for Young Readers, Penguin Classics, Algonquin)

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Book banning in the US: These are the authors of color who censors are trying to silence

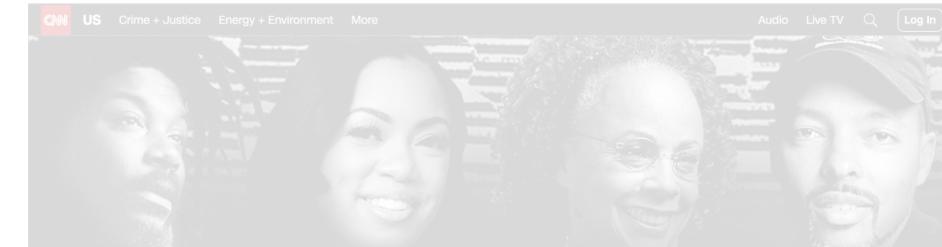
By Elliott C. McLaughlin, CNN

The New York Times

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



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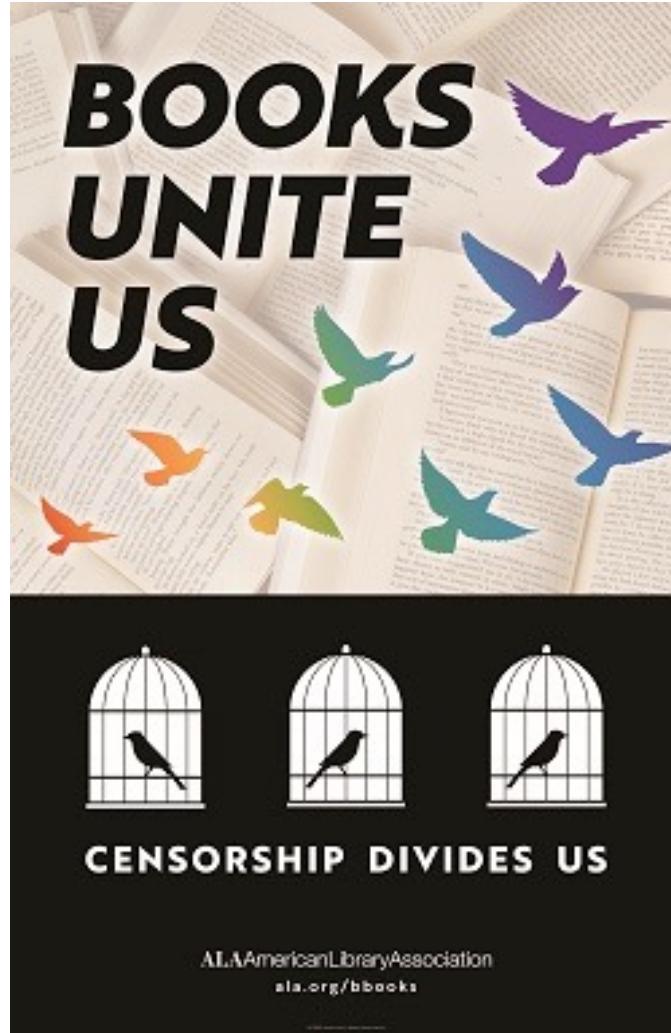


(The Washington Post illustration: Sourcebooks Fire, Pantheon, OniPress, Balzer + Bray, Penguin Books,

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 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

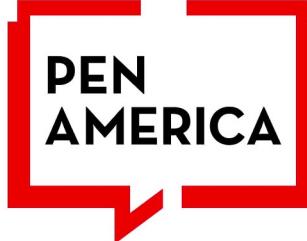
What is missing is a systematic study of book bans.

Where are books banned?

What books & authors are banned?

How does interest change after books are banned?

Data

	<p>Banned Books 2532 book bans from 2021-22</p> 
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Where are books banned?



++: MIT ELECTION DATA
+ SCIENCE LAB

What books get banned?



How does interest change?

