Closed Minds? Is a 'Cancel Culture' Stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science?

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Pippa Norris
Harvard Kennedy School

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Closed minds?

Is a 'cancel culture' stifling academic freedom and intellectual debate in political science?

Pippa Norris

Pippa_Norris@Harvard.edu

Synopsis: Recent years have seen extensive debate in popular commentary about a pervasive 'cancel culture' thought to be taking over college campuses. A progressive orthodoxy, it is argued, has silenced conservative voices and diverse perspectives. This development, it is claimed, has ostracized contrarians, limited academic freedom, strengthened conformism, and eviscerated robust intellectual debate. But does systematic empirical evidence support these claims? After reviewing the arguments, Part II of this study outline several propositions arising from the cancel culture thesis and describes the sources of empirical survey evidence and measures used to test these claims within the discipline of political science. Data is derived from a new global survey, the *World of Political Science, 2019*, with 2,446 responses collected from scholars studying or working in 102 countries. Part III presents the results. Part IV summarizes the key findings and considers their broader implications. Overall the study confirms the significant impact of Left-Right ideology on reported experience of the cancel culture in political science – but important contrasts were found in post-industrial and developing societies.

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Heated battles about the so-called 'cancel culture' on college campuses have been intensified by recent controversies surrounding issues of racism and ethnicity, sexual harassment and misogyny, non-binary gender identities and transphobia.[1] The concept of a 'cancel culture' can be defined broadly as attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms. The notion has also been understood more narrowly as "the practice of withdrawing support for (or canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive."[2] This practice is analogous to the tactic of consumer-boycotts withdrawing support for perceived unethical brands and corporations, a common form of political activism.[3] The cancelling strategy typically uses social media to shame individuals with the intention of exerting penalties with different degrees of severity, ranging from limiting access to public platforms, damaging reputations, and ending careers to instigating legal prosecutions. The process is exemplified by notorious cause célèbres in American popular entertainment, such as the cases of O.J. Simpson, Roseanne Barr, and Michael Jackson. The impact is thought to have spread more widely in many societies, however, with book deals being torn up, editors and journalists demoted or fired, and public intellectuals attacked. The phenomenon has claimed scalps among well-known media celebrities (like the comedian Louis C.K.), leading politicians (for example, former-Senator Al Franken), authors (J.K. Rowling), and corporate executives (such as Roger Ailes at Fox News). Critics warn that the process may have started with legitimate criticism of cases attracting widespread moral disapproval, but it is a slippery slope. As the tumbrils have rolled downhill, like revolutions eventually eating their own, the risks are that the process will ultimately undermine liberal tolerance of contrarians in many fields, including stifling intellectual debate on college campuses.

Can public shaming be regarded as an appropriate tactic? Debate continues.

On the one hand, this strategy can be justified as an effective tool for achieving social justice by victims unable to obtain legal redress or public apology. Examples include the MeToo boycotts directed against powerful sexual predators alleged to have repeatedly committed harassment, rape, and even pedophilia. Black Lives Matter activists have also used public shaming when calling out the authors of racist textbooks, fatal cases of police violence in communities of color, racial stereotypes used to sell consumer products, and university departments lacking diversity. In an era of rapidly changing moral standards and heightened cultural sensitivities around social identities, it can be argued that powerful figures in the public eye should try to move with the times, avoid causing unnecessary offence, and thereby be held accountable for their words and actions (or inactions). From this perspective, public shaming has a legitimate role through criticizing the use of derogatory and offensive language like racial or homophobic

slurs, highlighting the unacceptable abuse of power such as sexual harassment, or criticizing engagement in practices of cultural appropriation. Feeling comfortable to speak one's mind in an uninhibited and robust fashion may appear to be a healthy liberal virtue in an open society. But it can also be regarded as problematic where blunt talk carelessly hurts others, as reflected in the notion that 'white lies', or saying nothing, may be the more diplomatic strategy to offending. Indeed, those seeking to limit public shaming can also be seen to violate basic principles of free speech.

On the other, however, critics argue that the movement has gone too far, especially on college campuses, so that it now threatens classical liberal values at the heart of academic life. As exemplified in *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, liberalism champions tolerance of non-conformity and freedom of speech, even for, or indeed especially for, especially for the expression of deeply unpopular and contrarian opinions.[4] Only by questioning dogma and the conventional wisdom can we become aware of our own prior values and beliefs. In his public writings and speeches, Mill defended many controversial causes of his time, from Fenians planning an armed uprising to end British rule in Ireland to suffragettes demanding women's rights to vote. Conservatives argue that recent years have seen growing silencing of contrarian voices challenging the liberal hegemony in many cultural spaces, but especially in the academy, thereby limiting freedom of speech, increasing social pressures for ideological conformity, reinforcing intellectual exclusion, group-think bubbles, 'Us-Them' segregation, academic intolerance, and self-censorship. The net result, critics claim, is a rush to collective judgment and a new climate of censorship by the 'mob', magnifying even minor errors of judgment. [5] Kukianoff and Haidt regard this trend on campus as a sanctimonious 'coddling' of student minds, where emotional discomfort is seen as equivalent to physical harm, with colleges failing to cultivate resilience in a hostile world.[6] Williams argues that lack of academic freedom is detrimental for scientific progress, as researchers are unable to investigate all perspectives.[7] The U.S. Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, has accused liberal faculty members of forcing their views upon students, telling them what to think, with indoctrination replacing education.[8] Many Republicans claim that academic life is now dominated by scholars with progressive liberal or leftwing values. Intolerance of dissenting views, especially among the progressive 'far-left', it is argued, silences conservative perspectives, brainwashing students into 'politically correct' views. As expressed in President Trump's Mount Rushmore speech:

> *"One of their (the left's) political weapons is 'cancel culture' — driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees. This is the very*

definition of totalitarianism, and it is completely alien to our culture and our values, and it has absolutely no place in the United States of America."[9]

But concern about these issues is not confined to conservative Republicans; as expressed in the infamous letter in *Harper's Magazine,* it has also been endorsed by such luminary and diverse public intellectuals as Martin Amis, Gloria Steinem, J.K. Rowling, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Noam Chomsky:

"Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity."[10]

Theories suggests several factors in modern societies which may help to explain the rise of a culture culture. [11] Perhaps the most important factor in most accounts is the liberal hegemony in the contemporary academy, which is expected to lead the minority of conservative faculty and students to feel that their voices have been silenced. [12] Other potentially reinforcing conditions include contemporary shifts in the cultural values in post-industrial societies, deepening polarization over issues of identity politics which divide social conservatives and liberals.[13] Technology is widely regarded as another culprit, by expanding opportunities for collective expression via digital media, with the politics of outrage constantly reinforced by filter bubbles and echo chambers. Social media are thought to have amplified the reach, and accelerated the pace, of the cancel culture spreading on college campuses and beyond.

The cultural backlash in politics is a further reason. Populist parties and leaders, seeking to stir resentment and energize their followers, have sought to exploit claims of political bias as a polemical cudgel to attack intellectuals in colleges and universities. This is illustrated by President Trump's Mount Rushmore speech, claiming the mantle of shared conservative victimhood and denigrating the out-of-touch progressive intellectual elites. Moreover, the populist message is likely to resonate with his followers; Pew Research Center polls report that in late-2018, only 48% of Republicans expressed confidence in college and university professors, compared with 84% of Democrats, a larger partisan gap than other groups like the police or business executives.[14]

This phenomenon has attracted most attention in the U.S but it is not simply a result of partisan polarization during the Trump era or another case of American exceptionalism; similar concerns echo elsewhere. In the UK, for example, in 2019, the Human Rights Commission published new guidelines for

universities designed to protect free speech, following concern about censorship 'deplatforming' speakers, withdrawing invitations out of fear that they may prove controversial. [15] A recent report, drawing on a YouGov survey of faculty in the social sciences and humanities, concluded that UK universities face growing threats to academic freedom.[16] This called attention to 'structural discrimination', with progressive social norms arising from the predominance of leftwing scholars, generating a chilly climate of intolerance for the small minority challenging these views. [17] The report quoted examples of actions restricting unorthodox thinkers and viewpoint diversity, include events restricting speakers, cases of staff facing disciplinary actions or dismissal, and the abuse or harassment towards contrarians expressing views on contested subjects, such as the issues of gender, race and ethnicity. A survey of British students reported similar perceptions of liberal bias in universities and a reluctance by conservative students to express themselves for fear of disagreement with their peers.[18]

But despite the wealth of popular commentary, does systematic empirical evidence support the claim of a pervasive 'cancel culture' taking hold of academic life in many countries? Some political complaints can be dismissed as rhetorical talking points. More persuasive support comes from citing specific cases of intolerance and silencing on college campuses: speakers shouted down, events cancelled, Twitter outrage trending, faculty disciplined, and so on. It can be argued, however, that the plural of anecdotal cases is not data. Highlighting outrage directed against a few high-profile public intellectuals may cherry-pick cases to confirm prior expectations. Moreover, such actions are far from new, examples can be cited of similar censorship during previous eras of heated politics, especially during the mid-1960s and early-1970s culture wars, albeit spread through mimeographed posters and spirit duplicated newsletters before digital media. It is important use more systematic scientific survey evidence to establish whether specific cited cases today are anything more than isolated instances or whether, as a general tendency, conservative scholars report experience of growing restrictions on academic freedom, pressures to be politically correct, and the silencing of diverse perspectives in higher education.

