**The Politicization of Public Libraries: Consequences and Reform**

**Introduction**

There are nearly 17,500 public libraries in the United States today—more libraries than McDonalds restaurants. Their ubiquitous presence grew from their foundational role in the flourishing of American civil society following the Civil War through the mid-twentieth century.

Public libraries in America serve as community hubs for knowledge and information founded on the principle of equal access by offering a diverse collection to the general public. As originally conceived, they aimed to foster literacy and promote civic engagement.

Once seen as neutral spaces in which local communities could engage, libraries are increasingly viewed by moderate and conservative Americans as not merely having a politically liberal bias, but actively promoting a far-left political agenda especially targeted towards children. This perception alienates large portions of those same communities that libraries claim to serve. The leftward shift, driven by a growing emphasis on social justice activism, has driven many patrons away from the library and raised concerns about the future of these institutions.

This paper examines the historical role of public libraries, the rise of political polarization within them, and the tragic consequences for society. This paper will examine how ideological bias, driven by the abandonment of principles of neutrality, has resulted in conservatives deserting local library facilities and jeopardizing continued taxpayer support for this once-venerable institution. Through a robust program that promotes traditional American values that supersede political ideologies and encourages critical thinking skills, libraries can reduce political polarization and help to restore the social cohesion they once facilitated within a healthy civic life.

**The Traditional Role of Public Libraries**

Libraries have been essential to the functioning of a democratic society going back millennia. They provide citizens with the tools they need to make informed decisions. They also play a crucial role in promoting literacy and providing access to knowledge, essential for individual and societal progress. In the early days of the United States, libraries were often associated with private societies or universities; however, as the nation grew, so did the public’s demand for access to books and industry’s need for an educated workforce. As a result, industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie donated millions of dollars to launch libraries in communities across the nation.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, public libraries began to be viewed as institutions that could foster inclusive civic engagement at a time when the gap between rich and poor was wide. They became spaces where people from all walks of life could come together to discuss ideas, debate issues, and participate in community activities. Libraries also played a key role in promoting equal access to knowledge, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their economic status, had the opportunity to learn and grow.

**The Rise of Political Polarization & Social Justice in Libraries**

As early as the mid-19th century, public libraries were used to enhance the education of the masses and promote civic engagement. This role aligned with the progressive ideals of the time, but it was generally understood that libraries should avoid partisan politics.  In recent years, however, a growing number of public libraries have adopted an overtly political stance, particularly leaning towards progressive ideologies. This shift can be attributed to several factors:

**Social Justice Movements**

The rise of social justice movements has influenced library programming and collection development. Libraries have often taken on the role of promoting social change, particularly regarding issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and climate change. In recent decades, a growing number of libraries have embraced social justice activism. This trend is evident in various ways, including:

* **Politicized Book Displays:** Libraries have curated displays that promote homosexual, Islamic, Marxist and other leftist ideologies to the exclusion of opposing viewpoints.
* **Activist Programming:** Libraries have hosted events and workshops that promote leftist social justice causes or support controversial content, such as children’s books that contain sexually explicit or violent material, or those that promote radical ideologies at the expense of traditional library services.
* **Bias in Collection Development:** Libraries systematically acquire books that align with the same liberal progressive perspectives, while neglecting or even removing conservative viewpoints and associated materials.
* **Staff Activism:** Library staff, many of whom are politically active, have become increasingly vocal about their political beliefs and have used their positions to promote specific agendas that align with the political left. Librarians are frequently quoted in local papers with a crusading vigor that denies respect for any other perspectives on social justice except those embraced by the left. Some libraries have even become involved in political campaigns and protests, organizing events and displaying materials that promote Democratic political agendas.[[1]](#footnote-1) This blurs the lines between library services and nakedly one-sided political advocacy.

**The Consequences of Political Polarization in Public Libraries**

The increasing politicization of public libraries has far-reaching consequences that threaten their core mission. This trend is particularly troubling as it undermines the principles of neutrality, intellectual freedom, and community unity on which they were founded and in violation of ethical frameworks of the field’s professional associations.

**Neutrality**

One of the most significant consequences of political polarization in libraries is the erosion of neutrality. As libraries increasingly adopt partisan agendas, this neutrality is compromised.

An unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service is not only desirable, but also a core ethic of the IFLA, which states,

“Neutrality results in the most balanced collection and the most balanced access to information achievable. Librarians and other information workers define and publish their policies for selection, organization, preservation, provision, and dissemination of information. Librarians and other information workers distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties. They do not advance private interests or personal beliefs at the expense of neutrality.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is another objective of neutrality: assuring members of a diverse public that all will be treated with respect. Libraries must uphold the promise that people won't be disadvantaged by virtue of their identity, including partisan and religious identities. It doesn't involve the pretense that one personally has no views, but only that one should refrain from expressing views that compromise neutrality. Even if a librarian is a registered Democrat, Republican patrons should be confident that they won't be treated worse than their peers simply by virtue of being Republicans.

