The Books That the World Calls Immoral Are the Books That Show The World its Own Shame: An Analysis of Book Bans

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May 2025

This paper focuses on the statistics of and discussion surrounding the recent uptick in book bans across schools in America. I analyzed literature from the field by experts and educators (Hendrie, McArdle, Waldman, DeTemple, Goncalves et al., and Smith), as well as conducting my own research in the form of an anonymous poll and an interview with my school librarian. I also pulled statistics from organizations dedicated to tracking book bans, such as PEN America. As this topic is current and ever-changing, more research is always needed and welcome. I found that the increase in bans has come with an increase in political polarization, and the most banned books often contain or discuss diversity in some way, shape, or form.

Keywords: book bans, literature, politics, controversy

Part 1: Introduction/Research Objectives

Oscar Wilde said, "The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame." As a victim of censorship himself, Wilde would know. *A Picture of Dorian Gray,* one of his most famous works, was heavily censored at its initial publication for being sexually explicit and featuring a romantic relationship between two men (Basil Hallward and the titular Dorian Gray.) Over 130 years later, it was finally published uncensored by Harvard University Press, and Wilde's original vision of *Dorian Gray* finally saw the light.

In 2025, many authors are facing censorship just as Wilde did. Activist groups such as Moms for Liberty and Libs of TikTok advocate for the censorship and/or removal of books they find distasteful from classroom libraries and curricula. Book banning has been an issue in American classrooms for a long time, but in the past ten years we have seen the largest spike in censorship since the Satanic Panic of the 1980s-90s. Teachers are coming under fire just as much, if not more than, the authors of the books that they teach. As a future English teacher, there is no doubt in my mind that I will face parental concern or contritement over a book that my students read. Whether it is seen as too explicit, too divisive, or even just too hard, I will eventually face this in my career. Because of this and my own personal distaste for book bans and the people who are in favor of them, it was evident that I would choose to research this topic and the question "Why have book bans skyrocketed and how does the increase impact students and educators inside and outside the classroom?"

My research was done in three ways: reading articles and opinion pieces on the increase in book bans, an anonymous online survey, and an interview with my high school librarian.

Part 2: Literature Review

For this paper, I pulled information from a number of sources including scholarly articles. The articles mostly consisted of statistics on book bans such as genres, subject matter, reasons for book banning, and protagonist and/or author characteristics. Some articles also dealt with the conversation around book banning and how to foster an environment that is cooperative rather than reactionary.

Book Ban Statistics

Throughout several of the scholarly articles I used, the authors used statistics regarding book banning from the 2021-2022 school year. During that school year, schools were in their first full year of normal operation post-pandemic, and increases in political extremism, politicization of school boards, and anti-diversity rhetoric led to that year breaking book ban records.

Goncalves et al. pulled their data from the PEN America database, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting freedom of expression. Goncalves et al analyzed multiple categories of book ban statistics, three of which are most relevant: the variety of content, author identity, and in what socio-political contexts books are most likely to be banned (2024). They organized the list of banned books in the 2021-22 school year

based on genre, crowdsourcing the genre categories from Goodreads users' categorization of the books. Goncalves et al. ended up with seven genre clusters: children's literature, nonfiction history, fantasy, queer romance, women-centered fiction, mature fiction, and an unclustered outlier category. Children's literature made up the largest category of banned books at 37%, with nonfiction history in second place at 22%. In terms of the identity of authors, 64% of authors whose books were banned were women, 29% were men, and 3% were nonbinary. 19% overall identified with the LGBTQ+ community. 39% were BIPOC authors, and 24% were women of color (2024.)

McArdle discussed more specific statistics. Overall, the 2021-22 school year broke records with 1,269 challenges to books in that year. She cited the American Library Association, which stated that it went from receiving one to two reports of challenges to books per week to five to six reports per day (2023). Also per the ALA, the three most banned books in the country were *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morisson, and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George Johnson. (2023.) She stated that top two states with the highest number of bans were Texas, with 93 challenges involving 2,349 titles; and Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis signed laws requiring states to hire certified media specialists to ensure that schools don't have books that the state deems "inappropriate" and caused many titles to be taken off shelves for review (2023). Challenges also shifted to become directed at multiple books. 90% of challenges in 2022 were directed at multiple books and 40% targeted over 100. 48% of challenges were directed at public libraries rather than school libraries, which are often the focus of discussions about book bans (2023).

