

The Book-Bans Debate Has Finally Reached a Turning Point

Potentially the most consequential shift has come from the Biden administration.

By Ronald Brownstein



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Across multiple fronts, Democrats and their allies are stiffening their resistance to a surge of Republican-led book bans.

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in the past month have conspicuously escalated their denunciations of the book bans proliferating in schools across the country, explicitly linking them to restrictions on abortion and voting rights to make the case that “MAGA extremists” are threatening Americans’ “personal freedom,” as Biden said in the recent video announcing his campaign for a second term.

Last week, Illinois became the first Democratic-controlled state to pass legislation designed to discourage local school districts from banning books. And a prominent grassroots progressive group today will announce a new national campaign to organize mothers against the conservative drive to remove books and censor curriculum under the banner of protecting “parents’ rights.”

“We are not going to let the mantle of parents’ rights be hijacked by such an extreme minority,” Katie Paris, the founder of the group, Red Wine and Blue, told me.

These efforts are emerging as red states have passed a wave of new laws restricting how classroom teachers can talk about race, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as measures making it easier for critics to pressure schools to remove books from classrooms and libraries. Partly in response to those new statutes, the number of banned books has jumped by about 30 percent in the first half of the current school year as compared with last, according to a recent compilation by PEN America, a free-speech group founded by notable authors.

To the frustration of some local activists opposing these measures in state legislatures or school boards, the Biden administration has largely kept its distance from these fights. Nor did Democrats, while they controlled Congress, mount any sustained resistance to the educational constraints spreading across the red states.

But the events of the past few weeks suggest that this debate has clearly reached a turning point. From grassroots organizers like Paris to political advisers for Biden, more Democrats see book bans as the weak link in the GOP’s claim that it is upholding “parents’ rights” through measures such as restrictions on curriculum or legislation targeting transgender minors. A national CBS poll released on Monday found overwhelming opposition among Americans to banning books that discuss race or criticize U.S. history. “There is something about this idea of book

banning that really makes people stop and say, ‘I may be uncomfortable with some of this transitional treatment kids are getting, and I don’t know how I feel about pronouns, but I do not want them banning books,’” says Guy Molyneux, a Democratic pollster.

The conservative call to uphold parents’ rights in education has intensified since Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin in 2021 unexpectedly won the governorship in blue-leaning Virginia partly behind that theme. In the aftermath of long COVID-related shutdowns across many school districts, Youngkin’s victory showed that “Republicans really did tap into an energy there” by talking about ways of “giving parents more of a choice in education,” Patrick Brown, a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center who specializes in family issues, told me.

But as the parents’-rights crusade moved through Republican-controlled states, it quickly expanded well beyond academic concerns to encompass long-standing conservative complaints that liberal teachers were allegedly indoctrinating kids through “woke” lessons.

New red-state laws passed in response to those arguments have moved the fight over book banning from a retail to a wholesale level. Previously, most book bans were initiated by lone parents, even if they were working with national conservative groups such as Moms for Liberty, who objected to administrators or school boards in individual districts. But the new statutes have “supercharged” the book-banning process, in PEN’s phrase, by empowering critics to simultaneously demand the removal of more books in more places. Five red states—Florida, Texas, Missouri, South Carolina, and Utah—have now become the epicenter of book-banning efforts, the study concluded.

Biden and his administration were not entirely silent as these policies proliferated. He was clear and consistent in denouncing the initial “Don’t Say Gay” law that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis passed to bar

discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades. But that was the exception. Even during the 2022 campaign, when Biden regularly framed Republicans as a threat to voting and abortion rights, he did not highlight red-state book bans and curriculum censorship. Apart from abortion and voting, his inclination has been to focus his public communications less on culture-war disputes than on delivering kitchen-table benefits to working families. Nor had Education Secretary Miguel Cardona done much to elevate these issues either. “We have not seen a lot of visibility” from the Education Department, says Nadine Farid Johnson, PEN’s managing director for Washington.

The administration’s relative disengagement from the classroom wars, and the limited attention from national progressive groups, left many grassroots activists feeling “isolated,” Paris said. Revida Rahman, a co-founder of One WillCo, an organization that advocates for students of color in affluent and predominantly white Williamson County, south of Nashville, told me that the group has often felt at a disadvantage trying to respond to conservative parents working with national right-leaning groups to demand changes in curriculum or bans on books with racial or LGBTQ themes. “What we are fighting is a well-funded and well-oiled machine,” she told me, “and we don’t have the same capacity.”

