Professors are the enemy: Two faces of academic freedom
Faculty Research Working Paper Series

Pippa Norris
Harvard Kennedy School

July 2025
RWP25-004

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Two faces of academic freedom

Pippa Norris

Harvard University

Pippa_Norris@Harvard.edu

Synopsis: The early twenty-first century has seen growing concern about risks to academic freedom in America and worldwide. To understand these issues, *Part I* of the paper distinguishes two threats to academic freedom. Restrictions on independent scholarship can arise from outside institutions of higher education, through state laws and external regulatory bodies. They can also be due to internal cultural processes within the academy which limit viewpoint diversity. What is the relationship between these embedded dimensions? The study theorizes that legal regulations can exert a direct effect on academic freedom and also have an indirect chilling effect, through encouraging practices of self-censorship. To address these issues, *Part II* draws upon the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) Academic Freedom Index (AFI) in 179 nations worldwide. Net change in the Index is estimated since 2000 and it is illustrated by selected cases, including the United States. *Part III* builds upon this foundation to understand subjective perceptions of self-censorship within academia. Cross-national survey data from over 100 countries is used to examine the attitudes and behavior of scholars within the discipline of political science, a field dealing with issues at the forefront of culture wars in higher education. The conclusion in *Part IV* summarizes the core findings and considers their broader implications. The evidence suggests that 1) growing limits on academic freedom are associated with broader processes of backsliding in liberal democracy, evident in many parts of the globe. Equally importantly, legal constraints on academic freedom encourage processes of self-censorship, thereby silencing unorthodox voices, suppressing debate, and weakening viewpoint diversity in higher education. Institutions of higher education need to resist pressures on academic freedom to fulfil their classic mission of advancing human knowledge.

Keywords: Academic freedom, democratic backsliding, academic cultures, free speech

12 June 2025

The early twenty-first century has seen growing international concern about the state of academic freedom worldwide. As reported by the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, academic freedom faces adverse conditions around the globe, highlighting malpractices such as: "…overly strict legal restrictions; targeted violence against students and academics; arrest, detention, ill-treatment, extrajudicial killing and trial in military courts of those exercising academic freedom; attacks against institutional autonomy; the physical presence and/or interventions of security forces on university campuses; the engagement of students as a source of threat to academics; disruptions of the Internet and telecommunications services; travel restrictions; and the exclusion of students from scholarships."[1] Any erosion university autonomy and scholarly independence is important because these conditions are widely regarded as essential for achieving many individual benefits and social values, including open-minded debate, intellectual progress and critical thinking, democratic deliberation, informed citizenship and civic engagement, theoretical breakthroughs and scientific advances, medical and technological innovations, knowledge and creativity in the arts and humanities, and economic productivity, vocational skills, and human development (AAUP 1915, 1940; Willetts 2017).

To understand the nature of any threats to higher education, *Part I* of the paper outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework. The paper identifies two faces of academic freedom, distinguishing between restrictions on scholars arising from *outside* the academy (including external limits from formal state regulation of colleges and universities), and from *internal* constraints within the academy (including cultural processes of self-censorship). Unfortunately, contemporary political debates about these issues are often highly polarized ideologically. Hence the classical liberal tradition commonly emphasizes the importance of respecting the professional autonomy of educational institutions and the right of independent scholars to research and teach untrammeled by external state regulations. This notion is reflected in Harvard's rejection of attempts by the federal government to control: "…what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue." (Garber 2025). By contrast, however, contemporary social conservatives commonly express concern about a potential lack of viewpoint diversity reflected in the predominant internal culture inside the academy, attributed to a growing liberal or progressive bias. This argument has been used to justify attempted state and federal government interventions, for example, in student recruitment and faculty hiring practices, the use of affirmative action and social diversity programs, the contents of library bookshelves, and the funding allocation of scientific research awards. Both sides in the contemporary debate commonly frame and justify their arguments as attempts to defend academic freedom, but they often speak past each other, as opinions differ sharply in their critique of higher education.

It remains to be determined whether external or internal forces exert the greater impact in chilling academic freedom of speech – and, also, how embedded factors may interact. The study theorizes that formal external constraints on academic freedom can be expected to have a *direct* impact on freedom of expression on college campuses, as exemplified recently in the U.S. by federal actions attempting to restrict visas from international students and visiting scholars deemed insufficiently aligned ideologically with the views of the Trump administrations. Yet legal policies designed to constrain college autonomy may also fail to achieve their objectives, for example if blocked by court rulings or poorly implemented; hence the SCOTUS decision ending affirmative action in US colleges has been found to have had only a mixed impact on the subsequent enrollment of Asian and Black students.[2]

Government regulations are also theorized as likely to exert a more diffuse and subtle indirect effect on campus cultures, since students and scholars can be expected to be more likely to hesitate and self-censor their authentic opinions before expressing views deemed ideologically polarizing, morally sensitive, and politically controversial. Monitoring reports, for example cases investigated by Scholars at Risk, suggest that self-censorship can occur under any type of regime, but it is most likely to have a chilling effect in autocratic states, where expressions of dissent are stringently monitored and controlled.[3]

For new evidence about these propositions, to compare formal constraints on academic freedom worldwide, *Part II* examines systematic macro-level data by drawing upon the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) Academic Freedom Index (AFI) in 179 nation-states. This index is designed to monitor the autonomy of higher education institutions and the rights of academics to teach and research free of state censorship (Spannagel and Kinzelbach, 2023). The study compares these estimates with V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index during the same decades. To summarize enduring developments in each country during the early twenty-first century, this study measures *net* change in the Academic Freedom Index and the Liberal Democracy Index from 2000 to 2023. The global comparison confirms that, unsurprisingly, the worst contemporary cases restricting academic freedom indeed occur in the world's most repressive autocracies, exemplified by Iran, Russia, China, and Egypt. But the loss of scholarly autonomy has also become widespread in many societies during recent decades -- and it is not limited to authoritarian regimes. Instead, deteriorations in academic freedom are systematically associated with democratic backsliding in many other political institutions, including rule of law, freedom of the press, and checks on executive power. The policies used to control higher education are illustrated further in several selected cases, such as Hungary, Turkey, and the United States.