Smith's statistics included any challenges that restricted access to a book or temporarily removed it while the challenge was heard. She found that book bans increased 33% in the 2021-22 school year (2023), but her information on which states had the highest number of book bans conflicts with McArdle. Where McArdle stated that Texas was first and Florida second (2023), Smith says that 1,406 of a total of 3,362 bans that year took place in Florida with Texas in second at 625 (2023). Third, fourth, and fifth place went to Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania, respectively. Smith also included statistics regarding the content of banned books. She found that just under 50% of banned books include content regarding violence or abuse, including sexual assault (2023). Almost a third of the banned books have characters that identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and another third include characters of color and/or focus on racism (2023).

Waldman included new statistics regarding the age range and content matter of banned books. She found through PEN America data that a large percentage of banned books are in the Young Adult (YA) age demographic. Of those YA books, many included topics such as mental illness, addiction, rape, suicide, and being a social outcast. 41% of the banned books recorded by PEN America included LGBTQ+ themes, protagonists, and/or prominent side characters (2023). A substantial amount of the banned books also contained subject matter regarding contemporary issues (2023), such as Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* being about racism and police violence.

Reasoning and Discussions For or Against Book Bans

As with any major controversy, there are a wide range of reasonings used to justify a certain viewpoint. Those who oppose book bans may cite free speech or past historical instances of book banning and the negative repercussions it had. On the other hand, those in favor of book bans may cite the right of a parent to decide what is appropriate for their child or the idea that children should be protected from things deemed harmful.

In her piece for Education Week, Hendrie draws upon past opinion pieces published by other writers on EW (2023). For example, some writers saw the bans as distractions from larger issues (such as schools being unable to acquire funding to even have a library), whereas others see the bans as overt, deliberate discrimination. She also provided examples of teachers who were penalized for teaching certain books, such as a teacher in Illinois who had a police report filed against her alleging "child endangerment" after she used Juno Dawson's *This Book is Gay* while teaching about protest art (2023).

McArdle discussed the groups that are at the forefront of pro-ban movements and their reasoning (2023). One of the most well-known pro-ban groups is Moms for Liberty. Though they were not mentioned in the article, this group has risen in fame (or infamy) as they endorse and even introduce campaigns in favor of book bans across the country. These groups often don't stop at banning books. They will campaign for and elect their preferred candidates to their local school boards. Some groups even advocate for educational gag laws (laws preventing teachers from teaching about

various topics) against topics such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and aspects of American history that do not frame America in a good light (i.e. slavery) (2023). This worked in states such as Florida, where two AP courses (AP African-American Studies and AP Psychology) had content that various groups objected to. This led to AP African-American Studies not being taught in Florida public high schools across the state, while AP Psychology teachers were directed to skip the sections about sexual orientation and gender identity (2023). This effectively banned the course, as those sections are required content for the AP Psychology Exam. McArdle also addressed the argument that parents have the right to decide what their kids read. She agreed with Liz Phipps-Soeiro, the library director for the Boston public school district, who argued that parents have the right to prevent their child from reading a certain book but not other people's children (2023).

Waldman examined the argument that book bans protect children from inappropriate material. She looked at multiple examples of children's and YA banned books and found that a large number of them either addressed diversity or talked about contemporary issues such as police violence (2023). Additionally, books that did not meet either of those criteria were banned for being "inappropriate." For example, the middle-grade book *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume was banned for being "an introduction to pornography" (2023) because Margaret talks about getting her period. Waldman argued that "...what parents and advocacy groups are challenging in these books is difference itself. In their vision of childhood—a green, sweet-smelling land invented by Victorians and untouched by violence, or

discrimination, or death—white, straight, and cisgender characters are G-rated. All other characters, meanwhile, come with warning labels. When childhood is racialized, cisgendered, and de-queered, insisting on 'age-appropriate material' becomes a way to instill doctrine and foreclose options for some readers, and to evict other readers from childhood entirely." (2023)