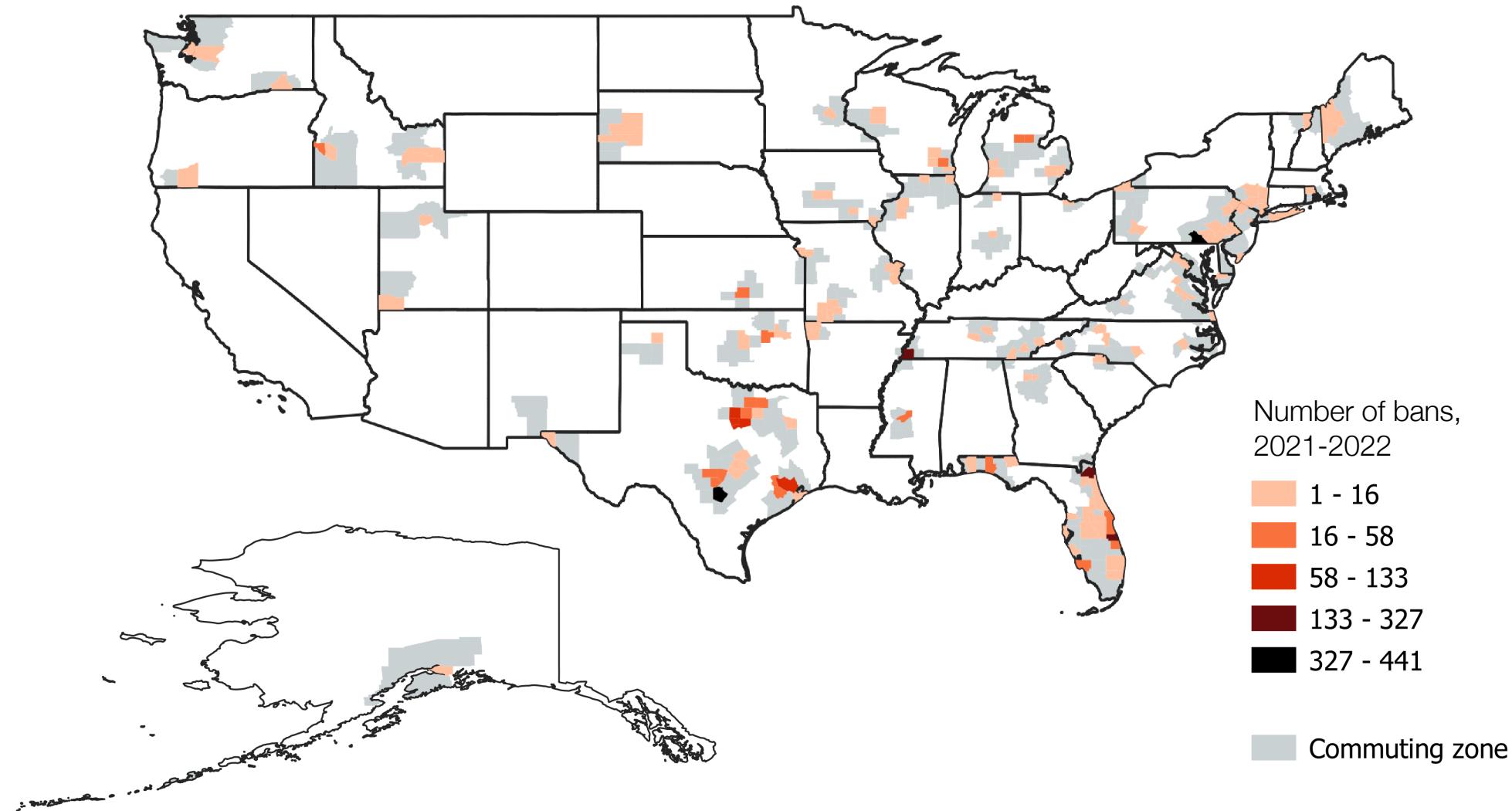


***Where* are books banned?**

What books & authors are banned?

How does interest change after books are banned?

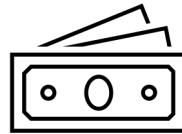
Where are books banned?



Where are books banned?

Possible sociodemographic factors:

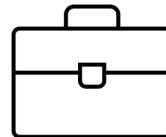
Income



Education



Employment



Diversity



Migration

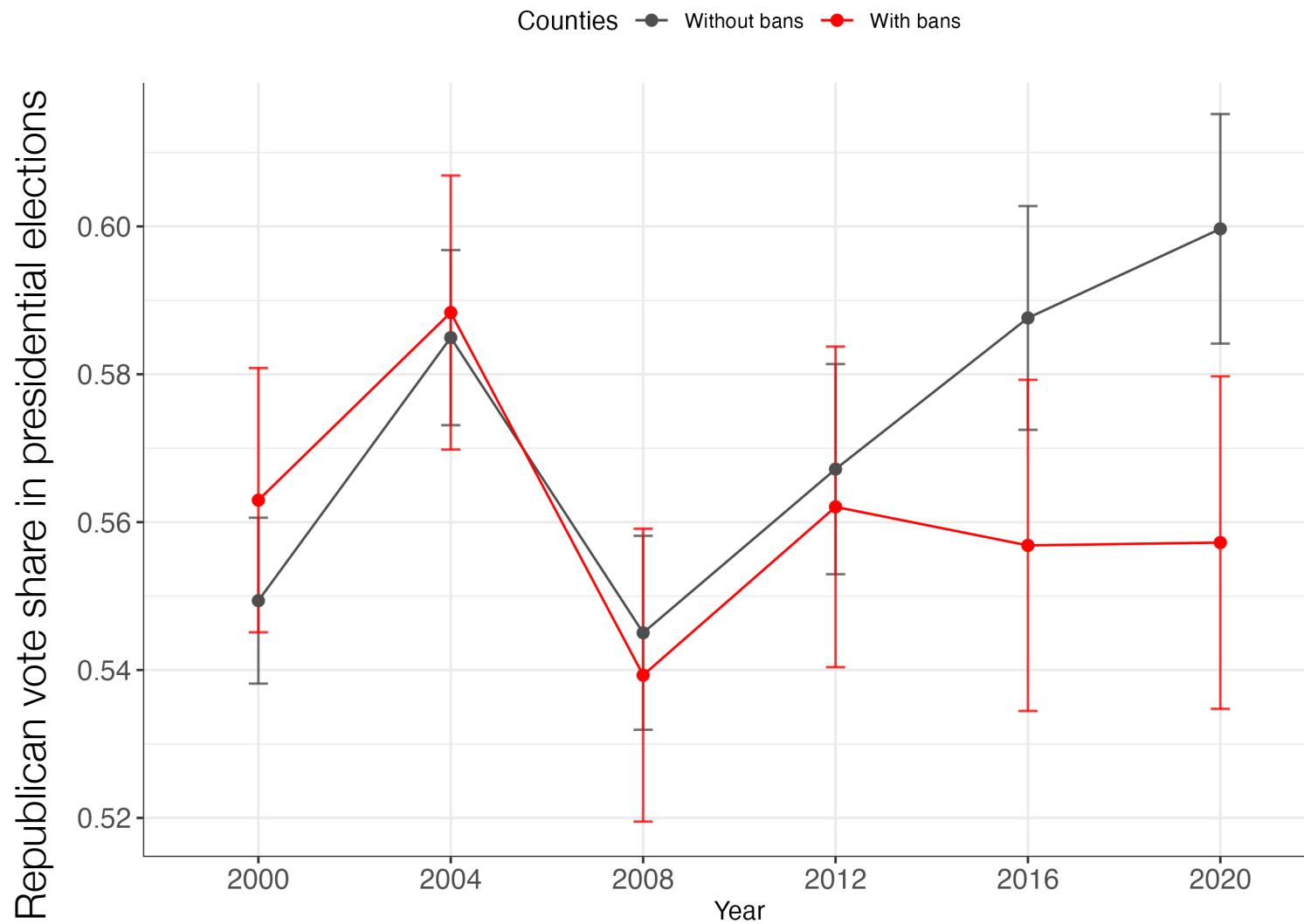


Resource hypothesis: are book bans more common in counties with highly-resourced parents?

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?



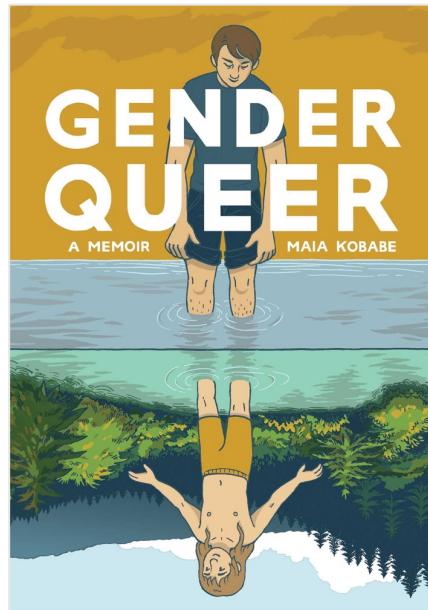
In 2020, counties that banned books **became less conservative regions** and more electorally competitive than those without bans

Where are books banned?

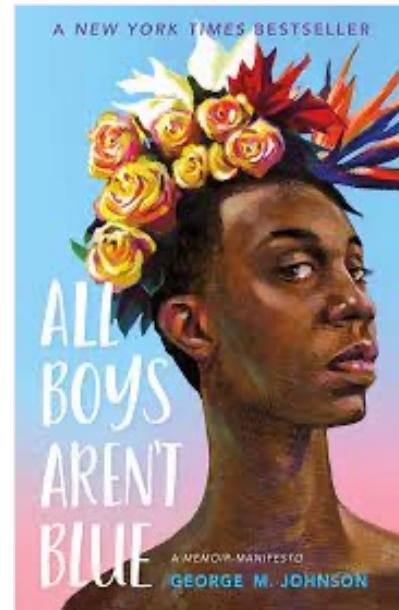
***What* books & authors are banned?**

How does interest change after books are banned?

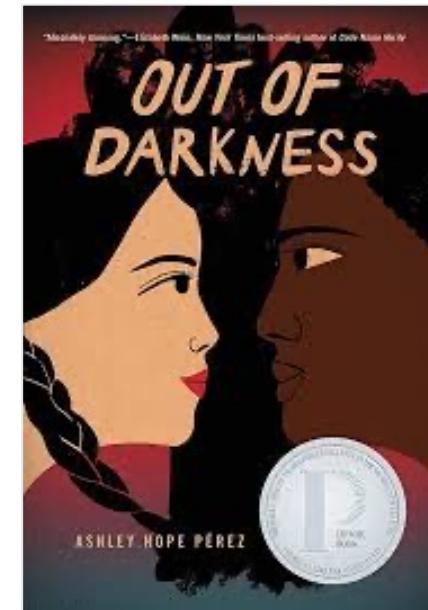
What books are banned?



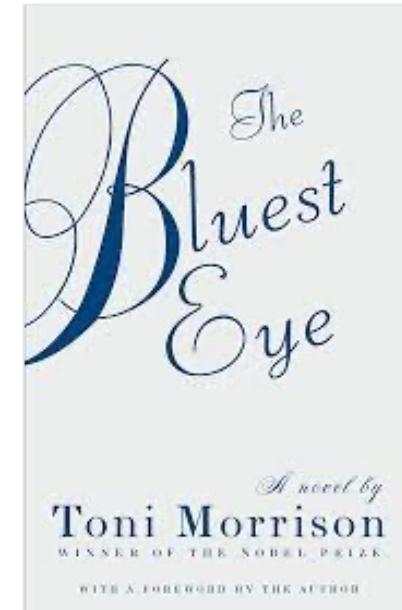
41 bans



29 bans



24 bans



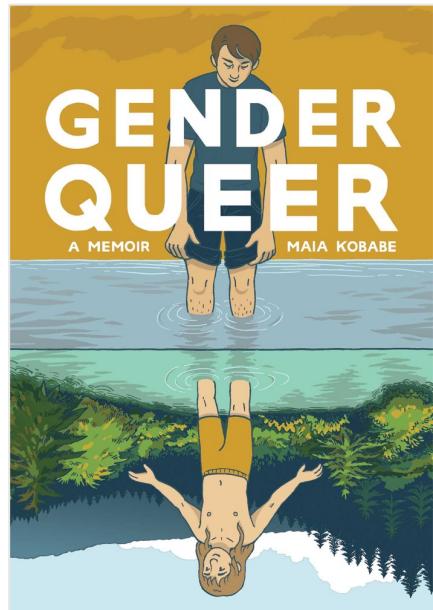
22 bans



17 bans

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)