Accordingly, drawing upon these arguments, Part II of this study proceeds to outline several propositions arising from the cancel culture thesis and then describes the sources of empirical survey evidence and measures used to test these claims within the discipline of political science. Data is derived from a new global survey in the discipline of political science, the *World of Political Science, 2019*, with 2,446 responses collected from scholars studying or working in 102 countries. Part III presents the results. The conclusions in Part IV summarize the key findings and considers their broader implications.

II: Hypotheses, evidence and measures

Testing the cancel culture claims about the growing silencing of contrarian speakers, the cancellation of events, and limits on conservative thought on college campuses is far from straightforward. Difficulties arise because by their very nature, practices of self-censorship are similar to non-events, akin to Conan Doyle's infamous dog which didn't bark. Much popular media speculation is politically driven. The debate involves complex normative issues. The logic of the argument suggests several propositions, however, which are potentially open to testing against empirical evidence from surveys of the professoriate.

The ideological identities of political scientists

The first (albeit weaker) test of the cancel culture thesis concerns claims about the predominate progressive left-wing ideological values and beliefs of college cultures. Claims of a liberal hegemony among the professoriate, silencing conservative voices, reflects a longstanding concern. Paul Lazarsfeld's pioneering 1958 book *The Academic Mind,* based on a large-scale representative survey of American social scientists*,* was the first to demonstrate that scholars tended to be more sympathetic to liberal or leftwing values than the general population.[19] The radical era of heated college and university politics during the 1960s and early-1970s triggered further research into the political beliefs and values of college and university professors, with the findings confirming the pervasive liberal tilt of the academy. This was documented by Everett Carll Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset's *The Divided Academy* (1976)[20], reporting that about 46% of professors in their survey identified themselves as left or liberal, 27% were middle of the road, while 28% were conservative. Social scientists were found to be further left than most other disciplines. Moreover this pattern was not confined to American campuses, as similar skews were found by Albert Halsey and Martin Trow's *The British Academics* (1971).[21] A decade ago, Gross and Simmons (2007) updated the evidence with another largescale survey of the American professoriate, demonstrating that conservatives and Republican identifiers remain relatively rare among faculty in U.S. universities, especially in the social sciences, although many held moderate middle-of-the-road views.[22] More recently, Shields and Dunn reviewed five major U.S. surveys of academics conducted since 2000 and concluded that the percentage of self-identified conservatives was found to range between 5% and 15% in the social sciences and 4% to 8% in the humanities.[23] In Europe, as well, analysis of the European Social Survey pooled data suggest that professors in 31 European countries are usually more liberal and left-leaning than other equivalent professions like lawyers, architects and physicians, although the political values and attitudes of academics on issues such as economic redistribution and EU integration are far from homogeneous. [24] Therefore, a series of previous studies of the sociology of the academy have

consistently reported for many decades that a pervasive liberal-left skew is observable, at least in post-industrial societies where most research has been conducted. This can be expected to be observed in the discipline of political science. This proposition can be tested by surveys examining either the values, attitudes and beliefs of faculty and students, or, as in this study, their self-identified leanings of political scientists across a Left-Right ideological scale.

Experience of worsening academic freedoms

But a progressive bias on campus doesn't necessarily imply a lack of tolerance for pluralistic debate, or that contrarian views are unwelcome, or ideas silenced. The stronger test of the cancel culture thesis concerns whether experience of this phenomenon is thought to have worsened. These measures also have important limitations, after all the majority of liberal faculty may well be unaware of any hegemonic bias, and, even if acknowledged, to downplay that this as a serious problem. But the minority of conservative scholars can be expected to be more likely to express concern about this phenomenon, if they have direct experience of a cancel culture, for example, agreeing most strongly from their experience with indicators of a worsening intellectual climate, such as growing restrictions on academic freedom of speech, pressures for ideological conformity, and the enforcement of politically correct speech. Accordingly, this study can compare reported experience of change in these conditions getting better or worse among self-identified conservative and liberal scholars in political science.

Mediating conditions: cohort and cross-national comparisons

As a related issue, another limitation with the available evidence is that benchmark data is unavailable to monitor change over time from successive surveys of scholars in political science. If a cancel culture has gradually intensified in recent years however, as often claimed, this should also be evident through comparisons of the reported experience of birth cohorts. In particular, generations may be expected to differ in how they respond to these issues. For example, a Politico/Morning Consult poll of public opinion reported that a plurality of Americans (46%) believed that a 'cancel culture' of group shaming had gone too far, with 49% believing that it has had a negative impact on society. But the youngest birth cohorts (Generation Z and Millennials) expressed the most sympathy towards punishing people with views regarded as offensive. For these reasons, the younger generation of scholars may be expected to prove both most liberal in their identities and also least concerned about public shaming for socially offensive speech and acts. By contrast, the older cohorts are predicted to be more conservative and to feel that academic freedom and intellectual tolerance have worsened. Perceptions of the cancel culture may also be influenced by gender, particularly if women's attitudes are shaped by the issues of sexual harassment,

abuse, and violence highlighted by the 'Me Too' movement seeking to oust and shame sexual predators, including some notorious cases involving senior faculty in higher education. The effects of gender can also be controlled in the multivariate models.

Finally, if academia reflects broader shifts in society, associated with a general cultural backlash and deepening polarization over values, this should be evident through cross-national comparisons. In particular, a 'cancel culture' should be expected to be more prevalent in colleges and universities located in affluent post-industrial societies - especially the United States, where most studies have been conducted. These countries have seen intensified polarization and deepening political battles in the cleavage over conservative v. liberal values, with the cultural backlash exemplified deep divisions over by the Trump presidency in the US and by battles between Leavers and Remainers over Brexit in the UK. It remains unclear whether these cleavages vary by level of development. A wealth of survey evidence suggests that socially liberal values towards cultural issues such as gender equality, secularization, and homosexuality have advanced most among the younger generation and the most educated social sectors in affluent post-industrial societies.[25] By contrast, many poorer developing societies in the rest of the world are characterized by a broader consensus about conservative values, which continue to predominate in more traditional cultures. On this basis, cultural polarization about the cancel culture may be expected to be most evident in colleges and universities located in the United States, as well as in similar affluent post-industrial societies in Western Europe and Australasia, compared with those in developing societies. This can be tested by breaking down the analysis to compare the predictors in the US, in the pooled sample of 23 post-industrial societies, and in 78 developing countries.

To summarize, for all these reasons, personal experience of a worsening 'cancel culture' may be expected to vary among scholars of political science by their (i) Left-Right ideological identities, (ii) generational birth cohort and gender, and (iii) the type of post-industrial or developing society in which they live, study and work.

Survey data and measures

Building upon the Lazarsfeld survey tradition in the sociology of knowledge, empirical data to explore these issues can be examined from a new global survey of scholars in the discipline of political science, the *World of Political Science, 2019*. Previous studies report that the liberal skew among scholars is more evident among social scientists rather than other disciplines.[26] Moreover, the phenomenon of a cancel culture involves controversies about many politically sensitive issues, especially inequalities of power and

status associated with race and gender, so the profession of political science is a particular appropriate discipline to test the core arguments.

