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Public Libraries:
Negotiating Efficacy in an Era of Increased Contestation

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Jacob Sutherland

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Charles Anthony Smith, Chair
Professor Danielle Thomsen
Professor Louis DeSipio

2026

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DEDICATION

To

sweet baby James

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Public Libraries: Negotiating Efficacy in an Era of Increased Contestation

by

Jacob Sutherland

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2027

Professor Charles Anthony Smith, Chair

Public libraries are one of the closest government institutions to the communities they serve, providing a range of civic and public goods to community members. Over the past decade, community members and politicians have increasingly politicized public libraries and contested their community roles, particularly about book bans, funding, and self-governance. While this type of political contestation is not unique, public libraries as a venue of politicization have been underrepresented within political science literature in comparison to other local government institutions. How do public libraries operate within the constraints of their institutional capacities, both in times of normalcy and times of crisis? How does political contestation in public libraries look today? Who is most likely to support increased restrictions on public library operations? How do community members and local governments navigate the nuances of such restrictions? Answering these questions can shed light on how public libraries and other local democratic institutions can defend their democratic roles within their communities. This dissertation employs a multi-method approach, including media analysis, survey analysis, and statistical analysis to answer these questions. The results of this analysis demonstrate that public libraries exert flexibility in their resource provision during times of crisis and that these efforts

help to define democratic citizenship at the local level. Community members and local politicians also engage in the politicization of public libraries, which places public libraries and their advocates in positions where they have to redefine and defend the institutional value of public libraries. The findings presented in this dissertation situate public libraries in an era where democratic institutions are increasingly contested and provide practical insights for policymakers and community members to navigate this politicization as public libraries continue to redefine and defend their institutional value. As democratic institutions continue to be contested, it is essential to research how such institutions negotiate their efficacy, representation, and value.

INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 2017, the West Chicago Library Board (WCLB) met to discuss and vote on whether or not the library would remove *This Day in June*, an LGBTQ+ children's book that provides a colorfully illustrated celebration of LGBTQ+ pride celebrations, and includes resources at the end of the book for parents looking for insight and information on how to talk to their children about the LGBTQ+ community in a way that provides visibility and openness to the discussion.

The reason why the fate of the book was on the WCLB's agenda that day was because of a complaint filed by two parents who had visited the library and were outraged to find the book in the children's collection after their daughter had pulled it out from one of the shelves. The complaint signaled to the WCLB that there was a sufficient amount of community interest in the issue to warrant a public comments period and vote at their next board meeting. After hours of debate during the meeting inside the library packed full of hundreds of community members, the board voted 6–1 to retain the book within the library's children's collection.

The case of the WCLB is significant because it signals a crucial moment in local politics at large. What was at the time a relatively isolated incident in 2017 has since grown in frequency—from 2019 to 2023, there were 121 cases of contestation of LGBTQ+ resources, books, and programs in public libraries around the country.[1] This has taken place in states all around the country, regardless of partisanship, and has been coupled with statewide efforts to either elevate or diminish public libraries' abilities to ban books and LGBTQ+ content from their collections.

[1] See Chapter 3.

While political contestation takes place in all venues of government, public libraries are underrepresented within political science literature compared to other local government venues like school boards and city councils. This gap in the literature is important to fill because of the institutional roles that public libraries have historically and contemporarily played within the United States.

Institutions are defined as "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints … and formal rules" (North, 1991). Political institutions encompass the aforementioned characteristics and are formally rooted in governmental organizations that create, enforce, and apply laws, as well as enact policy and provide representation for the communities they represent. Accordingly, public libraries are political institutions because they maintain formal rules of governance, they apply laws put forth by state and local governments, they create their own policies—primarily regarding the services they provide—and they provide representation for their local communities. Within their institutional context, public libraries provide a significant number of resources and services to their respective communities. Aside from books, public libraries provide a range of services, including free English language courses, access to the internet, research materials, educational opportunities for children and adults, public gathering spaces, resources for finding jobs, and free tax information and literacy courses, among others.

An additional point of interest is that community members have increasingly contested the roles of public libraries in recent years (Sutherland, 2025). While public libraries may remain non-salient to community members in an electoral context, as has been observed in other local governmental venues regardless of demographic characteristics (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003), election timing (Anzia, 2013), or state-level election policy (Sutherland, 2024), as sites of

political contestation, public libraries are becoming increasingly more salient to the community members they serve.

In this dissertation, I seek to understand how public libraries negotiate their efficacy in an era where their institutional functions and existence are increasingly contested by community members and politicians. Specifically, I address the following broad questions: 1) How do public libraries operate within the constraints of their institutional capacities, both in times of normalcy and times of crisis; 2) How does political contestation in public libraries look today; 3) Who is most likely to support increased restrictions on public library operations; and 4) How do community members and local governments navigate the nuances of such restrictions?

This dissertation proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, I provide a brief overview of the structure and governance of public libraries. In Chapter 2, I analyze the day-to-day operational policies of public libraries and their institutional responses in times of crisis, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. In Chapter 3, I shift gears and develop categories of contemporary library contestation and the types of contestation seen in different communities in relation to political polarization and demographics. In Chapter 4, I analyze the characteristics of the community members who are most likely to support book bans and discuss how book ban policies impact forms of governance, influence group power and coalition development, and challenge LGBTQ+ citizenship. Lastly, I conclude with some closing remarks on the study of public libraries through a political science lens.

CHAPTER 1: Structure and Governance of Public Libraries

Abstract

Like other types of local-level political institutions, public libraries maintain policies for their organization, governance, and funding. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the structure and governance of public libraries. First, I define and distinguish public libraries from other types of libraries. Then, I review the structure of public library governance, including jurisdictional organization, board members, and funding sources. Finally, I discuss what public libraries can and cannot do within their institutional capacities.

Introduction

Like other local governmental bodies, public libraries are political institutions. As Rothstein (1996) defines, there are four types of political institutions: those which are rulemaking, those which are rule-applying, those which are rule-adjudicating, and those which are rule-enforcing. Like other political institutions, public libraries share traits from all four of these categories.

However, the field of political science thus far has not paid much scholarly attention to public libraries as political institutions. This gap in the literature pertains not only to more empirical studies of public libraries but also to foundational information regarding the organization, governance, and funding of public libraries. To conduct a comprehensive empirical analysis of public libraries as political institutions, it is important first to understand the institutional foundations of public libraries, specifically their structure and governance.

This chapter provides an overview of the structure and governance of public libraries to clarify their institutional foundations. First, I define public libraries and distinguish them from other types of libraries. Next, I review the structure of public library governance, including identifying their legal bases for operation, board members, and funding sources. Finally, I

discuss what public libraries can and cannot do within their institutional capacities, as limited by their legal bases.

1.1 Types of Libraries

While this dissertation focuses on public libraries, it is important to note that various types of libraries are found throughout the United States. This section provides a brief overview of the different types of libraries.

Public Libraries

Public libraries, sometimes referred to as community libraries, are the most familiar type of library to the average person in the U.S. According to the 2022 Public Libraries Survey, there are around 9,000 public libraries in the United States, with approximately 17,000 individual outlets (i.e., main libraries, branches, and bookmobiles). The Institute of Museum and Library Services defines a public library as:

> an entity that is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and that provides at least the following: (1) an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof; (2) paid staff; (3) an established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public; (4) the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule; and (5) is supported in whole or in part with public funds.

What distinguishes public libraries from other types of libraries are five key characteristics: 1) public libraries are generally supported by taxes from any level of government; 2) they are governed by either an appointed or an elected board; 3) they are available and accessible to everyone; 4) their services are entirely voluntary; and 5) they provide their library and information services free of charge (Rubin and Rubin, 2020).

Public libraries as they are known today began in the U.S. with the creation of the Boston Public Library in 1852, the nation's first tax-supported public library (Dain, 1996). Libraries later became more popular around the country at the turn of the century, in large part due to the

philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie spent over $40 million through grants to construct 1,679 libraries around the U.S. during the late 1800s and early 1900s (Koontz, 2007). Many of these "Carnegie" libraries, as they came to be known, are still in operation today.

Throughout the 20th century, libraries expanded their services to provide their communities with more than books and information. Today, public libraries provide a variety of services to their communities, including, but not limited to, reference materials, e-resources, access to the internet, public meeting spaces and rooms, children's programming, technology lending, interlibrary loan programs, and adult and senior citizen programming (Mainka et al., 2013).

School Libraries

School libraries, those that serve students in both public and private schools, are the most common type of library in the U.S. According to the 2022 Digest of Education Statistics, there are an estimated 80,500 school libraries in public K–12 schools, with another 17,900 in private schools.[2] Unlike public libraries, available to the entire community, school library collections are only accessible to each school's students and faculty members. School libraries also support the curriculum, providing students with literature, information, and research resources. Their schools' budgets almost exclusively fund school libraries.

In recent years, school libraries have been one of the key battlegrounds in ongoing attempts to ban books. Throughout the Fall academic term of 2023, PEN America's Index of School Book Bans recorded 4,349 instances of book bans in public schools and their libraries across 42 states. Many of the books being contested in school libraries center around themes of

[2] National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Table 701.15. Number and percentage of public and private schools with libraries/media centers and average number of staff per library/media center, by staff type and employment status and selected school characteristics: School year 2020-21. *Digest of Education Statistics.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_701.15.asp.

the LGBTQ+ community and other "mature" content.[3] However, some states have recently started to outlaw "book bans" in public schools.[4]

Academic Libraries

Academic libraries are libraries that serve degree-granting post-secondary education institutions. As of 2021, there were 3,631 academic libraries in the U.S.[5] Similar to school libraries, academic library collections are primarily for students and faculty members at each library's home institution. However, unlike school libraries, many academic library collections have varying degrees of accessibility to members of the broader community. Academic libraries also have substantially larger collections than most public or school libraries and often have specialized collections and programming about the research strengths of the library's academic institution. Academic libraries are funded primarily by their academic institutions' budgets.

While community members do not typically view academic libraries as political institutions, they occasionally are the site of political contestation. Many academic libraries serve as sites for student-led protests, and some academic library collections or exhibits in recent years have been contested to varying degrees.

Special Libraries

The last category of libraries is special libraries. For the purposes of this chapter, these libraries include Corporate, Law, Medical, Religious, Research, Tribal, Armed Forces, and Government libraries, as well as any other libraries that do not fall under the aforementioned

[3] Meehan, K., Baêta, S., Markham, M., and Magnusson, T. (2024). Banned in the U.S. Narrating the Crisis. *PEN America*. https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/.
[4] Karnowski, S., and Catalini, M. (2024). Minnesota and other Democratic-led states lead pushback on censorship. They're banning the book ban. *Associated Press*. https://apnews.com/article/book-bans-censorship-lgbtq-gender-race-libraries-d52fee70d8e3d4f158068de37ce8194b#.
[5] National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). Table 701.40. Collections, staff, and operating expenditures of degree-granting postsecondary institution libraries: Selected academic years, 2001-02 through 2020-21. *Digest of Education Statistics*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_701.40.asp.

categories. As of 2023, there were 5,422 special libraries.[6] Special libraries usually are not accessible to the general public. Access to special library collections and resources is instead reserved for those who have a membership to the library or belong to the library's parent institution. Funding for special libraries comes from various public and private sources, depending on the nature of each institution.

1.2 Structure of Public Library Governance

While all public libraries share the same five key characteristics (Rubin and Rubin, 2020), they can differ in how they are organized and governed. Before coming into existence, a public library needs to have legal authorization to exist as an institution and needs to establish a governing structure.[7] The Public Libraries Survey identifies the following legal bases for public library governance: City/County, Municipal Government, County/Parish, Library District, Multijurisdictional, Nonprofit Association or Agency, and Other (Pelczar et al., 2024).[8] These categories correspond with where each public library derives its power and what is considered its jurisdiction, i.e., a city versus a county versus a special district.

The size of library jurisdictions varies. Smaller libraries, such as the West Chicago Public Library in West Chicago, Illinois, have one physical building, derive their funding from their special district, and only serve residents within the district. Other libraries, such as the Orange County Public Libraries, serve residents at the county level and have many branches, derive their funding from the county government, and serve residents throughout the county. Regional libraries, like those found throughout Virginia, serve residents in multi-county regions. They

[6] (2022). *American Library Directory, 2022–2023*. Medford, NJ: Information Today Books and Plexus Publishing.
[7] (2012). Setting Up a Library: A Resource Guide. *American Library Association*. https://web.archive.org/web/20130807053702/http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet16.
[8] Pelczar et al. (2024) also include the categories of Native American Tribal Government and School District. These have been excluded from the list here because they do not adhere to the five characteristics of public libraries (Rubin and Rubin, 2020).

have numerous branches throughout their regions, derive funding from the counties they serve, and serve residents throughout their multi-county region.

Like other local political institutions, all public libraries are governed by a board, whose members are referred to as trustees, directors, or members. Like members of other types of special local government agencies, these board members can either be appointed by their corresponding legal base, i.e., city council, county board, etc., or elected by residents residing within their jurisdiction (Savage and Sutherland, 2025). Regardless of whether the board members are appointed or elected, all library boards maintain the following responsibilities: 1) reviewing applications for and hiring the library CEO; 2) reviewing and adopting an annual budget; 3) assessing and monitoring library performance; 4) developing a succession plan to maintain leadership continuity; 5) holding strategic discussions; and 6) conducting library affairs in regularly scheduled board meetings.[9]

Because public library membership and resources are available to their communities at no charge, public libraries are primarily funded through tax revenue from district, city, and county governments. The state government provides additional funding, and public libraries can also apply for and receive grants from the federal government.[10] As a result, public library budgets fluctuate yearly, leading to some libraries supplementing their funding internally through late fees and fundraising activities like book sales.

[9] Urban Libraries Council. (2019): Leadership Brief: Leadership Roles for Library Trustees. https://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/Trustees-LB_Web.pdf.
[10] EveryLibrary. (2019). Where Does Public Library Funding Come From? https://action.everylibrary.org/where_does_public_library_funding_come_from.

1.3 What Public Libraries Can—and Cannot—Do

As institutions, public libraries are responsible for providing resources and services to their communities free of charge and in an accessible manner. As such, public libraries have broad discretion in deciding the types of resources they provide.

The most well-known resources that public libraries provide are book-borrowing and lending services. Public libraries can have anywhere from tens of thousands to millions of books within their collections, available to community members to read within the library or to borrow if they have a library card. These collections include fiction and nonfiction books, reference materials, and periodicals. Some public library collections also include audio and media lending and eBooks. These lending programs include interlibrary loans, which allow public libraries to lend books to other public libraries without those materials within their collections.

At their core, public libraries serve as "third" places, meaning that they serve as locations where people can spend time between home— "first" place—and work— "second" place (Butler and Diaz, 2016). Public libraries themselves exist as a "third" place because they are places where people go that are not home or work. However, most public libraries extend upon this principle by providing reading rooms, classrooms, and other meeting spaces. These rooms are frequently used for hosting library board meetings and community programming. Many public libraries also rent out these rooms to members of the community and local organizations for private meetings and events, often for a nominal fee.

Another common resource many public libraries provide is internet access and technology lending. Many public libraries offer WIFI and computers onsite. This has been an especially important resource in lower-income and rural communities that may not have access to the internet at home. Some public libraries even offer digital literacy programming to allow

community members to use computers and other types of technology. For those looking for access to digital and online research materials, some public libraries provide more extensive research assistance and access to online databases that may otherwise not be available to the average community member.

Public library programming is not limited to digital literacy. Many public libraries offer various programs for various audiences, including children, young adults, adults, the elderly, and immigrants. Some popular programs include children's summer reading programs, citizenship programs, voter information drives, group-based recreational activities, and educational programs. Some public libraries also partner with other local institutions and provide community members with passes to places like museums and parks.

Beyond deciding the types of resources they will provide, public libraries have varying degrees of ability to determine and make changes to their operational policies, depending on the amount of autonomy granted to the public library by their corresponding legal basis. This includes determining operating hours, having discretion over hiring staff, fundraising, and making changes to their rules and policies for patrons using library resources and services.

While public libraries have a significant amount of discretion in determining the types of resources they will provide, as well as varying degrees of ability to make changes to their operational policies, public libraries lack autonomy from their legal basis. Depending on the legal basis the library operates under, outside political and institutional actors can and do make non-budgetary decisions for the library, whether or not the public library wants these decisions. Even in public libraries whose legal basis is a special district, those making decisions are either elected or are political appointees, who may have differing policy priorities from the public library itself.

As stated previously, a public library's legal basis has significant discretion over the public library's budget and can make changes to the funds available to the public library. Because of this, public libraries cannot make significant changes to their operating budgets beyond what is granted to them by their legal basis. This notably took place in New York City throughout the summer of 2024. Ahead of fiscal year 2025, Mayor Eric Adams and the city council proposed approximately $58 million in cuts to the library's budget. This would have forced all public libraries in the city to close on Sundays. The proposed budget cuts were eventually reversed as a result of significant public pressure rather than the public library being able to push back within its institutional capacity beyond encouraging community members to voice their concerns to their council members and the mayor.[11]

A significant component of this lack of autonomy in recent years is that public libraries cannot choose their legal basis, make counter-decisions based on their legal basis, or simply maintain their existing legal basis. Recent examples in Orange County, California, best describe this unbalanced relationship between the public library and its legal basis. The Huntington Beach Public Library system's legal basis is at the city level, with the city council ultimately determining the library's operational standards and budget. However, in 2024, the city council proposed the privatization of the library system, outsourcing its operations to a private company.[12] In neighboring Irvine, the city council proposed changing the legal basis of the city's three public libraries to being at the city level. At the time of the proposal, the city's public libraries' legal basis was at the county level, as all three were a part of the Orange County Public

[11] Kim, E. (2024). NYC libraries to get budget funding back — and reopen on Sundays. *Gothamist*. https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-libraries-to-get-budget-funding-back-and-reopen-on-sundays.
[12] Slaten, M. (2024). Huntington Beach looking at privatizing library operations despite widespread opposition. *The Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2024/03/19/huntington-beach-moves-forward-with-privatizing-library-operations-despite-widespread-opposition/.

