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Book bans in political context: Evidence from US schools

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ABSTRACT

In the 2021–2022 school year, more books were banned in US school districts than in any previous year. Book banning and other forms of information censorship have serious implications for democratic processes, and censorship has become a central theme of partisan political rhetoric in the United States. However, there is little empirical work on the exact content, predictors of, and repercussions of this rise in book bans. Using a comprehensive dataset of 2,532 bans that occurred during the 2021–2022 school year from PEN America, combined with county-level administrative data, multiple book-level digital trace datasets, restricted-use book sales data, and a new crowd-sourced dataset of author demographic information, we find that (i) banned books are disproportionately written by people of color and feature characters of color, both fictional and historical, in children's books; (ii) right-leaning counties that have become less conservative over time are more likely to ban books than neighboring counties; and (iii) national and state levels of interest in books are largely unaffected after they are banned. Together, these results suggest that rather than serving primarily as a censorship tactic, book banning in this recent US context, targeted at low-interest children's books featuring diverse characters, is more similar to symbolic political action to galvanize shrinking voting blocs.