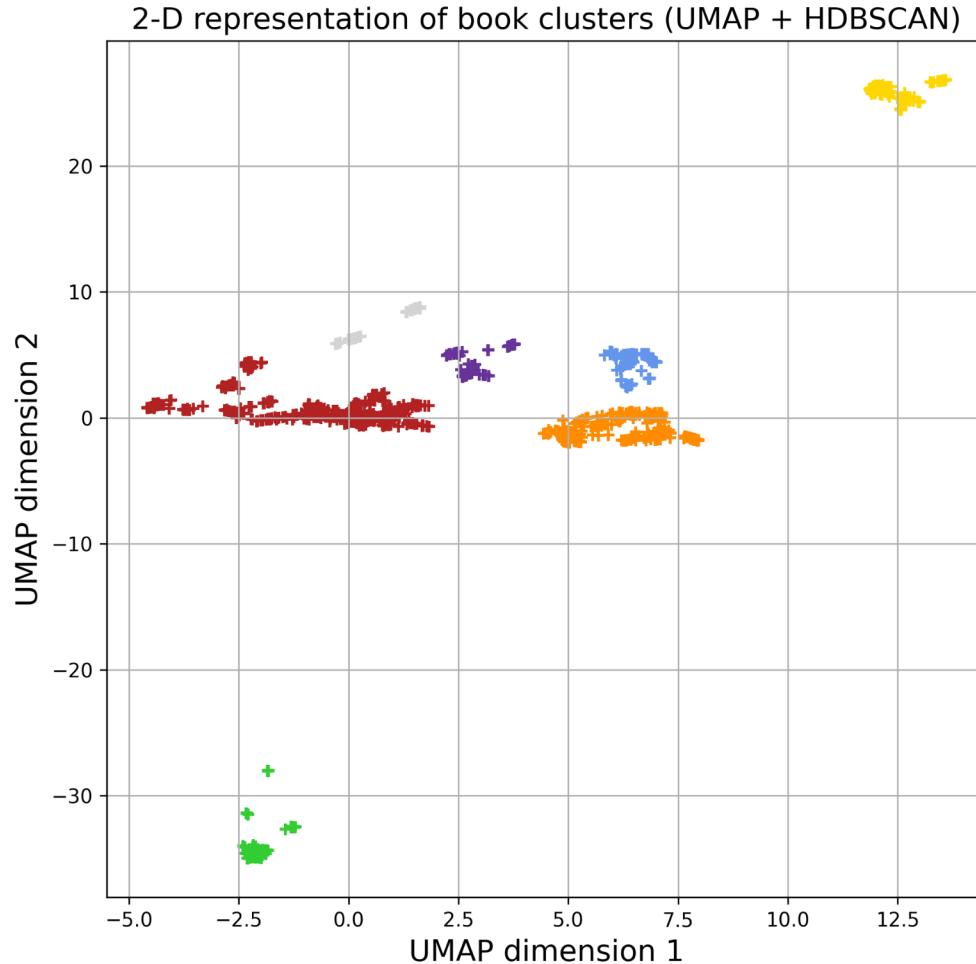
- Nonfiction
- Biography
- Autobiography
- Sequential art
- Comics
- Graphic novels comics

Related to the
style of the book

- LGBT
- History
- Social issues
- Gender
- Gender and sexuality
- Humanities
- Adult

Related to the
content of the book

What books are banned?