Library system.[13] In both cases of the public libraries in Huntington Beach and Irvine, neither has any ability to reject the proposals and maintain their current legal bases, nor do they have the ability to make changes to their legal bases on their own terms. These examples illustrate public libraries' significant lack of autonomy in defining their structure.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to provide an overview of the structure and governance of public libraries to provide a foundation from which I will develop my analyses of public libraries as political institutions in my dissertation. First, I distinguished between the different types of libraries. This involved a brief review of public, school, academic, and special library definitions. These four categories of libraries comprise nearly 125,000 individual library outlets throughout the U.S. Then, I presented a discussion of the structure of public library governance. Public libraries all have a legal basis from one of the following sources: City/County, Municipal Government, County/Parish, Library District, Multijurisdictional, Nonprofit Association or Agency, and Other. These legal bases have significant power over public library operations, notably determining library budgets, policies regarding the appointment or election of library board members, and discretion over some operational policies.

Finally, I discussed what public libraries can and cannot do within their institutional capacities. Public libraries have significant discretion over their resource offerings. While all public libraries provide books, information resources, and meeting spaces to varying extents, many public libraries also provide additional resources, internet access, technology lending, programs, and research assistance. Beyond resource offerings, public libraries have varying

[13] Horowitz, J. (2024). Irvine takes big step towards creating city library system, breaking from county. *The Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2024/07/26/irvine-takes-big-step-toward-creating-city-library-system-breaking-from-county/.

degrees of authority over operational procedures like hiring staff, hours of operation, and fundraising, among others. However, public libraries are limited in their authority by their legal bases. Public libraries lack autonomy over their budgets. Likewise, policy decisions for public libraries are often made by political actors, who may have different priorities from those of the public library and its patrons. Public libraries cannot change or maintain their legal basis; a decision their existing legal basis has the sole authority to make.

CHAPTER 2: Policies and Institutional Responses to Crises

Abstract

As sites of street-level bureaucracy, public libraries must navigate institutional and community demands while exercising discretion in the types of services they provide. However, less is known about the conditions that impact how street-level bureaucracies innovate in times of crisis. In this chapter, I argue that community partisanship motivates service expansion and innovation in times of crisis. Using the 2022 Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study, I show that public library systems that serve more Democratic-aligned communities are more likely to engage in policy innovation during the pandemic than those serving more Republican-aligned communities. The findings presented in this chapter contribute to studies on street-level bureaucracy by demonstrating that the partisan demands of a community function as a mechanism that expands bureaucratic latitude in times of crisis.

Introduction

In 2022, the New York Public Library (NYPL) and Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) both enacted unique policies for public library systems—they opened up portions of their collections to the general public across the United States, regardless of residence within their respective legal service areas.[14] NYPL's "Books for All" initiative provided anyone above the age of 13 with open access to a wide selection of commonly banned books in response to the rise in book bans nationwide. The BPL's "Books UnBanned" initiative was even more expansive. The BPL began providing digital library cards for any young adult in the U.S. between the ages of 13–21. These library cards were good for one year—with the ability for renewal—and allowed anyone

[14] *New York Public Library*. "Protect the Freedom to Read." https://www.nypl.org/spotlight/freedom-to-read.

holding a card to have access to the BPL's entire e-book collection.[15] As with the NYPL initiative, the BPL's program responded to the rise in book bans nationwide.

What is unique about the NYPL and BPL initiatives is that they were policy decisions that expanded the scope of what a public library system can do. According to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2022), public library systems "serve a community, district, or region … [and] are available and accessible to everyone." Through policy decisions, both the NYPL and BPL expanded the reach of their institutional capacities beyond the IMLS definition by reimagining their respective communities of service to be a much broader, nationwide audience. Public library systems like the NYPL and BPL engage in various day-to-day operational policies to benefit their communities. These types of policies pertain to staffing, hours of operation, circulation materials, programming, and resources. The types of operational policies that a public library system chooses to engage in can affect various operational outcomes, including the number of annual visits and revenue.

Moreover, public library system operations are not isolated from broader political moments and crises. Like other local institutions, public library systems need to decide when and how to respond to crises that can affect the communities they serve in a number of ways, as they are both formal political institutions and informal community gathering spaces. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, forced public library systems to decide how to act when confronted with the institutional constraints of the dilemma: reduce their operations to a bare minimum or innovate. Most public libraries chose the latter, implementing a range of innovative,

[15] Weaver, S. (2022). NYC libraries are offering free digital library cards to people across the U.S. *TimeOut*. https://www.timeout.com/newyork/news/nyc-libraries-are-offering-free-digital-library-cards-to-people-across-the-u-s-041322

pandemic-related services from digital library cards and expanded online reference services to outdoor WIFI hotspots and outdoor programming.

However, not all public library systems innovated in the same way. While some were able to respond to the pandemic within a few weeks by offering a variety of rapidly developed services, others were more constrained in their responses, whether that be taking a longer time to develop new services, providing a reduced amount of innovative services, or closing their doors for a few months. This variation in the degree to which public library systems were able to innovate and adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic raises the question: What factors promote or inhibit a public library system's ability to innovate in times of crisis?

In this chapter, I argue that community partisanship motivates service expansion and innovation instead of constraining operations, a relationship which has a greater impact on the latitude public libraries can exercise in times of crisis than does access to internal resources. Using the 2022 Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study, this chapter shows that public library systems that serve more Democratic-aligned communities on average had greater levels of policy innovation during the pandemic than did more Republican-aligned communities.

The findings presented in this chapter build on debates surrounding how street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) exercise discretion when faced with institutional mandates (Chang and Brewer, 2023; Maynard-Moody and Portillo, 2010). I show that community-level political demand can be a mechanism that encourages street-level bureaucrats to innovate beyond their basic institutional responsibilities, even under conditions that may otherwise encourage a reduction in operations. Understanding how public libraries operate within their institutional capacities can inform what is at stake when they increasingly face political contestation.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I review relevant literature on institutions, public policy, street-level bureaucracy, and the institutional role of public libraries. Next, I introduce my methods and an overview of the 2022 Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Then, I provide an overview of public library operations in the U.S. to establish a baseline from which to analyze how public library systems deviate from their day-to-day operations in times of crisis. I then provide an analysis of how public library systems responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and conclude with a review of the findings and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Political Institutions

Public libraries fall under the umbrella of political institutions. As North (1991) identifies, institutions are "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interactions," consisting of both informal and formal rules. Formal institutions refer to "rules and procedures that are created, communicated, and enforced through channels widely accepted as official" (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

However, informal institutions refer to socially shared rules created, communicated, and enforced outside formally sanctioned avenues. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) identify four types of informal institutions: 1) complementary, those that coexist with formal institutions, often to enhance efficiency; 2) accommodating, those creating incentives to behave in ways that alter the effects of formal rules without violating them; 3) competing, those which structure incentives in a way incompatible with formal rules; and 4) substitutive, those that achieve what formal institutions were designed, but failed, to accomplish. These categories of informal institutions are fluid and can change over time.

Institutions can be conceptualized in three ways. Hall and Taylor (1996) define these as the three new institutionalisms: 1) historical institutionalism, which views institutions as the formal and informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organization of the policy or political economy; 2) rational choice institutionalism, which defines institutions as having the purpose of solving many of the collective action problems that legislatures habitually confront; and 3) sociological institutionalism, which argues that even the most seemingly bureaucratic practices must be explained in cultural terms. Sociological institutionalism has three distinct features. This framework 1) defines institutions more broadly than political science to include the cultural features that "define frames of meaning" to guide human action; 2) emphasizes how institutions influence behavior; and 3) observes how institutions embrace practices viewed within a broader cultural context. In this chapter, I ground my observations under sociological institutionalism.

Rational Choice Theory and punctuated equilibrium

Public policy has historically been viewed through the lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT). RCT is the idea that any actions are rational. Before deciding, people will calculate and consider the likely costs and benefits of all the options available to them (Scott, 2000). While RCT fails to adequately address some issues, namely collective action, social norms, and social structures, the theory provides a foundational understanding of how policymakers make decisions.

RCT can only go so far in explaining the decision-making processes of policymakers, especially given that policymakers do not exist in a vacuum. As Smith & Larimer (2017) argue, institutional rules shape policymakers' decisions and assist policymakers in overcoming the collective action dilemma under RCT. Institutional constraints and multi-jurisdictional structures

(Tiebout, 1956) contribute to the broader theory of bounded rationality, which posits that policymakers are intendedly rational in their decision-making processes. Their rationality can fail due to their cognitive and emotional biases and can be limited by procedural and substantive limits (Jones, 1999).

The limits inhibiting policymakers from behaving rationally are interpreted broadly as the public policy process at any level of government being slow and incremental in nature (Lindblom, 1959). Incrementalism, however, does not fully explain what occurs in public policy arenas. Baumgartner and Jones (2009) argue that, rather than incrementalism, policymaking can be best viewed under the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET). Under PET, policymaking generally takes place incrementally, although drastic policy change can occur due to immense public pressure in light of focusing events that capture the public's interest.

RCT, the concept of local multi-jurisdictional governance, and PET can all be applied to the realm of public library systems. Public library systems are multi-jurisdictional in nature, as they provide specific services and policies to their communities. These goods and services fill in gaps left by other local governing bodies. For instance, many local public library systems are the sole guarantors of their community's free access to the internet, digital literacy instruction, e-government delivery, and emergency response, and are often one of the few local government outlets that provide the general public with opportunities that support learning, economic development, and civic engagement (Jaeger et al., 2014). At the same time, public libraries face the same social, political, and institutional restraints present to other policymakers that require them to be boundedly rational in their decision-making processes (Jaeger et al., 2013). As a result of this relationship, public library decision-making can be analyzed under PET. Public libraries may be slower in making policy changes, instead maintaining the status quo for

operations. Once public libraries face a significant crisis or public pressure, however, they may be pressured to make quick and dramatic policy changes.

Street-level bureaucracy, latitude, and community partisanship

Street-level bureaucracy is key to understanding the types of services that public libraries provide daily and in times of crisis. Street-level bureaucrats are civil servants who directly interact with the general public and are frontline representatives of government policy. Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats face a core dilemma: they have to help individuals or work on their behalf on a case-by-case basis, yet the structure of their jobs makes this a near-impossible task. As a result, street-level bureaucrats are forced to adapt, adopting uniform processes to handle individual cases to maximize efficiency at the cost of individual responsiveness and human interaction. This push to maximize efficiency can redirect policy outcomes in an unintended manner and cause community members to have diminishing levels of confidence in the government's ability to effectively work on their behalf (Lipsky, 2010).

Street-level bureaucrats have relatively high levels of discretion and autonomy within their day-to-day work. This latitude that street-level bureaucrats have informs how they manage their work, navigate bureaucratic rules, and the multiple accountabilities they face, including from other levels of government, the institution they work within, and other individuals they interact with (Hupe and Hill, 2007).

Despite multiple levels of accountability, a lot of the day-to-day work street-level bureaucrats do occurs outside of any formal oversight from supervisors (Maynard-Moody and Portillo, 2010). As a result, street-level bureaucrats often develop priorities that differ from those of their supervisors and their institutions. This, combined with resource constraints (Meyers and Nielsen, 2012), leads to street-level bureaucrats being considered the "ultimate policymakers"

rather than the final link in the chain of policy implementation. Their discretion allows them to decide which cases get attention and access to resources, and which do not. This is not to say that street-level bureaucrats can ignore multiple accountabilities, as exercising discretion at the expense of too much client satisfaction can lead to the devaluing of the institutions for which they work and represent (Lyons et al., 2019; Van de Walle, 2017). Rather, street-level bureaucrats must use strategic judgment to exercise their discretion and autonomy.

One reason why street-level bureaucrats exercise strategic judgment has been an increase in the decentralization and devolution of government over time, which has "pushed public services closer to the frontlines of government in recent years" (Chang and Brewer, 2023). As a result, street-level bureaucrats interact more frequently with the community members they serve than they did in the past. While street-level bureaucrats have always been accountable to their community members, these more frequent interactions can influence how they exercise their discretion and autonomy when making decisions on behalf of their respective organizations to implement policy.

The influence of community members on street-level bureaucrats is not isolated from broader trends. Rather, the partisanship of the communities they serve also influences how street-level bureaucrats exercise their latitude within their work. Partisan bias has been found to impact how citizens evaluate public services (Alon-Barkat et al., 2025), and party alignment has been found to impact the levels of trust that people have in local government (Shin, 2026). Within the realm of public libraries, community partisanship impacted the number of library visits after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Republican-voting areas having a quicker return to pre-pandemic library visit levels than Democratic-voting areas (Reckhow et al., 2026). On the other side of the relationship, local politicians have been found to change their communication styles

depending on the partisanship of their communities, depending on mis/alignment with their personal political values (de Benedictis-Kessner, 2021). Taken together, the partisan context within which street-level bureaucracies operate impacts both how citizens respond to and evaluate these institutions and how the institutions respond to the demands of the communities they serve.

Within their capacities as local institutions, public libraries face the same institutional, resource, and partisan constraints that other street-level bureaucracies face. Given how public libraries have become increasingly polarized over time (Winberry, 2025), and how partisanship can impact both public support for local government (Shin, 2026) and the political behavior of local politicians (deBenedictis-Kessner, 2021), it stands to reason that partisanship will also impact how public libraries respond in times of crisis. I expect that, given that Democrats are more likely to support local institutions and public libraries than Republicans, public library systems will see greater levels of innovation in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic when they serve more Democratic-aligned communities than when they are in more Republican-aligned communities.

Methods

In this chapter, I use the 2022 Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This annual survey "examines when, where, and how library services are changing to meet the needs of the public" (Pelczar et al., 2024). The survey contains information on all aspects of the public library system's operations, including basic community characteristics and various public library policies. The 2022 survey also includes supplemental questions on policies that public library systems adopted specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dataset contains a total of 9,248 entries. To maintain consistency with the Federal-State

Cooperative Public Library Definition, I excluded 218 entries marked in the dataset as not meeting this definition. I also excluded seven libraries that were designated as being temporarily closed throughout 2022. As a result, my entire dataset contains 9,023 individual public library systems, with entries for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.[16]

To provide background information on average public library system operations, I present descriptive statistics from the dataset and report Spearman rank correlations to analyze key components of public library system operations, given the right-skewed distributions of LSA and total operating revenue. I then employ logistic regression models of several public library policy innovations that operationalize public library systems' responses to the pandemic. These dichotomous variables include operational changes: outlet closures and staff reassignment; and service expansions: public services, electronic library cards, reference services, outdoor services, new external WIFI service, and expanded WIFI service. Each model focuses on one of the eight pandemic policy innovations as the dependent variable. For each model, all public library systems that did not respond to a question were omitted from the analysis.

The primary independent variables measure local partisanship and access to internal resources. In this case, local partisanship is operationalized as the Democratic candidate's vote share in the 2022 Congressional district general election, and access to internal resources is operationalized as total full-time equivalent staff. This chapter also includes the following control variables: the population of the library's legal service area, the population of the county the library system is within, and the length of the corresponding state's Stay-at-Home order.

[16] Puerto Rico was excluded from the dataset because none of its libraries met criteria under the FSCS public library definition.

While the survey also captured relevant data on other aspects of public libraries' access to internal resources, including total revenue and total number of visits, using these variables as measures for institutional capacity does not accurately reflect library operations during the pandemic, as the survey only captured revenue and visits in 2022. These two variables were more susceptible to variation due to the pandemic. Instead, full-time equivalent staff is used as a proxy for pandemic-era institutional capacity, as the variable is more stable across the pandemic than are measures that capture revenue or visits. Additionally, to avoid multicollinearity, I do not use other variables to measure partisanship, such as the governor's party affiliation.

2.1 Public Library System Operations in the United States

Public libraries are organizations that constantly adapt to changes in the political and social environments to fulfill the needs of their communities. In the context of a growing movement that demands public institutions justify their worth in a way that emphasizes concrete economic contributions, public libraries have had to navigate how they present the resources they provide, which often have social value rather than economic value. As Jaeger et al. (2011) argue, "finding ways to leverage an economic value from a service or resource intended as community value is a considerable challenge … yet … one that is critical [for] libraries to meet the demands of policymakers seeking economic contributions from all social services. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that most politicians approach value in terms of a business perspective that … does not fit comfortably with the history, goals, or activities of the public library."

One way that public libraries have innovated the ways in which they justify their institutional worth has been to leverage their resources to make themselves anchor institutions. Mersand et al. (2019) define anchor institutions as "organizations rooted in their local communities by mission, invested capital, and/or relationships to customers, employees, vendors

and clientele." The institutional worth that public libraries hold often derives from their relationships with individual community members. Public libraries provide various consistent resources, which have helped foster trust within their communities (Patin, 2010).

