

# Study highlights key social forces shaping worldwide academic freedom trends

February 1 2024

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Recent crackdowns on academic freedom span the globe, from cases of university closures in Turkey, the dismissal of professors in China, and attacks on scholars in India to legislative restrictions on race and gender curriculum in Hungary and the U.S.

Making use of a newly available cross-national and longitudinal dataset, University of California, Irvine sociologists explore the social foundations of academic freedom. They find [systematic evidence](#) in support of several longstanding views—the liberty to teach and learn is protected by democracy and threatened by state religiosity, armed conflict, and militarism. They also show the positive and negative effects of liberal and illiberal global institutions.

Published online in the [American Sociological Review](#), their findings underscore the impact of multiple coexisting forces shaping global trends in academic freedom.

"Local struggles over academic freedom don't occur in a vacuum; the global context matters. For example, today's global wave of authoritarianism and populism is emboldening leaders in diverse countries to restrict academic freedom. Conversely, international institutions like NGOs or human rights treaties can help protect academic freedom through advocacy and normative pressure," said lead author Julia Lerch, assistant professor of sociology.

"Until recently, however, we simply haven't had the cross-national and longitudinal data needed to systematically study these global trends."

With the recent release of the Academic Freedom Index, part of the Varieties of Democracy dataset, researchers were, for the first time, able to document empirically the general social forces that account for large-scale patterns across countries and time. The publicly available resource measures the extent to which academic freedom is respected in 155 countries from 1960 to 2022.

Using [regression analysis](#), the UCI team analyzed the index with a mix of variables that capture both countries' domestic conditions and also their connections to liberal and illiberal institutions, including

ratification of human rights treaties and membership in scientific unions.

Overall, they find that academic freedom has broadly increased over the past 60 years, but there have been substantial reversals, including the one underway in the present period linked to the worldwide wave of populism and authoritarianism. Broadly, their analyses highlight the role of heterogeneous global institutions in shaping the large-scale trajectories of academic freedom, over and above domestic factors.

"The post-1945 era witnessed the establishment of liberal international institutions, such as the United Nations, which championed human rights norms and ultimately bolstered academic freedom globally," said co-author Evan Schofer, professor of sociology.

"Alongside these ascendant liberal institutions, one can find a variety of alternatives and competitors, such as Cold War communism, that imposed greater control over universities and scholars. These competitors undercut liberal academic freedom norms and ultimately eroded academic freedom everywhere."

They find countries with strong linkages to liberal international institutions show a [positive association](#) with academic freedom, while illiberal international structures and organizations have the opposite effect. In other words, competing international structures both nurture and curtail academic freedom.

"Threats to academic freedom are hotly contested but poorly understood in contemporary society," said co-author David John Frank, professor and chair of sociology. "Our study pinpoints factors associated with restrictions on the pursuit of knowledge and opens the topic to systematic empirical analysis."

**More information:** Julia C. Lerch et al, The Social Foundations of

Academic Freedom: Heterogeneous Institutions in World Society, 1960 to 2022, *American Sociological Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00031224231214000](#)

Provided by University of California, Irvine

Citation: Study highlights key social forces shaping worldwide academic freedom trends (2024, February 1) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-highlights-key-social-worldwide-academic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.