Part III builds upon this foundation to understand how educational regulations potentially influence the internal or subjective processes of self-censorship within academia. The study theorizes that legal constraints are likely to have a direct impact on universities and colleges, for example by influencing personnel policies and hiring

practices, banning books, restricting research awards, or controlling the approved contents of curricula. But they are also predicted to exert an indirect chilling effect on the willingness of scholars to self-censor their authentic views on controversial topics. Cross-national survey data from over 100 countries are used to examine the individual-level attitudes and values of scholars within the discipline of political science, a field at the forefront in culture wars over 'cancel culture'. Evidence draws on the World of Political Science survey in 2023, conducted in cooperation with the International Political Science Association and the European Consortium of Political Research.[4] Multilevel models are used to compare the relative importance of government regulation of academic freedom on faculty perceptions of academic freedom to teach and research, and their tendency to engage in self-censorship, controlling for several standard social characteristics of scholars which are also likely to influence these attitudes and practices, including their ideology, age, gender, tenure status, and career seniority.

The conclusion in *Part IV* summarizes the two core findings and considers their broader implications.   Firstly, the study further confirms that state laws regulating freedom of research, teaching, and publication by scholars, as well as the institutional autonomy for schools, universities, and colleges, are systematically associated with broader patterns of liberal democratic backsliding in the early 21st century in many parts of the globe. Not surprisingly, growing constraints on university autonomy are linked to the erosion of other independent institutional checks and balances on the abuse of power by the core executive, such as the news media, courts, and state bureaucracy. In addition, equally importantly, legal restrictions on institutional autonomy significantly predict practices of self-censorship by scholars, weakening viewpoint diversity and debate within the academy. Institutions of higher education need to resist both threats to academic freedom if they are to fulfil their classic mission of advancing human knowledge.

I: Theoretical and conceptual framework

Academic freedom is a complex and multidimensional concept that is commonly justified in the long tradition of the Enlightenment, and expressed by leading philosophers in classical liberal thought, by the need for higher education to foster critical thinking, scientific debate, and the pursuit of knowledge, conducted for the common good, untrammelled by constraints (AAUP 1915, 1940; Altbach, 2001; Gordon 2022). One conventional way to understand the core conceptual components is to identify the locus of any constraints on scholars, including distinguishing freedom of research and publication, teaching and the contents of curricula used in the classroom, intramural activity like recruitment and promotion decisions within an educational institution, and extramural activities within the broader public sphere, like the use of social media (Finkin and Post 2009). Nevertheless, attempts to regulate universities and colleges may cut across these boundaries, such as the Trump

administration's attempts to abolish Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs in the U.S., including teaching and research on race, gender, and sexual orientation (Ng et al 2025). An alternative framework focuses instead on the key actors involved in restricting academic freedom. Accordingly, this study distinguishes two faces of academic freedom, including constraints posed by both external (or objective) state legal regulations and by internal (or subjective) cultural norms and processes of self-censorship by scholars within higher education.

External regulations

Traditional approaches rooted in classical liberal principles, and in international jurisprudence and treaties, have emphasized the importance of legal and financial threats arising outside the academy that limit individual and collective rights in higher education, especially from the role of state and federal governments (Russell 2002; Barendt 2010).

Thus the United Nations General Assembly has recognized the concept of academic freedom to include "the freedom of individuals, as members of academic communities (e.g., faculty, students, staff, scholars, administrators, and community participants) or in their own pursuits, to conduct activities involving the discovery and transmission of information and ideas, and to do so with the full protection of human rights law."[5] This understanding specifies that UN member states are obligated to protect individual scholars from undue political interference and to guarantee these rights by safeguarding the autonomy and self-governance of educational institutions. The April 2024 report of the Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur for Education identifies four interdependent pillars of academic freedom, namely: "…the right to teach; to engage in discussions and debates with persons and groups inside (including in classrooms) and outside the academic community; to conduct research; and to disseminate opinions and results of research."[6]

The broader framework of international instruments and conventions include rights to academic freedom and related entitlements. Hence the value of freedom of opinion and expression, without interference, is recognized in Article 19 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. National constitutions worldwide incorporate these principles into law; almost all (192/198) incorporate freedom of speech, like the First Amendment in the US Constitution, while around half (95) recognize rights to academic freedom.[7] Article 13 of the 1966 ICESCR recognizes the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, within minimum state standards.[8] The UNHCR highlights the risks of the loss of these rights: "Without academic freedom, societies lose one of the essential elements of democratic self-governance: the capacity for self-reflection, for knowledge generation and for a constant search for improvements of people's lives and social conditions."[9] Like equivalent professions in medicine and law, peer review is seen as the most appropriate standard used for evaluating the qualifications, training, and specialized expertise

required for scholars to teach, publish in leading scientific journals, and pursue excellent scientific research.

Yet the autonomy of educational institutions, especially in the public sector, has long been regulated by a wide range of external stakeholders, including the panoply of formal national laws and local state policies authorized by Ministers and Departments of Education, parliamentary oversight committees, the courts and judiciary, and educational bodies; the standards and accreditation processes used by institutional rating agencies, research selectivity monitors, and professional agencies; funding decisions by donors, NGOs, private sector corporations, and scientific research councils; and the role of civil society organizations, disciplinary associations, professional academies, and the media. Institutions of higher education, especially those funded in the public sector, are not ivory towers insulated from general educational regulations on all matters from hiring decisions to accreditation, as well as a wide range of laws governing matters such as free speech and restrictions on terrorism, standards of medical and scientific research, and technological development.

Reflecting the legal approach, during the early 21st Century, many international monitoring organizations have highlighted cases of attacks on academic autonomy by governments worldwide, especially, but not exclusively, in backsliding democracies and in authoritarian states. For example, the 2020 OHCHR reports governments using political criteria to withhold funding for teaching and research, imposing non-academic standards for student recruitment or intervening in the criteria used for faculty hiring and tenure, engaging directly in the appointment of institutional leaders, interfering in university governance, or restricting the contents of curriculum or learning materials. [10] Similar issues have been widely documented in a series of annual reports and policy statements issued by leading monitoring organizations including, amongst others, by Scholars at Risk, Pen International, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the International Association of Universities, the Academic Freedom Index, the European Union, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) (Ignatieff and Roch 2018).

