

## **Protesting the Local Library**

### *Past and present political contestation in public libraries*

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*Public libraries in the United States have historically been the sites of political contestation and controversy. 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 begs the question: how does political contestation in public libraries look today? Using a media analysis of U.S. public library contestation and controversy from 2019–2023, this paper presents categories of contemporary library contestation. These categories situate public libraries within a broader, ongoing context of efforts to polarize local political institutions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Public libraries in the United States have historically been the sites of political contestation and controversy. From early efforts to contest the use of local taxes to fund the construction of libraries, to social movements to expand library services to rural communities, to efforts to ban “cheap” fiction and books uplifting minority voices, public libraries have always been political institutions with duality: they simultaneously provide community services while also remaining touchpoints for political controversy.

However, public libraries have only gained in their prominence as sites of contestation. In 2023 alone, 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 contestation and controversy in public libraries begs 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 2019–2023, I identify four key categories of contestation in public libraries: Content, Event, Operations, and Site of Protest. I likewise explore historical political contestation in public libraries and present the substantive reasons behind recent efforts to contest local public libraries. My findings not only inform the phenomenon of political controversy in public libraries, but also situate public libraries within a broader, ongoing context of efforts to polarize local political institutions.

This paper 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 and then the categories of contemporary contestation. I conclude with some final remarks about public libraries within the broader context of political polarization.

## **HISTORICAL CONTESTATION**

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 to complement and supplement 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 was 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 access 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 the extension of 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 the expansion of 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, 2017). 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 to 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 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 One. 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 placed emphasis on 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 which 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 where public libraries began to become 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 policy-making (Gaffney, 2013).

While FLL started out 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.

While the history of library contestation centers under the broad umbrella of the purpose libraries hold in communities, the cases provided above yield two key categories of contestation. Early movements, such as the one in Boston to create a tax-funded public library, can be broadly defined as contestation over the operations of public libraries—in this case, whether or not a library should operate and how public libraries should be funded. The contestation of public library operations later transitioned to one surrounding the programs and resources that the library should provide, as well as extending services to rural communities.

Likewise, another key category of contestation in public libraries pertains to the content of materials libraries provide. Historically, this has centered around debates surrounding “cheap fiction” and novels, and later debates on whether or not literature pertaining to otherized communities—i.e. Germans in the 1910s, communists in the 1950s, the LGBTQ+ community in the 1990s—should be included within public library collections. These historical categories of contestation are significant because they provide a groundwork for analyzing recent contestation in public libraries.

## **METHODS**

To analyze recent library contestation, I conducted a media analysis of instances of libraries being the sites of contestation and controversy over the span of five years, from

2019–2023. I used targeted keyword searches on Google News, segmenting my searches within each calendar year to maximize the number of cases I would be able to find. This process yielded 185 unique instances of libraries being the sites of contestation and controversy across 45 states. The scope of my research is centered around tax-funded, public and community libraries. This means that my research does not include academic, school, or governmental libraries, or other specialized libraries.

One major limitation of this project is that focusing on news articles does not reveal every single instance of libraries being the sites of contestation and controversy, as other instances of this happening may have flown under the radar or may have taken place in media deserts. However, the goal of this project is to provide information on the categories of contestation that take place in public libraries, not to provide statistical analyses that offer predictions on where contestation may take place in the future. As such, while this limitation still means that some libraries may be left out of the dataset, the findings remain robust because the nature of this analysis is descriptive, not correlational.

## **REASONS FOR RECENT LIBRARY CONTROVERSY**

[Figure 1]      [Figure 2]

From 2019–2023, there were 185 unique instances of libraries being the sites of political contestation. Figure 1 provides a visual breakdown of the different types of reasons for each case from 2019–2023, and Figure 2 presents this breakdown for each of the five years analyzed in this study individually.

While varied in reasoning, the vast majority [65.4%] of these cases were centered around pro-LGBTQ+ content or events [115 cases], with an additional 6 cases being about libraries hosting anti-Transgender meetings. Additionally, the next most frequent reason for contestation,



mature content in children's sections [17 cases], made up 9.2% of the cases, and all involved books which included pro-LGBTQ+ materials in addition to other, more general content regarding health. The dominance of LGBTQ+ discourse in public libraries from 2019–2023 cannot be understated. In fact, in every year analyzed, LGBTQ+ issues were the dominant reason for contestation in public libraries, tied only in 2020 with Black Lives Matter [BLM]. This directly connects to the legacy of the FLL in the 1990s in making LGBTQ+ issues a conservative issue in the realm of public libraries, as well as recent elite-led mobilization (Bishin et al., 2021) and state-level policies (Knauer, 2020) against LGBTQ+ progress throughout the first quarter of the 21st century.