Public libraries provide resources to meet their communities' unique needs. These resources go well beyond the scope of the traditional view of what libraries provide. These unique resources include providing a public gathering space in an era of declining third spaces (Barclay, 2017), assisting with small business development through the provision of reference materials, internet access, legal support, and information on marketing and taxes (Bishop et al., 2016), and information on how to navigate federal and state public policy (Bassaller, 2016), to name a few. Potnis et al. (2020) provide a framework to categorize the types of resources and policies that public libraries provide. These include programs, which are access- and use-oriented; processes, which are efficiency and effectiveness-driven; partnerships, which include both internal and external partnerships; and technology, which includes web-based technologies, assistive technologies, and artificial intelligence.

Looking at public library systems today, according to the 2022 Institute of Museum and Library Services Public Libraries Survey, there are 9,023 open public libraries within the United States that fall under the Federal-State Cooperative Public Library Definition (Rubin and Rubin, 2020). These public library systems include 8,844 central libraries, 7,671 branch libraries, and 691 bookmobiles. The majority—53 percent—of public library systems in the U.S. have their legal basis defined as Municipal Government, meaning that their legal jurisdiction is derived from a city, town, or village. This is followed by 15 percent of public library systems' legal bases being Library District, 14 percent being Non-profit Association or Agency, and 10 percent being

County/Parish. All other legal bases each account for less than 5 percent of the public library systems in the U.S.

As it pertains to policy innovation and resource provision, public libraries differ in the populations they serve and the amount of revenue they are able to work with. Both of these factors impact the ways in which public libraries are able to respond to the changing needs and demands of their communities. The way in which the communities that public libraries serve are measured is by their Legal Service Areas (LSA). LSA is defined as: "the number of people in the geographic area for which a public library has been established to offer services and from which (or on behalf of which) the library derives revenue, plus any areas served under contract for which the library is the primary service provider" (Pelczar et al., 2024). Within all public library systems in the United States, the mean LSA population is 36,319 people, and the median is 7418.

Public library system funding is likewise measured by its Total Operating Revenue (TOR). TOR is defined as the sum of all sources of revenue: local government, state government, federal government, and others. The mean TOR for all public library systems is $1,711,966, and the median is $288,765.50. By and large, public library systems maintain relatively small TORs. 74.8% of all public library systems in the U.S. have TORs that are less than $1,000,000 across all sources. Most—86.19 percent—of public libraries' operating revenue comes from local governments. This revenue was primarily used to cover staff expenditures. 65.45 percent of public library expenditures can be attributed to staff, 10.70 percent to materials, and 22.62 percent to other unclassified expenditures. The reliance on local funding further makes public libraries accountable to the communities they serve, an accountability that may impact how public libraries behave, given the partisanship of their communities.

On average, public library systems in the U.S. provide 3,723.8 public service hours annually. This can be broken down to roughly 10.2 hours of public service daily. Within the realm of service, public library collections are dominated by electronic materials. 72.65 percent of all materials available in public library systems in the U.S. were electronic, compared to 27.35 percent of collection materials being physical items. Regarding physical collections, 85.66 percent were print materials, 4.88 percent were audio materials, 8.55 percent were video materials, and 1.34 percent were other unclassified types of physical materials. Looking towards internet access and electronic resources, public library systems in the U.S. provide their communities with 30.7 computers, with a median of 9 computers per library system. This results in an average of 9,099.7 hours of public internet use on in-house computers per public library system and a median of 1,694 hours of public internet use. Additionally, public library systems provided an average of 48,113.5 WIFI sessions per public library and a median of 4,006 WIFI sessions.

Table 2.1. Spearman Rank Correlations: Resources and Operation Scale

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Variable	Outcome	Spearman's ρ
LSA Population	Total FTE Staff	0.898
LSA Population	Total Visits	0.855
Total Operating Revenue	Total FTE Staff	0.970
Total Operating Revenue	Total Visits	0.908

Table 2.1 reports Spearman rank correlations between community size (LSA) and resources (TOR) and variables measuring day-to-day operations: total full-time equivalent staff (FTE) and total annual visits. For all four measures, community size and resources have strong, positive correlations to day-to-day operations. Public library systems that serve larger

populations tend to have more staff ($\rho = 0.898$) and tend to have more annual visits ($\rho = 0.855$). Moreover, public library systems with higher revenue tend to employ more staff ($\rho = 0.970$) and see more annual visits ($\rho = 0.908$), with the former aligning with the fact that 65.45 percent of public library expenditures can be attributed to staff. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how public library systems that have better access to resources and serve larger populations provide greater levels of baseline service.

2.2 How do Public Library Systems Respond to Crises?

The COVID-19 pandemic affected nearly all aspects of life, with political life no exception. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a partisan issue. Those on the left generally prioritized more expansive, cautionary, and community-oriented pandemic policy, while those on the right generally had more limited and individualistic pandemic policy priorities (Mehlhaff et al., 2024; Clinton et al., 2021). Like other local-level political institutions, public library systems had to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. 52 percent of public library systems had to close some of their outlets for at least a portion of the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2022). Despite closures, many public library systems introduced policies to address library services and community needs in their otherwise limited capacities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While public library systems that have better access to resources and serve larger populations provide greater levels of baseline service, in this section, I test whether the same relationship holds in times of crisis, or whether external factors, like community partisanship and the duration of the state's Stay-at-Home order, may have a stronger impact on the latitude public library systems exercised throughout the pandemic.

Table 2.2. Average Marginal Effects of COVID-19 Policies in Public Library Systems

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Predictors	Closures	Reassignment	Public Services	Elec. Cards	Reference	Outdoor	New WiFi	Expanded WiFi
Vote Share (D)	0.0009***	0.0003*	0.0014***	0.0038***	0.0024***	0.0016***	0.0025***	0.0014***
Stay at Home Order	0.0004***	0.0004***	0.0001	0.0004**	0.0003*	0.0003*	-0.0018***	0.0001
Total FTE Staff	0.0001	0.0001	-0.0001	0.0026***	0.0005	0.0004	-0.0000	0.0007**
County Population	0.0000***	0.0000	0.0000***	0.0000***	0.0000**	-0.0000	-0.0000*	-0.0000
LSA Population	0.0000	0.0000*	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	-0.0000	0.0000	-0.0000

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 2.2 presents the average marginal effects from the regression models for several public library policy innovations that operationalize public library systems' responses to the pandemic. These include operational changes: 1) outlet closures and 2) staff reassignment; and service expansions: 3) public services, 4) electronic library cards, 5) reference services, 6) outdoor services, 7) new external WIFI service, and 8) expanded WIFI service. Each model considers the following library policies as independent variables: legal service area population, county population, total full-time equivalent staff, the duration of the state's Stay-at-Home order, and the percentage of the vote that the Democratic candidate received in the library system's congressional district.

Public library systems in more Democratic-aligned communities were more likely to introduce seven of the eight types of pandemic policy innovations than those serving more Republican-aligned communities. For every additional percentage point increase in the Democratic Congressional nominee's vote share, the likelihood that a public library system would reassign staff increased by 0.03 percentage points, provide additional public services increased by 0.14 percentage points; provide electronic library cards increased by 0.38 percentage points; provide reference services increased by 0.24 percentage points; provide outdoor services increased by 0.16 percentage points; introduce new WIFI services increased by

0.25 percentage points; and expand existing external WIFI access increased by 0.14 percentage points. Democratic vote share did not have a measurable impact on library outlet closures.

While operational changes, measured by staff reassignment and closures, were at best slightly impacted by Democratic vote share, each of the variables measuring service expansions was substantially impacted by Democratic vote share, ranging from 0.14 percentage point increases each in the likelihood to expand existing WIFI access and public services to 0.38 percentage point increases in the likelihood of introducing electronic library cards per every one percentage point increase in the Democratic Congressional nominee's vote share. The fact that partisanship had the greatest impact on the likelihood of a public library system adopting electronic library cards in comparison to any other service expansions may be a result of requiring a lower lift to adopt than physical infrastructure investments, like new WIFI or outdoor services. Such digital expansions would allow public library systems with lower access to resources to still be able to respond to community demands. Broadly, the partisanship of a public library system's community may increase demand for policy innovation in times of crisis, a finding that is in line with prior research on how partisanship impacts citizen evaluations of public services (Alon-Barkat et al., 2025) and trust in local government (Shin, 2026).

Looking at the other variables, the duration of the corresponding state's Stay-at-Home order was statistically significant for six of the eight policy variables. For every one additional day of the duration of a Stay-at-Home order, the likelihood that a public library system would close an outlet increased by 0.04 percentage points; reassign staff increased by 0.04 percentage points; provide electronic library cards increased by 0.04 percentage points; provide reference services increased by 0.03 percentage points; and provide outdoor services increased by 0.03 percentage points. Likewise, for every one additional day of the duration of a Stay-at-Home

order, the likelihood of a public library providing new WIFI services decreased by 0.18 percentage points. While counterintuitive on the surface, this finding may suggest that public library systems facing longer Stay-at-Home orders may have focused their efforts on expanding remote access to digital services rather than introducing new, physical infrastructure like WIFI that can only be used in person. Lastly, there was no statistically significant association between the duration of a Stay-at-Home order and public services or expanding existing external WIFI access.

The number of full-time equivalent staff, used as a proxy for gauging pandemic-era institutional capacity, had a statistically significant relationship with only two of the eight policy innovation variables. For every one additional FTE, the likelihood that a public library system would introduce electronic library cards increased by 0.26 percentage points, and the likelihood that it would expand existing external WIFI access increased by 0.07 percentage points. Finally, the variables measuring population: legal service area and county, were not associated with any measurable changes in the likelihood of a public library system engaging in any of the eight types of policy innovations.

The finding on the impact of FTE on the likelihood of a public library system introducing electronic library cards—0.26 percentage points—was the only variable to come close to having a similar degree of impact on policy innovation as did Democratic vote share—0.38 percentage points. Likewise, the impact of the duration of the corresponding state's Stay-at-Home order was the only variable to have a greater impact on a policy innovation—0.04 percentage point increased likelihood for outlet closures—than did Democratic vote share—no measurable impact. This latter finding is significant because it suggests that community partisanship positively motivates service expansion and innovation in times of crisis instead of constraining

operations, something which instead is more likely to be impacted by factors outside of the public library system's control, like statewide Stay-at-Home orders.

Taken together, despite the access to resources predicting day-to-day operations in public library systems, the findings from the eight regression models demonstrate how the partisan composition of a public library's community, specifically, the degree of a community's Democratic alignment, has a greater impact on the degree to which a public library can innovate in times of crisis than does the system's access to internal resources, particularly when it comes to service expansion. Given the impact of partisanship on trust in local institutions, these findings suggest that public library systems can exercise greater degrees of latitude when responding to crises so long as they serve communities whose partisanship lends itself to greater support for local government.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began my empirical exploration into the politics of public libraries by analyzing them through the lenses of institutions and public policy. First, to ground my analysis, I reviewed relevant literature on political institutions, rational choice theory, and street-level bureaucracy. Then I provided a descriptive overview of day-to-day public library system operations in the U.S., along with Spearman correlation ranks that demonstrate how public library systems that have better access to resources and serve larger populations provide greater levels of baseline service. Finally, I presented the results and analysis of my logistic regression models on public library system policy innovation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results from the COVID-19 analysis support my central argument that the partisan composition of the community that a public library serves has a greater impact on the degree to which a public library can innovate in times of crisis than does the system's access to internal

resources. Specifically, public library systems serving more Democratic-aligned communities were more likely to engage in policy innovation during the pandemic than those serving more Republican-aligned communities. This is important because community partisanship can motivate, rather than constrain, service expansion and innovation in times of crisis, while external factors like a statewide Stay-at-Home order can serve as a constraint on public library system operations.

As sites of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), public libraries exercise latitude and strategic judgement (Chang and Brewer, 2023; Lyons et al., 2019; Van de Walle, 2017) as they navigate multiple accountabilities (Hupe and Hill, 2007), including other institutional actors and members of the communities they serve. The findings presented in this chapter expand upon these debates surrounding street-level bureaucracy and local governance by demonstrating how public library systems can exercise greater degrees of latitude when responding to crises so long as they serve communities whose partisanship lends itself to greater support for local government.

The primary limitation of this chapter is that the COVID-19 pandemic was a once-in-a-lifetime event that affected all aspects of life beyond public library system operations. While the findings remain robust, their applicability to other types of crises, such as those with narrower scope or regionality, may be limited. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this chapter's analysis cannot establish a causal relationship. Other important variables relevant to the resources a library has available, like revenue and visits, cannot be used for pandemic analysis as they were gathered in 2022 instead of at the height of the pandemic. Lastly, while the findings remain robust to public library operations, they may not be generalizable to other contexts, given

the distinct institutional structures, funding mechanisms, and political contexts that characterize different types of local institutions.

Future research should focus on analyzing public library system responses to crises smaller in scope than the COVID-19 pandemic, including regional crises, crises that pertain to individual public library systems, and other types of institutional and policy issues. Additionally, future research should continue to study how other types of local institutions respond to crises like the pandemic to demonstrate the scope of local institutional resilience. Lastly, future research should test out the ways in which community partisanship impacts latitude in other sites of street-level bureaucracy.

CHAPTER 3: Contemporary Political Contestation in Public Libraries

Abstract

Public libraries in the United States have historically been sites of political contestation. This ranges from contestation surrounding library funding to the content of library collections. Recently, activism within and against public libraries has become more frequent. This raises the question: how does political contestation in public libraries look today? Using a media analysis of U.S. public library contestation and controversy from 2014–2023 and U.S. Census data, this chapter develops categories of contemporary library contestation and the reasons behind it and provides an observational analysis of the demographic and political characteristics of the communities whose libraries have been contested. The findings presented in this chapter help to situate public libraries within a broader, ongoing context of efforts to polarize local political institutions.

Introduction

Librarians at the Rancho Peñasquitos branch of the San Diego Public Library began their June 2023 like any other: they created a Pride month display featuring LGBTQ+ books, a practice the branch and the library system as a whole have been doing for years. However, community members Ann Vance and Martha Martin, offended by the display because they considered it "inappropriate" for children, checked out nearly every book from the display to protest against the library. In their email to the library explaining their actions, they argued:

> It's time for the American public libraries to once again be a respectful space for young children to freely explore great ideas that unite and inspire us all, rather than places where controversial and divisive new ideological movements are given free rein to promote their theories and policy positions about sexuality to children without the consent or notification of parents.[17]

[17] Garrick, D. (2023). Protesters disrupt San Diego library's Pride exhibit by checking out nearly all the books. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-06-29/protestors-ruin-rancho-penasquitos-librarys-pride-exhibit-by-checking-out-nearly-all-the-books.

Their protest backfired. Other branches of the San Diego Public Library loaned LGBTQ+ books to the Rancho Peñasquitos branch, and community members joined in, sending additional books as well as money to help expand the branch's collection of LGBTQ+ books. In total, the branch replaced the books Vance and Martin had checked out and raised over $15,000 for the city's public library system, a number which the city matched and used to fund LGBTQ+ books and programming.[18] In an email to Vance and Martin, the City of San Diego Head Librarian, Misty Jones, wrote:

> A core value of SDPL is to provide a welcoming environment that reflects the diversity of our society. Displays such as the one at Rancho Peñasquitos send a powerful message that LGBTQ+ patrons and their allies are respected members of our community. They also serve to encourage conversations and dispel misconceptions and stereotypes that often surround the LGBTQ+ community.[19]

The case of the Rancho Peñasquitos library is not unique. Public libraries in the United States have historically been the sites of political contestation and controversy, ranging from early efforts contesting the use of local taxes to fund the construction of libraries, to social movements seeking expansions of library services to rural communities, to efforts to ban "cheap" fiction and books uplifting minority voices. Public libraries have always held two competing roles: they provide community services while remaining touchpoints for political controversy.

Public libraries have continued to gain prominence as sites of contestation over the years. In 2023 alone, my research shows that there were 58 unique instances of public libraries being the site of political contestation and controversy, in addition to there being several nationwide movements to promote far-Right ideology within public libraries. The continued prominence of

[18] Malcom, R. (2023). Attempt to Remove San Diego Library's LGBTQ Books Backfires. *Metro Weekly*. https://metroweekly.com/2023/07/attempt-to-remove-san-diego-librarys-lgbtq-books-backfires/.
[19] Letang, A. (2023). Protesters check out all LGBTQ+ books at Rancho Peñasquitos library. *Fox 5*. https://fox5sandiego.com/news/local-news/protesters-check-out-all-lgbtq-books-at-rancho-penasquitos-library/.

contestation and controversy in public libraries raises the question: how does political contestation in public libraries look today?

Using a media analysis to compile recent, unique instances of political contestation in public libraries in the U.S. from 2014–2023, as well as U.S. Census data, I identify four key categories of contestation in public libraries: Content, efforts to exclude materials from a library's collection; Event, efforts to contest events held on library property; Operations, efforts to contest aspects of a library's day-to-day operations; and Site of Protest, any instance where a library was used as a gathering space to protest topics unrelated to the library itself. I likewise explore historical political contestation in public libraries and present the substantive reasons behind recent efforts to contest local public libraries. Finally, I draw observations on the demographic and partisan characteristics of the communities that have seen their public libraries contested within my dataset.