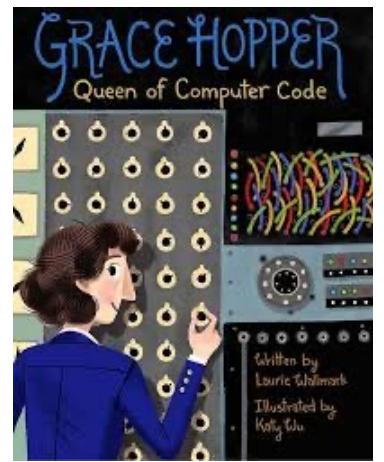
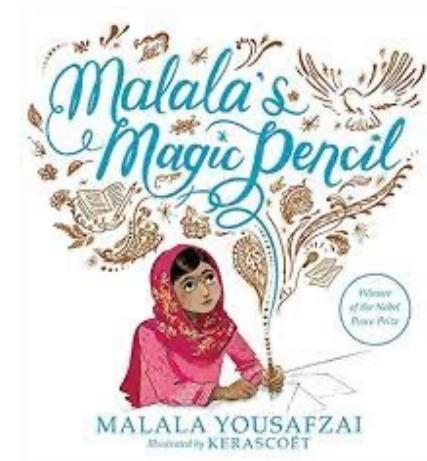
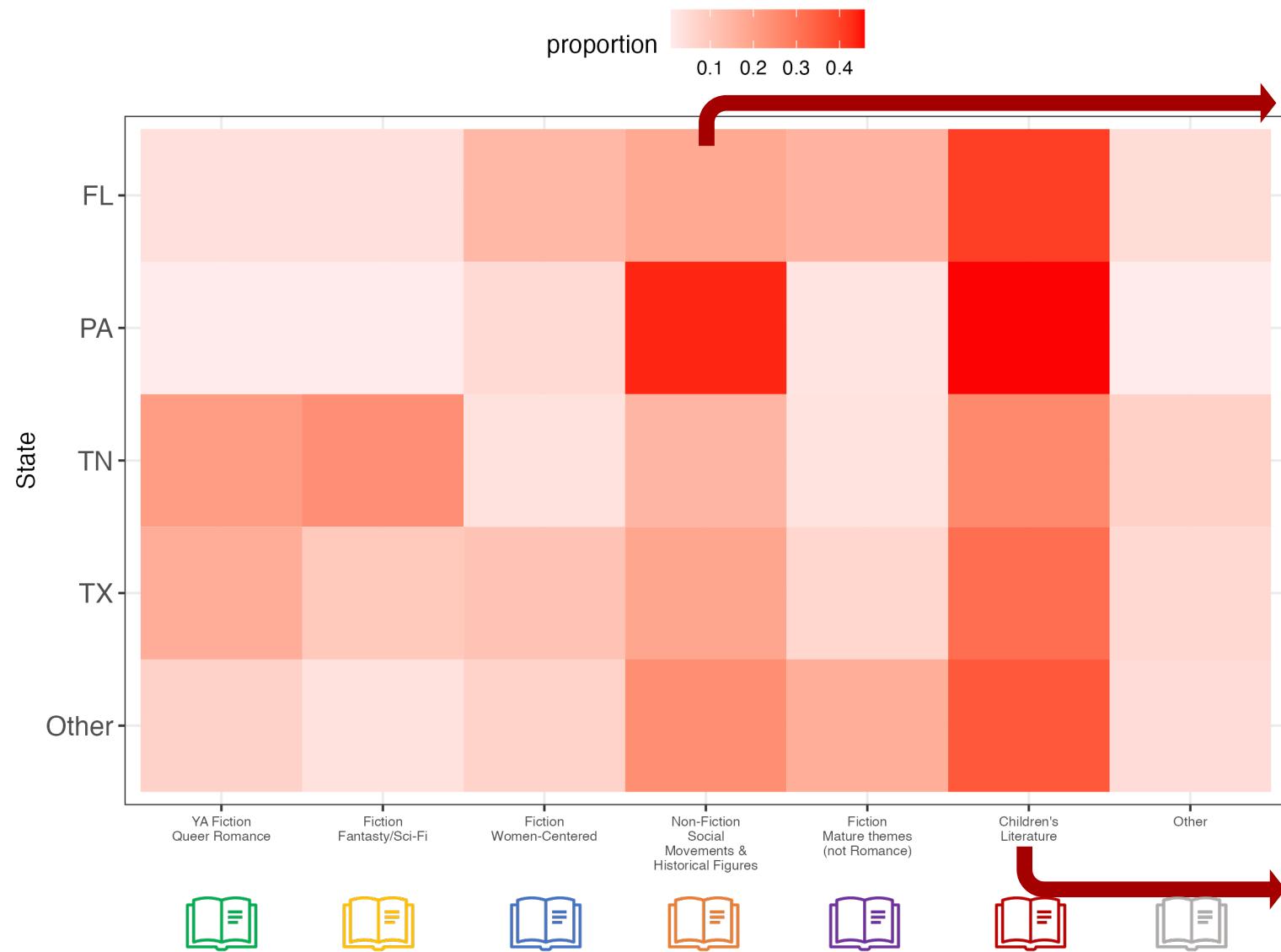
We grouped books into clusters based on how similar their Goodreads genres were.

- 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)**

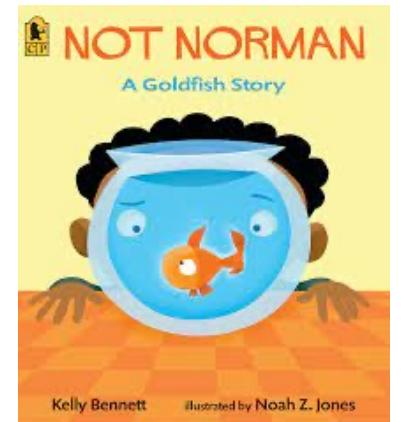
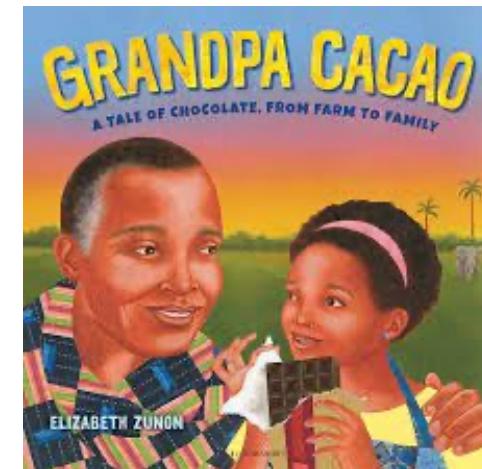
Feature space reduced with UMAP and HDBSCAN, and a range of hyperparameters was tested.