What remains less well established from specific case studies concerns the more systematic distribution of academic freedom worldwide and, in particular, how far trends vary consistently by the type of regime and other systematic cross-national structural conditions. Pelke (2023) suggests that growing restrictions on academic freedom in leading country cases are far from isolated; instead, these developments have often accompanied the broader erosion of liberal democratic institutions, procedures, and norms in recent years. It seems plausible to expect academic freedom to face serious threats in countries experiencing democratic erosion over time, as well as to be limited in contemporary authoritarian states. Nevertheless, despite specific cases, de jure laws and official state policies by educational authorities may fail to limit

university autonomy or academic free speech in practice for several reasons, such as the rejection of policies following judicial review, lack of technical implementation and administrative capacity, poorly designed legislation, inadequate consultation with key local stakeholders, organizational conservatism and resistance to change by academic cultures, and so on (Viennet and Pont, 2017). For example, dozens of White House Executive Orders and administrative actions seeking to limit academic freedom during the first 100 days of the second Trump administration generated legal countersuits, with mixed fortunes which continue to work their way through the courts.[11] In this regard, it helps to distinguish between de jure policy *outputs* in the governance of higher education (including government laws, administrative guidelines and regulations, executive orders, budgetary allocations, and court rulings) and subsequent de facto policy *outcomes (*whether initiatives achieve their long-term objectives) (Dal Mas et al., 2019). It is therefore important to document where legal constraints have limited academic freedom around the world – and under what types of regimes they have proved most effective.

Internal threats to academic freedom

Legal constraints pose one important threat to institutional autonomy and scholarly independence. But at the same time in recent years the debate over 'cancel culture' has highlighted growing concern about 'subjective' dimensions of academic freedom measured by *internal threats* to academic speech and heterodox thinking *within* the Ivory Tower (Norris 2023, 2024). In Western societies, many rightwing thinkers have warned about the impact of informal social pressures generated by the predominant liberal attitudes, norms, and cultural values which are believed to constrain contrarian or heterodox voices within higher education, weaking viewpoint diversity (Lukianoff 2023, Nierman and Sachs 2023). Rightwing critics argue that legal interventions are needed to correct a persistent liberal predominance (or even indoctrination) within academia and the perceived intolerance and exclusion of conservative values in schools and universities. Hence the Trump administration claims that Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs should be abandoned since they curb free speech, discriminate against White Men, and limit exposure to viewpoint diversity on college campuses (Ng et al 2025).

In previous work, the notion of a 'cancel culture' has been defined as a chilly climate silencing speech deemed derogatory, hostile, factually incorrect, or morally offensive (Norris 2023). Academic freedom can be undermined by processes of *self-censorship* where people are unwilling to express their authentic views in public, measured by the hesitancy of heterodox scholars to articulate controversial views within and outside academia, including in their teaching and research, department, and social media. Self-censorship within the academy is likely to be most common among heterodox viewpoint minorities who hold unconventional values, beliefs, and attitudes contrary to the predominant consensus within any group culture. By contrast, '*orthodox*' viewpoint majorities can be conceptualized as members holding cultural attitudes

shared by the majority within a group. Practices of 'self-silencing' depressing overt dissent have been found to be greatest in mismatched (heterodox) cases, or 'fish-out-of-water' (Norris 2023). Consequently, extreme heterodox views come to be regarded as crackpot ideas or conspiratorial beliefs beyond the boundaries of reasonable deliberation, factual evidence, and serious argument, the equivalent of teaching flat earth theories in physics, criticizing evolutionary theories in biology, or denying climate change in environmental studies (Allen and Levine 1969, De Dreu and De Vries 2001). This can be problematic where thoughtful, rational discourse about anything and everything depends on an environment where free, civil and respectful exchanges will eventually reveal the inherent weakness or worth of any argument.

A growing body of evidence has sought to measure practices of self-censorship (Shen and Truex 2021) and cancel culture behavior (Mueller 2021), explained by demographic and psychological characteristics such as employment status, contract tenure, age, and gender. What remains to be examined in this study is how far the formal legal constraints on academic freedom within a society, and perceptions of academic freedom, influence speech acts by heterodox minorities. This study proposes that severe limits of legal rights to free speech by academics in any country, and uncertainty arising from threats to institutional autonomy and scholarly independence, can be expected to exert an indirect chilling effect in reinforcing self-censorship by academics. For example, in the case of U.S. State Department policies towards the Israeli Palestinian conflict or the Russian-Ukrainian war, threats to federal funding of scientific research awards, and to visas issued to international students, can be expected to deter scholars who disagree with the Trump administration's actions from public expressions of dissent, engaging in protests, or social media criticism.

Part II: Comparing legal restrictions on academic freedom

To examine the evidence, we first need to establish where has academic freedom has come under greatest attack from governments worldwide in recent decades and whether any decline is systematically associated, as expected, with the type of regime in power and broader processes of democratic backsliding, like weakened rule of law, independent courts, and legislative checks and balances on executive powers, as Pelke (2023) suggests.

Evidence for annual trends in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) at national-level can be compared for 179 countries worldwide with data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is conceptualized as the right of academics to freedom of teaching and discussion, research, and publication, without constraint from censorship (Pelke and Spannagel 2023; Spannagel and Kinzelbach 2023). [12] This understanding reflects a negative view of freedom emphasizing the professional autonomy of individual scholars, for example, for members of university and college communities to speak out on moral and political issues within the context of university and colleges, without external constraints on

their work or accountability to senior college administrators, donors, government authorities, or other external actors.

V-Dem also draws on the methods of expert estimates to generate the annual Liberal Democracy Index, widely used in the research literature, with items monitoring the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. This includes holding free and fair multiparty contests for elected office as well as respecting constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. [13] Countries can also be compared using V-Dem's Regimes of the World typology, which classifies regimes into Absolute Authoritarian, Electoral Authoritarian, Electoral Democracies, and Liberal Democracies.