What counts as a virtue in the public realm may not be one in the private realm. Ballplayers want the umpire to be neutral; they don't want their spouses to be neutral. In private, we can rage, revere, and condemn because as citizens, we're entitled to promote our vision of who is worthy of our personal respect; but librarians, in their official duties and public life, must be neutral. As Professor Appiah explains, “Dwelling peaceably together amid disagreements is the ultimate aim of neutrality.” “Viewing our work through the prism of disinterest, the rhetoric of dispassion, the stance of neutrality will serve us well. As private individuals, we're entitled to fight for what we believe in. In a pluralistic society, however, the ideal of neutrality helps keep the fighting fair.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite maintaining “neutrality” on paper with association ethical guidelines[[4]](#footnote-4), librarians have largely replaced neutrality in day-to-day work with “inclusiveness”. Inclusiveness can feel as though it meets the ethical burden of neutrality because it welcomes everyone. In reality, the welcome is only applied to those who hold the same leftist worldview.

Inclusiveness cannot replace neutrality without risking the legitimacy of the space. This ethic of inclusiveness over neutrality can be found in the removal of conservative books from libraries.[[5]](#footnote-5) Conservative books weeded from library collections are often ignored in conversations about book banning.[[6]](#footnote-6) The end result is a library that privileges certain worldviews and their criteria for which books to carry while decrying members of the public they serve for doing the same thing in the other direction.

In recent years, there has been a surge in book challenges and bans, often targeting books (mostly children’s titles) with LGBTQ+ themes, racial justice content, or those that contradict traditional Judeo-Christian values. While some of the more publicized challenges are driven by conservative groups, the vast majority are quietly initiated by progressive activists masquerading as librarians, who seek to remove books they deem harmful or offensive even if their local community disagrees. Urban values have sought to displace localism as librarians operate as if every community is (or should be) as diverse as New York City. This has sadly become standard operating procedure at most libraries and receives little to no publicity thanks to the collaboration of liberal media.

This ideological worldview not only informs library decisions on a sub-conscious level, but also specifically calls for acquisitions and weeding[[7]](#footnote-7) to include these ideological considerations in formal library procedures and processes.[[8]](#footnote-8) This has led to an undemocratic situation where members of one political party have near complete control over what appears on the shelves of local libraries and have functionally abandoned neutrality as a premise for those decisions. This is while those with concerns about these policies are being told they are the ones politicizing the library.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Librarians aren’t neutral, but actually are the opposite with near universal alignment with a single political party. In 2020, employees of the American Library Association (ALA) donated to democratic candidates and causes 100% of the time. In the 2020 election cycle, all librarians donated to Democrats at a rate of 419:1.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Intellectual Freedom**

A focus on social justice activism can lead to the suppression of conservative viewpoints thereby creating a hostile environment for those with differing opinions. Political polarization in libraries often leads to the suppression of viewpoints that diverge from liberal orthodoxy. As libraries become more focused on promoting progressive ideologies, conservative perspectives may be marginalized or even banned. This creates a hostile environment for those who hold differing opinions and undermines the principles of free speech and intellectual freedom.

Book challenges and bans, which have become increasingly common in recent years, are a prime example of this trend. Conservative-leaning books are often targeted for removal from library shelves, while progressive books are protected. This selective censorship limits the range of ideas available to the public, promotes “group-think” and stifles intellectual growth and imaginative problem solving to complex social issues.

Suppression is not the only problem. Deliberate inclusion of explicit and age-inappropriate materials, particularly in children's sections, tramples on parental rights and invites harmful exposure with a consequential loss of innocence.[[11]](#footnote-11) The resulting backlash from concerned parents jeopardizes library funding streams. The same librarians whose paternalistic and condescending attitudes invited the criticism in the first place are the first to cry “censorship” while engaging in the same practice. Librarians cannot have it both ways: Drafting incendiary policies targeting children for ideological indoctrination (especially with regard to homosexuality) that offend parents and then feigning outrage when those same parents ask civil authorities to reduce or eliminate funding for organizations who refuse to serve their local community with humility.

**Division**

Politicized libraries exacerbate social divisions and hinder constructive intracommunity dialogue. When libraries become battlegrounds for ideological conflict, it leads to unhealthy tension and animosity between different groups. This can damage the social fabric of the community and make it more difficult for people to come together and find common ground.

As libraries become increasingly partisan, they lose credibility and are seen as less trustworthy. This can have negative consequences for the library's reputation and its ability to fulfill its mission.  The insistence on a “one-culture fits all” approach denies local/regional differences and dismisses rural vs urban sensibilities with a snide, elitist condescension. Until the 2024 election initiated a reversal, libraries embraced destructive diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives founded upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) which erodes the shared sense of unity within society and diminishes the civic life Americans once enjoyed.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This shift towards a more politically charged environment alienates conservative and even moderate patrons who see their viewpoints are not being represented or respected. Libraries must be places of *responsible* intellectual freedom (i.e. liberty not license) and open discourse, but always mindful of their duty to serve, respect and provide a work product reflective of the values and traditions of the local community who fund their work. Of course, adherence to this definition of duty would look very different from one community to another.

**Erosion of Trust**

As public trust in libraries has eroded, vastly decreased usage has been the result. An April 2024, survey supports that conclusion.[[13]](#footnote-13) Which groups, in fact, use libraries the least?