The World of Political Science survey (WPS-2019) provides a representative profile of the political science profession across the world.[27] Invitations asking political scientists to participate were distributed through social media notifications (Facebook, emails, and Twitter), the ECPR Newsletter list and IPSA lists, and through several national associations (CPSA, PSA UK, Australian PSA and Russia). Overall, 2,446 responses were collected from 3 February to 7 April 2019 from respondents studying or working in 102 countries. In total, 1,245 responses were collected from political scientists studying or working in 23 affluent post-industrial societies (including the US, Europe, and Australasia).

The World of Political Science survey gathered information through an online Qualtrics questionnaire about multiple dimensions of professional life and work, including role priorities, social background characteristics, national origins, qualifications, thematic subfield of expertise, and methodological skills. The survey also included a battery of 22 items monitoring direct experience of changes in the profession during the last five years. Respondents were asked:

> *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale,* ***based on your experience****, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years."*

Potential responses in this battery of items were measured on a 5-point scale and recoded as follows: Got a lot better (1), got somewhat better (2), no change (3), got somewhat worse (4), got a lot worse (5).[28] The questions are therefore designed to tap into experiential judgments about the direction of change. The list included both positive and negative types of changes, to avoid potential affirmative response bias.

The concept of a 'cancel culture' was defined earlier as attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms. The change battery included three items selected as proxy or indirect measures of this underlying concept, based on the direct experience of respondents. These asked whether, in their experience, each of the following aspects of academic life had got better, no change, or got worse, using the 5-point scale:

i. "*Respect for open debate from diverse perspectives*."

ii. "*Pressures to be 'politically correct'."*

iii. *"Academic freedom to teach and research."*

The items can be seen as valid proxy indicators of experience about several claims in the 'cancel culture' thesis, including that college campuses have seen worsening tolerance of pluralistic debate and opposing viewpoints, growing pressures to conform with prevalent (progressive or liberal) social norms and forms of expression in higher education, as well as diminished academic freedom and autonomy for individual academics to pursue their interests through teaching and research.

The correlation of these three items was tested for reliability, generating a moderately strong relationship (Cronbach Alpha =.598), suggesting that they could be combined to create a single consistent scale. The recoded variables were summed to create a Cancel Culture Index, standardized to a 100-point continuous scale for ease of interpretation where a higher score reflect experience that academic freedom, pressures to be politically correct and respect for open debate had worsened during recent years. The multivariate analysis examines the impact of ideology on the Cancel Culture Index after adding controls for cohort of birth and gender, in successive models for the global sample, among those living, studying and working in post-industrial societies, and in the US. We can look into responses in more detail by data visualization charts illustrating contrasts and similarities among Leftwing and Rightwing scholars on each of the separate items in the index. We can also compare the experiences of more Leftwing and Rightwing political scientists in ten countries where we have at least 70 respondents per nation.

III: Results of the analysis

A leftwing academic culture?

As a first step, is there systematic evidence for a 'liberal', 'progressive' or a 'leftwing' skew in the ideological identities of political scientists?[29] This is commonly claimed in arguments about the 'silencing' of conservative or rightwing voices on campus, supporting suspicions about the dismissal of legitimate challenges from alternative viewpoints and the left-wing indoctrination of students. The underlying assumption is that political scientists cannot be neutral, so that their personal values and political attitudes will be reflected in their teaching and research. There are obviously many ways to gauge ideological values and beliefs, such as by asking about positions on a range of controversial issues, such as attitudes towards LGBTQ rights, religion, racial justice, or economic inequality. For consistency with the long tradition established by several previous major studies, the survey sought to monitor ideological identities. This is also the most consistent approach for cross-national comparisons, where the salient issues vary from one place to another. Respondents were asked where they would place themselves on the following question: "*Generally speaking, how would you usually describe yourself?"* Responses from 1,788 political scientists were collected through a sliding scale in the questionnaire ranging from most

leftwing (0) to most rightwing (10). The self-identified scale position was subsequently categorized into four categories: 'Far-left' (0-1), moderate left (2-4), moderate right (5-8), and far-right (9-10). For subsequent analysis, this was simplified by dichotomizing the scale into Left (0-5) and Right (6-10).

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of how political scientists worldwide and in the U.S. identified their own position across the Left-Right ideological scale. Overall, replicating a pattern observed in many previous studies of social science faculty, the distribution displayed a normal curve with a positive leftwing skew.[30] The mean score for all respondents worldwide was 4.53 on the 0-10 Left-Right scale. In total, the majority of political scientists (58%) around the globe saw themselves as located in the moderate left of the ideological spectrum, while another 14% positioned themselves on the 'far left'. The ideological imbalance of the discipline should not be exaggerated, however; just over one quarter (27%) of political scientists worldwide placed themselves as moderate right, although at the same time very few respondents (only 2%) saw themselves as 'far right'.

[Figure 1 about here]

In comparison, when the sample was confined to political scientists currently studying or working in the United States (irrespective of their country of origin or citizenship), the positive skew towards left-wing identification strengthened. The mean score in the US sample was 3.16 on the 0-10 Left-Right scale. Two-thirds of American political scientists (65%) saw themselves as moderate left on the ideological scale, which an additional small group (15%) located themselves as far left. By contrast, overall one fifth (20%) saw themselves as moderate right, but almost no respondents saw themselves as 'far right'. To this extent, the first proposition is confirmed in the WPS data; many surveys since Lazarsfeld's original 1958 study have reported a moderate left-wing or liberal skew among the American academy.[31] As one recent study observed: "Progressives rule higher education. Their rule is not absolute. But conservatives are scarcer in academic than in just about any other major profession."[32] The new data confirms this pattern among political scientists working both in US universities and also globally. This underscores the common complaint by conservatives that their voices are relatively under-represented in political science, especially in America. Lack of intellectual diversity can be problematic within the discipline, especially in controversial areas such as the politics of race, gender, power and inequality, limiting alternative perspectives questioning the prevailing normative values and empirical theories embedded in the mainstream research agenda. Several explanations of this long-standing phenomenon are possible, including the socialization effects of higher education on ideological values and the reinforcement effects of self-recruitment.[33]

This provides only a partial test of the cancel culture thesis, however, as an ideological skew in higher education (especially a persistent academic culture) does not necessarily imply growing intolerance for alternative values and beliefs, limiting intellectual debate and pluralism. This leads towards the more critical propositions for this study: on the basis of their personal experiences, do many political scientists feel that restrictions on academic freedom of speech, pressures for ideological conformity, and politically correct speech have worsened in recent years? And, given the ideological imbalance in the discipline, and their minority status, are conservative political scientists most likely to agree with these statements?

Multivariate regression is used to examine the impact of the 10-point Left-Right ideological identity scale on the Cancel Culture Index. The simple models controls for age and gender, for the reasons discussed earlier. To consider whether this phenomenon differs by the type of society, as may be expected by broader cultural shifts accompanying development, Model A is restricted to 193 respondents studying or working in the US, Model B includes 1,023 respondents in twenty-three advanced post-industrial societies (in North America, Western Europe and Australasia), while Model C includes the pooled sample of 487 scholars in 78 developing countries worldwide.

[Table 1 and Figure 1 about here]

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis. The successive models confirm that Left-Right ideological identity is a significant and consistent predictor of the Cancel Culture Index. The effects of ideology is stronger in the U.S. than in all post-industrial societies; as illustrated in Figure 2, American scholars on the moderate right and far right report experiencing worsening pressures to be politically correct, limits on academic freedom, and in lack of respect for open debate. This reflects progressive predominance and the minority status of conservative scholars within the discipline, observed earlier. Moreover, this was not simply another case of American exceptionalism; in the pooled sample across all the post-industrial countries, as predicted, more rightwing political scientists reported that, in their own experience, the cancel culture had worsened in recent years. In the pooled sample of political scientists in developing societies, however, the sign of the coefficient in this relationship reverses to become negative, meaning that those on the left thought that, in their own experience, the cancel culture had worsened in higher education. The conclusion speculates about potential reasons for these societal contrasts and their implications for understanding this phenomenon. In terms of the other background demographic characteristics, in the U.S., women political scientists were also significantly more likely than men to believe that the cancel culture had got worse, but there was no different by age. In Model B, comparing scholars in post-industrial

societies, however, both men and the older generations were significantly more likely to believe that the cancel culture had worsened.