Comparisons using these indices can be drawn from year-to-year, but these may reflect specific events highlighted in the news media, such as changes in the leader or party in power, and thus prove somewhat arbitrary and volatile rather than measuring enduring longitudinal trends. A more stable and reliable measure estimating the cumulative effects of annual developments in liberal democracy and academic freedom can be calculated by the net change in these V-Dem indices over a longer time-period, calculated in this study as the years from 2000 to the latest available observation (in 2023).

[Figure 1 and 2 about here]

Figure 1 demonstrates the contemporary distribution of academic freedom and liberal democracy using the most recently available V-Dem estimates, and the strong correlation between these measures. Thus, in the top-right quadrant, many leading countries with the highest scores on the Academic Freedom Index are long-established Western European democracies such as Sweden, Germany and France, although some third-wave democracies elsewhere also fall into this group, including Chile, Lithuania, and Argentina. At the same time, the middle-ranked countries on the AFI index are from diverse geographic and cultural regions, with some cases such as Nigeria, Honduras, and Bosnia Herzegovina rated more highly for academic freedom than democratic governance. Finally, the authoritarian states are also ranked most poorly in academic freedom, exemplified by the cases of Iran, Russia and Turkey.

But how has the picture shifted in recent decades? Figure 2 illustrates the net change from 2000-2023 in both these measures, illustrating the cases with the worst deterioration observed in both indices, including in Orban's Hungary, Erdogan's Turkey, and Ortega's Nicaragua. Similar developments can be observed in a broader range of autocracies from diverse global regions, such as in Hong Kong under the clampdown on political dissent by President Xi, in Putin's Russia, and in Maduro's Venezuela. Figure 2 also illustrates the type of regime in power at the start of the series,

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in 2000, using the four-fold classification schema monitoring V-Dem's Regimes of the World.

During the early twenty-first century, the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) estimates that academic freedom eroded in twenty-two countries worldwide, home to over half the world's population, while improving in only five.[14] Growing restrictions on higher education during the last decade have been observed in cases as diverse as Poland, Turkey, India Egypt, Mexico, Nicaragua, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Thailand.[15] At the same time, however, according to these estimates, the pattern shows some diverse net changes can be seen during the 21st Century, rather than a uniform decline, with positive developments registered in cases such as Kenya, Iraq and Fiji. The erosion observed in the United States suggests a decline in academic freedom during these decades, with the latest observations taken in 2023, prior to the actions taken by the second Trump administration.

The reliability of the AFI estimates is further confirmed by case study evidence documented in a series of global reports published by leading international monitoring agencies. These highlight the way that risks from formal and informal constraints on the general autonomy of institutions in higher education, and threats to the freedom of teaching, research and publication by individual scholars, have become more frequent in recent decades.

Autocratic constraints

Observers suggest that numerous risks threaten academic freedom and institutional autonomy are most severe in authoritarian states where the right to think and speak freely is routinely repressed, and in situations of armed conflict and political crisis, where higher education institutions are threatened. In this regard, attacks on universities are part of a broader barrage of attempts to intimidate independent cultural and legal institutions in civil society, such as media organizations, law firms, tech companies, and pro-democracy and human rights NGOs. The 2023 Scholars at Risk report documents over 400 attacks on scholars, students, and their institutions in 66 countries and territories, including highlighting problems in Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Mexico, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United States.[16] Serious violations of human rights and systematic clampdowns on academics were observed in Turkey and Iran, with armed attacks destroying higher education institutions in Ukrainian and Gaza conflict zones, and draconian Taliban bans on women and girl's education in Afghanistan.

In some of the worst performing autocracies, including Russia and China, the Scholars at Risk network documents many cases of academics and students subject to growing harassment, imprisonment, and exile, with the use of official state censorship and political indoctrination programs silencing dissenting voices among groups critical of

the regime. [17] In China, the independence in institutions of higher education has been undermined under President Xi.[18] China's extensive program of political 'reeducation' is designed to indoctrinate over one million Muslim Uyghurs detained in internment camps.[19] Similarly, Scholars At Risk highlights many cases of prominent dissident writers, public intellectuals, and protesting students in Bahrain, Iran, and Egypt who have suffered wrongful conviction, incarceration, 'reeducation', or even execution.[20] In Central and Eastern Europe, as well, human rights observers report many cases of government interference in the autonomy of academic institutions, along with the use of coercion and violence against students and scholars in Turkey, Belarus, and Russia.[21] Turkey provides another case where academic freedom came under aggressive attack following the attempted military coup on 15 July 2016, leading to the imprisonment or exile of many scholars (Doğan and Selenica 2021). In Nicaragua, as well, the government has closed 28 universities in the country since 2018 as part of the crackdown on thousands of civil society organizations and the arbitrary arrest of academics and students by the police.[22] In August 2023, the Ortega administration shuttered the private Jesuit-run University of Central America (UCA) and confiscated all its assets and infrastructure.

Europe

Problems occur in Europe as well. A recent review, commissioned by the European Parliament, documents major threats to academic freedom across Europe, especially in Poland and Greece (Massen et al 2023). The report suggests that de jure academic freedom remains relatively high among most EU member states, but Hungary is highlighted as the poster child for the most problematic case within the European Union. Under Viktor Orban, university autonomy was systematically undermined (Ignatieff 2024; Ignatieff and Roch 2018). This process is exemplified most dramatically by the case of the Orban administration's actions expelling the Central European University (CEU) from Budapest (Bard, 2018). The Hungarian government banned gender studies in colleges, stripped the Academy of Sciences of its autonomy, and appointed party loyalists to many university boards of trustees (Ryder 2020). Human Rights observers document how LGBTQ rights have been under renewed pressure in the country, where the Orban government has conflated these rights with 'child protection', including passing laws banning depictions of gay people in schoolbooks, as well as ending legal gender recognition for transgender people, and amending the constitution to define marriage as a heterosexual union.[23] Britain has also seen rising concern over threats to free speech in universities (Adekoya, Kaufmann, and Simpson 2020). Against this background, the UK Conservative Government passed a *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023*, allowing speakers to seek compensation if they are "no-platformed" and empowering the Office for Students to fine infringing institutions, weakening university self-governance.[24]