Two broad groups that lean conservative were found to spend less time in public libraries than any other demographic.

1. Conservatives. Democrats are almost twice as likely to be monthly library visitors as their Republican friends — 30 percent vs. 17 percent.
2. Southerners, folks 45 or older, Protestants and rural Americans all fall near the bottom of the rankings, and most of this demographic lean right.

Based on the data, the anti-library stance appears to be ideological. The biggest partisan gaps in the survey come in library funding (31 percent of Republicans want to increase it, compared with 64 percent of Democrats) and ideology. Republicans are twice as likely to say library restrictions are motivated by sincere concerns about harmful material than Democrats.

**A Call for Restoration - Exploring Alternative Solutions:**

To ensure public libraries serve the needs of all citizens regardless of political identity, several alternative solutions should be implemented without delay. To address the negative consequences of political polarization in libraries, it is essential to restore libraries as neutral spaces and return their focus to providing access to information and fostering intellectual curiosity.

This can be achieved through the following strategies:

**Strict Adherence to Neutrality:** Libraries should avoid promoting specific political or ideological viewpoints and instead strive to maintain a neutral stance. This means avoiding partisan programming, displays, and collections. It also requires the following:

* Clear Guidelines: Libraries should establish clear, written policies that explicitly outline the principles of neutrality and prohibit the promotion of specific political or ideological viewpoints.
* Staff Hiring and Training: Library staff should reflect the population that they serve and receive regular training on neutrality policies, emphasizing the importance of impartiality and the avoidance of bias in their interactions with patrons and in the selection of materials. An explicit initiative to recruit and hire an ideologically balanced staff, particularly underrepresented conservative males, would be a welcome sign of a commitment to change the status quo.
* Regular Reviews: Periodic reviews of library collections, displays, and programs should be conducted by a local, bipartisan commission to ensure compliance with neutrality policies.

**Cease Political Activism:**

* Avoid Partisan Involvement: Libraries should refuse to insert themselves into partisan political activities, such as endorsing candidates or supporting specific political platforms/campaigns.
* Embrace Neutral Programming: Library programs should be designed to inform and educate, rather than to promote specific political or ideological viewpoints.
* Balance Book Collections: Libraries should maintain balanced collections that represent a variety of viewpoints, including conservative perspectives, and should give weight to local traditions and sensibilities.

**Community Involvement:** Libraries should involve the community in decision-making processes, including the selection of materials and the development of programs. This spreads the risk of controversy among others in the local government and avoids placing the burdensome decision-making entirely on the library administration. To that end, each library should establish the following:

* Advisory Boards: Establish local advisory boards comprised of diverse community members, especially parents, from across the ideological spectrum to provide valuable input on library policies and programming. This guidance should inform book selection, programming, and community outreach. Libraries must respect the rights of parents to guide their children's education and media consumption. This includes providing parents with information about the content of library materials and offering age-appropriate programming.
* Public Input Sessions: Holding regular public input sessions allows community members to express their concerns and suggestions regarding library services. Engaging with the community through outreach programs that are sensitive and responsive to the input solicited can help to build the trust and understanding that has been lost through decades of irresponsible, biased, and often tyrannical behavior.
* Transparent Decision-Making: Libraries should be transparent about their decision-making processes, particularly when it comes to controversial issues such as book selection and programming.

**Focus on Core Services:** Libraries should prioritize their core services, such as providing access to books, computers, and other resources, over distracting political activism that diverts limited time and attention from providing access to information and promoting increasingly important ***digital***, as well as, print literacy. This re-focusing will ensure that libraries remain relevant and are perceived as valuable to the *entire* community.

By implementing these solutions, public libraries can help to bridge the political divide and reclaim their role as a neutral institution that serves the needs of the entire community. It is essential to ensure that libraries remain places where individuals can access information that is not curated solely from one particular viewpoint or an unaccountable oligarchy of politically captive librarians.

**Conclusion**

The death cycle of diminishment that libraries are experiencing has a likely end that we have seen many times before. Namely, a near total loss of institutional trust. For example, the nightly news (i.e. mainstream media) was once a foundational civic space in American life. As late as the 1970s, more than 70% of Americans trusted the news media. Those who have a “great deal of trust” in the media are now down to 8%. [[14]](#footnote-14) The reduction of trust in libraries must be arrested and reversed in order to help restore civil society.

The politicization of public libraries is a serious threat to their core mission and their role in society. Libraries should prioritize content that upholds traditional American values over partisan concerns. These values include a healthy patriotism, love of family and community, as well as a focus on individual responsibility and good citizenship. By encouraging critical thinking rather than remaining captive to a specific ideological agenda, libraries will ensure an educated electorate fueled by a hearty, civil debate on a wide range of issues.

When libraries become advocates for specific political ideology, they alienate significant portions of their patrons and increase social segregation that already plagues American society. Conservative individuals feel unwelcome and marginalized in such environments leading to a decline in library usage and reduction of funding. When librarians return their focus to providing access to information and fostering a love of learning our society as a whole will benefit.

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