Rhetoric and Freedom: A Rhetorical Analysis of Library Censorship and Intellectual Freedom in the Contemporary United States

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Overview

In the 2023–2024 academic year, book bans in the United States reached unprecedented levels, with over 10,800 titles challenged or removed from school and public libraries across 29 states (PEN America, 2024). These bans overwhelmingly target books by and about LGBTQIA+ individuals, people of color, and those discussing topics such as gender identity, sexuality, race, and social justice. As the fourth-highest state in book banning activity, Wisconsin has become a major battleground in this cultural and political struggle. These efforts are not isolated; they are driven by coordinated campaigns, often under the guise of parental rights or child protection, which mask deeper ideological efforts to suppress marginalized voices and rewrite public memory. Libraries—especially school and public libraries—have become flashpoints in this war over representation and access. Increasingly, legislation is being introduced to formalize censorship, criminalize librarians, and restrict the scope of what can be included in public collections. This project examines how such censorship operates through the language of state legislation by comparing Idaho's HB710, a bill that promotes punitive, vague, and fear-based restrictions, with California's AB1825, which affirms the importance of diversity and First Amendment rights through protective policy. Through this comparison, the research explores the consequences of legislative censorship for librarians, communities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly in Wisconsin. By understanding the rhetoric and implications of these bills, this project highlights the urgency of legal protections for intellectual freedom and offers a path toward advocacy, equity, and resistance.

Idaho HB710

Idaho's House Bill 710, titled the "Children's School and Library Protection Act," presents a striking example of how vague and ideologically driven legal language can be used to limit access to information and punish library professionals. The bill prohibits public and school libraries from providing minors with access to any material deemed "harmful," including works with what it calls "explicit and detailed verbal descriptions or narrative accounts of sexual excitement, sexual conduct, or sado-masochistic abuse" (Idaho Legislature, 2024, Sec. 18-1517B). What makes HB710 particularly dangerous is its broad, undefined terms and the enforcement mechanisms it authorizes. Parents can sue libraries or librarians for damages if their child accesses such material, and the law allows for potential criminal charges. These provisions create a climate of fear and uncertainty, encouraging preemptive self-censorship even when no specific complaint has been filed. LGBTQIA+ books are especially vulnerable under this framework, as terms like "sexual content" are frequently used to conflate queer identity with pornography. In effect, HB710 treats the existence of LGBTQIA+ people as inherently inappropriate for minors, erasing critical representation from the shelves and criminalizing those who defend it.

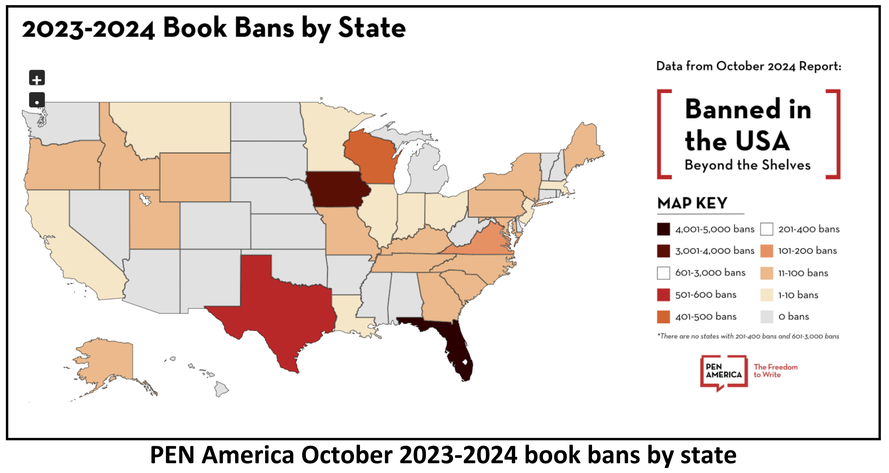
California AB1825

In contrast, California Assembly Bill 1825, also known as the "Freedom to Read Act," seeks to affirm and protect intellectual freedom by requiring that public libraries adopt and publish collection development policies that are inclusive and legally sound. The bill states that "library materials shall not be excluded solely on the basis of inclusive and diverse perspectives or because they contain sexual content, unless they qualify as obscene under United States Supreme Court precedent" (California Legislative Information, 2023, Sec. 19802). AB1825 not only protects librarians from punitive action for their professional decisions but also encourages a broader cultural understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in public resources. Rather than using fear-based rhetoric, this law anchors its guidelines in existing legal standards and civil rights protections, positioning libraries as institutions of democracy, public service, and learning. It acknowledges that young people deserve access to materials that reflect their lived experiences and identities and offers a model for other states aiming to combat rising censorship while safeguarding First Amendment rights.

We would like to thank University Printing Services for printing the poster.

Wisconsin: At-Risk State

Although neither HB710 nor AB1825 applies directly to Wisconsin, the state is deeply entangled in the national censorship crisis. According to PEN America (2024), Wisconsin ranks fourth in the nation for book bans. Much of this activity stems from the increasing influence of groups like Moms for Liberty, who advocate for removing books with LGBTQIA+ content, racial justice themes, and sex education from public school libraries. Wisconsin librarians have reported growing harassment, including threats of job loss, political pressure from school boards, and challenges to library funding. In some cases, books are not removed entirely but are moved to inaccessible sections or quietly censored through policy changes—practices that scholars call "soft censorship." Without legislative protections like California's AB1825, Wisconsin's librarians remain vulnerable to political intimidation and misinformation. The absence of clear legal safeguards opens the door for HB710-style initiatives to take root locally, which could have chilling effects on access to information and the professional autonomy of librarians across the state.



PEN America October 2023-2024 book bans by state

LGBTQIA+ Impacts

The consequences of these censorship efforts are most acutely felt by LGBTQIA+ youth, whose lives and identities are frequently the first targets of book bans. These young people rely on libraries as places of affirmation, safety, and self-discovery—often finding in books the validation they do not receive at home or in school. By removing queer content from shelves or labeling it as harmful, lawmakers and activists send a clear message: that LGBTQIA+ people are dangerous, deviant, or unfit for public life. The rhetoric in Project 2025, a policy blueprint by The Heritage Foundation, illustrates this vividly: "Pornography, manifested today in the omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children… [should] be outlawed. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders" (Heritage Foundation, 2022, p. 5). Such language conflates identity with obscenity and seeks to erase trans and queer experiences from public discourse. The stakes are not theoretical—when stories are removed, people are erased, and lives are put at risk.

Conclusion

Libraries are more than quiet places to borrow books; they are living archives of human experience, knowledge, and hope. The rising wave of censorship legislation threatens not just what we read, but who we allow to be seen, heard, and remembered. If we want libraries to remain inclusive, equitable, and democratic spaces, we must act now. This includes advocating for policies like AB1825 that explicitly protect diverse collections and librarian autonomy, defending federal funding sources like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and educating our communities about the real dangers of censorship and misinformation. We must also support the mental health and legal rights of librarians who are increasingly targeted for doing their jobs. Campaigns like Unite Against Book Bans and EveryLibrary provide toolkits, legal assistance, and advocacy networks to mobilize public support. Most importantly, we must vote for candidates who support intellectual freedom and stand against erasure. If we fail to act, we risk losing not just access to books—but the right to imagine a better future.

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