My findings provide a foundation to analyze political controversy in public libraries, situating this phenomenon in the context of broader, ongoing efforts to polarize local institutions. This includes recent efforts to delegitimize public health departments during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Usher, 2024) and school boards in the context of increased anti-LGBTQ+ (Mayo, 2021) and anti-equity movements (LoBue and Douglass, 2023). The aforementioned trends in political polarization paint a broader picture of diminishing levels of trust in local institutions, which is alarming to democracy scholars and policymakers.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I present a review of the history of contestation in U.S. public libraries, presenting two historical categories of library contestation. Next, I introduce my methods, dataset, and scope of the research project. I then turn to my results, first presenting a review of the reasons behind recent library controversy, then the categories of

contemporary contestation, and finally, an analysis of the demographic and political characteristics of the communities included in the dataset. I then explore my findings in depth before presenting some concluding remarks on future avenues to study contemporary contestation in public libraries.

Literature Review

Participation

In order to understand participation trends in public libraries—both those with and without elected library boards—it is important to understand the foundational literature on voter participation as it relates to identity. Lien et al. (2001) define voting as a three-step process involving naturalization, registration, and turning out to vote. There are different costs associated with each of these steps: while native-born citizens do not need to engage in the naturalization process, they do need to register to vote and show up at the polls. Non-citizen community members, in contrast, must labor through the costs of naturalization in order to move on to the next stage in the voting process. Even then, DeSipio (2011) observes that naturalized citizens do not engage in the subsequent stages of the voting process as frequently as native-born citizens. Because one is more likely to vote when they are encouraged to do so, and registration is not automatic, naturalized citizens do not participate in elections at as high a rate as native-born citizens because they more commonly live in communities where candidates and political parties do not regularly engage in voter mobilization.

Amongst naturalized and native-born citizens, many studies have observed voting patterns along racial and ethnic lines. Barreto et al. (2004) find that Latinos are more likely to vote in elections when they reside in majority-minority districts. These districts have a compounding effect: Latino voter participation increases as the number of majority-minority

districts that a community falls under increases. They also find that this has an inverse effect on non-Latino voter turnout: non-Latino voter turnout decreases as the amount of Latinos in a community increases. Conversely, Bobo and Gilliam (1990) analyze the effect of Black-empowerment areas, measured as communities with a Black mayor. They find that Black voters are more active in high Black-empowerment areas than are Black voters in low-empowerment areas or white voters of similar socioeconomic statuses. They argue that this happens because high empowerment leads to Black voters having a more trusting and efficacious orientation toward politics and a greater attentiveness to politics overall. Regardless of racial or ethnic group, racial identification and group consciousness have a modest effect on increasing voter turnout, all things considered (Chong and Rogers, 2005).

Gender has an intersecting effect on participation trends as they pertain to race and ethnicity. While Lien (1988) argues that the significance of gender as it pertains to political participation varies by racial group and that gender is not a useful predictor of voter turnout, others have found more nuanced findings. Brown (2014) finds that women who have higher levels of education and income are more likely to participate in resource-poor, nontraditional forms of political engagement, like signing a petition, marching in a protest, or participating in a boycott. This is significant because white and Asian women are more likely to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than are Black or Latina women. Who engages in resource-rich and resource-poor forms of political engagement has a racial effect on who is being represented through these forms of participation.

Beyond racial, ethnic, and gender identity, Brady et al. (1995) provide a framework for analyzing participation more broadly: the Resource Model of Political Participation. Under this framework, they move beyond socioeconomic status and center their analysis of political

participation as it pertains to time, money, and civic skills. They find several notable trends in participation. Voting is not correlated with educational attainment but rather with political interest, which can be fostered through education. They also find that donating money to political causes is highly correlated with having money and not with civic skills or political interest. Finally, they find that participation in time-intensive political activities, like working in a campaign, protesting, or attending board meetings, is highly correlated with political interest, free time, and the exercising of civic skills in nonpolitical institutions and participation in high school government, but is not correlated with family income. Taken together, one's access to resources is relevant to the forms of political participation they engage in.

One final observation on voter participation relevant to the study of public libraries is symbolic politics. Mendelberg (2018) argues that "symbols call up charged visions of what kind of behavior counts as proper and good in the eyes of society. They represent broad expectations about the appropriate status of ingroups and outgroups." This is important because this trend impacts how voters make decisions. Under a model of symbolic politics, voters do not act based on whether they believe their leaders will deliver on what they have promised, their likelihood of doing what they promise in the future, or any cues pertaining to those who have previously enacted specific policies. Instead, voters "respond to political messages as condensation symbols, with the evoked emotions of anger, or fear, or disgust, or enthusiasm, using them to intuit who is their political friend or foe, which stereotypes to bring to bear, and so on."

Responses to Political Issues

Political issues do not arise in a vacuum; they often arise within elite circles and are disseminated to the general public. Carmines and Stimson (1986) provide a model for analyzing the evolution of issues. Under their model, political elites first reorient their opinions about contentious issues.

This reorientation lays the groundwork for partisan lines to be drawn and observed by the mass public, which they refer to as clarity, as it often comes in the form of a critical moment. This is followed by two intervening steps: the mass public changing their perceptions of the political parties and the public having a deep emotional connection to the issue at stake. Only once these intervening steps are present will an issue be redefined at the elite level.

These intervening steps have been expanded upon to be described as opinion backlash. This is "a large, negative, and enduring shift in opinion against a policy or group that occurs in response to some event that threatens the status quo" (Bishin et al., 2015). While opinion backlash on the surface may provide an appealing explanation of issue evolution, it falls short in explaining observed political trends. Indeed, Bishin et al. (2015) find that public opinion towards gay marriage did not change after gay marriage was legalized. They argue this provides evidence that opinion backlash may have been incorrectly used in the literature to interpret existing negative opinions rather than to explain mass opinion change on political issues.

What is instead relevant to issue evolution and public perception is the Theory of Elite-Led Mobilization (Bishin et al., 2021). Under this model, efforts to mobilize the public against policies are elite-driven rather than driven by mass opinion backlash. They classify three categories of elites relevant to issue evolution: relevant national figureheads, state and local political organizational leaders, and local influencers. Elites from these three categories use their resources to seek out new venues to pursue their policy goals, fund policy-friendly politicians, and drum up support amongst the general public by making an issue salient to the average community member.

Elites play an important role in the establishment of political issues and partisan positions. Partisanship itself is a powerful intermediary in how one views and responds to a

political issue. As Iyengar et al. (2018) note, partisanship is a largely stagnant attribute in one's life: one's partisan identity is typically acquired at a young age and rarely changes throughout one's lifetime. They argue that this partisanship over time has contributed to a rise in affective polarization, which is distrust and dislike of those from an opposing political party. This is distinct from the ideological divide and is not rooted in the extremes of partisan views. Rather, affective polarization can lead to the othering of members of opposing political parties in the eyes of party members. This can be utilized by elites to mobilize community members to support or oppose policies and issues.

In line with prior research, I have the following hypotheses regarding contemporary contestation in public libraries:

Hypothesis 1: Contemporary political contestation will be dominated by LGBTQ+ issues.

Hypothesis 2: Communities with a significant right-wing population will be more likely to see LGBTQ+ content and events contested in public libraries.

Hypothesis 3: Communities with sizable political minority groups will be the most likely communities to have their public libraries contested.

Hypothesis 4: Public libraries with appointed board members will see more contestation than public libraries with elected board members.

Historical Contestation in Public Libraries

Public libraries have been the sites of contestation since their inception. Beginning in the mid-1800s, many urban communities began movements to create tax-funded public libraries to offer community members free access to books. This movement stemmed from two core sets of beliefs: 1) negative perceptions of social libraries, which were membership-based and available

only to elites within the community, as elitist and non-egalitarian; and 2) the belief that, following the extension of suffrage to all white males, public libraries needed to be created to help foster a citizenry that could adequately self-govern (Dain, 1996).

This movement saw early success in Boston, where the Boston Public Library became the first tax-supported public library to be established in the U.S. in 1852. The Boston model included a board of trustees chosen by the city council and municipal representatives and served the explicit purpose of complementing and supplementing public school systems (Dain, 1996). This set the blueprint for future public libraries to take root, at first in urban communities. However, these early successes surrounding community access to books were countered by a more libertarian movement against taxation, specifically the utilization of taxpayer dollars to fund public libraries (Dain, 1996).

As public libraries continued to be established throughout the country, contestation surrounding public libraries transitioned to one surrounding access to library services in rural communities. Rural communities historically have had several barriers to accessing public goods, including scattered, low-density populations, poor communication and transportation systems, lower educational levels, and a greater lack of financial resources compared to urban communities (DeGruyter, 1980). Consequently, beginning in the 1890s, a new movement emerged in rural communities to advocate for extending library services to these communities. Many states responded to this movement by creating traveling libraries to bring books to rural communities and by starting library commissions to assist communities in establishing and maintaining their own public libraries (Kevane and Sundstrom, 2016).

Controversy at the turn of the century was not limited to the movement towards expanding access in rural communities. In public libraries around the country, community

members often opposed the inclusion of fiction and novels within the collections due to their recreational nature. This was linked to the belief that, unlike educational or civic activities, recreational activities were not a necessary public need. Moreover, many community members viewed reading "cheap fiction" as "mentally and morally dangerous" (Glynn, 2018). The controversy surrounding the types of books that should be included and excluded from public libraries fell along a gendered dimension. As Glynn notes: "reading 'solid' books was rational and therefore masculine. Reading popular novels was frivolous and feminine. Non-fiction was self-improving and, therefore, promoted the public good. Fiction was private, self-indulgent, demoralizing. The idealized reader thus reflected gendered values that distinguished the public from the private in American culture." This gendered rejection of fiction can be similarly viewed as a masculine reaction to the first-wave feminist movement that was ongoing at the time.

An important facet of the perception of public libraries at the turn of the century was that many viewed them as spaces for the Americanization of the growing immigrant population. From their inception, public libraries have provided English reading materials and resources explaining American democracy and culture. These resources were coupled with the idea that public libraries could serve as independent adult learning centers (Koontz 2007). The availability of these resources to immigrants is important because it may have fueled the demand for public libraries. Kevane and Sundstrom (2014) demonstrate that communities with larger immigrant populations from 1870–1930 are associated with a higher likelihood of libraries being established. This suggests that the ideology of Americanization may have had a more important role to play in community demand for public libraries than did social homogeneity or solidarity.

The context of libraries as centers of Americanization is significant because this push for immigrant incorporation faced backlash during World War One, with many Americans hostile

towards German immigrants. This hostility manifested itself in public library spaces with demands from the federal government and community members to remove content that was deemed "sympathetic" to Germans, including German-language materials. This was especially apparent in Iowa, which had a significant German population. Many libraries in the state followed suit and removed content that could be perceived as sympathetic towards Germans to participate in the war effort to appease public hostility towards Germans at the time, as well as avoid suspicions that those working in the libraries were German sympathizers (Skinner, 2013). This marks one of the first times that the general public actively opposed the inclusion of content in support of an otherized community within library collections.

Controversy in public libraries, for the most part, died down following the anti-German hysteria of World War I. However, renewed hysteria under McCarthyism in the 1950s against communism bled into the realm of public libraries. Throughout this decade, libraries and librarians themselves faced significant backlash as they were the targets of anticommunist organizers. Some librarians were fired for refusing to take loyalty oaths to the U.S. Other librarians faced significant public pressure to label materials as sympathetic towards communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy even got directly involved with libraries, announcing in 1952 that State Department-run overseas libraries contained "30,000 dangerous books" written by 418 "suspect" authors (Williams, 1988). In a similar vein to that of the previous anti-German hysteria, the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s demonstrates how public library spaces were continuing to be used as battlegrounds against otherized communities.

Despite the hysteria of the 1950s, the middle of the 20th century also saw the expansion of the institution of public libraries—first under programs funded by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and 1940s and later under the Library Services Act of 1956, which

provided federal aid to rural libraries, and the Library Services and Construction Act of 1964, which emphasized providing aid to large and urban libraries, as well as encouraging interlibrary cooperation on a regional and statewide level (DeGruyter, 1980). This expansion continued throughout the 1970s, an era that saw libraries shift focus to assessing and solving community needs. Libraries around the country began to provide homework and information hotlines, diverse outreach programs, branches in housing projects, book kiosks, ethnic service centers, and the publication of guides and reports on service to minority groups (Koontz, 2007).

It was not until the mid-1990s that public libraries became contested over issues that continue into the 21st century. In reaction to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ materials in public libraries, a conservative organization called Family Friendly Libraries [FLL] was created to "protect" children from LGBTQ+ materials. FLL maintained several policies they advocated for, including 1) collections emphasizing the "traditional family;" 2) parental rights to control all aspects of their children's library experiences; 3) respect for community standards; 4) respect for minors, which they took to mean that libraries should not have "sexually explicit" or LGBTQ+ themed displays; and 5) greater taxpayer participation in library policymaking (Gaffney, 2013).

While FLL started fairly isolated, the organization helped to expand the anti-LGBTQ+ movement that started in the second half of the 20th century, albeit within public libraries around the country. This case of contestation demonstrates the significant disagreement that the public has surrounding the role public libraries should play in communities. To this day, the anti-LGBTQ+ movement continues to work in public libraries around the country to censor LGBTQ+ materials.

Methods

I conducted a media analysis of instances of libraries being sites of contestation and controversy from 2014–2023. I used targeted keyword searches on Google News, segmenting my searches within each calendar year to maximize the number of cases I would find. I used the following search terms: "library protest," "library controversy," "library demonstration," and "library contested." These search terms resulted in many articles appearing several times with each keyword search, which makes me confident these search terms were exhaustive for this study. This process yielded 226 unique instances of libraries being the sites of contestation across 47 states. The scope of my research is locally driven contestation in tax-funded public libraries. My research does not include academic, school, specialized, or governmental libraries, nor does it include nationally coordinated movements using public libraries as one of many sites of contestation.

I used open coding to identify specific reasons for contestation in each case. These include the specific piece of content, theme, or other reason for contestation. From here, I used axial coding to categorize the reasons—for example, all instances of contestation related to the LGBTQ+ community were all coded as "LGBT." I employed a similar open- and axial-coding process to develop the categories of contestation. These are distinct from the specific reasons and allow me to draw broader comparisons across the cases. For example, any event involving pro- and anti-LGBT events, book talks, and other programming was coded as "Event."

I primarily focused on the 2020 U.S. Census results and presidential election results from each library's pertinent county Registrar of Voters to analyze demographic, community, and institutional characteristics. Each demographic characteristic—Elderly, Women, White, Hispanic, Foreign Born, Homeowner, and College, along with Democratic Presidential Vote

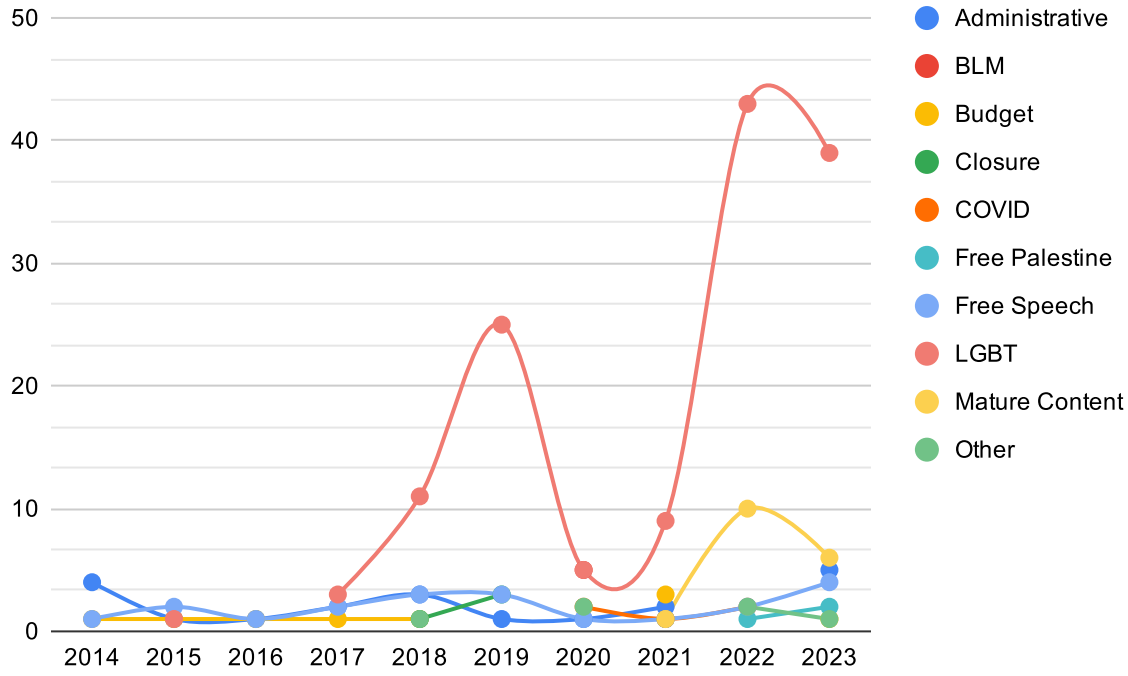
Share—was operationalized as community population percentages. Median Household Income (MHI) was recorded and analyzed as a dollar amount, and Elected vs. Appointed was operationalized as a dichotomous variable. Democratic Presidential Vote Share was further operationalized as the vote share that the Democratic presidential nominee received in the most recent general election when the case of library contestation occurred. For example, if a case occurred in 2015, the most recent presidential election used for analysis was 2012. With this data, I conduct basic descriptive analysis to compare the characteristics of the communities that saw public library contestation and those that did not.

