

Banned But Not Beaten:

Confronting Book Bans from a Utilitarian Perspective

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Texas. Florida. Missouri. Utah. Pennsylvania. South Carolina. Tennessee. Oklahoma. What do these states have in common? In the last year, over 3,300 books have been banned within their school districts and libraries. Unfortunately, this is not an exhaustive list; there are several other states enacting book bans with the express purpose of politicizing and eliminating books that include themes of history, antiracism, identity, sexuality, and gender. The resurgence of book banning in the United States threatens to reverse hard-fought progress achieved in civil rights and social justice—and it runs contrary to the utilitarian principle of ethics. Utilitarianism states that an action is ethical if the sum of utilities produced by that action is greater than the sum of utilities from any other possible act (PEN America 2023). In other words, actions are morally right if they promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Applying the utilitarian principle reveals that recent book bans in the United States fail to promote the greatest good for society; instead, book bans cause significant harm to historically marginalized groups and underscore the need for concerted opposition to this form of censorship. These bans put historically marginalized groups in danger and must be repelled via conscious action by publishers, educators, and concerned citizens.

Banning Books Silences Minority Voices

Many recent book bans enacted within the United States appear to specifically target works by authors of color and LGBTQ+ authors. For example, in Florida, the 2022 Stop WOKE Act, under the guise of regulating the content of instruction and training in schools and workplaces (Staff of Ron DeSantis 2022), attempts to obfuscate, deny, and rewrite history in the United States as it pertains to the racial oppression African Americans have faced. After the passage of the Stop WOKE Act, Floridian Governor Ron DeSantis came under fire by historians and politicians—including Vice President Kamala Harris—who criticized the state's African American history standards that, among other things, portrayed slavery as beneficial for the enslaved (*The New York Times* 2023a).

Similarly, Tennessee Senate Bill 1059, passed on May 4, 2023, makes it a Class E felony for book publishers, distributors, or sellers to “knowingly sell or distribute obscene matter” to K-12 public schools (Tennessee General Assembly 2023). The State of Tennessee defines “obscene” as the average person applying contemporary community standards finding the work “appeals to the prurient interest,” or “depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct,” or if the work as a whole “lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (Justia 2021). District attorneys in the state decide if the materials in question meet the state's definition of obscene. These decisions often fail to take into consideration the inherent biases of the prosecuting attorneys. The new law follows a trend of anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that punishes deviations from heteronormative social mores (American Civil Liberties Union 2024).

According to PEN America (2023), a nonprofit organization that promotes free expression through literature, from July 2022 to December 2022, 1,477 individual books were banned in 22 states. Some of the most banned books were *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, an autobiographical memoir affirming different perspectives on gender identity, with 15 bans; *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* by Margaret Atwood, a cautionary dystopian novel about a religious patriarchal dictatorship that overthrows the US government and takes away the civil rights of women, with 12 bans; and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, a story about a young black girl who develops an inferiority complex over her dark skin, fueling a desire for blue eyes associated with whiteness, with 10 bans. As of February 2024, each book's total number of bans has increased to 26, 34, and 29, respectively. “Many of these books are removed from student

access before due process of any kind is carried out; in many cases, books are removed before they are even read, or before objections to books are checked for basic accuracy,” writes PEN America (2023). Americans are taught not to judge a book by its cover, but isn’t this hypocritical when the judgment of books is taken to such extremes?

Weaponizing Censorship for Political Gain

The deliberate prohibition and subsequent destruction of knowledge, be that through decay and neglect or violent means such as burning, is a tactic used to impede the progress of a society or movement (Ovenden 2020). While communities protesting the contents of a particular book is not new, typically, this behavior is initiated by a local community of parents and other interested parties. What is especially concerning today is that state legislators are initiating this behavior as part of a greater political agenda, introducing censorship orders and proposing the tracking and monitoring of the content teachers have control over in the classroom. State legislators are using their power to threaten free expression through the surge of book bans.

In June 2021, DeSantis made the following claims: “The woke class wants to teach kids to hate each other, rather than teaching them how to read, but we will not let them bring nonsense ideology into Florida’s schools” (Staff of Ron DeSantis 2021). Assuming that certain books teach children to hate each other rather than teach them how to read requires a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. The notion that the act of reading a book doesn’t teach literacy is itself a perversion of the truth and demonstrates a level of bad faith on the part of pro-banning sympathizers. Banning books is counter-intuitive and is not a remedy for those concerned about childhood literacy. The assumption that book bans will benefit children and young people fails to consider the potential harm that this decision can bring to society at large. Instead, it indicates that legislators are likely pursuing the interests of their voter base.

Inflammatory campaign rallies create an echo chamber of prejudice where legislators and constituents openly share opinions and beliefs that are damaging to already marginalized populations without fear of repercussions. Consider this quote from Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons (2021) in their article, “Why Are States Banning Critical Race Theory?”: “[M]any Americans are not able to separate their individual identity as an American from the social institutions that govern us—these people perceive themselves as the system. Consequently, they interpret calling [social institutions racist](#) as calling them racist personally” (Ray and Gibbons 2021). Paradoxically, many

people who claim to recognize the United States' racist history are unable to divorce themselves from the false narrative that the country is an equitable democracy (Ray and Gibbons 2021). Recognizing this is important because it gives insight into why some Americans support book banning and may feel that children are being taught to hate one another. They may feel that books educating people about the more sordid details of United States history and the negative consequences that are still being felt from those periods cultivate and perpetuate an "us-versus-them" worldview. Whatever the rationale, banning books will only galvanize further anti-diversity sentiments in the United States and further fan the flames of the divisive culture war currently embroiling the country.