Experience of respect for open debate

To understand this further, the analysis can be disaggregated to look at each of the indicators in the summary Index. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of assessments that respect for open debate from diverse perspectives in academic life has changed for better or worse during the prior five years. Agreement gets to the heart of the cancel culture thesis by implying an erosion of tolerance for intellectual diversity and more closed minds on campus. Overall the distribution shows a normal curve (Mean=3.16 on the 1-5 scale), with the plurality view suggesting no change in the quality of open debate over time. In total, almost as many political scientists reported on the basis of their own experience that open debate had improved as that it had worsened. If the distribution is broken down by the dichotomous measure of Left-Right ideological identity, however, some modest differences can be observed. Leftwing faculty were more likely to feel that the quality of debate had not changed in their experience in recent years. By contrast rightwing faculty were slightly more likely to believe on the basis of their own experience that open debate has got a lot worse over time. The contrasts by ideology proved modest in size, however, and differences should not be exaggerated.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

Experience of pressures to be politically correct

Figure 4 shows responses to how perceptions that pressures to be 'politically correct' in academic life had altered during recent years. This concept refers to conformity towards predominant social norms, a form of self-censorship of authentic words and actions designed to fit in and avoid opprobrium. On this issue, there was clearer evidence for concern – and in this case one shared on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Again, the largest plurality of respondents (39%) reported that in their own experience there had been no change over time. But overall one third reported that these pressures had worsened 'somewhat/a lot' (36%) in their experience, clearly outweighed the proportion feeling more positively that these pressures had got 'somewhat/a lot' better (15%). Contrasts were also observed when broken down by Left-Right ideology. More of those on the Right thought that these pressures had got 'somewhat/a lot' worse (60%), more than those on the Left (45%). By comparison, 42% of political scientists on the Left thought that there had been no change in these pressures to conform, in their experience, compared with 20% of their colleagues on the Right.

Experience of academic freedom

Figure 5 examines the distribution towards the last indicator under comparison: experience of academic freedom to teach and research. Of course this does not specify the reasons for any perceived change, with restrictions which may arise from practices associated with a 'cancel culture', or alternatively from broader structural developments and job dissatisfaction, due to the growth of bureaucratic control and managerialism in university administration, the casualization of employment and weakening of tenure security in academic careers, growing pressures to teach, and/or restrictions on academic freedom more generally in societies experiencing democratic backsliding, such as Hungary and Turkey. Nevertheless, the question provides an important indicator of the quality of intellectual life and feelings of autonomy in the profession. Here the largest plurality (47%) thought that, in their experience, academic freedom had deteriorated 'somewhat/a 'lot'. Another third reported no change, while a fifth responded that freedom had improved 'somewhat/a lot' (20%). On this issue, however, contrary to expectations, those on the Left proved more negative than those on the Right; almost half of those on the Left (49%) thought academic freedom had deteriorated 'somewhat/a lot', compared with 39% of those on the Right.

Cross-national comparisons

How do these patterns vary across countries? Are differences between left and right observed in the U.S another case of American exceptionalism – or do they reflect general patterns found in comparable post-industrial societies? In many cases, unfortunately we have too few respondents for reliable analysis. But there are ten diverse countries with a minimum of at least 70 respondents. As shown in Figure 6, in fact there are remarkably similar experiences reported in a range of post-industrial societies – especially in the Anglo-American democracies which share similar historical traditions and systems of higher education. Thus, the US pattern where those on the right report worse experiences of the cancel culture is clearly reflected in the cases of Canada, Australia, the UK – but also in the Western European cases of Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, as well as Russia and (to a lesser extent) Sweden. The main exception is Nigeria – where there are no significant differences between Left and Right. Not surprisingly, responses to the question about reported experiences of pressures to be politically correct show a similar distribution, with greater experience of this reported by rightwing scholars in all the countries except Nigeria. Clearly there is room for further comparative research into several possible reasons for this, as discussed below, but larger national samples are needed to analyze this with any degree of reliability.

Conclusions and implications

Debates about the cancel culture have intensified in recent years as part of deepening ideological and value cleavages dividing progressive liberals and social conservatives. Of course, the public outing of heretics and dissenters is nothing new, as exemplified by the fanatical prosecution of religious non-conformists, the medieval punishment by stocks and pillory in the town square, or the notorious Salem witch trials. Contemporary media speculation about the shaming of celebrities and leading public figures in the worlds of popular entertainment, publishing, and politics, as well as colleges and universities, encapsulated in the 'cancel culture' label, has often generated more political heat than intellectual light. Yet there are genuine grounds for concern if a cancel culture has evolved, as critics charge, from the legitimate criticism of socially offensive words and deeds to become a tidal wave eroding tolerance of dissent, stifling free speech, and enforcing a progressive of left-wing orthodoxy among professors, administrators, and students. But is there evidence, beyond some specific anecdotes, that this has actually occurred?

Several key findings can be highlighted.

Firstly, as predicted from the series of previous surveys of academics in the US and other Western societies, the WPS survey data *confirmed the leftwing skew in the discipline of political science*. The extent of the imbalance should not be exaggerated, as the majority of scholars described their position on the ideology scale as *moderately* leftwing on the political spectrum, rather than far left. Overall a substantial minority - around one quarter of political scientists worldwide – also identified as moderately rightwing. The leftwing predominance in the discipline was stronger in the U.S., however, than worldwide.

Yet this imbalance in the personal ideological leanings in the profession is far from sufficient, by itself, to settle the heated debate about the effects of the liberal/left hegemony on issues of academic freedom of expression and social pressures for contrarians to conform with progressive values. The evidence presented in this study generated a summary Cancel Culture Index, reflecting experience of growing restrictions on academic freedom of speech, pressures for ideological conformity, and the enforcement of politically correct speech. The results of the models confirmed *the significant effects of Left-Right ideology which consistently predicted scores on this index*.

Most importantly, however, *the effects varied in direction by the type of society under comparison*. Models suggest that in the United States, and in 23 comparable post-industrial societies, self-identified rightwing political scientists were most likely to report personal experience of a worsening cancel culture. By

contrast, among those studying and working in universities and colleges in the 78 developing societies, it was the self-identified leftwing scholars who reported a worsening cancel culture.

What can explain these contrasts? Further research with macro-level comparative evidence is needed to investigate the reasons for the cross-cultural differences, since this could be attributed to factors such as the role of socioeconomic development and modernization, patterns of freedom of expression, democratization, and the type of regime in each society, the polarization of political partisanship, the role of long-standing cultural traditions, and structural contrasts in the institutions and policies of higher education.

One plausible explanation draws upon Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's classic concept of a 'spiral of silence', developed almost four decades ago, drawing upon studies in social psychology and interpersonal communications. This idea describes situations where, for fear of social isolation or loss of status, people are hesitant to express authentic opinions contrary to prevalent social norms.[34] The more that individuals feel that their opinion reflects majority opinion, however, the more willing they become to voice it in public discourse.

But the balance of public opinion is far from static, instead it is well documented to evolve over time in line with processes of societal development. The notion of a spiral of silence can be usefully combined with the theory and evidence for value change presented in *Cultural Backlash*.[35] A wealth of cross-national and time-series survey data, including from the European/World Values Surveys, demonstrates that socially conservative values usually continue to prevail as the majority view in many developing countries. This includes attitudes, beliefs and values on social issues dividing conservatives and liberals, such as towards the division of sex roles for women and men, non-binary gender identities, homosexuality and LGBTQ rights, traditional views of sexuality, family and marriage, the importance of religion, and feelings of nationalism and nativism. In many developing countries, the traditional values held by conservative scholars and intellectuals will therefore continue to reflect the majority culture. But liberal college professors and students holding progressive views in these countries may feel pressures to conform with the predominant social norms and values in the classroom and common room.