DeTemple advocated for shifting the way book bans are debated. She believed that the rhetoric has become so extreme that people on either side would rather attack each other than try to see others' point of view. DeTemple used a research project examining the effects of dialogue in college classrooms as a way to see this in a different context. She found that "...students who experience properly structured dialogue in classrooms are more willing to speak in class. There is comfort around classmates: Students feel like they belong, they are more resilient when listening to something that goes against a deeply held belief or worldview, they become more aware of the origins of their own beliefs, and they learn core content better. As one student put it, 'Dialogue can be civil, understanding, and productive.'" (2023) DeTemple used these findings to make her point that dialogue does not have to prove one side correct and the other wrong; it can allow people to see each other's reasoning and helps opposing sides find common ground. She encouraged school board leaders, teachers, and administrators to encourage meaningful dialogue and respectful discussion regarding book bans and other inflammatory topics.

Part 3: Methodology/Data Sources

Along with the data from the literature review, I also collected some data of my own. I shared a Google Form with some questions about book bans with fellow students and community members. I also briefly interviewed the librarian at my home school with a couple questions regarding her experience with book bans.

Researcher Context

For my survey, I first shared it on my Tumblr page hoping to get a wide range of participants from across the country and even around the world. However, it did not get a lot of traction, and I got very few responses. When that didn't work, I shared it on my Facebook page. My mom also posted it, and I got a lot of responses from family and friends. I ended up with 39 responses.

My second data source is an interview with Ms. B, the librarian at Upper Merion Area High School. I asked her if she'd had any experiences with contentious parents in favor of book bans and if there have been any attempts to ban books in our school district.

Participant Selection

I made an attempt to not choose my participants for my survey and get a wider range of perspectives, but because of the lack of participation on Tumblr, most of my responses came from my classmates, family, and friends of my parents.

For the interview, I wanted to speak with Ms. Bontempo because of all the librarians, I would consider her the "head" librarian or the person in charge of the library overall. I have known her longer than the other librarians, as she is the only one who has been there for my entire high school experience, and I am closer with her than the others.

Methods of Data Collection

Choosing my methods wasn't very difficult. I wanted to get community feedback and opinions, so I created a survey. I wanted a more concentrated perspective from someone who is directly involved in the book ban discussion, so I conducted an interview. Neither of these decisions took too much time to make.

Part 4: Data Analysis

I asked 11 questions in my survey, including where the respondent was from, whether or not they were a student or had a child in school, the political alignment of their local school board, and their opinion on book bans. All of my respondents said that they opposed book bans. The majority of them were from the Northeast region of America, had a school-age child, and were unsure of the political alignment of their school board. Few respondents said that there were efforts to ban books in their local school district, and only two people reported successful bans. I found it interesting that many respondents were not sure what the political alignment of their school board is. Given that people vote in school board elections, why are they not sure? This question

is not answered in this paper, as it is not very relevant to my topic, but it is certainly interesting. It is likely that if I had more responses from other regions, the data would be more widely distributed. However, the survey was mostly responded to by friends of my family, and the majority of them live in the Northeast region. See the Appendix section for the full visual of my responses.

During my interview with Ms. B, my primary question was about whether she'd had interactions with parents who wanted a book banned. She is an advocate for reading banned books, so I was interested in hearing her perspective. She told me about a parent who came forward with a concern about a book their child had independently checked out from the library. When she looked at the book in the library system, it was not a book that she had bought for the library. It was an older book that had been there for a while, and other than the student with the concerned parent, it was not checked out often. After reviewing the content of the book, Ms. B made the decision to remove it as she did not think that any other students would be interested in it or miss it. She also discussed pushback to some books in the school's Give Voice program, where students choose a book to be given to them for free to keep. These books are often written by a diverse group of authors, and the books *The Hate U Give, All American Boys,* and *Dear Martin* concerned some parents. Ms. B met with the schools' reading specialist, the principal, and the concerned parents to come up with a list of alternative books with lighter subject matter that their students could choose from. When we discussed books with sexual content (or "spicy" books, as they are called colloquially) and the fact that books are most often banned for that reason, she

said that when she purchases a "spicy" book (such as the Empyrean series, all of which are present in the school library), she thinks about it for a little while before putting it out. Sure, it's a book with an adult age rating, but it's something that students want. Sometimes, she puts it in the back office of the library, and if a student requests it specifically, she takes it out and gives it to the student. Ms. B said that she worries about some of the books in the library, but they are books that the students want to read, and that's all she can ask for as an educator.