Additional reasons for political contestation in public libraries, in order of most to least occurrences, include: Free Speech [12 cases], library administrative policies [9 cases], BLM [5 cases], Covid-19 [5 cases], library budgets [4 cases], library closures [4 cases], and Free Palestine [3 cases]. One-off reasons for contestation and controversy include: accessibility issues, a local politics protest, the lack of a Christmas display, a library's relationship with the local police department, and the revelation that a library was used by an adult entertainer 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 hosted in public libraries in response to drag queen story hours. The tour generated significant controversy within communities around the country 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 event titled

“See You at the Library,” which was held in 260 libraries across 44 states. Similar to 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]      [Figure 4]

The vast majority of the 185 cases of library contestation and controversy can be classified under one of four key categories: Content [77 cases], Event [73 cases], Operations [23 cases], and Site of Protest [9 cases]. The remaining three cases could not be classified in the aforementioned categories, and will subsequently be explored later under the heading “Other.” Figure 3 provides a visual breakdown of the percentage of cases that each category was composed of, while Figure 4 presents this breakdown for each of the five years analyzed in this study.

### ***Content***

The contestation category of content can be defined as any efforts to object to the inclusion of specific books, resources, displays, artwork, or other public materials within the library’s collection. From 2019–2023, there were 77 cases of Content contestation, with 70 of the reported cases being attempted book bans. These book bans centered exclusively around either LGBTQ+ books [52 cases] or children’s books being deemed as having inappropriate, mature content [17 cases]. One additional case was about removing a book for its racist content. The attempts to ban LGBTQ+ books from public libraries mirrors that 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 observed was surrounding different displays and exhibits put on by public libraries. Two cases were centered around murals in public

libraries—a racist mural in Cabarrus County Public Library in North Carolina, and an anti-Zionism mural in the San Francisco Public Library. The other two cases were about the content of displays in public libraries—one about a racist display in a branch of the New York City Public Library, and another about an anti-Tibet display in the Queens Public Library.

### ***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 themselves, as well as events held in rented out spaces by community members, local groups, or organizations. From 2019–2023, there were 73 cases of Event contestation. The vast majority of the events being contested in public libraries were events featuring drag queens [56 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, and 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 pertaining to free speech [13 cases]. These include contestation against anti-Transgender groups hosting meetings at the libraries [7 cases], controversial author talks [2 cases], far-Right story hours [2 cases], and a case each for a Communist group meeting and a public library’s Banned Books event.

### ***Operations***

Similar to Content, Operations was the other historical category observed from 2019–2023. 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 2019–2023, there were 23 cases of contestation that can be categorized under Operations. These include 9 cases pertaining to

aspects of library administration and policy, 5 cases related to Covid-19-specific policies, 4 cases related to library budgets, 4 cases in response to library closures, and one case regarding accessible design concerns.

### ***Site of Protest***

The final category of library contestation, Site of Protest, can be defined as any protests which 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 2019–2023, there were 9 cases of Site of Protest contestation in public libraries. These included 5 Black Lives Matter protests, 3 Free Palestine protests, and one protest against a local politician in Indianapolis.

### ***Other***

In addition to the aforementioned four main categories of contestation in public libraries, three additional cases could not be classified, and are discussed here in brief. First, the Santa Monica Public Library in California was the site of controversy in 2020 after community members learned that the library had been used by an adult entertainer 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 a patron was arrested by police for sitting on the floor of the library with their children.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to address the question: how does political contestation in public libraries look today? After a review of the history of contestation in public libraries, which revealed the

historical contestation categories of Operations and Content, I presented an analysis of political contestation in public libraries from 2019–2023. This analysis demonstrated the significance of LGBTQ+ issues in public libraries, which accounted for a majority of the reasons for recent contestation in public libraries. Additionally, my analysis demonstrated that the historical contestation categories of Operations and Content remain significant today, as well as the additional categories of Event and Site of Protest.

These categories of contestation in public libraries are significant because they help to contextualize contemporary political polarization in local government more broadly. Similar to school districts (Deckman, 2004; Mayo, 2021) public libraries are becoming increasingly contested for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content and events. Likewise, the observation that libraries serve as sites of protest for non-library issues, such as the observed use of public libraries to protest for the BLM and Free Palestine movements, reveals where social movements find it politically expedient to demonstrate in order to raise awareness for social issues. Finally, the continued prevalence of Operations as a category of contestation for public libraries reveals that, despite the general low-salience that the average person holds for local government (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003), some community members continue to pay attention and make their voices heard for local level issues.