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

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Elizabeth Acevedo is a [Dominican-American](#) poet and author.^[1] In September 2022, the [Poetry Foundation](#) named her the year's [Young People's Poet Laureate](#).^[2]

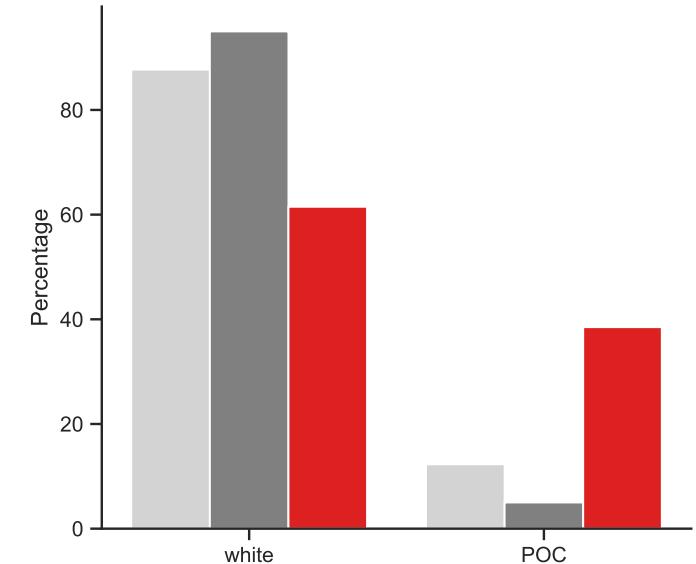
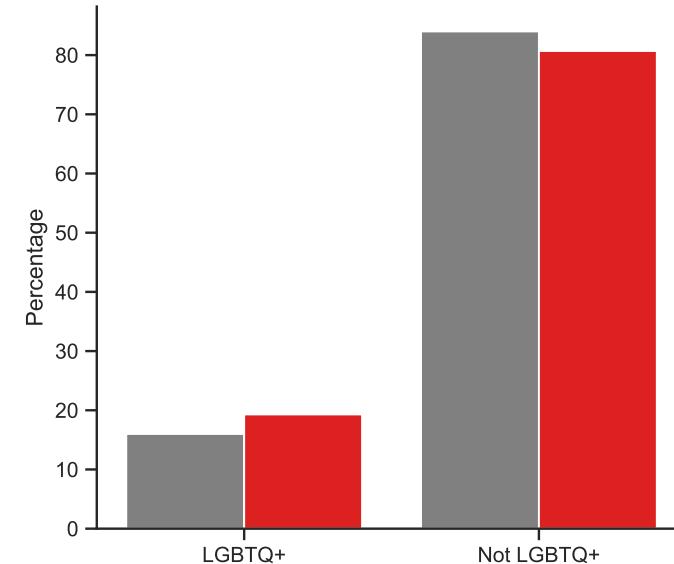
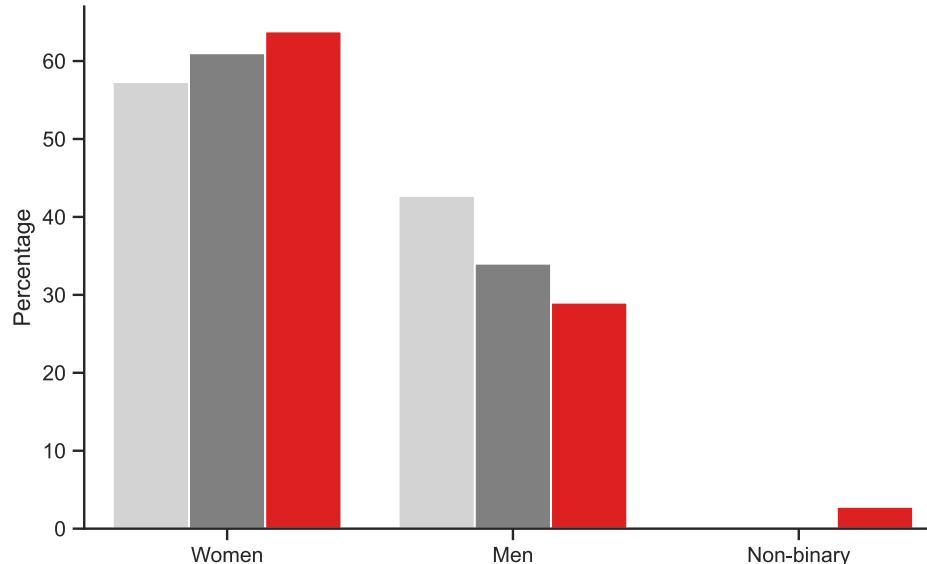
Acevedo is the author of the [young adult](#) novels *The Poet X*, *With the Fire on High*, and *Clap When You Land*. *The Poet X* is a [New York Times](#) Bestseller,^[3] National Book Award Winner,^[3] and Carnegie Medal winner.^[4] She is also the winner of the 2019 Michael L. Printz Award, the 2018 Pura Belpre Award, and the Boston-Globe Hornbook Award Prize for Best Children's Fiction of 2018. She lives in Washington, DC.^{[5][6]}



