

Economics research shows free speech benefits the poor the most

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Recently published research analyzes the types of people who benefit most from freedom of speech. The research found people with more resources place greater priority on freedom of speech. However, people

with fewer resources (i.e. lower incomes or education levels) benefit most from free speech. The results support the hypothesis that free speech empowers those with fewer resources in society compared to those with greater resources.

The analysis includes 300,000 individuals from more than 90 countries over a 40-year period.

The two results are not incompatible: people with fewer resources may need to prioritize [basic needs](#) more than 'luxuries' such as free speech but, being in marginalized populations, they may still benefit most from having freedom of expression.

Free speech acts as a luxury good when individuals are asked to rank it alongside other factors that may affect their well-being. Just because poorer people prioritize more immediate needs does not, however, mean that they benefit less from free speech. Free speech offers the poor and the marginalized a greater opportunity to voice their concerns publicly and to influence decisions.

While it is not their top priority when making ends meet, they gain greater benefit from having free speech than more prosperous groups.

We conclude that even though survey evidence for stated preferences indicates that free speech is a luxury good, regimes which increase freedom of speech (on average) simultaneously raise the subjective well-being of more marginalized members of society relative to those with greater resources.

The researchers analyzed if people value free speech differently relative to others with different income or [education levels](#) in their country. They also analyze how people rank the importance of free speech relative to a list of other possible priorities (choices include: protecting freedom of

speech, giving people more say in important government decisions, fighting rising prices, and maintaining order in the nation.)

Finally, the research analyzes whose (self-rated) well-being is enhanced most by having [freedom of speech](#) in their country. The researchers tested if free speech is valued more highly by high-income earners and the well-educated, or by those with fewer resources.

Related findings from the research include:

(i) People who say they value free speech benefit from living in countries with free speech.

(ii) Preferences towards free speech vary according to population characteristics, in addition to income and education levels.

Other groups more likely to prioritize free speech include the young, students, non-religious people and those on the left of the political spectrum. Preferences also reflect country circumstances, with people in the 'West' being more supportive of free speech than people in other regions of the world.

The analyzes uses well-being and other individual data from the World Values Survey and the Latino Barometer survey, plus data covering country-level free speech and [human rights](#) sourced from two independently compiled databases (CIRIGHTS and VDEM). Many of the countries in the surveys have had marked changes in their [free speech](#) levels over the study period.

The paper, "The Economics of Free Speech: Subjective Wellbeing and Empowerment of Marginalized Citizens," is published in the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.

More information: Diana Voerman-Tam et al, The economics of free speech: Subjective wellbeing and empowerment of marginalized citizens, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2023.05.047](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.05.047)

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