**Headline:** Republicans Want to Defund Our Libraries

**Teaser:** Claiming to protect children, Republicans are going after libraries and librarians instead of the police, gun manufacturers, and actual child sexual abusers.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

Missouri Republicans in early April voted to cut all public funding for libraries as part of their state budget proposal.

Leading the move was [Cody Smith](https://apnews.com/article/libraries-funding-lgbtq-gay-books-fbb4f9d536b116390949e15f697d5ec8), a top Republican lawmaker and chair of the state’s budget committee, who made no attempt to hide the fact that he was retaliating against librarians because they dared to join the ACLU in suing the state over a [Republican-led book ban](https://kcbeacon.org/stories/2022/11/22/missouri-book-challenge-secretary-of-state/). Smith [said](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/librarians-say-a-missouri-house-proposal-to-eliminate-library-funding-would-have-devastating-ripple-effects), “I don’t think we should subsidize the attempts to overturn laws that we also created,” even though the ACLU is entirely funding the lawsuit.

Indeed, Republicans forced Missouri’s librarians into suing their state in what appears to be yet another flashpoint in the GOP’s increasingly desperate culture wars. In 2022 the GOP passed [SB 775](https://www.kcur.org/news/2023-02-23/aclu-sues-missouri-over-book-ban-law-that-pushed-school-libraries-to-remove-hundreds-of-titles), criminalizing librarians for providing “sexually explicit” material to minors. They face a $2,000 fine or up to a year in jail if found in violation of the bizarre law.

Thankfully, the state Senate Appropriations Committee moved quickly to restore public library funding, with Senate Republican [Lincoln Hough](https://kcbeacon.org/stories/2023/04/21/missouri-library-funding/) admitting, “I think it was kind of a punitive cut that the House made.”

But the threat still remains after Missouri’s Republican State Secretary [Jay Ashcroft](https://www.npr.org/2023/05/04/1173274834/book-bans-library-funding-missouri-texas-ashcroft) pushed through an administrative rule that threatens funding if libraries violate the book ban. He did so in an explicitly undemocratic manner, saying, “I have to figure out how to do this, because by rule I can get it done much more quickly than if I wait on the legislature.”

“Defund the Library” could be the GOP’s new slogan, succinctly encompassing a free-market agenda to destroy public funding of institutions that enlighten and educate, all under the disingenuous banner of “protecting children.”

Missouri’s library debacle isn’t an isolated incident. [Patmos Library](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/90930-michigan-library-association-defends-library-defunded-over-lgbtq-books.html) in Jamestown, Michigan, lost its public funding last November after it refused to ban books that conservative voters deemed objectionable.

[Louisiana](https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/2023/04/27/louisiana-silences-opposition-to-library-bill-restricting-access-to-sexually-explicit-lgbt-material/70158945007/) Republicans are also advancing a state bill that threatens library funding over material deemed objectionable.

And Texas Republicans voted to cut library funding in [retaliation](https://www.texastribune.org/2023/04/04/texas-drag-queen-shows-senate/) for “drag queen story hour” readings, again claiming to do so in order to protect children from being exposed to men and gender-nonconforming individuals wearing makeup and dresses with pride.

A [Vox analysis](https://www.vox.com/politics/2023/5/5/23711417/republicans-want-to-defund-public-libraries-book-bans) of libraries under attack explained the disturbing trend: “Usually, lawmakers start with book bans. If the bans aren’t as effective as they’d hope, they escalate to threatening to defund local libraries.”

U.S. libraries have long been institutions embodying freedom: the freedom to learn, and to do so anonymously, without regard to one’s financial status. When Congress rushed through the USA PATRIOT Act in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, [librarians](https://slate.com/technology/2015/06/usa-freedom-act-before-snowden-librarians-were-the-anti-surveillance-heroes.html#:~:text=Librarians%20were%20among%20the%20first,which%20passed%20in%20October%202001.) were among the first to counter the anti-democratic law, refusing to spy on their users for the government. They stood up to the federal government and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation. One Connecticut librarian named [Peter Chase](https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/librarians-speak-out-first-time-after-being-gagged-patriot-act), who was bound by a government gag order over a requirement to turn over records, said, “As a librarian, I believe it is my duty and responsibility to speak out about any infringement to the intellectual freedom of library patrons.”

Libraries offer free use of computers and [free internet service](https://www.beanstack.com/blog/how-librarians-in-rural-communities-are-bridging-the-digital-divide), an especially important service for people living in low-income neighborhoods, rural areas, and tribal communities. During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns forced children out of classrooms, many libraries created community hot spots and enabled Wi-Fi access in their parking lots so that kids without home internet could connect remotely with their classrooms.