Results

This section provides a broad overview of the reasons for public library contestation from 2014–2023, the introduction of categories of contestation in public libraries, and detailed descriptive information on the characteristics of U.S. communities that have experienced public library contestation over the past decade. The results shed light on why community members politicize public libraries as institutions. Likewise, my findings provide an understanding of what sociopolitical factors are associated with public library contestation. The results from my analysis are presented with brief descriptions below.

Reasons for Library Contestation

Figure 3.1. Reasons for Library Contestation, 2014–2023



From 2014–2023, there were 226 unique instances of libraries being the sites of political contestation. Figure 3.1 provides a visual breakdown of the frequency of each type of reason for library contestation from 2014–2023.

In line with my expectations, the cases had similarities in reason. The vast majority [60.2 percent] of these cases were centered around pro-LGBTQ+ content or events [136 cases]. The third most frequent reason for contestation, mature content in children's sections [17 cases], made up 7.5 percent of the cases, and all involved books that included LGBTQ+ topics in addition to other, more general content regarding health. The dominance of LGBTQ+ discourse in public libraries from 2014–2023 cannot be understated. In fact, in six of the ten years analyzed, LGBTQ+ issues were the dominant reason for contestation in public libraries, tied with Black Lives Matter [BLM] in 2020. This connects to the legacy of the FLL in the 1990s, as well

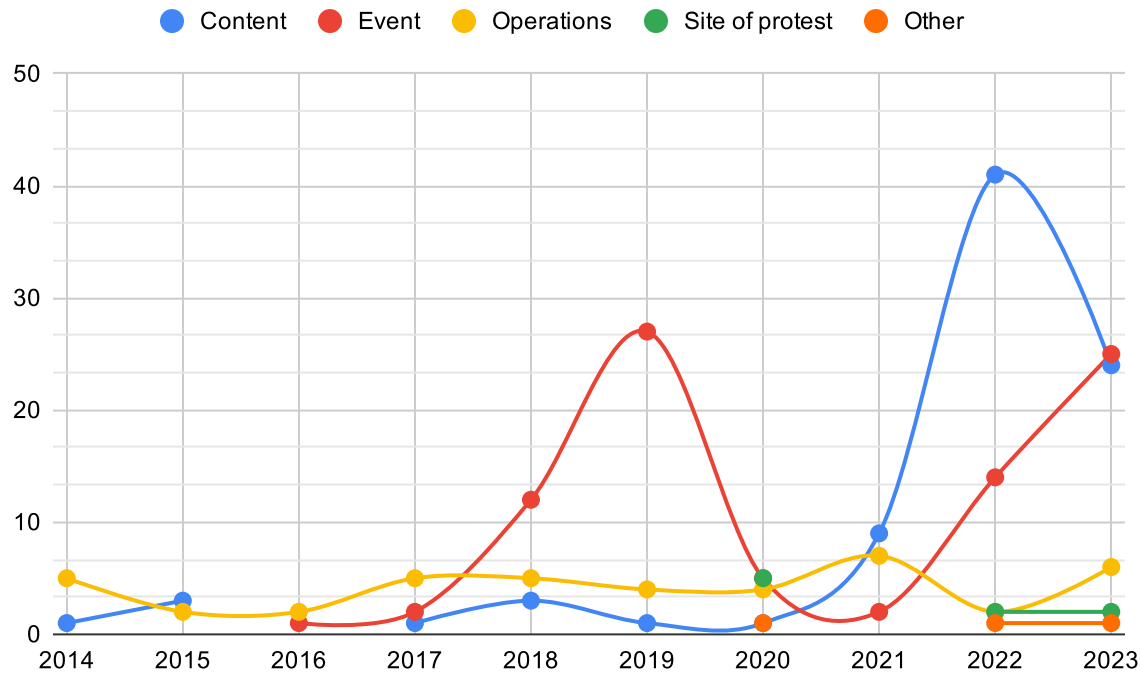
as recent elite-led mobilization (Bishin et al., 2021) and state-level policies (Knauer, 2020) against LGBTQ+ progress beginning in the 2000s.

Additional reasons for political contestation in public libraries, in order of most to least occurrences, include Free Speech [21 cases], library administrative policies [20 cases], library budgets [9 cases], BLM [5 cases], COVID-19 [5 cases], library closures [5 cases], and Free Palestine [3 cases]. One-off reasons for contestation and controversy include accessibility issues, a local political protest, the lack of a Christmas display, a library's relationship with the local police department, controversy surrounding a Mexican Independence Day event, and the revelation that an adult entertainer used a library to film an unauthorized adult film.

One final reason for contestation that was excluded from the dataset as being a significant outlier was a series of events hosted by Evangelical-Christian activist Kirk Cameron and the far-Right publisher Brave Books. Throughout 2023, Cameron and the publisher hosted the Freedom Island Book Tour, a national tour in public libraries in response to drag queen story hours. The tour generated significant controversy within communities nationwide for its far-Right content but was permitted to take place in the name of Free Speech. Additionally, on August 5, 2023, Cameron and the publisher hosted a nationwide "See You at the Library" event held in 260 libraries across 44 states. Like the book tour, this one-day event was targeted as a response to pro-LGBTQ+ content and events held in public libraries and was centered around Evangelical and patriotic content.

Categories of Contestation in Public Libraries

Figure 3.2. Categories of Library Contestation, 2014–2023



The vast majority of the 226 cases of library contestation and controversy can be classified under one of four key categories: Content [84 cases], Event [88 cases], Operations [42 cases], and Site of Protest [9 cases]. The remaining three cases could not be classified in the aforementioned categories and will be explored later under the heading "Other." Figure 3.2 provides a visual breakdown of the number of cases that each category was composed of by year.

Content

The contestation category of Content can be defined as any effort to object to the inclusion of specific books, resources, displays, artwork, or other public materials within the library's collection. From 2014–2023, there were 84 cases of Content contestation, with 75 of the reported cases being attempted book bans. These book bans centered exclusively around either LGBTQ+ books [55 cases] or children's books being deemed as having inappropriate, mature

content [17 cases]. Two additional cases were about removing books for their racist content, and one case was centered around a library's attempts to "weed out" unpopular books. The attempts to ban LGBTQ+ books from public libraries mirror those of historical Content contestation efforts, both regarding trying to prohibit otherized voices from being included in public library collections and the legacy of the FLL's fight against LGBTQ+ books beginning in the 1990s.

The other minor aspect of Content contestation was surrounding different displays and exhibits put on by public libraries. The remaining cases [10 cases] centered around library murals, components and themes of displays, and issues surrounding copyright access to the information presented in a display.

Event

The Event category of contestation can be defined as any efforts to protest, disrupt, or shut down public or private events being held on library property. These include events hosted by the libraries and held in rented-out spaces by community members, local groups, or organizations. From 2014–2023, there were 88 cases of Event contestation. Most of the events contested in public libraries featured drag queens [67 cases], namely drag queen story hours. The contestation of drag queen events in public libraries follows in the footsteps of the FLL's activism in the 1990s. It has gained national attention in the media due to how frequently these acts of contestation have occurred over the past five years.

The other significant reason observed under the Event contestation category can be broadly defined as events about free speech [16 cases]. These include contestation against anti-LGBTQ+ groups hosting meetings at the libraries [8 cases], controversial author talks [3 cases], far-Right story hours [2 cases], and a case each for a Communist group meeting, a public library's Banned Books event, and an event on Islam.

Operations

Similar to Content, Operations was the other historical category observed from 2014–2023. The Operations contestation category can be defined as any efforts to contest any aspects related to the day-to-day operations of the public library. From 2014–2023, there were 42 cases of contestation that can be categorized under Operations. These include 20 cases about library administration and policy, nine cases related to library budgets, five cases related to COVID-19-specific policies, five cases in response to library closures, two cases about free speech issues from library board members, and one regarding accessible design concerns.

Site of Protest

The final category of library contestation, Site of Protest, can be defined as any protests that took place on the grounds of a public library but did not directly pertain to the library itself. This category of contestation is important to note because, given that public libraries provide communities with a readily accessible public space, they can serve as gathering spaces for social movements. From 2014–2023, there were 9 cases of Site of Protest contestation in public libraries. These included five Black Lives Matter protests, three Free Palestine protests, and one protest against a local politician in Indianapolis.

Other

In addition to the four main categories of contestation in public libraries, three additional cases could not be classified and are briefly discussed here. First, the Santa Monica Public Library in California was the site of controversy in 2020 after community members learned that an adult entertainer had used the library to film an unauthorized adult film. Second, community members in Dedham, Massachusetts, protested the lack of a Christmas display on library property in 2022. Finally, in 2023, community members protested the East Lake Library in

Minneapolis after police arrested a patron for sitting on the floor of the library with their children.

Community and Library Board Characteristics

The results of the data presented here focus on the median demographic and community characteristics of all 226 cases. Many of the median characteristics within the dataset are close to those of the U.S. as a whole. The median percentages of the case population compared with the national population are as follows: the elderly case population was 15.8 percent, compared to 17.7 percent nationally; women 51 percent, compared to 50.5 percent nationally; white 71.6 percent, compared to 75.3 percent nationally; foreign-born 10.3 percent, compared to 13.7 percent nationally; college degree-holders 36.7 percent, compared to 34.3 percent nationally; and finally, the median MHI was $75,980, compared to $75,149 nationally. All of these community characteristics are close to those of their national counterparts, with none falling above a plus or minus four percentage point difference.

Of note are the median community characteristics that deviated from their national averages. The median percentage of the case population that owns a home is 57.7 percent, in comparison to 64.8 percent nationally. This represents a 7.1 percentage point difference between the national average and the median of the cases in the dataset. Likewise, the median percentage of the case population that identifies as Hispanic is 9.3 percent, in comparison to 19.5 percent nationally. This represents a 10.2 percentage point difference between the national average and the median of the cases in the dataset, the largest difference for any of the community characteristics analyzed in this chapter.

Turning towards community partisanship, the median support for the Democratic presidential candidate in the most recent election for the cases analyzed was similar to national

support for the Democratic presidential candidate in the 2020 election. The median support in the cases was 52.4 percent, in comparison to Biden's 51.3 percent vote share nationally. This represents a 1.1 percentage point difference between the cases and the 2020 election. However, the majority of contested libraries were in counties with between 25 and 80 percent support for the Democratic candidate in that county's most recent presidential election. Only 25 of the 226 cases in the dataset fell outside of this range for Democratic presidential support. The dataset has a bimodal distribution, with peaks of Democratic support around 30 and 70 percent.

Finally, looking at the structure of library boards, the dataset reveals that most contested libraries have appointed boards. 89.4 percent of the cases have appointed library boards, compared to the 10.6 percent that elect their library boards. While the exact number of library boards in the U.S. that are appointed vs. elected is unknown, the most recent Public Libraries Survey shows that only 15.2 percent of all public libraries in the U.S. belong to their own library districts, i.e., the only public libraries that are legally separate governments with their own elections and fiscal responsibilities (Pelczar, Alhassani, and Mabile, 2024). All other public libraries in the U.S. are multi-jurisdictional, meaning they share governance with another entity and are more likely to be appointed instead of elected. Taken together, there is a 4.6 percentage point difference between the percent of public libraries with elected boards and the percent of library boards that are their own jurisdictional entities and hold their own elections, a proxy for the number of elected library boards in the U.S.

Discussion

Table 3.1. Categories of Contestation, 2014–2023

Table 3.1: Categories of Contestation, 2014–2023

Category	Number of Cases	Dominant Reason	Definition
Content	84	LGBT: 59	Any efforts to object to the inclusion of specific books, resources, displays, artwork, or other public materials within the library's collection.
Event	88	LGBT: 77	Any efforts to protest, disrupt, or shut down public or private events being held on library property.
Operations	42	Administrative: 20	Any efforts to contest any aspects related to day-to-day operations of the library.
Site of Protest	9	BLM: 5	Any protests which took place on library grounds, but did not directly pertain to the library itself.

The primary goal of this chapter is to explore and examine the characteristics of political contestation in public libraries today. This includes developing categories of the types of political contestation seen in public libraries and providing specific reasons for contestation. Typologizing public library contestation in this way can pinpoint areas for improvement in library operations, resource offerings, and opportunities for public involvement. My analysis also examines the characteristics of the types of communities that see public library contestation. Given the descriptive nature of my dataset, the discussion that follows focuses on characterizing the findings around general, national trends rather than testing for statistical significance.

My data analysis is consistent with **Hypothesis 1:** contemporary political contestation will be dominated by LGBTQ+ issues. Both pro- and anti-LGBTQ+ issues were the most common reason for public library political contestation from 2014–2023, specifically being the dominant issue in six out of the ten years analyzed and tied with BLM in 2020. LGBTQ+ issues accounted for 60.2 percent of the reasons for contestation observed in the dataset. This is similar

to the continued dominance of the contestation of LGBTQ+ issues in other local political institutions like school districts (Deckman, 2004; Mayo, 2021) and an increase in national movements in support of and against the LGBTQ+ community (Valelly, 2012).

The dominance of pro- and anti-LGBTQ+ issues from 2014–2023 was fairly universal, regardless of community partisanship. My results do not align with **Hypothesis 2:** communities with a significant right-wing population will be more likely to see LGBTQ+ content and events contested in public libraries. Instead, the median Democratic presidential vote share in cities that saw contestation about LGBTQ+ issues was 49.3 percent. This is compared to the national 2020 popular vote of 51.3 percent support for the Democratic presidential nominee.

Moreover, the distribution of contested cases of any kind is bimodal, with peaks at 30 percent and 70 percent support for the most recent Democratic presidential nominee. This is consistent with **Hypothesis 3:** communities with sizable political minority groups will be the most likely to have their public libraries contested. This suggests that public library contestation of any kind is more likely to take place in communities that are relatively partisan but maintain significant partisan minority populations. This trend may be attributed to the positionality of those in the political minority within their communities: community members from a substantial minority partisan affiliation may turn to alternative means to make their voices heard when they do not have the numbers to impact local policy outcomes electorally.

This trend may be amplified by the nature of library boards themselves. Nationwide, only 15.2 percent of all public libraries in the U.S. belong to their own library districts, meaning they have their own elections and fiscal responsibilities (Pelczar, Alhassani, and Mabile, 2024). This is in contrast to the remaining majority of multi-jurisdictional public libraries, which are more likely to have their board members appointed rather than elected. Within my dataset, only 10.6

percent of the cases were in public libraries with elected library boards. All of the other libraries have appointed board members. This discrepancy aligns with **Hypothesis 4:** Public libraries with appointed board members will see more contestation than public libraries with elected board members. Aside from public comment opportunities, community members whose library boards are appointed do not have other formal means to make their voices heard by the board members. Like those from significant political minority communities, community members whose library board members are appointed may turn to political contestation to try and make change when faced with no other options, like a direct election.

The continued prevalence of the historical categories of contestation, Content and Operations, in contrast with the contemporary categories of Event and Site of Protest, is significant because it contextualizes the institutional role libraries hold within their communities. Public libraries provide resources to the community and shape what those resources look like and how they should be accounted for. The continued prevalence of both historical categories today shows how community members view public libraries as places for resource provision. That said, the development of newer categories of contestation shows how the institutional role of public libraries has expanded over time. Public libraries both provide resources to their communities and physical space for community members to gather for several civic and social purposes.

While the dataset does not provide a random sample for analysis, the fact that most of the median community characteristics of the cases were similar to the national averages shows how public library contestation is not a phenomenon isolated to certain types of communities. Rather, public libraries are largely contested in communities that look like the rest of the U.S. as a whole.

This suggests that most demographic characteristics of communities do not influence the likelihood of public library contestation on their own.

One major exception to this trend is homeownership rates. While the national homeownership rate is 64.8 percent, the median homeownership rate in the dataset is 57.7 percent, a negative difference of 7.1 percentage points. There may be a trend regarding rates of homeownership versus renting. Given that prior research has shown that those who rent have less access to resources than those who own their homes (McCabe, 2013), those with fewer personal resources may be more likely to contest different aspects of public library operations because they are more likely to have a vested interest in library operations than homeowners. Renters may be more likely to use library resources, whereas homeowners may be more likely to have other options to access similar resources elsewhere. If true, this would counter prior research demonstrating that homeowners typically have more vested interest in their communities than renters (Jiang, 2018; McCabe, 2013). However, because my dataset is not a random sample, this finding is, at best, observational.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I continued to analyze the contemporary trend of the politicization of public libraries through a civic engagement lens. First, through an analysis of historical public library contestation, I presented two key categories of contestation: Content and Operations. Then, I shifted my focus toward contemporary contestation. Through media and demographic analyses of communities that experienced contestation within their public libraries from 2014–2023, I presented an additional two categories of contestation in public libraries, Event and Site of Protest, and an in-depth explanation of why people choose to contest their public libraries. This was followed by a broad discussion on the demographic characteristics of the communities

that do see their public libraries contested. The results from my data analysis provide an observational understanding of which communities do and do not experience contestation in their public libraries and a concrete framework to typologize local-level political contestation in public libraries in the future.

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research to continue analyzing contestation in public libraries through a lens of civic engagement. The non-random nature of the data collection means that only observational findings could be presented. This dataset does not lend itself to correlation analyses, and the findings presented here represent a snapshot in time rather than providing a predictive framework. Future research should analyze public library contestation through a random sample. This would allow researchers to affirm and expand upon the findings presented in this chapter, particularly the deviations in homeownership rates and Hispanic representation, and develop a comprehensive framework from which to analyze political contestation in public libraries.