By contrast, the balance of public opinion on a wide range of issues has gradually shifted in a more socially liberal and progressive direction to become the majority view in public opinion in many affluent post-industrial societies in Western Europe and North America. The balance of public opinion in society has been transformed in a more liberal direction towards issues such as LGBTQ rights, secularization, gender equality, ethnic diversity, and racial inclusion. This shift is gone furthest among the groups who have been

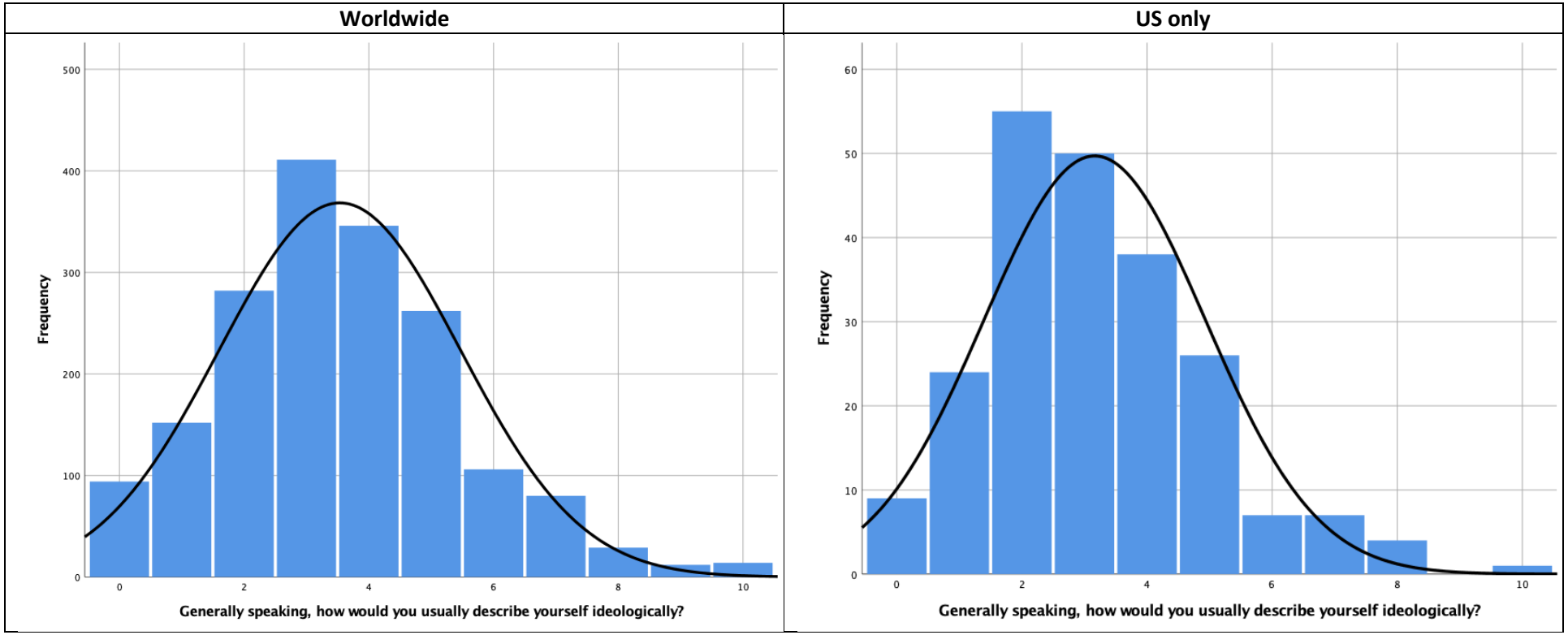
at the vanguard of these changes, namely the younger generation (hence students) and college educated populations (hence professors). [36] As a result, to avoid social isolation on college campuses, and potential loss of professional status and opportunities, rightwing scholars holding traditional conservative beliefs and attitudes are likely to feel growing pressures to conform with evolving informal social values both in the academy and more broadly in postindustrial societies. Academics may also find themselves out of step with contemporary legal policies governing higher education and evolving norms of expression and behavior in the workplace, including practices which used to be widely tolerated just a few decades ago. Well documented processes of long-term generational cultural change in many Western societies means that the proportion of those holding traditionally socially conservative values has gradually experienced a tipping point in recent decades, as this group shifts from hegemonic to minority status on college campuses and in society, heightening ideological and partisan polarization. In this regard, the reported experience of a chilly climate in academia among rightwing scholars, documented in this survey, exemplifying the classic spiral of silence phenomenon, seems likely to reflect their reactions to broader cultural and structural shifts in post-industrial societies.

Finally, when the indicators in the composite index were disaggregated into their component parts, there were some important observable contrasts. Leftwing faculty are more likely than those on the right to believe that there has been little or no change in respect for open academic debate and pressures to be politically correct. Given the predominance of progressive liberalism on college campuses, those on the left may be simply unaware of the experience of more conservative colleagues – and deny that there is a problem - or intense polarization over issues of identity politics may make them unsympathetic to these claims. By contrast, however, a broader consensus can be observed among political science scholars about experiencing deteriorations in academic freedom to teach and research, which may reflect broader structural changes in higher education, as much as ideological shifts.

The survey which is the basis of this study builds upon a long tradition developed in the sociology of the academy. Most previous work on these issues has focused on scholars in higher education working in the U.S. and in similar affluent Western societies. One advantage of the WPS survey is that this expands the comparisons worldwide, and thus facilitates insights into different cultures. Nevertheless, the data considered in this study is limited in several ways. In particular, the survey asks scholars about their ideological identities and their direct experience of changes in the profession, but the latter cannot be separated in practice from perceptions of the academy. Perceptions, by themselves, are important for the social construction of reality. If a scholar says that they feel social pressures to confirm with predominant

values, or that they self-censored their authentic words or actions to avoid ostracism, then we should take them at their word. Further survey measures would be useful, however, to explore experience of different aspects of the cancel culture in more depth, for example whether conservatives felt that they had failed to be appointed or promoted because of their political views, whether they had been involved in organizing any public events which had subsequently been cancelled, or whether they have ever felt uncomfortable speaking up in faculty meetings or the class room because of their values. Larger national samples, especially of scholars in varied developing countries, would be invaluable to pursue the cross-national comparisons. Finally, the survey is restricted to the discipline of political science. It is unclear whether similar generalizations can be observed in related social science disciplines, such as sociology, economics, and social psychology, as well as in the humanities and natural sciences, and equivalent survey data of the professoriate facilitating comparisons across academia could explore these issues further.

Figure 1: Distribution of Left-Right identities among political scientists



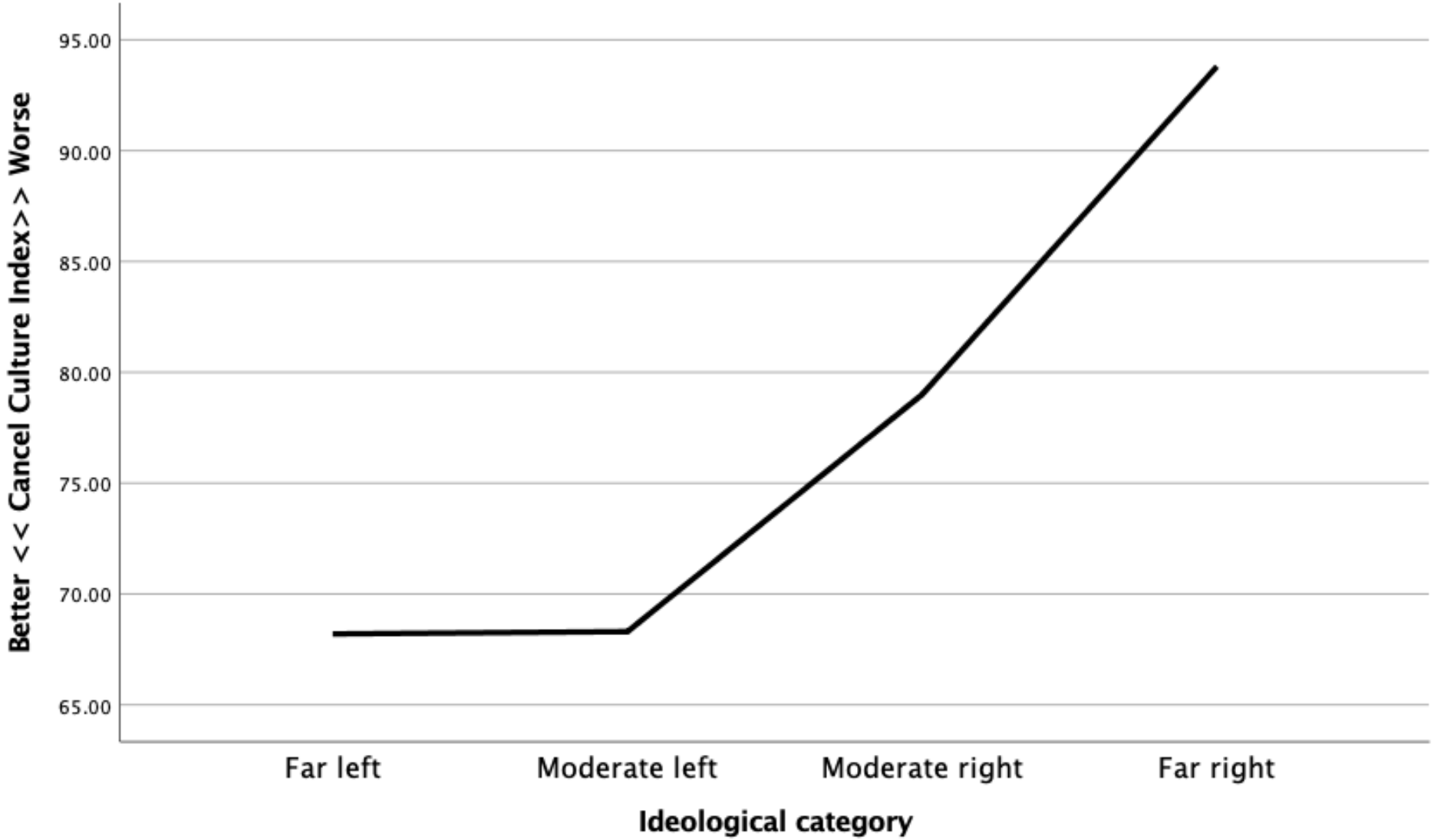
Note: Q30: *"Generally speaking, how would you usually describe yourself ideologically?"* Scale response from 'Most leftwing' (0) to 'Most rightwing' (10).