Part 5: Findings

Most Recent Data

Along with the data I collected myself, I saved various Instagram posts by PEN America regarding book ban statistics and current events related to book bans. Most of the data in my Literature Review discusses the 2021-22 or 2022-23 school years, so I used Instagram to collect data regarding the most recent school year as the organization itself shared their findings. In the 2023-24 school year, PEN America found over 10,000 bans affecting over 4,000 unique titles. 45% of bans occurred in Florida, with Iowa following second at 36%. The top 11 most banned books in the United States were:

1. *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult (98 bans)
2. *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (78 bans)
3. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (85 bans)
4. *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (85 Bans)

5. *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (76 bans)

6. *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins (76 bans)

7. *Identical* by Ellen Hopkins (74 bans)

8. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (73 bans)

9. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (67 bans)

10. *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen (66 bans)

11. *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins (66 bans)

Additionally, PEN America kept track of the most banned picture books. These included *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, *The Family Book* by Todd Parr, *Julián Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, *Draw Me a Star* by Eric Carle, *Prince & Knight* by Daniel Haack, and *Milo Imagines the World* by Matt de la Peña.

PEN America also posted about new book ban laws, including Utah's January 2025 decision to ban students from bringing banned books into school. Not only were the books banned from schools' libraries, but they were banned from the campus entirely. This, paired with the weeks-later decision by the Department of Defense to remove various books from their schools (including *No Truth Without Ruth,* a picture book by Kathleen Krull about the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg), showed that despite the claims by the Trump administration that book bans are a "hoax," they continue to flourish.

More data found by PEN America concludes that in the 2023-24 school year:

● 4,218 unique titles banned

● 36% featured characters that were people of color

- 25% included LGBTQ+ characters

- 10% featured neurodivergent or disabled characters

- 85% of banned books were fiction, 14% nonfiction, and 1% poetry

- 73% of banned graphic novels or illustrated books featured "visuals with LGBTQ+ representation, people or characters of color, or discuss race/racism."

- 64% of banned picture books featured LGBTQ+ characters

- Only 40% of books discussed sexual content

- Many banned books discuss inflammatory human experiences, with 65% of books addressing violence, 55% addressing death or grief, and 43% addressing abuse

All of the data in this section is from the PEN America and the PEN America Index of School Book Bans.

Larger Themes in Data

The most prominent theme in my data is the censorship of diverse voices or experiences. As stated previously, a large portion of banned books discuss stories of non-white, non-cisgender, non-straight, non-male, non-Christian narratives. As the current presidential administration attempts to do away with diversity initiatives, the people and politicians that feel the same way attempt to silence diverse voices by preventing students from reading about them.

Another theme is the debate around the idea of "parental rights" as to what their children read. Many book bans take place under the guise of "protecting children," but

why are a single group of parents trying to control what all children read? One of the articles I read was based on this debate, and it brought up the idea that parents *do* have the right to stop their children from reading something they deem inappropriate, but they do *not* have the right to stop other people's children from reading the same thing. If individual parental rights are so important, why do some of these parents want to take the decision away from other parents? (McArdle 2023)

The final but most impactful theme is the way that the debate around book bans affects teachers and librarians. The banning of books and even specific topics has affected curricula around the country, especially in English classes. I am lucky to go to a school where *The Kite Runner,* one of PEN America's most banned books of the 2023-24 school year, is taught yearly in the ninth grade English classes. However, some parents may object to the subject matter in that book, such as sexual assault. Books that contain content about issues such as sexual assault and consent are often banned for containing "explicit sexual content," even if that content is presented in an educational manner (such as a sex education book). The educators who teach and discuss books that contain content similar to this, whether it is an assault or a consensual intimate interaction between two characters, are often villainized as "pushing" sex onto students and even encouraging them to have sex. These claims are baseless and utterly ridiculous, but they are still believed, and in the worst cases they lead to the educator being harmed either mentally or physically. One of my articles discussed this, and the author advocated for changing the discussion around book bans to humanize people on both sides, rather than villainize them. (Waldman 2023)

Part 6: Conclusion/Research & Teaching Implications

New Questions

This research brings up various new questions, some of which have already been stated. These include:

- Given that people vote in school board elections, why were a majority of my poll respondents unaware of the political alignment of their school board, and is this lack of knowledge consistent in other regions?