Pushback from Democrats and their allies, though, is now coalescing. Earlier this month, the Freedom to Learn initiative, a coalition organized mostly by Black educators, held a series of events, many on college campuses, protesting restrictions on curriculum and books. The Red Wine and Blue group is looking to organize a systematic grassroots response. Founded in 2019, the organization has about 500,000 mostly suburban mothers in its network and paid organizers in five states. The group has already provided training for local activists to oppose curriculum censorship and book bans, and today it is launching the Freedom to Parent 21st Century Kids project, a more sweeping counter to conservative parents’-rights groups. The project will include virtual training sessions for activists, programs in which participants can talk

with transgender kids and their parents, and efforts to highlight banned books. “We want to equip parents to talk about this stuff,” Paris told me. “It’s moms learning from moms who already faced this in their community.”

Illinois opened another front in this debate with its first-in-the-nation bill to discourage book banning. The legislation will withhold state grants from school districts unless they adopt explicit policies to prohibit banning books in response to partisan or ideological pressure. Democratic Governor J. B. Pritzker has indicated that he will sign the bill.

Potentially the most consequential shift has come from the Biden administration. The president signaled a new approach in his late-April announcement video, when he cited book bans as evidence for his accusation that Republicans in the Donald Trump era are targeting Americans’ “personal freedom.” That was, “by far, the most we have seen on” book bans from Biden, Farid Johnson told me.

One senior adviser close to Biden told me that the connection of book bans to those more frequent presidential targets of abortion and democracy was no accident. “There is a basic American pushback when people are told what they can and cannot do,” said the adviser, who asked for anonymity while discussing campaign strategy. “Voters,” the adviser said, “don’t like to be told, ‘You can’t make a decision about your own life when it comes to your health care; you can’t make a decision about what book to read.’ I think book bans fit in that broader context.”

Biden may sharpen that attack as soon as Saturday, when he delivers the commencement address at Howard University. Meanwhile, Vice President Harris has already previewed how the administration may flesh out this argument. In her own speech at Howard last month, she cited book bans and curriculum censorship as components of a red-state social regime that the GOP will try to impose nationwide if it wins the

White House in 2024. In passing these laws, Republicans are not just “impacting the people” of Florida or Texas, she said. “What we are witnessing—and be clear about this—is there is a national agenda that’s at play ... Don’t think it’s not a national agenda when they start banning books.”

The Education Department has also edged into the fray. When the recent release of national test scores showed a decline in students’ performance on history, Cardona, the education secretary, issued a statement declaring that “banning history books and censoring educators ... does our students a disservice and will move America in the wrong direction.”

His statement came months after the department’s Office of Civil Rights launched an investigation that could shape the next stages of this struggle. The office is probing whether a Texas school district that sweepingly removed LGBTQ-themed books from its shelves has violated federal civil-rights laws. The department has not revealed anything about the investigation’s status, but PEN’s Farid Johnson said if it concludes that the removals violated federal law, other districts might be deterred from banning books.

The politics of the parents’-rights debate are complex. Republicans are confident that their interconnected initiatives related to education and young people can win back suburban voters, especially mothers, who have rejected the party in the Trump era. Polling, including surveys done by Democratic pollsters last year for the American Federation of Teachers, has consistently found majority national support for some individual planks in the GOP agenda, including the prohibitions on discussing sexual orientation in early grades.

Brown said he believes that at the national level, the battle over book bans is likely to end in a “stalemate.” That’s not only, he argued, because each side can point to examples of extreme behavior by the other in

defending or removing individual books, but also because views on what's acceptable for kids vary so much from place to place. "We shouldn't expect a national consensus on what book is appropriate for a 13-year-old to be reading, because that's going to be different among different parents in different communities," Brown told me.

Yet as the awakening Democratic resistance suggests, many in the party are confident that voters will find the whole of the GOP agenda less attractive than the sum of its parts. In that 2022 polling for the teachers' union, a significant majority of adults said they worry less that kids are being taught values their parents don't like than that culture-war fights are diverting schools from their real mission of educating students. Paris said the most common complaint she hears from women drawn to her group is that the conservative activists proclaiming parents' rights are curtailing the freedoms of other parents by trying to dictate what materials all students can access. "What you'll have women in our communities say all the time is 'If you don't want your kid to read a book, that's fine, but you don't get to decide for me and my family,'" she told me.

The White House, the senior official told me, believes that after the Supreme Court last year rescinded the right to abortion, many voters are uncertain and uneasy about what rights or liberties Republicans may target next. "There is a fear about *Where does it stop?*," the official said, and book bans powerfully crystallize that concern. Trump and DeSantis, who's expected to join the GOP race, have both indicated that they intend to aggressively advance the conservative parents'-rights agenda of attacks on instruction they deem "woke" and books they consider indecent. Biden and other Democrats, after months of hesitation, are stepping onto the field against them. The library looms as the next big confrontation in the culture war.

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