Academic Freedom in the United States

America was once regarded as leader of First Amendment constitutional rights to free speech, as shown by the country's relatively high AFI rank in 2023. Yet political critiques of higher education are far from novel, in the words of President Richard Nixon to Henry Kissinger, recorded on tape in the Oval Office in 14th May 1972: "Never forget, the press is the enemy. The establishment is the enemy. *The professors are the enemy. Professors are the enemy.* Write that on a blackboard 100 times and never forget it." But recent years have seen growing political pressures weakening academic autonomy and freedom in the United States, with Vice President J.D. Vance repeating Nixon's words. The threats are not exclusively on the right, by any means: the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) highlights cases where scholars have been penalized by state laws and official university regulations reflecting liberal or progressive principles and policies, such as requirements for diversity statements in the processes used for college hiring and promotion, and the use of university policies and speech codes limiting words and expressions deemed unpopular, controversial, or even deeply offensive.[25] Nevertheless, numerous legal restrictions to academic freedom in America have been passed by elected officials in Republican-controlled states and by local school boards, such as attempts to ban Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies in educational institutions, limiting what can be taught about race, sexual orientations, and gender identities in classrooms and school library books (Ng et al 2025). For example, the American Association of University Professors report a raft of 57 bills in 23 states, including Florida, Texas, Ohio, and Tennessee, seeking to limit the autonomy or public colleges and universities by prohibiting or banning the content of syllabi, empowering partisan appointments on managing boards, and restricting freedom to learn, teach and conduct research.[26] Florida, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Mississippi have passed legislation designed to weaken tenure for faculty employed in public universities where reviews find evidence of bias in teaching. Conservative foundations have also lobbied state legislatures to withdraw funding from scientific research on topics such as gender studies and environmental science.[27] This development has been reinforced in America by a coalition of right-wing grassroots organizations, funded by rich donors, claiming to advocate parental rights in schools, like 'Moms for Liberty', as well as by news coverage by right-wing media outlets and websites. This movement has attacked the use of 'politically correct' language, rejected the claims of so-called 'woke' activists seeking social justice, and sought to dismantle Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs in universities and colleges (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019; Lukianoff, Nierman and Sachs 2023).

Race, racism and ethnicity have proved one of the primary trigger points in a cultural backlash to social change; since 2020, for example, over 200 U.S. official bodies have introduced 670 legal measures seeking to ban the discussion of 'critical race theory' in

the classroom, exemplified by Florida's 'Stop WOKE' Act in 2022, with negative consequences for academic morale (Groton, Barsky and Spadola 2023). Binary or fluid gender identities and sexual orientation have similarly been central to culture wars: Republican lawmakers in dozens of U.S. states like Florida and Texas proposed or passed bills designed to repeal non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ children in public schools, make it illegal for teachers to discuss gender and sexuality, ban gender-affirming health care like hormone treatment to minors, and exclude transgender youths from school athletics, bathrooms and locker rooms, and other gender-segregated spaces.[28] Non-profit organizations have also challenged legal limits on freedom of religious expression in colleges and universities.[29] Republican-dominated US states passed a series of controversial laws or executive actions that ban or restrict how race, gender, and sexuality can be discussed in primary or secondary school classrooms and, in some cases, in public universities and colleges (Lopez and Sleeter 2023; Guard and Jacobsen 2024).[30] Similarly, library censorship has surged in America (Knox 2015). According to PEN America, in the latter half of 2023, more than 4000 books were banned from school libraries, many concerned with issues of race, gender, and sexuality, with the most aggressive purges in Texas and Florida.[31]

At federal level, following campus protests over war in the Middle East, in early-2024 Republican members of the U.S. Ways and Means House Committee held hearings, claiming to fight antisemitism on college campuses, and called for the resignation of several university presidents. Federal attacks on the education sector dramatically escalated during the second Trump administration, following a series of Executive Orders and Presidential Declarations seeking to intervene in university governance, while suspending federal research grants from scientific foundations at university labs and research institutes across the country, including $1bn funds at Cornell and $3 billion at Harvard University. Thousands of international students and visiting scholars in America saw their legal visas threatened, with some facing incarceration and deportation. Some federal interventions were suspended by the courts, at least temporarily, following legal challenges. The federal government demanded that Harvard close all diversity, equity and inclusion programs, share admission details, report foreign students who violate conduct, and appoint an outside auditor to ensure viewpoint diversity among its faculty and students. Attempted threats designed to ensure compliance included cancelling all federal contracts with Harvard, withdrawing its tax-exempt status, seeking to halt all visas for international students, and raising taxes on its endowment income. In response, Harvard refused to comply and sued the federal government. Similarly, the Trump administration withheld millions of dollars in federal research grants from Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton, accused of failing to comply with its priorities.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities expressed deep concern about developments, with over 150 presidents endorsing a letter opposing the Trump administration's political interference in higher education.[32] Opinion polls suggest that

the majority of the public opposes several of these developments, for example in the April 18-25 2025 Washington Post-ABC News survey, three out of four respondents opposed reductions in federal funding for medical research, six out of ten were against shuttering the Education Department, while seven out of ten disapproved of attempts to increase the government's role in private universities.[33] During the first 100 days, the president's ambitious agenda has been challenged by a series of public protests and a flurry of lawsuits from critics, which the university lawyers are contesting, so the final outcome of these initiatives remain to be determined. Nevertheless, even if subsequently amended or rescinded, the informal impact of these developments is likely to persist, for example by deterring the number of international students applying to American universities, or by the brain drain exodus of leading research scientists heading for Europe.

III: Do restriction on academic freedom encourage self-censorship?

Where implemented effectively, legal restrictions on higher education can be expected to have direct consequences, for example on funding, hiring and recruitment decisions. But what have been the implications for academic freedom of speech? In particular, are scholars more hesitant to express heterodox views within universities, and thus more likely to self-censor, where government policies limit academic freedom, after controlling for individual-level social characteristics which may predict these practices, like their ideological views, attitudes towards free speech, age, gender, and tenure?