- How can students' voices be heard in this conflict when so much of the debate is between adults?

- How would someone in favor of book bans defend their position when engaged in civil debate?
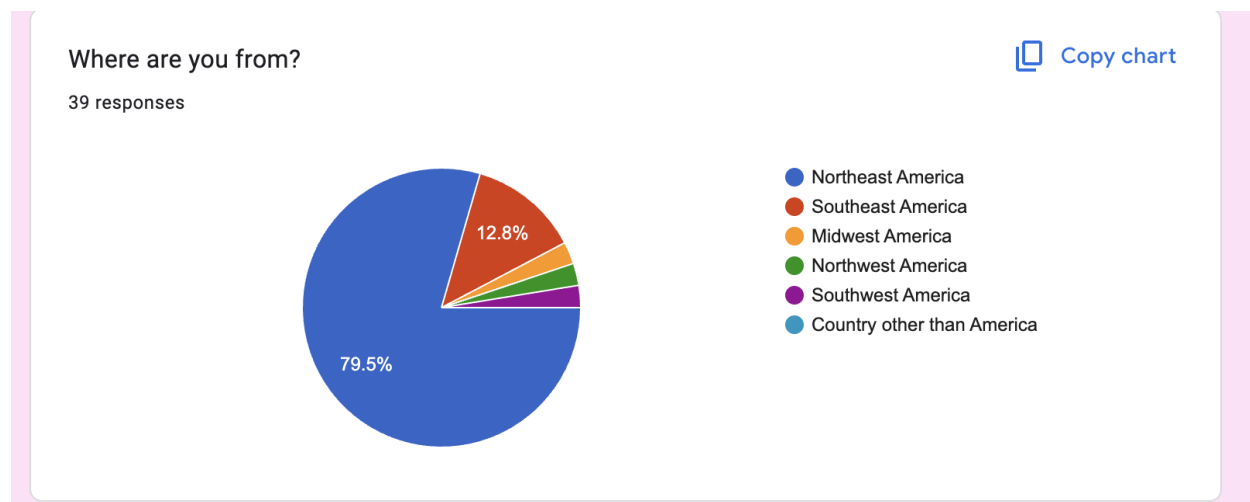
Research Implications

The controversy and discussion surrounding book bans is ever-changing and constant, especially as the political climate in America grows more and more tumultuous every day. As such, more research is always necessary and needed to truly understand the full scope and impact of book bans on students, educators, parents, and politics.

Teaching Implications

 As my sources in Part 2 discussed, educators may often be at the forefront of a book banning controversy. Many teachers are vocal advocates against book bans, but depending on the state that they live and teach in, they may or may not be subject to bans. These bans can shape a school's curriculum and remove books that could provide insightful, important discussion between students. As a future English teacher, I recognize that I will likely face a parent upset by the books I teach about at some point in my career. Research like this enables me to approach a conflict like that with understanding of where both sides of the conflict are coming from, and may help me come to a compromise or solution with the parent. Now that I have done this research, I feel prepared to encounter this issue in my career and handle it with care and knowledge.

Appendix: Poll Results

These are the full results for the questions asked in my poll.

Where are you from?

39 responses

- Northeast America — 79.5%
- Southeast America — 12.8%
- Midwest America
- Northwest America
- Southwest America
- Country other than America

Are you against or in favor of book bans? Why?

31 responses

Against

Against

Against. Access restrictions are one thing but to ban a book totally is un-American. We need more access to information not less.

Against. Book selections should not be controlled by schools or govt agencies. Topics and content may not be appealing for all, or meet certain societal expectations, but great works of literature should not be hidden. All history within stories need to told and understood.