Worldwide N. 1,733. Mean=3.54 Positive Skew=0.495.

U.S. responses only. N. 221. Mean=3.16 Positive Skew=0.737.

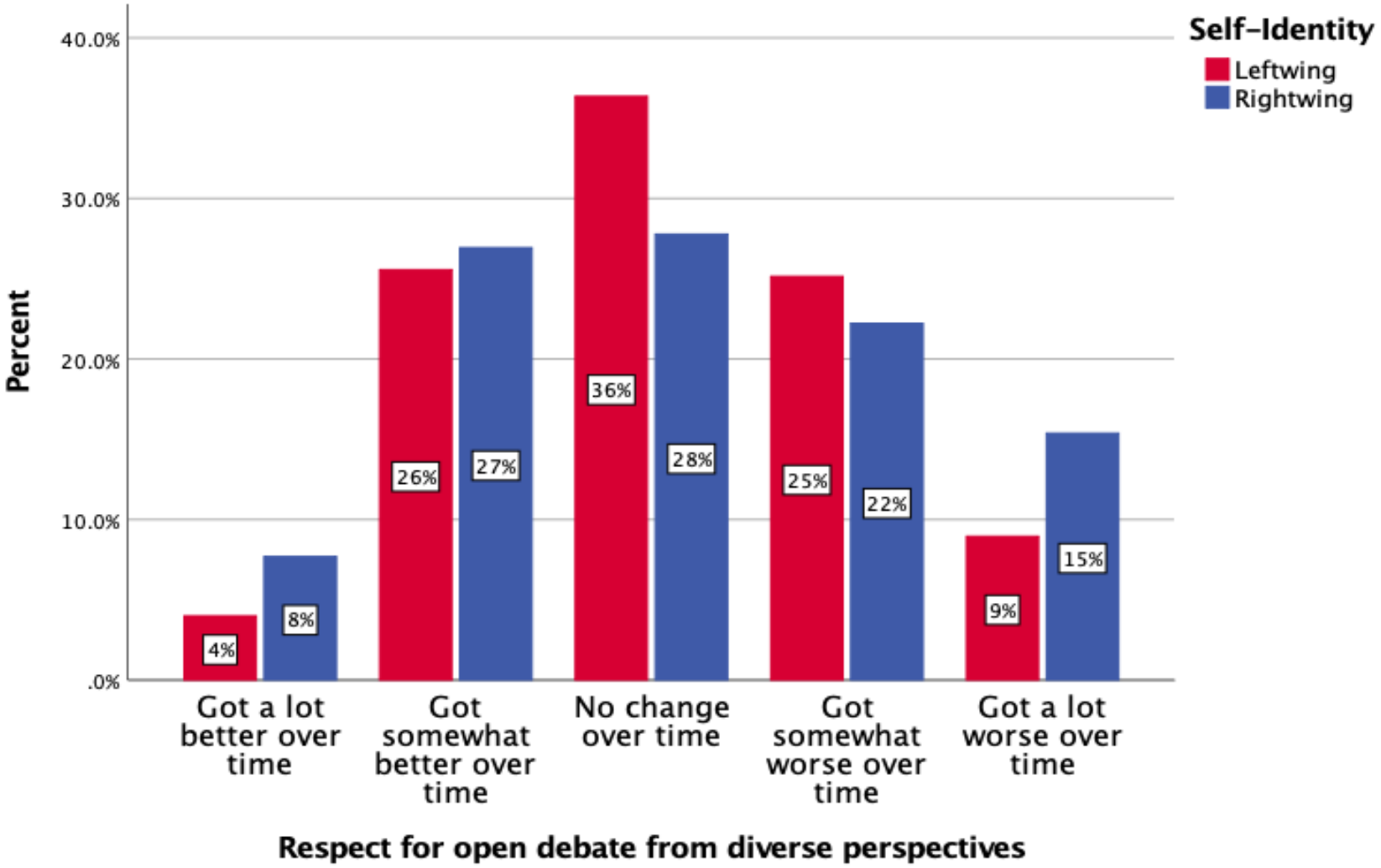
Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019

Figure 2: **Experience of changes in the Cancel Culture Index by Left-Right identity, US only**



Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019, US only N. 281.

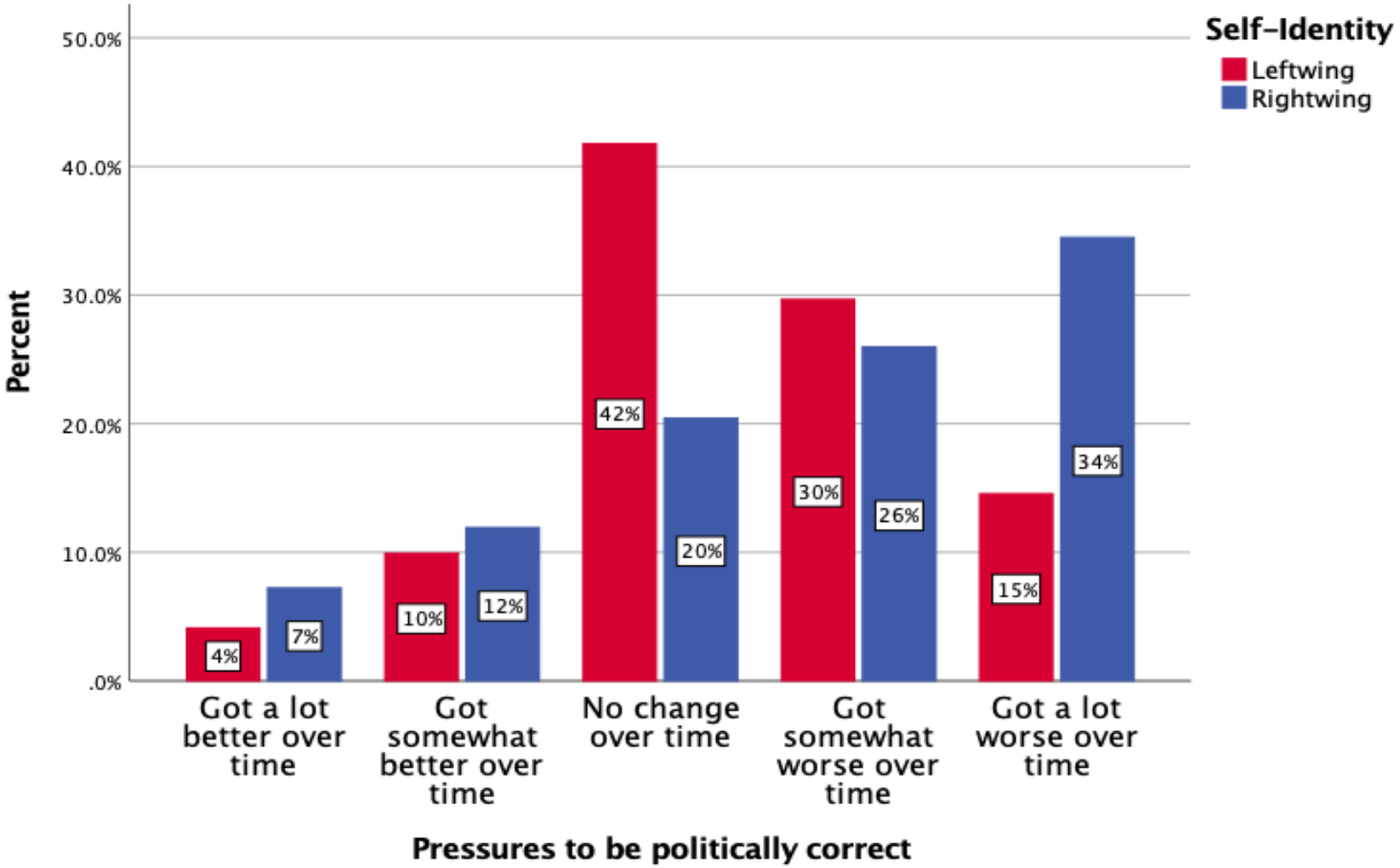
Figure 3: Experience that respect for open debate in academic life has changed for better or worse by Left-Right identity