To examine some empirical micro-level evidence about these propositions, this study draws upon a global survey of the political science profession -- the World of Political Science survey (WPS-2023) -- the second study in this series. The codebook and questionnaire provide further technical details. [34]   Overall, the survey collected 1,989 responses between 29 November 2022 and 31 January 2023. This included replies from scholars currently studying or working in 103 countries in eight global regions.

Measuring self-censorship

Following previous research (Norris 2023, 2004), the concept of self-censorship is understood as an unwillingness to express views to others who are perceived to disagree with them. The reasons may be manifold, for example, low self-esteem, social anxiety, or fear of group ostracism (Hayes, Glynn and Shanahan 2005). In the WPS-2023, self-censorship was monitored by asking respondents: *"How often have you felt hesitant to express controversial and heterodox views?"* measured on a 4-point scale from 'always' to 'never.' The question was repeated for diverse contexts, including in the individual's teaching, research and publications, department or institution, social media, and other public venues. The responses across the five items were tested with

reliability analysis and proved to be strongly intercorrelated (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.856 N. 1989), so they were examined descriptively and then summed to create a standardized 100-point Self-Censorship index, as the key dependent variable.

Measuring academic freedom

Multivariate models in the study included several attitudinal and social controls which may be related to issues of viewpoint diversity and freedom of academic expression. To examine any impact of legal constraints on practices of self-censorship, models include the contemporary state of institutional autonomy within each country from the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index in 2023, based on expert annual assessments.

It is also helpful to supplement this with a battery of items in the WPS survey monitored *subjective perceptions* of the state of academic freedom. After all, whether accurate or not, perceptions can be expected to exert a more direct effect on the willingness of scholars to express unpopular views than objective indices. These were monitored in this study through five items designed to generate a scale, including agreement that certain conditions have got better or worse during recent years, including academic freedom to teach and research; pressures to be politically correct; tolerance of alternative viewpoints; freedom of speech; and respect for open debate from diverse perspectives (Norris 2023). These items were confirmed to form a consistent scale through principal component factor analysis and thus transformed into a single standardized perceptions of worsening academic freedom scale.

Attitudinal controls

Based on prior research (Norris 2023), those holding heterodox (minority) views in academia are predicted to be most likely to self-censor their authentic views. To monitor this directly, respondents were asked whether they believed that the majority of people in their department, local community, and society shared their political and moral views. These items were intercorrelated and summed into a single perception of heterodox views scale.

In addition, *positive attitudes towards principles and values of free speech* may also matter, since those strongly endorsing principles of free speech can be expected to be more willing to express unpopular or controversial views, even if facing moral disapproval from others or violating norms within any group. These attitudes were monitored in the survey using a battery containing five items, as indicated by approval (or disapproval) on a five-point scale concerning the following statements: faculty need to challenge conventional dogma and orthodoxy; faculty and students are too easily offended by what others say; university policies should respect the expression of extremist views; academics should have the freedom to communicate unpopular opinions without threat of sanction; and scholars should debate the pros and cons of unpopular views about issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

Measuring ideological values

The critique by rightwing commentators claims that social conservatives are a heterodox minority within the academy, so they will be more likely to hesitate before expressing unpopular views contrary to the prevailing 'woke' culture (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019). Many academic surveys have measured the ideological position of scholars using a simple Left-Right scales or binary categories. This approach assumes that the terms 'Left' and 'Right' are universal and hold equivalent meanings worldwide, which may not be a valid assumption (Gere et al 2025). Even more serious measurement ambiguities arise when scholars are asked about their ideological identity or their position on continuous polar scales as either 'Liberals' or 'Conservatives,' not least because the usage of these terms differs systematically cross-nationally, such as in Europe and the United States. Accordingly, in this study scholars were asked to classify themselves using two ideological 10-point scales, replicating those used in the cross-national Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of party positions, with each question providing short descriptive cues to cue and frame the meaning of the measures.[35]

The survey included the GALTAN question used in CHES which is designed to measure social or moral liberalism and conservatism, at the heart of battles over 'woke' issues. Respondents were asked to identify their own positions using the following cue: "*People also differ in their social values. Those with LIBERAL values favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, on abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and democratic participation. Those with CONSERVATIVE values reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition and stability, believing that government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues. Where would you place your views on this scale?*" The responses allow respondents to be classified on a continuous scale, which was collapsed into a 5-point index.

As an alternative measure, respondents were also asked to identify their position on a similar *economic* left-right 10-point scale about the economy, using the following question from CHES: "*People differ in their views towards ECONOMIC ISSUES such as privatization, taxes, regulation, government spending, and the welfare state. Those on the economic LEFT want government to play an active role in the economy. Those on the economic RIGHT favor a reduced role for government. Where would you place your views on this scale?*" Responses were also collapsed into a 5-point scale to maximize reliability. The use of both these scales allows ideological positions to be mapped across a two-dimensional issue space. It is perfectly consistent for respondents to be socially conservative on moral issues like religion and abortion, for example, but also to favor an active role for government in managing the economy and welfare state, just as they can be personally liberal on moral issues and yet also pro-market.

Socio-demographic and Employment Controls

The analysis controls for several standard socio-demographic characteristics in the academic workforce, including gender, age, and tenure, which may influence attitudes

and values towards free speech and self-censorship (Marquina and Jones 2015; Bastedo, Altbach, and Gumport 2023). Formal employment security, status and power are thought important for the willingness to express unpopular views in many societies. Lecturers lacking security of tenure may be less willing to express unpopular views among colleagues in their department, among senior administrators at interview, or to face the risk of criticisms and poor teaching ratings from students in the classroom. Employment in higher education has become increasingly precarious and casualized, with growing numbers of contingent lecturers lacking the security of legal contracts protecting full-time pay and status, career tenure, and related employment benefits like pension and sabbatical leave (Chait 2005, Altbach 2000, Austin and Jones 2015, Gerber 2015). These developments may be expected to make early-career scholars, women and those lacking tenure more vulnerable to constraints on academic freedom. Accordingly, models control for several characteristics which may be closely associated with self-censorship, including age, gender and tenure.