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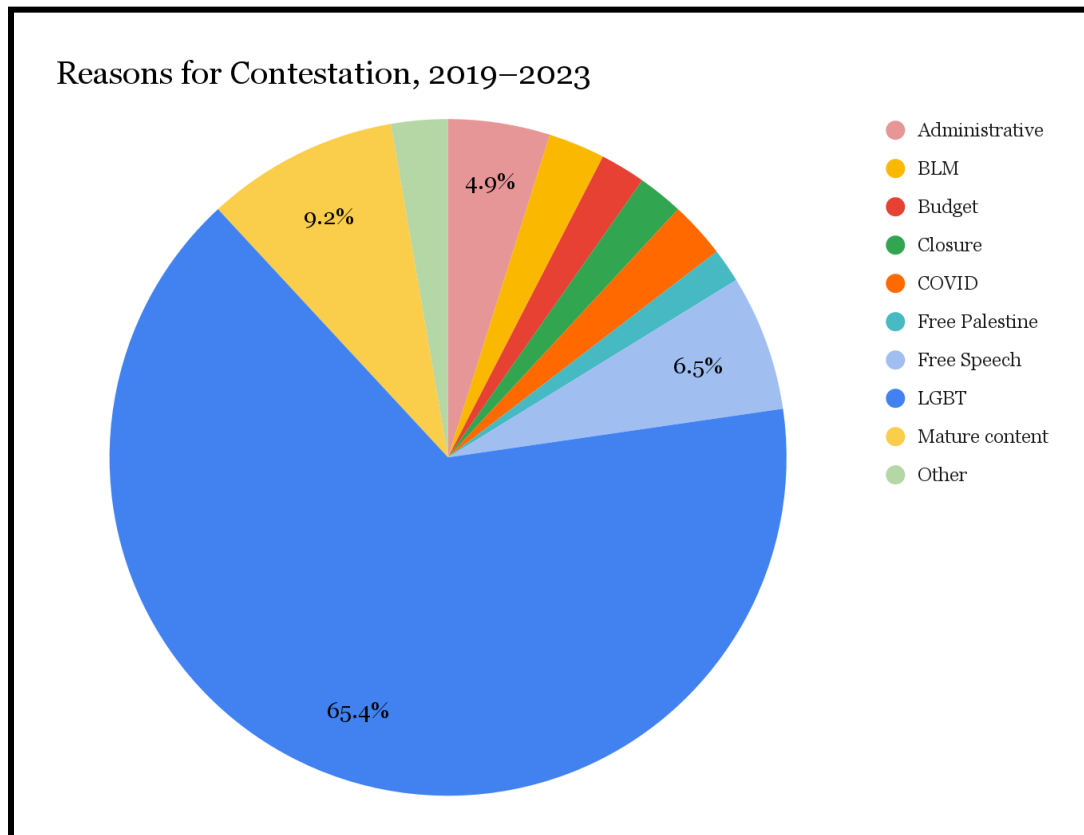
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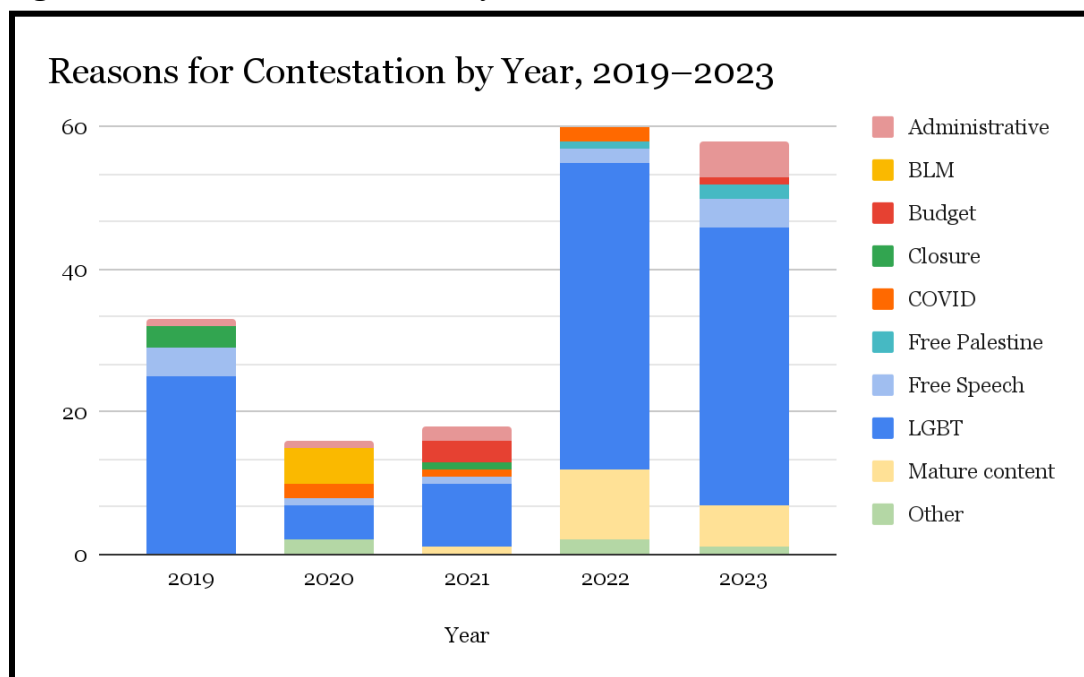
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## FIGURES