No. People consume and retain information in different ways. Books are another way of educating and consuming information and should stay accessible.
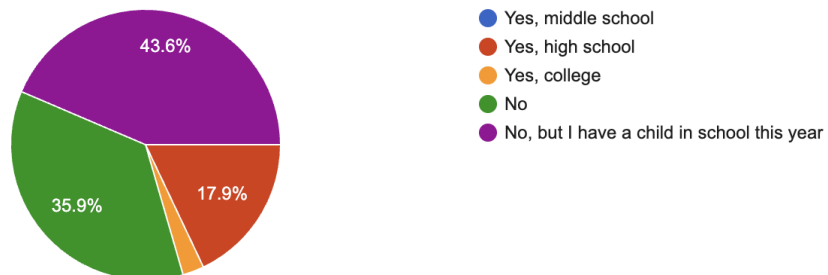
against. Books are what tell our story as a country. They are also a way to let people relax and just have fun.

Against, because not everybody wants to read kiddie books and not everybody is immature.
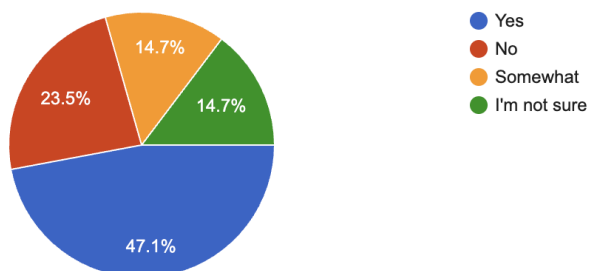
Are you in school this year?

39 responses

Copy chart

- Yes, middle school
- Yes, high school
- Yes, college
- No
- No, but I have a child in school this year

43.6%

17.9%

35.9%

Is your/your child's school considered diverse?

34 responses

- ● Yes
- ● No
- ● Somewhat
- ● I'm not sure

47.1% Yes, 23.5% No, 14.7% Somewhat, 14.7% I'm not sure

Copy chart

What political alignment fits your/your child's school board?

34 responses

- ● Liberal majority
- ● Conservative majority
- ● Bipartisan
- ● I'm not sure

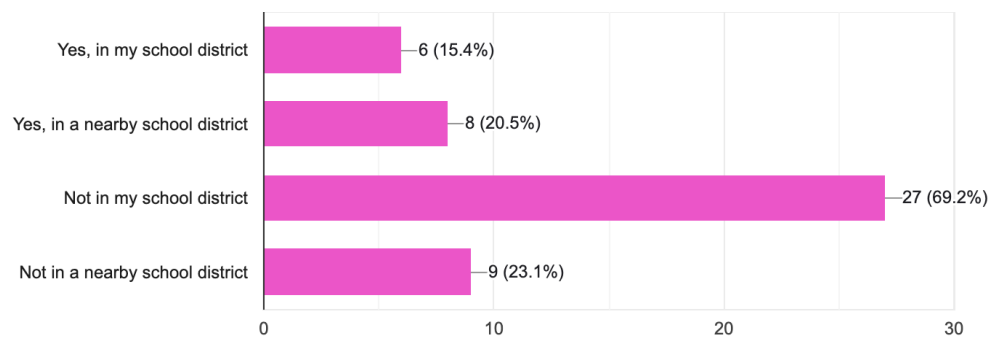44.1% I'm not sure, 29.4% Liberal majority, 17.6% Bipartisan, 8.8% Conservative majority
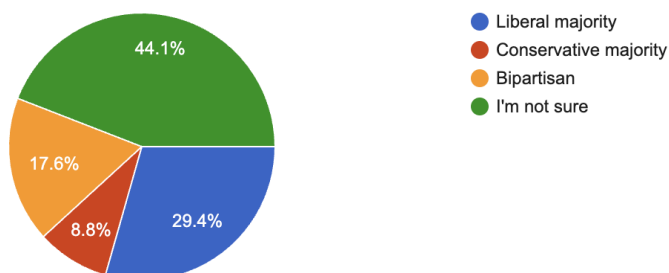
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Are you aware of book bans in your/your child's school district or a nearby school district? (You can select multiple)
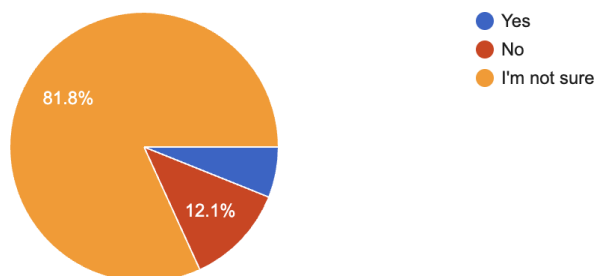
39 responses