[Figure 3 and Table 1 about here]

The dependent variable in the multilevel model is the standardized scale measuring how far scholars hesitate to express controversial and heterodox views in diverse contexts, such as in their teaching, department or social media. The coefficient plot is generated by Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) Linear Regression Models with random effects for the respondents' nation. The results are illustrated in Figure 3 and more details are presented in Table 1.

Overall, the analysis confirms that the tendency to self-censor is indeed significantly strengthened in societies with restrictions on academic freedom, according to scores on VDem's expert Academic Freedom Index, as well as where respondents believe subjectively that academic freedom has worsened in several ways. Indeed, out of all the factors in the model, the AFI Index exerts the strongest impact on strengthening the propensity for scholars to hesitate before expressing controversial views. Where the state Big Brother is setting curricula in the classroom, banning books, or restricting decisions on hiring and promotion, then scholars are the most cautious, limiting viewpoint diversity. Other factors influencing this process include gender, with female academics more hesitant to express contrarian views than men, a process which studies suggest seems likely to be deeply embedded in widely-observed gender roles, different forms of language and communications for men and women in society, as well as imbalances in status and power within organizations (Adamska 2022). Age (but not tenure) has similar effects, with the young (and thus less senior in status) more prone to censor their views. In addition, social conservatives are also more likely to self-censor, probably reflecting the liberal skew in academic cultures, as many rightwing commentators claim. By contrast, endorsing strong pro-academic freedom values predicts the willingness of scholars to speak out, even against the popular consensus.

IV: Conclusions

Issues of academic freedom have raised widespread concern in many societies, including the United States, with controversies about the meaning of the core concept and the nature of the problems facing higher education. Both rightwing social conservatives and progressive liberals claim to be defending academic freedom, yet they increasingly find themselves at odds. One reason for the heated debate is that academic freedom has two faces, not one. The autonomy and self-governance of institutions of higher education and the independence of academics face growing threats from external state regulations, limiting decisions about what scholars can teach in the classroom, who they can recruit and promote, and what they can research and publish. This is most obvious in cases like Hungary, Russia, and Turkey, where states have sought to censor dissenting academic voices and control critics of the regime. But academic freedom can also be undermined within the academy, where the predominant liberal culture and intolerance of unpopular views may penalize and marginalize heterodox thinkers, especially social conservatives challenging progressive shibboleths.

The evidence presented in this study suggest that state control of the higher education sector, and the attempted suppression of academic views which differ from the regime, are not isolated; instead, these are systematically related to broader symptoms of democratic backsliding observed in many countries during the early-21st Century. Moreover, interventions by the state over the governance of the higher education sector reinforce practices of self-censorship by scholars, and thus encourage an erosion of viewpoint diversity, not its strengthening. Institutions of higher education need to resist these pressures if they are to fulfil their classic mission of advancing human knowledge, expanding scientific progress, and strengthening civic deliberation. Whether they can do so effectively currently remains unclear.

Figure 1: The Academic Freedom Index and Liberal Democracy Index, 2023
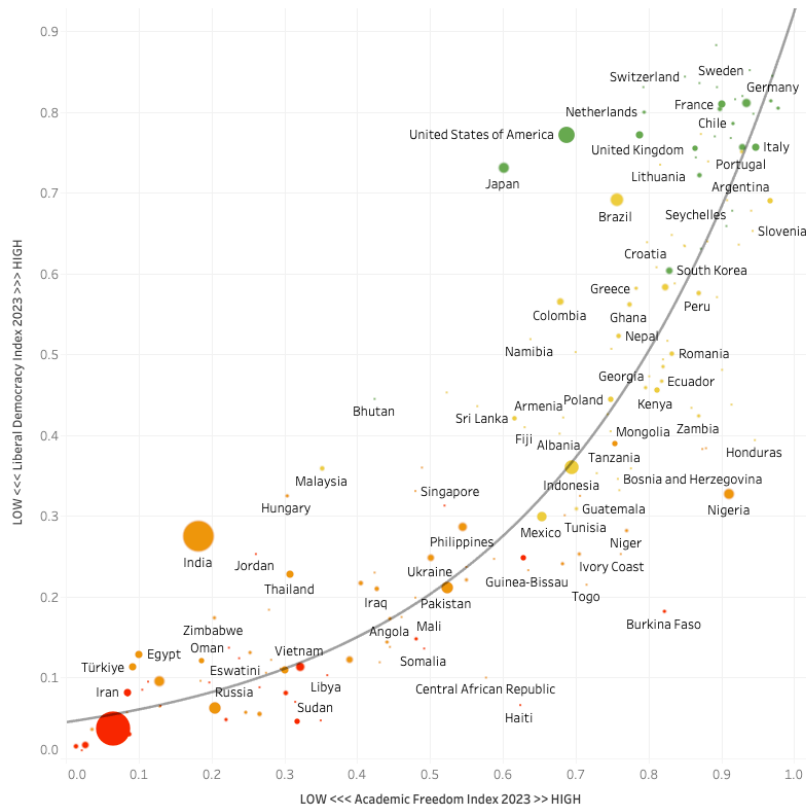
Notes: **Regimes** are classified by *Regimes of the World,* (V-Dem 14) into Absolute authoritarian (Red), Electoral Authoritarian (Orange), Electoral Democracies (Yellow), and Liberal Democracies (Green). **The Academic Freedom Index** and The **Liberal Democracy Index** are measured annually by the Varieties of Democracy project. R=0.76.