Another limitation of this chapter is that focusing on news articles does not reveal every instance of libraries being sites of contestation, as other instances may have flown under the radar or taken place in media deserts. While the observational findings presented in this chapter remain robust, future research should focus on gathering data on the public libraries whose contestation the media may have overlooked. This may involve other methods of data collection, such as social media analysis and interviews, and in-depth case studies that could reveal further insight into ongoing public library contestation.

From a broad perspective, the findings presented in this chapter are useful to both policymakers and democracy scholars. The typologized framework of the categories of contestation helps practitioners pinpoint areas for improvement in library operations, resource

offerings, and opportunities for public involvement, and to draw comparisons between future instances of contestation in public libraries. Additionally, the demographic analysis presented here provides observations that can be used to draw comparisons between public libraries and contestation in other local institutional settings, such as school districts, local health departments, and other special districts. Taken together, the findings presented in this chapter represent a starting point for research on contemporary public library contestation as it pertains to civic engagement.

CHAPTER 4: Book Bans: Supporters and Impacts on Governance, Coalitions, and Citizenship

Abstract

Research on book bans has expanded in political science in recent years, particularly focusing on the rise of book bans. However, less is known about the types of community members that support book bans and how community members and local governments navigate the nuances of such policies. Through an analysis of the 2022 General Social Survey and a case of a failed attempt to implement book ban policies in the Huntington Beach Public Library System, this chapter presents insights on the characteristics of the community members who are most likely to support book bans, and how book ban policies can impact modes of governance, coalition development, and LGBTQ+ citizenship at the local level. The findings presented in this chapter inform how community members perceive the role of public libraries within their communities and how book bans influence civic life beyond the walls of public libraries.

Introduction

In this dissertation, I have so far explored how public libraries operate within the constraints of their institutional capacities and developed a framework to categorize the reasons why community members contest various aspects of public library operations and how this contestation manifests itself in the form of community mobilization. A throughline within these findings is that the primary service public libraries provide is access to books, and the primary reason community members contest their public libraries is because of access to different types of books.

This throughline is reflected in recent research documenting the rise of book bans. Goncalves et al. (2024) find that 1) book bans disproportionately impact books written by people of color and that feature characters of color in children's books; 2) right-leaning counties that

have become less conservative are more likely to implement book bans than their neighboring counties; and 3) interest in banned books are largely unaffected after they are banned, both at the national and state levels. In a similar vein, McGehee and Chrastka (2025) find that parents are divided on their opinions of book bans, with some supporting total bans of any books with people of color and LGBTQ+ characters, those discussing race, racism, and social justice, and those about puberty and sexuality, and others believing children should have unrestricted access to age-appropriate materials on all of the aforementioned topics. Lastly, the findings presented in chapter three of this dissertation show that book bans were the single most common reason for community members to contest their public libraries.

While research has focused on the rise of book bans, less is known about the characteristics of the community members who support book bans, how book bans are developed, and the impacts book bans—proposed and implemented—have on community members and public libraries. This chapter seeks to address this gap in the literature by asking: What are the demographic characteristics of those most likely to support book bans? Who or what is driving the development of book ban policies? How do book bans, whether implemented or proposed, impact community members, local institutions, and citizenship?

To answer these questions, I employ a multi-method approach. First, I analyze the 2022 General Social Survey, which asked respondents their thoughts on several hypothetical proposed book bans. I also conduct a media-driven case study, analyzing the recent, failed attempt to implement a formal process to ban books in the Huntington Beach Public Library System, using policy feedback theory as a framework for my analysis.

The findings presented in this chapter are relevant for those who study democracy, institutions, public policy, and public administration, and those who work in and with public

libraries. Specifically, the findings from the GSS survey analysis can inform future studies on the contexts in which community members support or oppose book bans within their public libraries, as well as in other contexts like school libraries. Additionally, the findings from the case study can inform future studies on how community members and public officials navigate their principal-agent relationship, as well as how different policies can impact local-level conceptualizations of citizenship.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I review relevant literature on public opinion, group consciousness, and policy feedback theory to center my analysis. Next, I introduce the methods used in this chapter, providing a brief overview of the 2022 GSS and the method for how I developed the case study. I then present the results and discussion of the survey and case study in two parts. First, I review the findings from the 2022 GSS and discuss their implications for book ban support. Then, I present the case in detail and discuss key insights from the case study through the lens of policy feedback theory. I conclude with a brief review of my key findings, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Converse (1964) defines belief systems as a "configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence." He argues that, when new information changes one "idea-element" in one's brain, others are likely to change shortly thereafter. He also argues that one's belief system has several sources of constraint when it comes to the ability to change: those that are logical, psychological, or social. The dissemination of public opinion attitudes follows a top-down process: as information or belief systems move from the elite level to that of the average person,

they become more easily defined and rigid in structure. Under the Converse model of belief systems, public opinion is often fragmented, narrow, and diverse.

Building off of Converse's framework, Zaller (1992; 2012) argues that an individual's political awareness can mediate the impact of elite-driven communication and influence on public opinion. Individuals have competing interests, and their "winning" opinion is determined by whichever considerations may be at the top of mind. As it pertains to how one develops their opinions on any given issue, Zaller presents the "Receive-Accept-Sample" model, in which an individual's opinions reflect their exposure to information, whether or not they view the information as aligned with their values, and, when asked to share an opinion, do so by "sampling" from the values, beliefs, and information they currently have.

While the role of elites (Bishin et al., 2021) can impact public opinion, one's own social identity and community affiliations also impact how they develop their own opinions and act on them. Group consciousness refers to one's identification with an identity group and their political awareness of their group's relative position in society (Gurin et al., 1980). Miller et al. (1981) present a theory on group consciousness and political participation which explains: a) that members from marginalized communities will participate in traditional forms of civic engagement like voting when they see how unjust systems give their respective communities relatively less power in society, and b) that members of marginalized communities will form group consciousness when the aforementioned dissatisfactions with a community's relative level of power are shared by many members of the community and subsequently politicized. They also identify several key insights regarding group consciousness. They define polar affect as one preferring their own group and a dislike for their outgroup and define polar power as the expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their group's status, power, or access to material

resources in relation to other groups. Moreover, they argue that identification with a subordinate group only promotes political participation when said group is politicized.

Group consciousness is particularly important for understanding public opinion as it pertains to race and ethnicity (Czaja et al., 2015; Czaja and Medenica, 2019; Scarborough and Holbrook, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, gender (Gurin 1985; Harnois 2015; Junn and Masuoka, 2024). Religious affiliation also plays a role in fostering group consciousness and political mobilization (Verba et al., 1995), although to varying degrees. This can be seen in the Black church (McDaniel, 2009; Dorien, 2015), mosques (Jamal, 2005), different socially conservative Protestant groups (Steensland and Wright, 2014; Lichtman, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2016), Jewish groups (Kaplan, 2015), and the Mormon church (May, 1980), among others. To an extent, group consciousness has been observed amongst those who identify as atheists as well (Haq, 2013). More recent literature has also started to look at how LGBTQ+ individuals can exhibit varying degrees of group consciousness (Chan and Magni, 2025).

Important to understanding the role group consciousness and identity may play in support for book bans in public libraries is how political identity impacts political behavior. Self-identification with a liberal or conservative political ideology is largely symbolic in nature (Conover and Feldman, 1981) and is something that, in recent decades, has grown to be one of the most salient social identities a person can have (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). A conservative political ideology in the U.S. is often, although not exclusively, associated with a more conservative religious ideology (Malka et al., 2012), particularly conservative Christianity (Williams, 2026; Sutton et al., 2020; Kruse, 2015). This has been seen most recently in the development of Christian Nationalism as a social identity (Walker et al., 2026).

Where the linkage of conservative Christianity and conservative political identity is particularly relevant for the study of book bans is that those who adhere to moral traditionalism, an umbrella ideology that encompasses a variety of conservative stances on social issues including gender roles, sexuality, and religion, are often associated with the Christian Right (de Koster and Van der Waal, 2007). This association has also been seen to vary by race and ethnicity, with some evidence that white, Christian Americans are stronger adherents to conservative stances on social issues (Perry et al., 2022; Perry and Whitehead, 2015). Taken together, this may suggest that one's identification with both Christianity and conservative political values may predispose them to support bans on books which have subject matter that counters moral traditionalism, as was seen in the historical review in Chapter 3 of this dissertation with the Family Friendly Libraries (see Gaffney, 2013). Indeed, rates of political tolerance for free speech on social identities considered controversial has declined across the political spectrum over the past several decades (Chong et al., 2024).

The impact of group consciousness on support for book bans is not isolated to individual public opinion. Rather, such support or lack thereof can also play in the way that libraries and administrators respond to public opinion. Public opinion can influence the selection and implementation of public policy (Schaffer et al., 2022; Lax and Phillips, 2009; Burstein, 2003). That said, once a policy is in place, it can become a force of influence itself. This is the core idea behind policy feedback theory: policies can shape and influence elite and institutional behaviors and attitudes, public opinion, and future policy implementation (Mettler and SoRelle, 2018). Policy feedback theory is significant because it provides a framework to analyze how political agendas and policy problems are defined and developed, how policies affect the form or mode of

governance, how they influence the power of groups and coalitions, and how policies can define the meaning of citizenship in a given context (SoRelle and Michener, 2022).

For this chapter, I analyze the case study through a policy feedback framework, specifically trying to see whether book ban policies impact the form of library governance and political mobilization. I also use the framework to analyze how the city council attempts to advocate for their proposed book ban policies. I expect the city council to co-opt a perceived level of public support for the policies, a strategy that has been seen used by other local governments (Savage and Sutherland, 2025).

Methods

This chapter employs a multi-method approach. First, I look at the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a biennial, nationally representative survey that collects data on public opinion as it pertains to contemporary American society. The survey also records many relevant socio-demographic information from survey respondents.

The 2022 GSS asked respondents to answer the following questions regarding potential book removals from public libraries. Respondents were randomly assigned either a gender neutral prompt ("this person") or a gendered prompt ("he"). Both sets of questions have been combined below, and the datasets for both sets of questions have been combined.

> **Q1:** There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against all churches and religion…
> If some people in your community suggested that a book (this person/he) wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
>
> **Q2:** Or consider a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior…
> If some people in your community suggested that a book (this person/he) wrote which said Blacks are inferior should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
>
> **Q3:** Now, we would like to ask you some questions about a self-identified Communist…

> Suppose (this person/he) wrote a book which is in your public library. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?
>
> **Q4:** Now consider a Islamic religious leader who preaches hatred of the United States… If some people in your community suggested that a book (this person/he) wrote which preaches hatred of the United States should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

The combined GSS dataset contains 2,341 total responses. After removing responses designated in the dataset as incomplete or not applicable, the cleaned GSS dataset for this chapter contains 1825 total responses. With this dataset, I use logistic regression analysis, with each of the four questions acting as a binary dependent variable within its respective model. Testing all four questions rather than one in isolation allows me to examine whether or not the content of the book facing a proposed ban matters, or whether demographic variables impact support for book bans regardless of content. Within my regression analyses, I include race (white, non-white), partisanship (Democrat, Republican, Independent), and religion (non-Christian, Christian) as independent variables. I also include the following interaction terms: race × religion, partisanship × religion, race × partisanship, and race × partisanship × religion in order to fully define the interaction effects and see whether partisanship, race, or both amplify or mitigate the impact that religion may have in determining support for book bans. I also control for age and gender. For analysis, I calculate the odds ratios for each of the independent variables and interaction terms.

Second, I conduct a media analysis on news coverage about the Huntington Beach Public Library System from 2023–2025, using targeted keyword searches on Google News and segmenting the searches within each calendar year to maximize the number of articles that could be found. Huntington Beach was chosen as the case for this chapter, given that it had several well-documented instances of government officials and community members alike contesting various aspects of public library operations throughout a two-year period. This provides a

significant opportunity to research the nuances of public opinion and public policy as it pertains to local-level institutions. The scope of the article collection includes all news articles about the library system. Where multiple news outlets covered the same topic, articles were filtered out only when they did not provide new information. In total, I consider 34 unique news articles.

4.1 Public Support for Book Removals

Appendix A provides the results of the logistic regression models for each of the four public library book removal questions. For this section, I present the odds ratios for the likelihood of support for book removal as it pertains to the following variables: partisanship, which includes Democrat, Republican, and Independent; race, which includes white and non-white; and religion, which includes non-Christian and Christian. Democrat, white, and non-Christian are the baselines for each of the variables within the models.

Table 4.1. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Anti-Religion (Author & Content) Book

Table 4.1. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Anti-Religion (Author & Content) Book

	Non-Christian		Christian	
Partisanship	White	Non-White	White	Non-White
Democrat	1.000	16.409	4.179	33.072
Republican	9.881	36.319	26.519	131.759
Independent	8.422	32.614	30.831	58.831

Note: 'Democrat, White, and Non-Christian' serves as the reference category. Values represent odds ratios (1.00 = reference).

Model 1 pertains to survey respondents' support for the removal of a book with anti-religious content written by an anti-religion author. Table 4.1 presents the odds ratios for the likelihood of support for the removal of the anti-religious book, as it pertains to the interactions between partisanship, race, and religion.

In comparison to the baseline non-Christian white democrats, all other groups are more likely to support the removal of the anti-religious book. For other white non-Christians,

Republicans are 9.8 times more likely, and Independents are 8.4 times more likely to support removal. For non-white non-Christians, Democrats are 16.4 times more likely, non-white Republicans are 36.3 times more likely, and Independents are 32.6 times more likely to support removal. For white Christians, Democrats are 4.2 times more likely, Republicans 26.5 times more likely, and Independents 30.8 times more likely to support removal. Finally, for non-white Christians, Democrats are 33.1 times more likely, Republicans 131.8 times more likely, and Independents 58.8 times more likely to support removing the anti-religious book from the public library.

Table 4.2. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Racist (Author & Content) Book

Table 4.2. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Racist (Author & Content) Book

	Non-Christian		Christian	
Partisanship	White	Non-White	White	Non-White
Democrat	1.000	1.484	1.388	2.709
Republican	0.722	0.945	1.383	1.791
Independent	0.928	1.421	2.114	1.092

Note: 'Democrat, White, and Non-Christian' serves as the reference category. Values represent odds ratios (1.00 = reference).

Model 2 pertains to survey respondents' support for the removal of a book with racist content written by a racist author. Table 4.2 presents the odds ratios for the likelihood of support for the removal of the racist book, as it pertains to the interactions between partisanship, race, and religion.

In comparison to the baseline non-Christian white Democrats, there is significant variability in support for removing the racist book from the public library. Indeed, white non-Christian Republicans and Independents, along with non-white non-Christian Republicans, were all less likely to support the books' removal than were non-Christian white Democrats: white

non-Christian Republicans 1.4 times less likely, white non-Christian Independents 1.1 times less likely, and non-white non-Christian Republicans 1.1 times less likely to support removal.

Each of the other groups was more likely than non-Christian white Democrats to support the racist book's removal. For non-white non-Christians, Democrats were 1.5 times more likely, and Independents were 1.4 times more likely to support removal. For white Christians, Democrats were 1.4 times more likely, Republicans 1.4 times more likely, and Independents 2.1 times more likely to support removal. Finally, for non-white Christians, Democrats were 2.7 times more likely, Republicans 1.8 times more likely, and Independents 1.1 times more likely to support removing the racist book from the public library.

Table 4.3. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Communist (Author & Content) Book

Table 4.3. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Communist (Author & Content) Book

	Non-Christian		Christian	
Partisanship	White	Non-White	White	Non-White
Democrat	1.000	9.691	4.487	11.393
Republican	5.547	10.375	10.852	35.444
Independent	5.682	11.068	12.824	26.309

Note: 'Democrat, White, and Non-Christian' serves as the reference category. Values represent odds ratios (1.00 = reference).

Model 3 pertains to survey respondents' support for the removal of a book with communist content written by a communist author. Table 4.3 presents the odds ratios for the likelihood of support for the removal of the communist book, as it pertains to the interactions between partisanship, race, and religion.

In comparison to the baseline non-Christian white Democrats, all other groups are more likely to support the removal of the communist book. For other white non-Christians, Republicans were 5.6 times more likely, and Independents 5.7 times more likely to support removal. For non-white non-Christians, Democrats were 9.7 times more likely, Republicans 10.4

times more likely, and Independents 11.1 times more likely to support removal. For white Christians, Democrats were 4.5 times more likely, Republicans 10.9 times more likely, and Independents 12.8 times more likely to support removal. Finally, for non-white Christians, Democrats were 11.4 times more likely, Republicans 35.4 times more likely, and Independents 26.3 times more likely to support removing the communist book from the public library.

Table 4.4. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Anti-American Content, Muslim Author Book

Table 4.4. Odds Ratios for Support for Removal of Anti-American Content, Muslim Author Book

	Non-Christian		Christian	
Partisanship	White	Non-White	White	Non-White
Democrat	1.000	1.967	1.778	3.931
Republican	2.276	1.356	3.003	5.782
Independent	1.824	3.057	3.811	3.464

Note: 'Democrat, White, and Non-Christian' serves as the reference category. Values represent odds ratios (1.00 = reference).

Model 4 pertains to survey respondents' support for the removal of a book with anti-American content written by a Muslim author. Table 4.4 presents the odds ratios for the likelihood of support for the removal of the anti-American book, as it pertains to the interactions between partisanship, race, and religion.