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Response	Count
Yes, in my school district	6 (15.4%)
Yes, in a nearby school district	8 (20.5%)
Not in my school district	27 (69.2%)
Not in a nearby school district	9 (23.1%)

If there were efforts to ban books in your/your child's school district, were they successful?
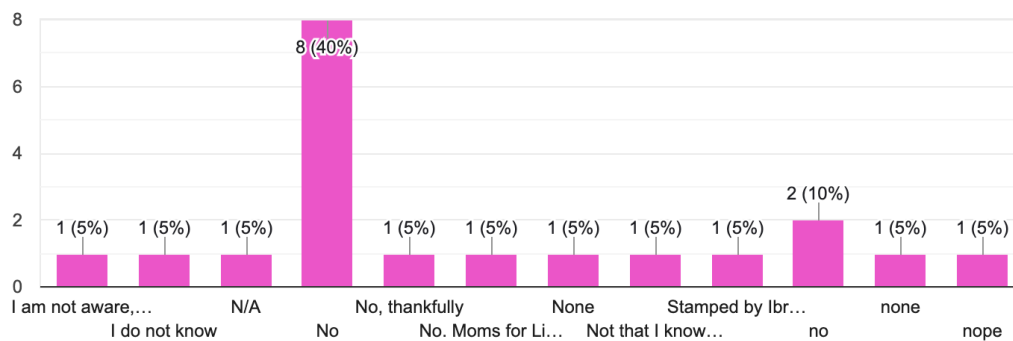
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33 responses

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

81.8%

12.1%

Do you know of any specific books that have been banned in your/your child's district?

Copy chart

20 responses

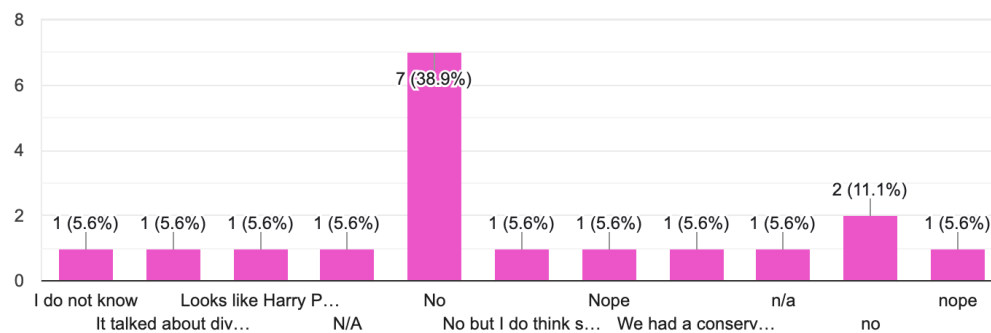| Label	Count
I am not aware,…	1 (5%)
I do not know	1 (5%)
N/A	1 (5%)
No	8 (40%)
No, thankfully	1 (5%)
No. Moms for Li…	1 (5%)
None	1 (5%)
Not that I know…	1 (5%)
Stamped by lbr…	1 (5%)
no	2 (10%)
none	1 (5%)
nope	1 (5%)

Do you know of any specific reasons that certain books were banned in your/your child's school district?

Copy chart

18 responses

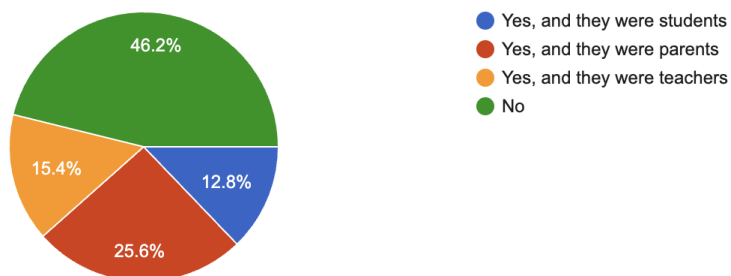Have people in your/your child's district spoken out against book bans?

Copy chart

39 responses

- Yes, and they were students
- Yes, and they were parents
- Yes, and they were teachers
- No

46.2%

12.8%

25.6%

15.4%

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