**Figure 1.** Reasons for Contestation, 2019–2023

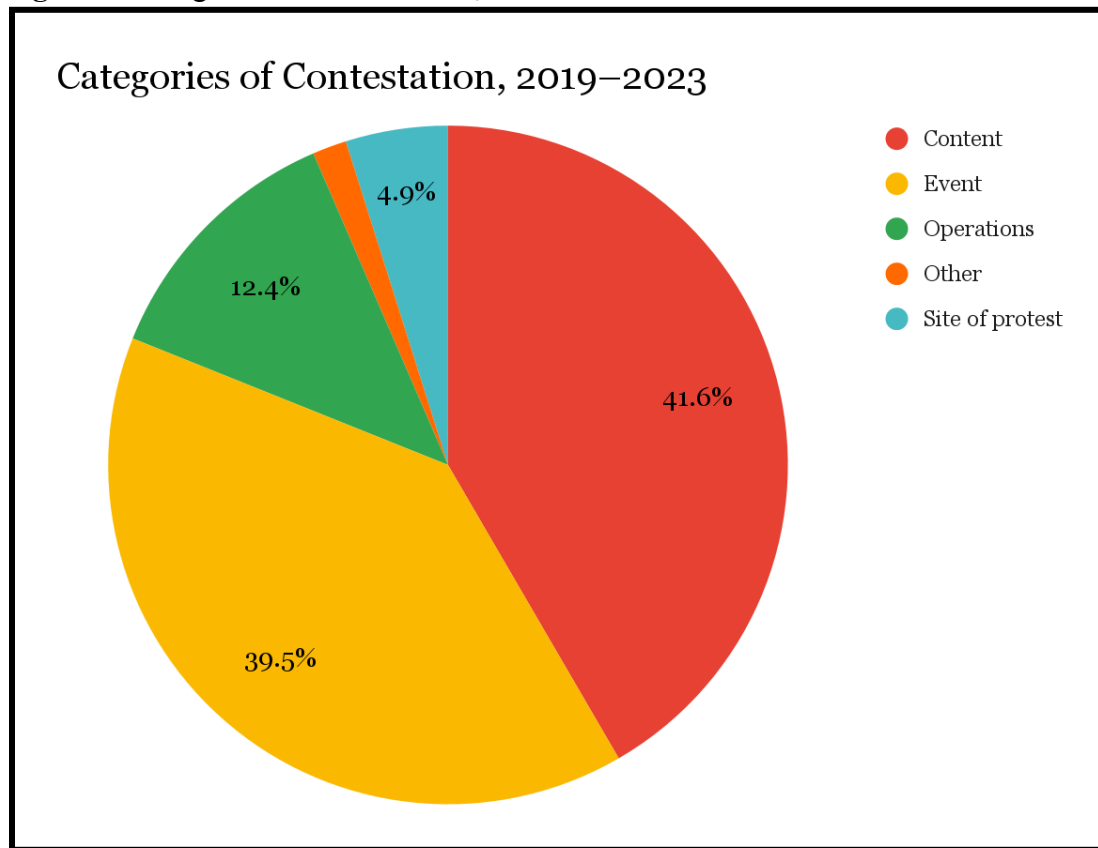


**Figure 2.** Reasons for Contestation by Year, 2019–2023





**Figure 3.** Categories of Contestation, 2019–2023



**Figure 4.** Categories of Contestation by Year, 2019–2023