Evaluating Book Bans Through a Utilitarian Lens

When evaluating this issue through a utilitarian lens, in addition to identifying the purported benefits that book banning (e.g., protecting children, upholding community values) as well as the types of harm caused by bans (e.g., limiting access to information, restricting historically marginalized voices and representation), there are other factors to consider: the duration of the harm versus the duration of the supposed benefits, the intensity of the possible harms and benefits, and the likelihood of each are other measures that can be used in this utilitarian calculus. The stated benefits of book banning are protecting children and upholding community values (Staff of Ron DeSantis 2022) with an emphasis on maintaining the parental right to determine what is appropriate for children. The harms of book banning include limiting access to information, muting marginalized voices, and restricting representation (PEN America 2023). Additionally, book bans do not prevent curiosity about banned subjects or the seeking of information on them. However, the lack of proper access to helpful resources leaves those interested vulnerable to misinformation.

In sum, though claimed to uphold communal standards, book bans disproportionately and negatively impact already marginalized voices. In addition, restricting access to ideas limits intellectual discourse and social progress in tangible ways, regardless of the stated intentions behind such restrictions. Proponents of book banning are parenting other people's children by controlling their access to books. Book bans limit the availability of resources that could start natural conversations that parents and children should have in the ways that make them the most comfortable. If the greatest good is the advancement of free expression, open inquiry, and equal access, then the harm caused by book bans far outweighs the benefits. The recent surge of censorship

generates vastly more societal pain than pleasure, pointing to the need for immediate, thoughtful opposition to book bans to promote the greatest good.

Early Signs of Resistance Against State Censorship

Despite certain legislators using political pressure to whip up a censorship frenzy, there have been signs of resistance. The majority of the Florida education group members that came up with the new standards for teaching African American history in the 2022 Stop WOKE Act came out against the sections that drew criticism, stating that only two members out of thirteen pushed for the problematic language (NBC News 2023). One member, State Senator Geraldine Thompson, said, “I don’t know who the people were who worked on this... people that you would expect would be involved or at least informed, were not” (NBC News 2023). The lack of transparency among this education group extends to the Florida Education Department, which has refused to disclose how group members were selected or how the new language was decided (NBC News 2023). It is unclear what criteria were used to evaluate members of the education group or how many members were present in each meeting for the discussions (NBC News 2023). In a San Diego library in June 2023, disgruntled neighborhood residents checked out the entire contents of a display promoting Pride month, stating, “To protect our children and the community, we have checked out the books in the Pride display. We plan to keep these books checked out until the library agrees to permanently remove the inappropriate content from the shelves” (*The New York Times* 2023b). In response, nearly two hundred San Diego residents purchased new copies of the books and gave over \$15,000 to the library system.

Civic Engagement to Challenge Banning

What can concerned citizens do to help in the fight against book banning? Speaking out about the issue on social media platforms and directly to family members, friends, and neighbors is a good place to start. Writing to local school boards and library administrations to make one’s voice heard also helps. Those who oppose book bans can encourage others in their communities to join in the effort and express support for the kind of books they want in their libraries and schools and what that means to them. Concerned students can organize and protest by speaking up at school board meetings. Educators can band together to take their concerns to their school boards and principals to take a stand against censorship in education. Ambitious individuals can build Little Free

Libraries in their neighborhoods and fill them with the books they want to read and enjoy.

What can publishers do to help in the fight against censorship? Publishers can continue to publish controversial books. To increase representation for those holding the pen and those on the page, publishers should make concerted efforts to amplify the voices of diverse authors and partner with booksellers, teachers, and librarians to promote banned books and authors. When called on by censors to pull certain books, rather than self-censor, publishers can stand firm by forcing book banners to follow through with formal processes. Individuals can apply to represent their community as a local library board member.

Conclusion

The contemporary resurgence of book banning across the United States represents an alarming infringement on free speech that disproportionately harms already marginalized communities. This movement, driven by partisan politicization and a misguided rationale of “protecting” children, actively seeks to silence diverse voices and restrict access to representations of identity, history, and human experience. Through a utilitarian ethical lens that weighs the balance of societal benefit versus detriment, book bans create exponentially more harm than any purported good, thus stifling intellectual progress, denying equitable participation, and enabling further systemic injustice. Concerned citizens, educators, students, librarians, and publishers must unite to resist this existential threat proactively. Concerted actions ranging from public advocacy to bolstering alternative book access can push back against state censorship and legislative overreach. In the face of these anti-democratic book-banning efforts, it is a moral imperative to defend freedom of expression and ensure the flourishing of a vibrant civic sphere accessible to all. By taking steps to advocate for the greatest good, people can affirm the power and necessity of free expression and defend the ability of books to share diverse ideas and reflect humanity in all of its variety. The stakes are clear—book bans jeopardize vulnerable populations and must be repelled through our tireless commitment to conscious resistance. “Better never means better for everyone,” Margaret Atwood (1985, 256) warns in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “It always means worse, for some.”

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