Notes: Q10-11: *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse."* '**Respect for open debate from diverse perspectives'** All countries worldwide.

Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019

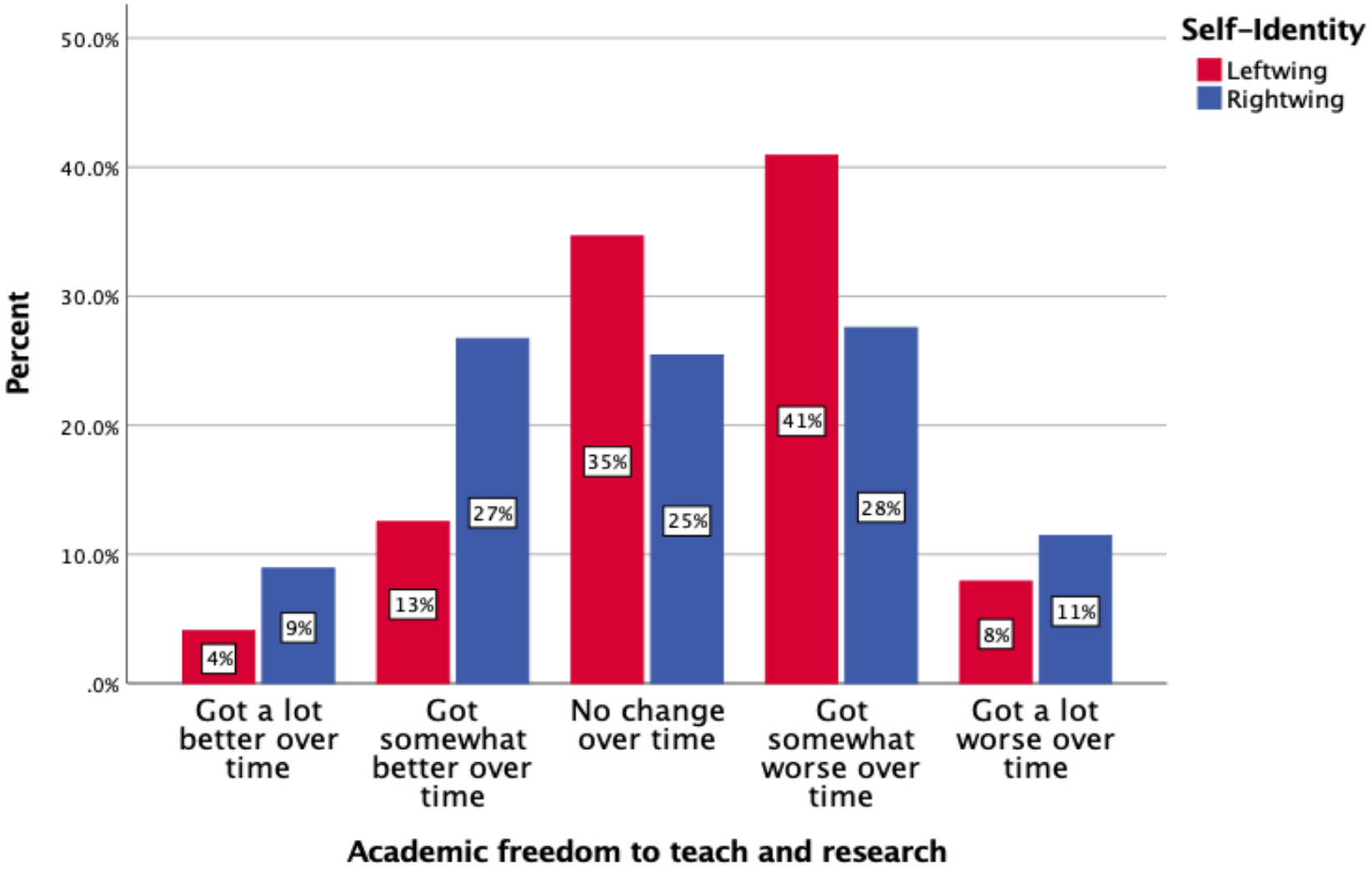
Figure 4: Experience that pressure to be 'politically correct' in academic life has changed for better or worse by Left-Right identity



Notes: Q10-11: *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse."* '**Pressures to be 'politically correct'** All countries worldwide.

Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019

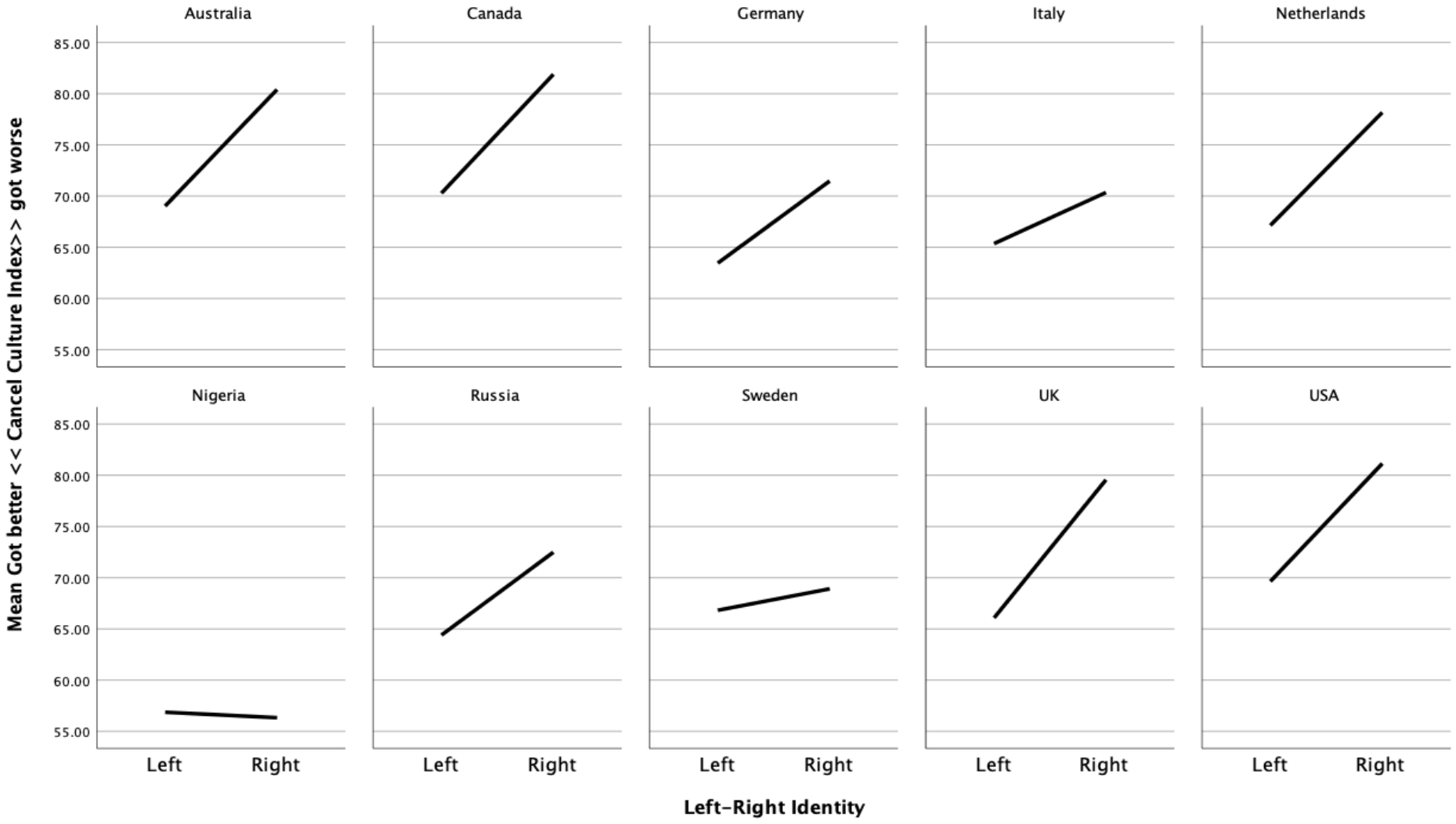
Figure 5: **Experience that academic freedom to teach and research has changed for better or worse by Left-Right identity**