In comparison to the baseline non-Christian white democrats, all other groups are more likely to support the removal of the anti-American book written by a Muslim author. For other white non-Christians, Republicans were 2.3 times more likely, and Independents 1.8 times more likely to support removal. For non-white non-Christians, Democrats were 2 times more likely, Republicans 1.4 times more likely, and Independents 3.1 times more likely to support removal. For white Christians, Democrats were 1.8 times more likely, Republicans 3 times more likely, and Independents 3.8 times more likely to support removal. Finally, for non-white Christians, Democrats were 3.9 times more likely, Republicans 5.8 times more likely, and Independents 3.5

times more likely to support removing the anti-American books written by a Muslim author from the public library.

Aside from the racist book written by a racist author, every group of survey respondents was more likely to support the removal of each of the other "controversial" books than were non-Christian white Democrats. On the surface, this makes sense regarding all Christian groups being more likely to support the removal of the anti-religious book than the baseline non-Christian group. However, this trend was broadly observed across religious affiliations, partisanship, and race. Moreover, the trend of non-Christian white Democrats being the least supportive of the aforementioned three proposed book bans in comparison to all other groups is insightful because it suggests that non-Christian white Democrats may have more progressive views of the roles that public libraries, and, to an extent, some other local institutions, hold than do other groups.

Support for the proposed removals of the three books discussed so far—anti-religious, communist, and anti-American—can be categorized as more socially conservative stances. Indeed, all three of the topics of the books have historically been viewed more negatively by Republicans than by Democrats (Goncalves et al., 2024). However, support for the proposed removal of the racist book is more difficult to categorize. On the one hand, an openly racist book, like the one described in the survey question, would typically be something that Democrats would be less likely to support (Chong et al., 2024), which would suggest that support for the removal of the book would be a more socially liberal position. However, Democrats in general tend to oppose book bans of any kind more often than Republicans, even when they disagree with the content of the book (EveryLibrary Institute, 2022; Jaeger et al., 2023). Support for book bans, subsequently, is a more socially conservative position to take. This discrepancy between the content of the racist book and the action of removing the book creates the opportunity for

survey respondents to have more nuanced perspectives than with the anti-religious, communist, and anti-American books.

Indeed, we do see that support for the removal of the racist book has more nuanced findings. The only groups that are more likely to support the removal of the racist book than non-Christian white Democrats are non-Christian white Republicans and Independents, and non-Christian non-white Republicans. In other words, these three groups are more likely to support the public library retaining the racist book within its collection. Every other group—non-Christian non-white Democrats and Independents, and every Christian group—is more likely to support the removal of the racist book than are non-Christian white Democrats.

Because of the difficulties in defining the partisan stance of supporting the removal of the racist book, there are two possibilities at play to explain this finding. On the one hand, it may be the case that non-Christian non-white Democrats are more tolerant of the content of the racist book. This may suggest that this group in general is more tolerant of the content of all controversial books than any other group, as was observed with the other three books.

On the other hand, it may be the case that all non-white groups, aside from non-Christian Republicans, and all white Christian groups care more about limiting access to harmful content, in this case, racist rhetoric, than they do about protecting the ability for public libraries to be spaces to learn about a variety of different viewpoints. This may suggest that each of these groups, in general, is more supportive of banning any type of book if they perceive the book to be against their personal beliefs than are non-Christian non-white Democrats, as was observed with the other groups.

These two perspectives on the trends observed in all four books are not mutually exclusive. Non-Christian non-white Democrats in general may be more likely to be tolerant of

public libraries retaining controversial books, *and* the aforementioned groups—non-Christian non-white Democrats and Independents, and all Christians—may be more likely to support banning any type of book from public libraries that they perceive to be against their personal beliefs. Moreover, this duality suggests that the three groups that had discrepancies in their levels of support for banning the anti-religious, communist, and anti-American book in comparison to the racist book—non-Christian white Republicans, Independents, and non-white Republicans—may only support book bans when the books counter their partisan beliefs.

4.2 The Case of the Huntington Beach Public Library System

Case in Review

Huntington Beach, California, has long been a site of local-level political conflict, affecting nearly every local political institution, a trend which, up until recently, had spared the city's public library system. The Huntington Beach public library system became a spot of political conflict beginning in June 2023, with two separate votes at council meetings: one affecting children's access to books, and another affecting the funding of the public library system.

During the June 21, 2023, city council meeting, Councilmember Gracey Van Der Mark proposed a measure for the city attorney and city manager to research ways to make it more difficult for children to access LGBTQ+ books, which she deemed to be sexually explicit.[20] A few years before being elected to council, Van Der Mark notably had filed a formal request to remove *Gender Queer*—the most challenged book in the country in 2022—from the library's

[20] Arellano, G. (2023). Huntington Beach wants to keep 'obscene' books away from children. Good luck. *Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-06-30/huntington-beach-library-obscene-books

collection.[21] The council meetings saw over a hundred people in attendance to voice their concerns, and over 600 public comments were emailed. The greater community expressed opinions on both sides of the issue, with the debate centering around what institutional role the public library should hold throughout the discernment process for children's books. The board ultimately voted 4–3 to have the city attorney and manager look into options for making children's access to these materials more difficult.[22]

Only a few days after the vote, the city council announced it would explore potential cuts to the city's budget. Notably, one of the suggestions up for consideration was to close three of the city's five library locations. Mayor Tony Strickland noted that the suggestion to close library locations came from the city's staff, rather than from any community members. Instead, he said that the council had heard significant disapproval for the potential closures from community members.[23] In response to public backlash, in the following city council meeting, the council voted 7–0 to approve a budget that did not include closures of any public library locations.[24]

Later in Fall 2023, the council returned to the topic of restricting children's access to certain books in the library. Councilmember Rhonda Bolton proposed putting the book access restrictions for children up to a public vote as a ballot measure.[25] In a separate meeting, Van Der Mark, now Mayor Pro Tem, proposed a different resolution. Under her proposal, the council

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[21] Slaten, M. (2023). Here are 5 books people have asked the Huntington Beach Public Library to remove. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2023/07/07/here-are-five-books-people-have-asked-the-huntington-beach-public-library-to-remove/

[22] Slaten, M. (2023). Huntington Beach wants options for making it harder for children to access sexually explicit books. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2023/06/20/packed-room-for-tonights-huntington-beach-city-council-meeting-about-screening-childrens-books-at-city-libraries/

[23] Gonzalez, D. (2023). Proposed budget cuts in Huntington Beach include shutting down public libraries. *ABC7.* https://abc7.com/huntington-beach-budget-cuts-close-libraries-meeting/13429921/

[24] Slaten, M. (2023). Huntington Beach sets $500 million budget, addresses future deficit but avoids closing libraries. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2023/06/27/huntington-beach-sets-500000-budget-addresses-future-deficit-but-avoids-closing-libraries-downtown-shuttle/

[25] Biesiada, N. (2023). Huntington Beach Considers Potential Ballot Measures On Voter ID and Library Control. *Voice of Orange County*. https://voiceofoc.org/2023/09/huntington-beach-considers-potential-ballot-measures-on-voter-id-and-library-control/

would create a parent/guardian review board that would meet at least twice a year to review any new children's books for any sort of sexually explicit content.[26] This board would operate under an official prohibition for minors to access any content within public libraries deemed sexually explicit[27]. In a subsequent vote in an October council meeting, the city council voted 4–3 to implement the parental review board, despite about 90 percent of public comments, in the form of 128 people in person at the meeting and an additional 550 emails, reported as being against implementing the review board.[28]

City leaders began considering a different approach to managing the public library in early 2024. In closed-door meetings, they discussed privatizing the library, specifically having the Library Systems and Services company, which operates other public libraries in Riverside County, take over operations. The company itself has faced criticism in the past for union-busting.[29]

The same week that the report on the private discussions for library privatization came out, librarians began to review children's materials for sexually explicit content. Ashley Wyoscki, Huntington Beach's Director of Community and Library Services, informed librarians earlier in 2024 that the definition of sexually explicit they would be following came from Wikipedia: "explicit, implicit sexual behavior, such as flirting, or include sexual language and euphemisms."

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[26] Szabo, M. (2023). Huntington Beach City Council to consider review board to stop some books from hitting public library shelves. *The Lost Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2023-10-13/huntington-beach-city-council-to-consider-review-board-to-stop-some-books-from-hitting-public-library-shelves
[27] Replogle, J. (2023). Huntington Beach City Council Looks To Restrict Minor's Access To Books With Sexual Content. *LAist*. https://laist.com/news/politics/huntington-beach-restrict-books-sexual-content
[28] Szabo, M. (2023). Huntington Beach to use parent review board to vet children's books for public library, City Council decrees. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2023-10-18/huntington-beach-to-use-parent-review-board-to-vet-childrens-books-for-public-library-city-council-decrees
[29] Biesiada, N. (2024). Huntington Beach Studies Privatizing Public Library Management. *Voice of OC*. https://voiceofoc.org/2024/02/huntington-beach-studies-privatizing-public-library-management/

In early 2024, city librarians began to remove books pertaining to the human body and puberty out of the children's section in an effort to comply with the council's resolution to restrict access to books with content deemed sexually explicit for people under the age of 18. This policy was later clarified by library management to exclusively focus on what the council defined as "material with explicit sexual content and sexual references." This implemented review process was coupled with a new policy on children's library cards. The library expired library cards for anyone under the age of 18 on March 1. To renew them, they had to return to the library with a parent, who would have to approve whether the child could have access to check out all books, or only books from the children's section.[30]

Up to this point, the parental review board had still not gone into effect. However, in a February council meeting, the board voted down a resolution introduced by councilmember Natalie Moser that would have provided the general public with greater transparency on the review process.[31] In protest, for several weeks throughout February and March 2024, a group of community members began meeting outside of the Central Library to read books that had been removed from the children's section, a protest referred to as the "Banned Books Story Hour." During the same time, pride flags were graffiti-ed around the Central Library grounds, seemingly in protest of the parental review board. One of the graffiti flags included the phrase "We Belong."[32] Additionally, ahead of a March council meeting, EveryLibrary and PEN America, two public library and free speech interest groups, released a joint press release condemning the

[30] Replogle, J. (2024). Huntington Beach Librarians Begin Reviewing Kids' Books For 'Sexual Content.' *LAist*. https://laist.com/news/politics/huntington-beach-library-sexual-content-review
[31] Szabo, M. (2024). Huntington Beach City Council votes down item seeking transparency in children's book restrictions. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-02-21/huntington-beach-city-council-votes-against-item-seeking-transparency-in-childrens-book-restriction
[32] Szabo, M. (2024). Huntington Beach police investigating Pride flag graffiti at Central Library. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-03-12/huntington-beach-police-investigating-pride-flags-tagged-at-central-library

parental review board, as the council was going to vote to further expand the power of the review board to allow them to outright ban books from the library's collection, rather than simply restricting access to them.[33]

During the March 19, 2024, meeting, the council moved forward with their efforts to privatize the library system in a 4–3 vote, agreeing to seek out bids from companies like Library Systems and Services.[34] The conservative bloc argued that seeking out bids was just one way they were attempting to save the city money. During the council meeting, over 100 members of the public expressed their outrage over the vote, with Strickland demanding that the police remove those in the audience who had shouted out "Shame!" after the vote. The audience members in question ultimately were not removed from the meeting. The board would later deny a request to put the issue of privatization up for a public vote, rejecting dozens of public comments and over 400 emails sent in favor of a public vote.[35]

In the same March meeting, the council also approved an ordinance in a 4–3 vote that outlined further details on the library's children's book review board, outlining that: "The board will meet at least twice a year and will be subject to the state open meetings law. The city's community and library services department head will submit a list of new children's books intended for purchase 45 days ahead of meetings, and any board member may pull a book for review." Under this process, books under review cannot be purchased by the library until they are approved by the board, and decisions made by the board are not appealable, although they

[33] PEN America. (2024). EveryLibrary and PEN America Oppose Proposed Huntington Beach, CA Ordinance for Community Review of Children's Library Books. *Pen America*. https://pen.org/press-release/everylibrary-and-pen-america-oppose-proposed-huntington-beach-ca-ordinance-for-community-review-of-childrens-library-books/

[34] Szabo, M. (2024). Despite outcry, Huntington Beach council votes to seek bids for privatization of library management. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-03-20/huntington-beach-to-seek-bids-for-privatization-of-library-services

[35] Szabo, M. (2024). Huntington Beach won't send possible library outsourcing to voters to decide. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-05-08/huntington-beach-wont-send-possible-library-outsourcing-to-voters-to-decide

can be brought up for reconsideration a year after the first decision was made. Likewise, books not selected for review are automatically approved after 90 days.[36] The council would formally adopt the review board under these parameters two weeks later, adding Chapter 2.66 to the city's municipal code.[37]

Following the formal adoption of the review board and the rejection of a public vote on library privatization, a group of residents began collecting signatures on two petitions to counteract the council's efforts. One would create a ballot initiative that would repeal Chapter 2.66, abolishing the review board,[38] and the other would prevent the council from seeking out library privatization bids.[39] The petition efforts were led in part by the library system's Friends of the Library organization, which argued that residents wanted library operations to remain as they had been before the council's two controversial votes. However, Library Systems and Services, the only company that ended up putting in a bid to take over the library system, pulled out of consideration by mid-June 2024.[40] This put a formal end to the council's efforts to privatize the library system.

Huntington Beach's review board continued its work throughout the summer, something which was not isolated to the city. Similar review boards began to pop up in cities around the state, like Fresno. In response to the growing number of library materials review boards, along

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[36] Slaten, M. (2024). Huntington Beach approves rules for children's book review board. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2024/03/21/huntington-beach-approves-rules-for-childrens-book-review-board/

[37] Szabo, M. (2024). Huntington Beach formally adopts parent/ guardian children's book review board. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-04-03/huntington-beach-formally-adopts-parent-guardian-childrens-book-review-board

[38] Turner, A. (2024). Petitioners seek to repeal children's book review board in Huntington Beach. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-04-17/petitioners-seek-to-repeal-childrens-book-review-committee-in-huntington-beach

[39] Chang, H. (2024). 2 petitions look to overturn controversial changes at Huntington Beach libraries. *NBC Los Angeles*. https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/2-petitions-look-to-overturn-controversial-changes-at-huntington-beach-libraries/3426268/

[40] Hicks, A., and Biesiada, N. (2024). Surf City's Move to Privatize Public Libraries Falls Apart at 11th Hour. *Voice of OC*. https://voiceofoc.org/2024/06/surf-citys-move-to-privatize-public-libraries-falls-apart-at-11th-hour/

with similar legislation being passed in other Democratic-led states, the California state legislature proposed a bill that would "outlaw book review committees and other policies that limit access to materials at public libraries."[41] Signed into law in September by Newsom, AB 1825: The California Freedom to Read Act, prevents library systems in the state from implementing policies that ban or limit access to materials because of the views, ideas, or opinions expressed in them, or due to the materials containing sexual content.[42] Ahead of the bill's signing, Huntington Beach's City Attorney Michael Gates threatened to sue the state should the bill become law.[43]

In December 2024, both of the ongoing petitions to set up ballot initiatives to counter the council's recent conservative library policies had been delivered to the Orange County Registrar of Voters for signature verification. Both petitions had surpassed the requisite 13,247 valid signatures necessary for ballot initiative elections.[44] As a result, the petitions were first required to go before the council in their January 21, 2025, meeting. The council could decide to 1) adopt either or both of the initiatives outright, which would avoid an election, 2) order a report on the initiatives be generated and presented to them within 30 days for additional consideration, 3) put the questions before the voters in an already ongoing special election in April, or 4) put the questions before the voters in the next general election in November 2026.[45] Proponents of the

[41] Koseff, A. (2024). As LGBTQ library material comes under fire, California may ban book bans. *CalMatters*. https://calmatters.org/politics/capitol/2024/08/book-bans-california-libraries/
[42] Slaten, M. (2024). Newsom signs two laws that take aim at Huntington Beach initiatives on voter IDs and books. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2024/09/30/newsom-signs-two-laws-that-take-aim-at-recent-huntington-beach-initiatives/
[43] Ng, F., and Replogle, J. (2024). Huntington Beach city attorney says it will fight bill that prohibits public libraries from banning books. *LAist*. https://laist.com/news/politics/huntington-beach-opposes-bill-prohibiting-library-book-bans
[44] Szabo, M. (2024). Huntington Beach voters will likely decide library issues. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2024-12-31/huntington-beach-voters-will-likely-decide-library-issues
[45] Slaten, M. (2025). 2 Huntington Beach library ballot initiatives have gathered enough signatures to force public vote. *Orange County Register*. https://www.ocregister.com/2025/01/06/2-huntington-beach-library-ballot-initiatives-have-gathered-enough-signatures-to-force-public-vote/

initiatives were vying to have the initiatives added to the April special election so as not to delay the final vote for another year and a half.