Libraries do so much more than lend books. They offer passport services, help with job applications and school research, and provide low-cost or free spaces for community events. They promote local authors and participate in city-wide reading programs and book clubs. A 2021 [California report](https://www.library.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Value-of-Libraries.pdf) on libraries in the state concluded that “Through digital labs, makerspaces, career centers and business resources, memory labs, public programs, community partnerships, and online resources, public libraries help communities explore, learn, connect, and have fun beyond their traditional ‘library’ brand.”

When Vermont Senator [Bernie Sanders](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/10/19/preparing-to-define-democratic-socialism-bernie-sanders-points-to-libraries-and-the-police/) ran for president in the 2016 election, he cited public funding of libraries as an example of democratic socialism in action, and libraries as “socialist institutions.”

Indeed, these socialist institutions are hugely popular. A [Gallup poll](https://news.gallup.com/poll/284009/library-visits-outpaced-trips-movies-2019.aspx) of leisure activities conducted every 10 years found in 2019 that going to the library was “the most common cultural activity Americans engage in,” even more so than going to the movie theater. Libraries were far more popular among women than men, and low-income residents were far more likely to use their local library’s services than their higher-income neighbors.

In Michigan, where several libraries are dealing with book bans and where Patmos Library in Jamestown faced defunding, a March 2023 [poll](https://michiganadvance.com/2023/05/04/poll-finds-majority-of-voters-oppose-efforts-to-ban-books-and-attack-libraries/) found broad support among the public, across party lines and political affiliations, to support libraries and the free dissemination of information.

These days it seems as though any public institution that actually helps and protects Americans is ripe for Republican-led destruction. It’s no wonder that conservatives are [taking aim](https://stoppingsocialism.com/2022/10/public-libraries-have-become-bastions-of-marxism/) at this pillar of American democracy, deeming libraries “bastions of Marxism,” and “woke” purveyors of material that encourages racial justice and questions sexual orthodoxy. Not only have hundreds of [books been banned](https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/) across the country, but Republicans, like the ones in Missouri, are threatening librarians across the nation with fines and imprisonment. The [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/18/school-librarians-jailed-banned-books/) in a May 2023 analysis found that “[a]t least seven states have passed such laws in the last two years.”

Unlike police, who [routinely kill and maim Americans](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1821204116), and who rightfully deserve to be targeted with defunding, and unlike gun manufacturers whose weapons continue to wreak constant [violence and death](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081) across the country, librarians are the ones protecting and serving the public and its right to access information freely. But the GOP prefers to protect police and weapons makers while attacking librarians.

One New Jersey high school librarian named [Martha Hickson](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/20/us-book-bans-fight-school-library) was shocked to face unfounded accusations from a conservative of being “a pedophile, a pornographer, and a groomer of children,” during a heated debate over a book ban.

It turns out that not only do Republicans have a deep disdain for librarians, but also for children, the purported focus of their vociferous concerns.

Setting aside the GOP’s failure to protect children from [mass shooters](https://www.salon.com/2023/02/15/its-about-control-not-protection-would-rather-kids-be-shot-than-let-them-read-books/), Republican lawmakers have often shielded sexual predators. Pennsylvania Republicans [refused to hold the church accountable](https://apnews.com/article/f0cab92732c04818a8b256798f0ad126) for years of sexual abuse of children. Dozens of House Republicans [refused to vote](https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/12/gop-congressmembers-concerned-grooming-vote-child-sex-abuse-bill/) for the Respect for Child Survivors Act, a bill that would have protected child victims of sexual abuse. And Republican Congressman [Louie Gohmert](https://onlysky.media/hemant-mehta/louie-gohmert-tommy-nelson-pastor-child-sex-abuse-scandal-denton-bible/) even praised a pastor friend and read his sermon on the House floor—a pastor who was a convicted child sexual abuser.

In fact, Daily Kos has a [forum](https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2023/3/12/2157746/-Republican-Sexual-Predators-Abusers-and-Enablers-Pt-41) where readers submit news reports of “Republican Sexual Predators, Abusers, and Enablers.” The list is shockingly long.

Indeed, we should not be surprised to find out then that a Kansas City right-wing activist named [Ryan Utterback](https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/lgbtq-book-ban-advocate-faces-felony-child-molestation-charge-missouri-rcna14763), who pushed for Missouri’s book ban on the basis of protecting kids from LGBT-themed books, turned out to be an accused sexual predator. Utterback faces a felony charge of second-degree child sexual molestation.

In the battle over who really protects our children—librarians or Republicans—librarians are the ones who belong in our good books.