Notes: Q10-11: *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse" '***Academic freedom to teach and research'*** All countries worldwide.

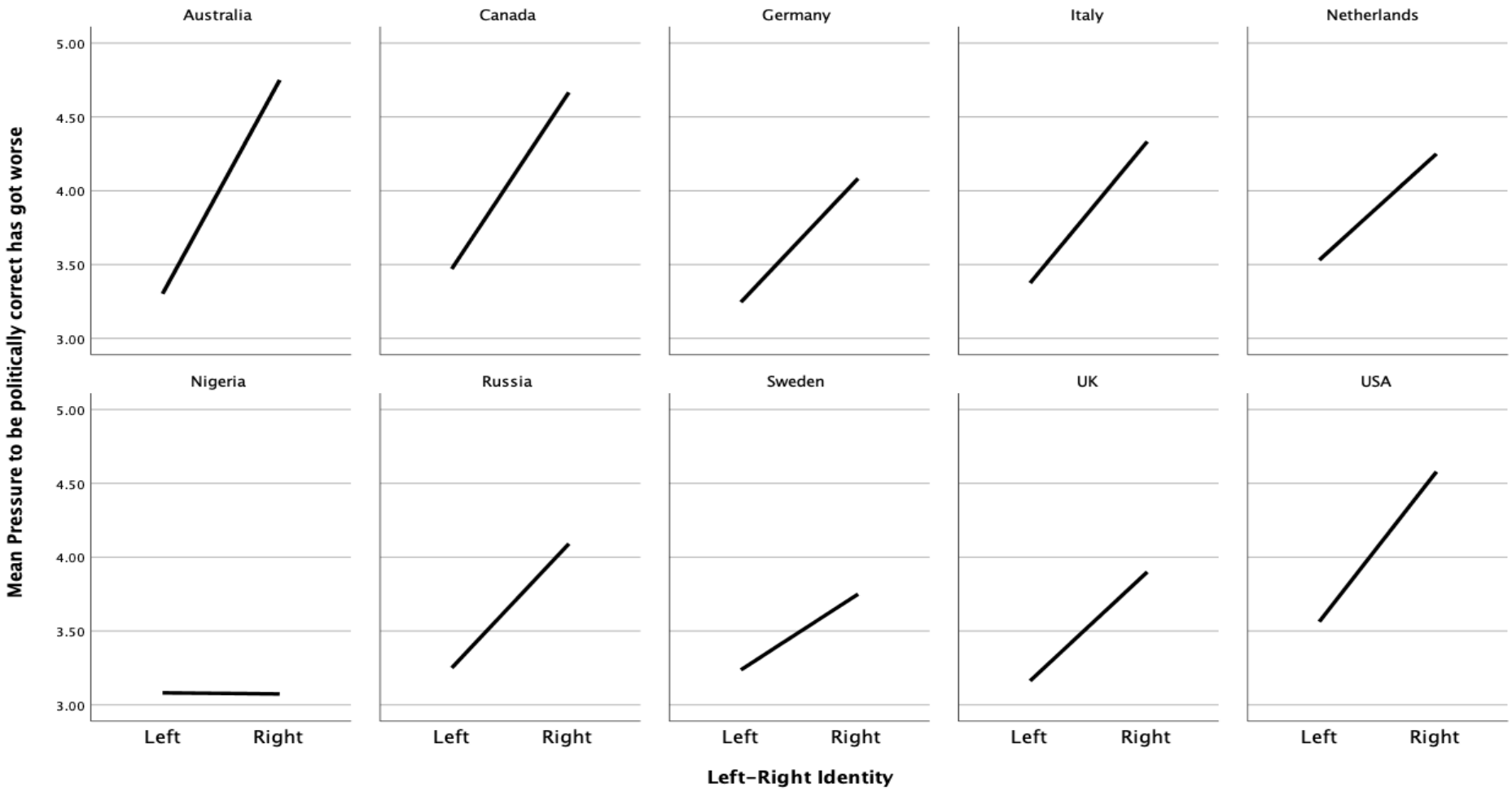
Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019

Figure 6: **Experience of changes in the Cancel Culture Index by Left-Right identity, 10 societies**



Note: The standardized 100-point Cancel Culture Index is created by combining three items using the following question *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse." '*Academic freedom to teach and research'**, '**Respect for open debate from diverse perspectives', and 'Pressures to be politically correct.' 10 countries worldwide each with 70-281 respondents.
Source: World of Political Science survey,

Figure 7: **Experience of pressures to be politically correct by Left-Right identity, 10 societies**



Notes: Q10-11: *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse."* '**Pressures to be 'politically correct'.** 10 countries worldwide each with 70-281 respondents.

Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019

Table 1: Predicting scores on the Cancel Culture Index

	Model A: US only				Model B: Post-industrial societies				Model C: Developing societies			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.
Left-Right ideological identity (Left 0, Right 10)	2.05	0.57	0.26	***	0.76	0.24	0.10	***	-1.19	0.38	-0.14	***
Gender (Women 1/ Men 0))	1.45	2.15	0.05	*	-1.20	0.88	-0.04	**	0.51	1.75	0.01	N/s
Age (Year of birth)	-0.01	0.06	-0.01	N/s	-0.08	0.03	-0.08	***	0.09	0.07	0.06	N/s
(Constant)	72.1				223.1				100			
Adjusted R^2	0.05				0.02				0.05			
N. respondents	193				1023				487			
N. countries	1				23				78			

Note: Multivariate regression analysis. Dependent Variable: The 100-pt Cancel Culture Index (Low score= Got better, High score=Got worse) Sig P. * 05, **. 01 *** .001 The standardized Cancel Culture Index is created by combining three items using the following question *"Academic life is often thought to be in a state of change. Using the following scale, based on your experience, please indicate whether you think the quality of the following aspects of academic life have changed over the last five years. Got a lot better, got somewhat better, no change, got somewhat worse, got a lot worse." 'A*cademic freedom to teach and research'**, '**Respect for open debate from diverse perspectives', and 'Pressures to be politically correct.'

Source: World of Political Science survey, 2019.

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[27] For details, see Pippa Norris. 2020. 'The World of Political Science: Internationalization and its Consequences.' In *Political Science in Europe: Achievement, Challenges, Prospects* Eds. Thibaud Boncourt, Isabelle Engeli, and Diego Garzia. Essex/New York: ECPR Press/Rowman and Littlefield.

[28] The original survey items were recoded for consistency with the thesis, so that a higher score on each indicated negative evaluations, meaning that respondents perceived a worsening 'cancel culture'.

[29] It should be noted that the terms 'liberal', 'left' and 'progressive' are used interchangeably in this study, as are 'rightwing' and 'conservative', following traditional American usage, although strictly speaking these are separate concepts.

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