In an effort seemingly to try and "run out the clock" on the special election, the council ordered reports to be generated on both of the initiatives, delaying the final fate of the initiatives to the following council meeting in February.[46] The council also began surveying residents via email about the nature of the signature-gathering efforts for both petitions, asking residents whether they had been "misled" into signing the petitions. Proponents of the initiatives speculated that this survey was being conducted to give the council's conservative majority grounds from which to sue those who had gathered signatures and invalidate both of the petitions.[47]

While the fate of the ballot initiatives was still being considered, on February 27, 2025, two Huntington Beach teenagers, one of the city's librarians, and the non-profit Alianza Translatinx filed a lawsuit against the city council with the support of the ACLU. The suit alleged that the review board violates the California Freedom to Read Act and the California Constitution.[48] As argued by David Loy, the legal director of the First Amendment Coalition: "For young people especially, freedom of thought begins with the freedom to read. To read is to explore and learn—to see one's experience reflected by others or to imagine oneself in the shoes of another. The government has no business standing in the way of young people as they grow

[46] Replogle, J. (2025). Clock is ticking on Huntington Beach library initiatives. *LAist*. https://laist.com/news/politics/huntington-beach-library-ballot-initiatives-study
[47] Szabo, M. (2025). Library petition proponents cry foul after Huntington Beach sends out survey. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2025-01-28/library-petition-proponents-cry-foul-after-huntington-beach-sends-out-survey
[48] Szabo, M. (2025). Huntington Beach teenagers part of group suing city over library policies. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2025-02-27/huntington-beach-teenagers-part-of-group-suing-city-over-library-policies

into adulthood by reading about the diverse experiences of the world around them."[49] In the following March council meeting, the conservative majority of the council vowed they would fight back against the suit. The council also decided on the fate of the ballot initiatives, setting a special election for June 10, 2025.[50]

In the three months leading up to the special election, opponents of the ballot initiatives placed controversial campaign signs around the city that read: "PROTECT OUR KIDS FROM PORN. NO on A & B." Many residents in the city were particularly upset about the signs due to the use of the word "porn," and many of the signs were either vandalized or removed by residents.[51] The city council also threatened to launch an investigation into the library's "Friends of the Library" organization, alleging that the non-profit had violated rules about donating to political campaigns. The allegations pertained to the non-profit's 501(c)(3) status, which does not allow such organizations to contribute to political organizations. However, the merit of the allegations was questionable, given that 501(c)(3) organizations are allowed to donate to committees that support or oppose ballot measures, as they had done in the lead-up to the special election.[52]

The voters in the special election ultimately supported both ballot measures. Measure A, which pertained to abolishing the community parent review board, received 58.38% approval of the measure. Measure B, which sought to prevent the privatization of the city's library system,

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[49] ACLU Southern California. (2025). Community Group and Huntington Beach Residents Sue City Over Library Censorship. *ACLU Southern California.* https://www.aclusocal.org/press-releases/community-group-and-huntington-beach-residents-sue-city-over-library-censorship/

[50] Szabo, M. (2025). Huntington Beach leaders respond to ACLU library lawsuit, set special election. https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/story/2025-03-05/huntington-beach-leaders-respond-to-aclu-library-lawsuit-set-special-election

[51] Chang, H., and Rendon, K. (2025). Controversial campaign signs that upset Huntington Beach parents were vandalized. *NBC Los Angeles*. https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/controversial-campaign-signs-that-upset-huntington-beach-parents-were-vandalized/3683682/

[52] Biesiada, N. (2025). Huntington Beach Calls for Probe of Library Nonprofit's Political Spending. *Voice of OC*. https://voiceofoc.org/2025/05/huntington-beach-calls-for-probe-of-library-nonprofits-political-spending/

received 60.52% approval of the measure.[53] While the city council would go on to attempt to fight the outcomes of the election throughout the remainder of the summer, the voters' decisions on both ballot measures are now city law.

Findings from the Case Study

The case of the Huntington Beach Library is reflective of a broader trend of public library systems implementing, being asked to implement, or being required to implement book bans. As discussed in Chapter 3, there has been a substantial increase in community members contesting the content of their public libraries' collections. While not within the scope of this chapter, this trend has also been observed within public school library collections around the country (Goncalves et al., 2024). With that in mind, analyzing this case through the lens of policy feedback theory provides several insights into book bans as a form of public policy. As SoRelle and Michener (2022) note, policy feedback theory provides a framework to analyze how political agendas and policy problems are defined and developed, how policies affect the form or mode of governance, how they influence the power of groups and coalitions, and how policies can define the meaning of citizenship in a given context.

Regarding the definition and development of political agendas and policy problems, the case of Huntington Beach shows how the scope of book bans and restrictions was primarily elite-driven. The debate surrounding limiting or removing children's access to LGBTQ+ materials directly stemmed from councilmember Gracey Van Der Mark's formal request to have the book *Gender Queer* removed from the library's collection a few years before her election to the city council. Throughout the duration of the case, Van Der Mark was at the forefront of adding the

[53] Rodriguez, M. (2025). Voters reject Huntington Beach's library review board in special election. *CBS News Los Angeles*. https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/huntington-beach-special-election-library-review-board-rejected/

topic of book bans and restrictions to the city council's political agenda. While members of the public routinely provided comments, both emailed and in-person at council meetings, it is unclear whether public opinion informed the council's decision-making process, as the restriction policies came from the council itself rather than from public comments demanding a change to public library content access. While the council reversed course on potentially closing library locations to address budgetary shortfalls in response to backlash from the community, the council routinely ignored similar public outcry towards the establishment of a parent/guardian review board for children's materials within the library. Taken together, political elites rather than community members play a leading role in setting the political agenda when it comes to book bans or restrictions on access to public library materials.

The case of the Huntington Beach Library also highlights how public policy can affect forms or modes of governance. One significant outcome observed within the case is how the city council's desire to limit or ban children's access to LGBTQ+ materials led the council to attempt to establish a new governmental institution: a parent/guardian review board that would operate under an official prohibition for minors to access any content within public libraries deemed to be sexually explicit. This review board was introduced in response to another councilmember's proposal to put restrictions on children's access to these materials up to a public vote. Within the realm of policy feedback theory, the establishment of the review board represents how public policy—book bans and restrictions—can affect forms or modes of governance, in this case, removing authority from the public library system and giving it to a new governmental institution. The review board took away discretionary authority for book purchasing from the public library system itself, requiring all new children's books to be approved by the board.

Taken together, book ban policies and restrictions can lead to both the establishment of new forms of government and modifications to existing forms of government.

The case also demonstrates how policies can influence the power of groups and the formation of coalitions. In every council meeting pertaining to changes in public library policy and governance, the general public mobilized to express their opinions on the policy and governance changes through the council's public comment forum, often responding negatively to the proposed changes. Moreover, in response to some books being removed from the children's section, community members organized a "Banned Books Story Hour" where they would protest the book restriction policy by reading the affected books out loud outside of the city's library locations. National organizations, including EveryLibrary, PEN America, and the ACLU, got involved with community organizers, and community members successfully came together to collect signatures for ballot initiatives to end the review board and the push to privatize the library system. This community mobilization was directly in response to the book ban and restriction policies and attempted changes to library governance. This sheds light on the ways that policies banning or restricting access to books can influence the development of coalitions and the power of groups. Connected with the findings from Chapter 3, this case shows how public library contestation is not something typically carried out by individuals, but rather by groups of community members and coalitions supported by broader organizations.

Lastly, the case demonstrates how policies banning or restricting access to books work to define or manipulate the meaning of citizenship in a given context. From a content standpoint, the policies were specifically designed to limit children's access to LGBTQ+ materials. Throughout the duration of the case, LGBTQ+ materials of any kind were deemed sexually explicit, pornographic, and content that is deserving of being restricted. The focus on restricting

LGBTQ+ materials signals to members of the LGBTQ+ community within Huntington Beach that their mere existence is deserving of restriction. The othering of the LGBTQ+ community can directly impact how they feel connected to their communities and whether they feel fully incorporated as citizens (Kagedan, 2020; Phelan, 2010).

Councilmembers advocating for the policies restricting access to LGBTQ+ materials did not frame the policy solely along a perceived moral standpoint. Rather, the policies were framed around age-based restrictions on accessing LGBTQ+ materials within the library: creating new children's library cards for those under the age of 18 that required parental approval for those holding these new library cards to have access to materials outside of the children's section. Framing the policy around age-based restrictions rather than an outright content ban for all community members has some precedent: age-based discrimination is largely legal in the United States if it serves a specific, compelling government interest, such as driving, voting, and purchasing alcohol. Building the book ban and restriction policies around age-based discrimination provides a way for supporters of the policy to argue that they are not violating LGBTQ+ civil rights but rather are behaving within the legal norm of age-based discrimination.

Even with the legal precedent of age-based discrimination, the review board was eventually challenged legally as a step too far beyond legal precedent for age-based discrimination, rather than as an LGBTQ+ civil rights issue. The suit, filed by two Huntington Beach teenagers, one of the city's librarians, and the non-profit Alianza Translatinx, argued that the implementation of a review board for LGBTQ+ materials violated the California Freedom to Read Act and the California Constitution because such bans and restrictions on access to books restrict the ability of all community members, regardless of age, to fully exercise the scope of their citizenship as city residents. The focus of such book ban and restriction policies on

children's access to LGBTQ+ materials, both within Huntington Beach and in library systems around the country, demonstrates how such policies actively challenge the definition of LGBTQ+ citizenship under the guise of adhering to the legal precedent of age-based discrimination. Approaching book bans in such a way that pairs relatively uncontroversial legal precedent—age-based discrimination—with a controversial policy goal—LGBTQ+ discrimination—may be a deliberate or functional strategy to make exclusionary policies much more legally defensible.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I concluded my analysis of how public libraries negotiate efficacy in an era of increased contestation by analyzing book ban and restriction policies, both through a public policy and policy feedback theory lens. First, I explored relevant literature pertaining to public opinion and group consciousness and introduced the policy feedback theory framework. Then, I analyzed public opinion data from the 2022 General Social Survey pertaining to proposed bans on various types of books, paying particular attention to survey respondents' race and ethnicity, religious affiliations, and political parties. Finally, I presented a case study on the Huntington Beach Library's recent, failed attempt to ban or restrict children's access to LGBTQ+ materials, exploring how the case can provide insights into the growing trend of book bans and restrictions taking place around the country, particularly as to how they can impact local-level citizenship.

The analysis of the GSS survey revealed that non-Christian white Democrats are the least likely group to support the removal of controversial books, aside from the racist book written by a racist author. All other groups were more likely to support book removals in the other cases, consistent across religious affiliation, partisanship, and race. The findings about the racist book

suggest two possible, not mutually exclusive, explanations: 1) non-Christian non-white Democrats may be more tolerant of the content of controversial books than the other groups; and 2) all non-white groups, aside from non-Christian Republicans, and all white Christian groups may care more about limiting access to controversial content than they do about protecting the ability for public libraries to be spaces to learn about a variety of different viewpoints, suggesting that each of these groups is more supportive of book bans if they perceive the book to be against their personal beliefs.

The case study revealed several key findings relevant to understanding book bans as a form of public policy: 1) political elites, not community members, play a leading role in setting the political agenda when it comes to book bans or restrictions on access to public library materials; 2) book ban policies and restrictions can lead to both the establishment of new forms of government and modifications to existing forms of government; 3) public library contestation is not something typically carried out by individuals, but rather by groups of community members and coalitions supported by broader organizations; and 4) book ban policies that actively challenge the definition of LGBTQ+ citizenship do so under the guise of adhering to an age-based discrimination legal precedent.

There are some key limitations to this chapter that can inform future avenues of research. First, the GSS survey represents hypothetical book bans rather than specific books. Had the survey included specific book titles that regularly see ban attempts across the country, such as *Gender Queer*, the survey results may have been different, as respondents would be presented with a more realistic book ban. Future research should focus on surveying different groups' perspectives on proposed book bans for books that regularly see bans around the country to offer a comparative perspective on the findings presented in this chapter.

Additionally, while the Huntington Beach case is representative of ongoing book bans around the country, there were unique aspects of the case, particularly the city council's involvement in the push for book bans, that make the case unique from other library systems where a library board has the final authority to implement book bans. Future research should continue analyzing pushes to ban books in public libraries around the country, particularly looking at public library systems with differing governance structures.

The findings presented in this chapter are particularly relevant for those who study democracy, institutions, public policy, and public administration, and those who work in and with public libraries. The findings from the GSS survey analysis can inform future studies on the contexts in which community members support or oppose book bans within their public libraries, as well as in other contexts like school libraries. Similarly, the findings from the Huntington Beach case study can inform future studies on how community members and public officials navigate their principal-agent relationship.

Conclusion

When the West Chicago Library Board (WCLB) voted 6–1 to retain the LGBTQ+ children's book, *This Day in June*, within its children's collection, the board was doing much more than simply a procedural vote on the placement of an item within its collection. Their vote made a clear statement that public libraries exist to serve all community members, and that this mission requires relative autonomy in their discernment processes.

While the case of the WCLB was relatively isolated at the time, political contestation of public libraries has since become a common occurrence around the country. While the WCLB's vote serves as a model for how public libraries can push back against contestation, not all public libraries respond in the same way. The increase in contestation and variability of public library responses informed my inquiry to understand how public libraries negotiate their efficacy in an era where their institutional functions and existence are contested by community members and politicians.

To answer this question, I employed a multi-study and multimethod approach to different aspects of public library functions, governance, and their relationships with their communities. In Chapter 1, I provided a brief overview of the structure and governance of public libraries to introduce a foundation for the case selection process for the remainder of the dissertation. This overview showed how public libraries are structurally diverse institutions, including their revenue sources, the communities they serve, and their legal basis, all of which can shape what a public library can or cannot do.

In Chapter 2, I argued that community partisanship motivates service expansion and innovation in times of crisis. Through a statistical analysis of the 2022 Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, I found that public library systems that serve more Democratic-aligned communities are more likely to engage in policy innovation during the

pandemic than those serving more Republican-aligned communities. This suggests that public library systems can exercise greater degrees of latitude when responding to crises so long as they serve communities whose partisanship lends itself to greater support for local government.

In Chapter 3, I set out to define the present moment of the political contestation of public libraries. Through a media analysis of news articles documenting instances of public library contestation from 2014–2023, I developed a framework from which to typologize individual cases of contestation: categories of contemporary library contestation and the reasons behind it. Using the categories of Content, Event, Operations, and Site of Protest, I then presented an observational analysis of the demographic and political characteristics of the communities whose libraries have been contested. I found that the communities that saw contestation on average had similar demographics to the country as a whole, save for homeownership rates and Hispanic populations. This suggests that most demographic characteristics of communities do not influence the likelihood of public library contestation on their own.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I conducted a multi-method analysis on one of the most dominant categories of contestation: content. I analyzed the 2022 General Social Survey and presented a case study on book ban policies implemented in the Huntington Beach Public Library System to look at the types of community members that support book bans and how community members and local governments navigate the nuances of such policies. My GSS analysis found that non-Christian white Democrats are generally the least likely group to support the removal of controversial books. In the case study, I found that efforts to ban books are elite-driven; such policies can impact existing and create new forms of government and influence coalition development; and that book ban policies which actively challenge the definition of LGBTQ+ citizenship do so under the guise of adhering to an age-based discrimination legal precedent.

These findings help to understand the impact that political contestation can have on public library governance and vulnerable communities.

The findings presented in this dissertation suggest that public library efficacy is neither guaranteed by institutional structure nor determined solely by resources. Instead, efficacy is actively negotiated through the political and social contexts in which libraries operate. In the current era of many different kinds of local institutions being contested, public library efficacy is something that must be actively fought for. This fight is being carried out by public library boards, librarians and staff, other elected officials, and community members who understand the civic importance of public libraries.

However, an important warning from this dissertation is that, if public libraries are ignored by community members and scholars alike, they risk succumbing to democratic backsliding, which can lead to a reduction in their ability to be civic institutions that provide resources and services to all community members. I hope that this study will become one of many within political science that seek to analyze and protect democratic institutions at the local level. Public libraries are but one case in a broad pattern of institutional contestation, and it is our responsibility as researchers to be curious about how our work can best serve these institutions and meet communities where they are.

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APPENDIX A

Table A.1. Logistic Regression Results for Book Removal Support

Table A.1. Logistic Regression Results for Book Removal Support				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	0.004	-0.020***	0.009**	0.004
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female	0.139	0.051	0.304**	0.243*
	(0.129)	(0.099)	(0.113)	(0.098)
Race (Non-white)	2.798***	0.394	2.271***	0.676*
	(0.655)	(0.264)	(0.394)	(0.272)
Partisanship (R)	2.291***	-0.326	1.713***	0.822**
	(0.691)	(0.294)	(0.423)	(0.273)
Partisanship (I)	2.131**	-0.075	1.737***	0.601**
	(0.655)	(0.227)	(0.379)	(0.231)
Christian	2.330***	0.328	1.501***	0.575**
	(0.613)	(0.188)	(0.348)	(0.194)
Non-White × R	-1.497	-0.125	-1.646*	-1.196
	(0.959)	(0.673)	(0.769)	(0.692)
Non-White × I	-1.442	0.031	-1.607**	-0.161
	(0.770)	(0.402)	(0.519)	(0.404)
Non-White × Christian	-1.629*	0.274	-1.339**	0.117
	(0.701)	(0.328)	(0.450)	(0.333)
R × Christian	-1.342	0.322	-0.830	-0.299
	(0.725)	(0.336)	(0.462)	(0.315)
I × Christian	-1.033	0.495	-0.687	0.161
	(0.704)	(0.304)	(0.440)	(0.305)
Non-White × Christian × R	0.588	0.108	1.067	0.758
	(1.049)	(0.769)	(0.860)	(0.783)
Non-White × Christian × I	-0.111	-0.864	0.704	-0.568
	(0.880)	(0.531)	(0.636)	(0.531)
Constant	-4.720***	0.146	-3.714***	-1.454***
	(0.613)	(0.197)	(0.357)	(0.208)
Observations	1825	1825	1825	1825
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				