Source: Varieties of Democracy dataset (V14.0) March 2024 University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.
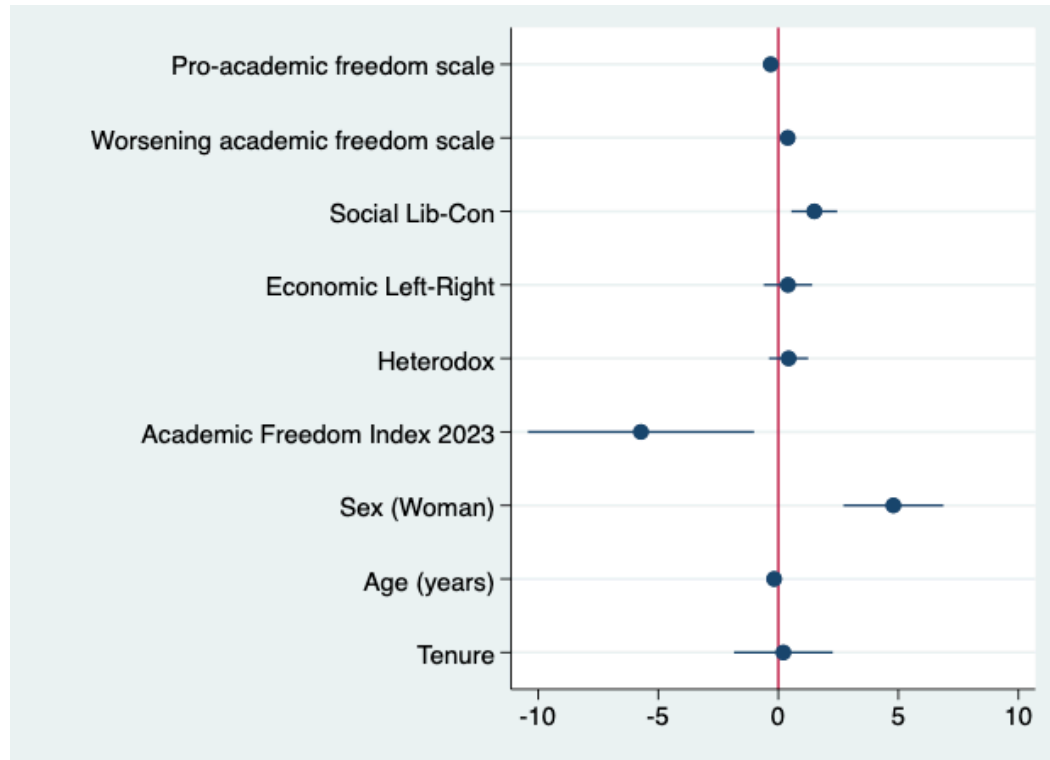
Figure 2: Net changes in the Academic Freedom Index and the Liberal Democracy Index, 2000-2023
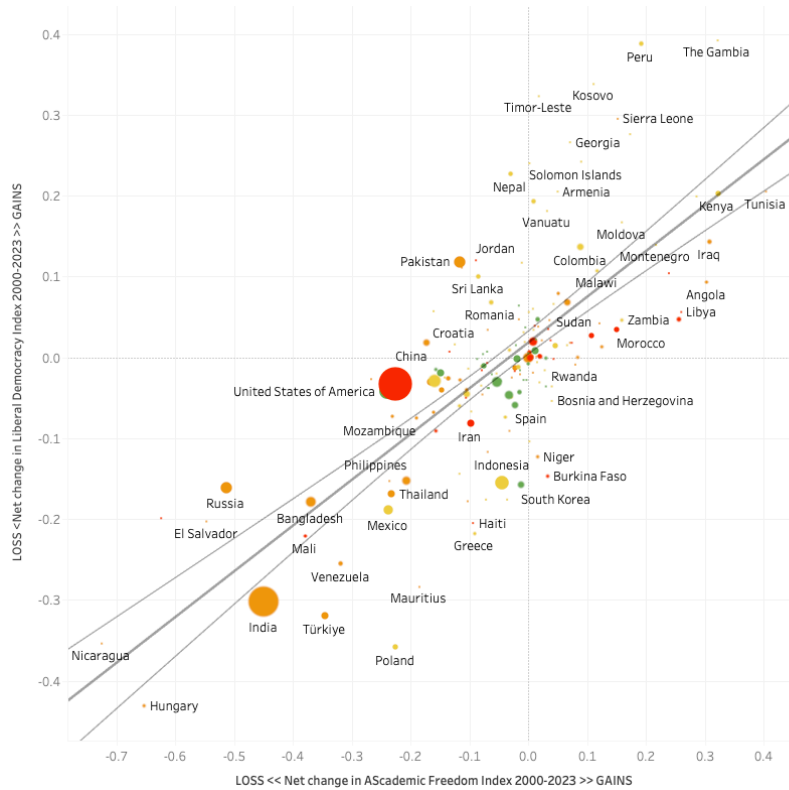
Notes: See Figure 1. The net changes are measured by the indices in 2000-2023. R=0.51.

Source: Varieties of Democracy dataset (V14.0) March 2024 University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

Figure 3: Predicting self-censorship

Note: The dependent variable is the standardized scale measuring how far scholars hesitate to express controversial and heterodox views in diverse contexts, such as in their teaching, department or social media. The coefficient plot is generated by Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) Linear Regression Models with random effects for the respondents' nation. The model includes measures of positive attitudes by respondents towards academic free speech, perceptions of worsening academic freedom, their position on social liberal or conservative ideological value scales, their self-perceived heterodox status, and the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index for each country in 2023, controlling for their sex (female), age (years) and employment tenure.

Sources: Varieties of Democracy dataset (V14.0) March 2024 University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute; World of Political Science 2023, ECPR-IPSA.

Table 1: REML Models predicting the willingness of scholars to self-censor

	B	SE	Sig (P)
Pro-Academic freedom values scale	-0.315	0.041	***
Perceptions of worsening academic freedom scale	0.393	0.039	***
Social Liberal-Conservative position scale	1.500	0.486	***
Economic Left-Right position scale	0.402	0.515	N/s
Perceived heterodox status	0.429	0.416	N/s
Academic Freedom Index (V-Dem)	-5.710	2.400	**
Gender (female)	4.790	1.060	***
Age (years)	-0.169	0.040	***
Tenure (1/0)	0.212	1.049	N/s
Constant	61.40		
N.	1,071		

Note: See Figure 1.

Sources: Varieties of Democracy dataset (V14.0) March 2024 University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute; World of Political Science 2023, ECPR-IPSA.

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