Elizabeth Acevedo

Acevedo in 2018

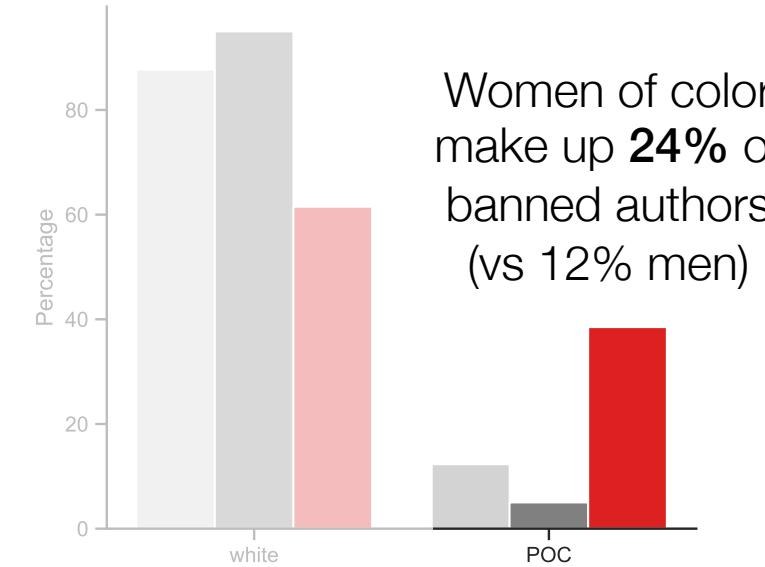
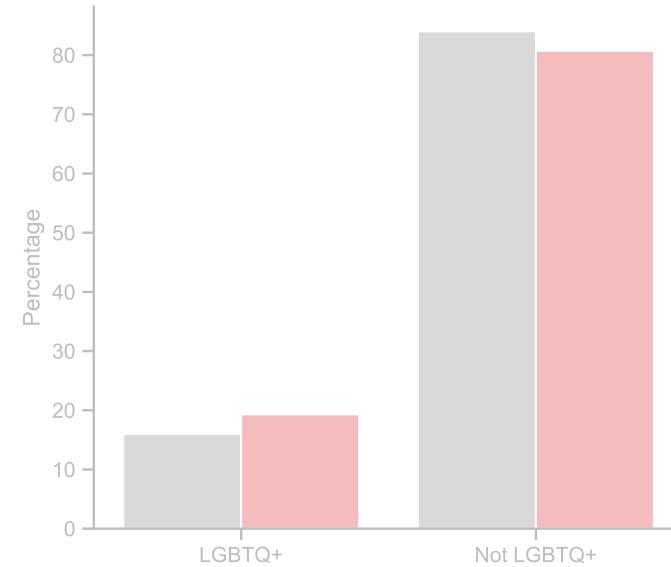
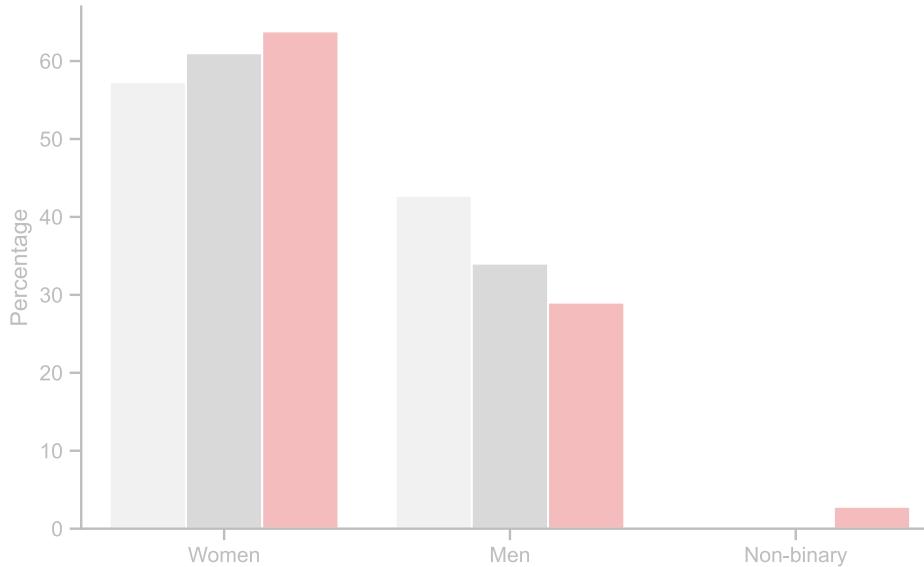
Which authors are banned?



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

Which authors are banned?



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?



Monthly sales
326 bans
13% of sample

Pro: sales are the strongest interest

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



Monthly checkouts
1220 bans
48% of sample

Pro: libraries mimic the book-banning environment most closely

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



Weekly Google searches
1566 bans
62% of sample

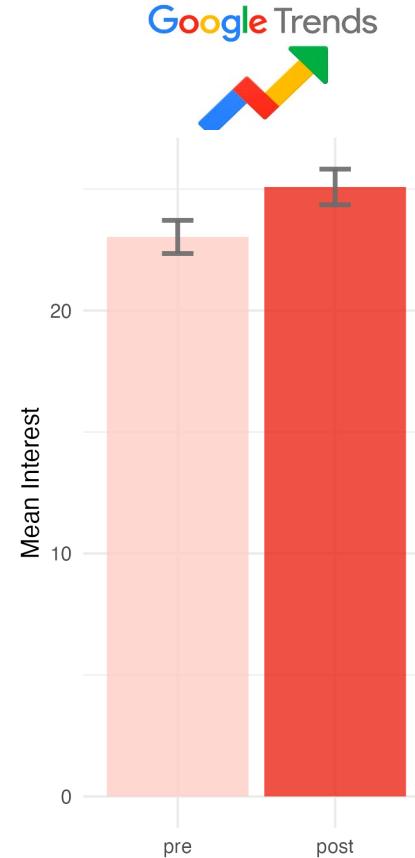
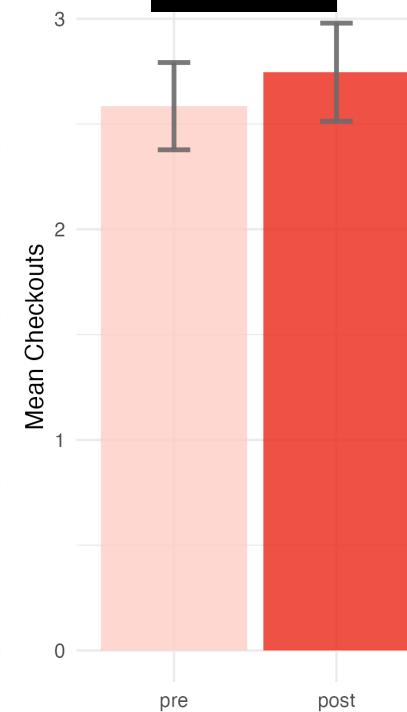
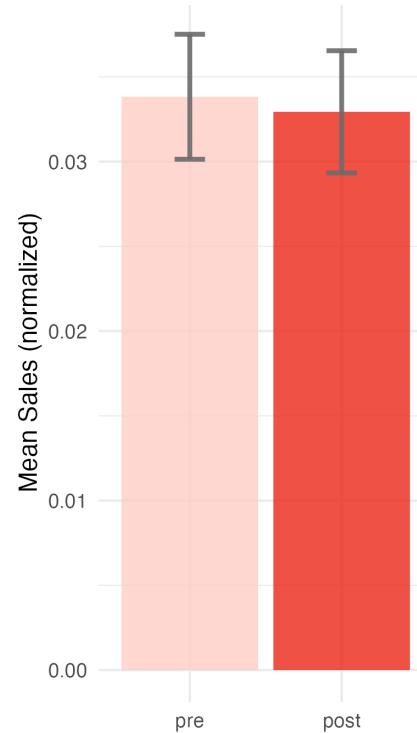
Pro: highest coverage

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?

B Bookshop



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?

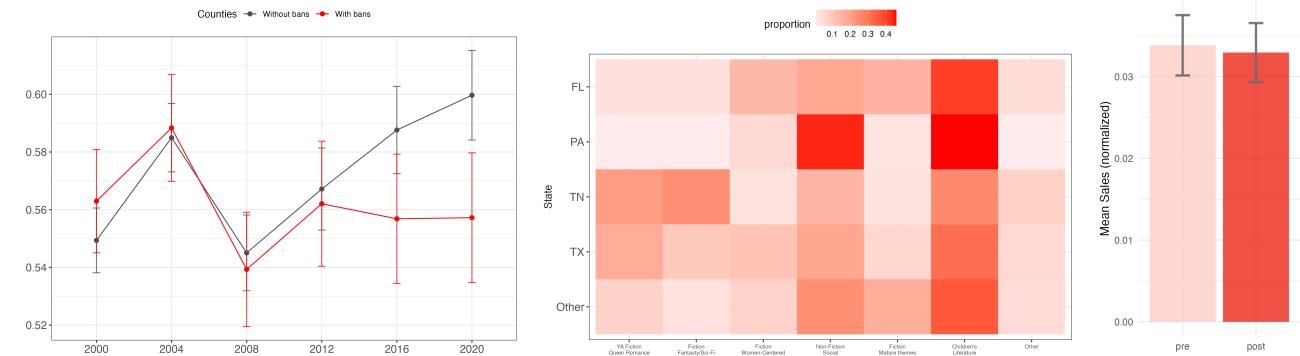
Counties that ban books are more likely to be electoral battlegrounds vs neighboring counties

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*



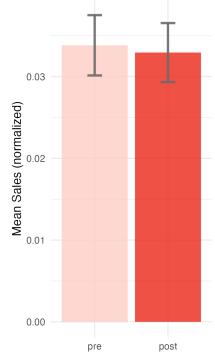
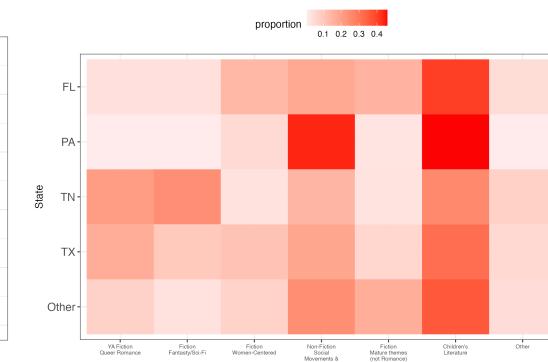
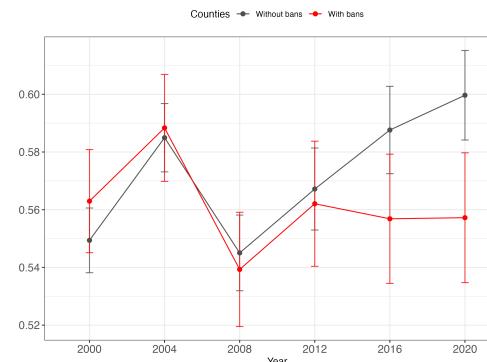
Takeaways:

- 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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Sciences Po



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