

Academic Freedom Index

Update 2023



Main Findings

The *Academic Freedom Index* (AFI) provides an overview of the state of academic freedom in 179 countries in 2022. Academic freedom is in retreat for over 50% of the world’s population – 4 billion people. This year’s update of the AFI identifies 22 countries and territories where universities and scholars enjoy significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago. During the same period, academic freedom has improved in only five small countries, which benefits a mere 0.7% of the global population. Academic freedom is stagnating in most countries (152), often at far too low a level.

In this report, we first present the overall findings of this year’s *Academic Freedom Index* and then highlight India, China, the USA, and Mexico to illustrate different levels and patterns of backsliding in populous autocratic and democratic countries. Whereas India’s decline in academic freedom started from a comparatively high level during India’s democratic period and is now associated with rapidly accelerating autocratization, China shows variation in a closed autocracy with increasingly repressive policies. In the United States of America, subnational politics matter more for academic freedom than federal politics, as individual states increasingly interfere in academic affairs. In Mexico, academic freedom is at risk through government use of fiscal policy and appointment decisions to further political control of universities.

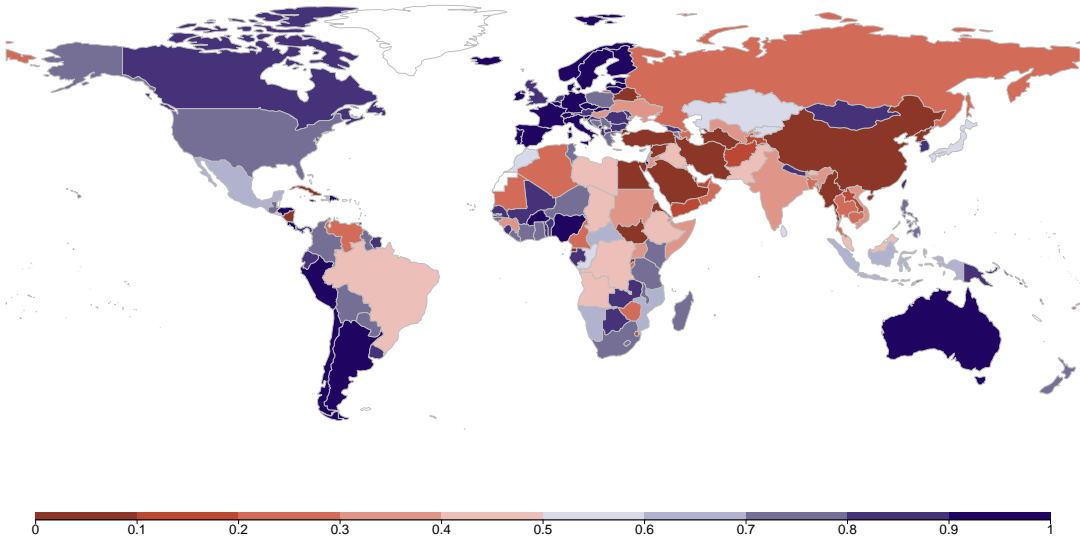


Figure 1: The state of academic freedom in 2022 (0–1, low to high)

Figure 1 shows the state of academic freedom in 2022, based on the latest version of the *Academic Freedom Index* (AFI).¹ The AFI assesses *de facto* levels of academic freedom across the world. It is a unique approach to conceptualizing and assessing academic freedom. It builds on the expertise of 2,197 scholars around the globe and is freely available at <https://academic-freedom-index.net> and <https://www.v-dem.net>. Figure 2 and Figure 3 list all country scores.

¹Curated in version 13 of the V-Dem dataset: Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset V13” (University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2023), doi:10.23696/vdemds23.

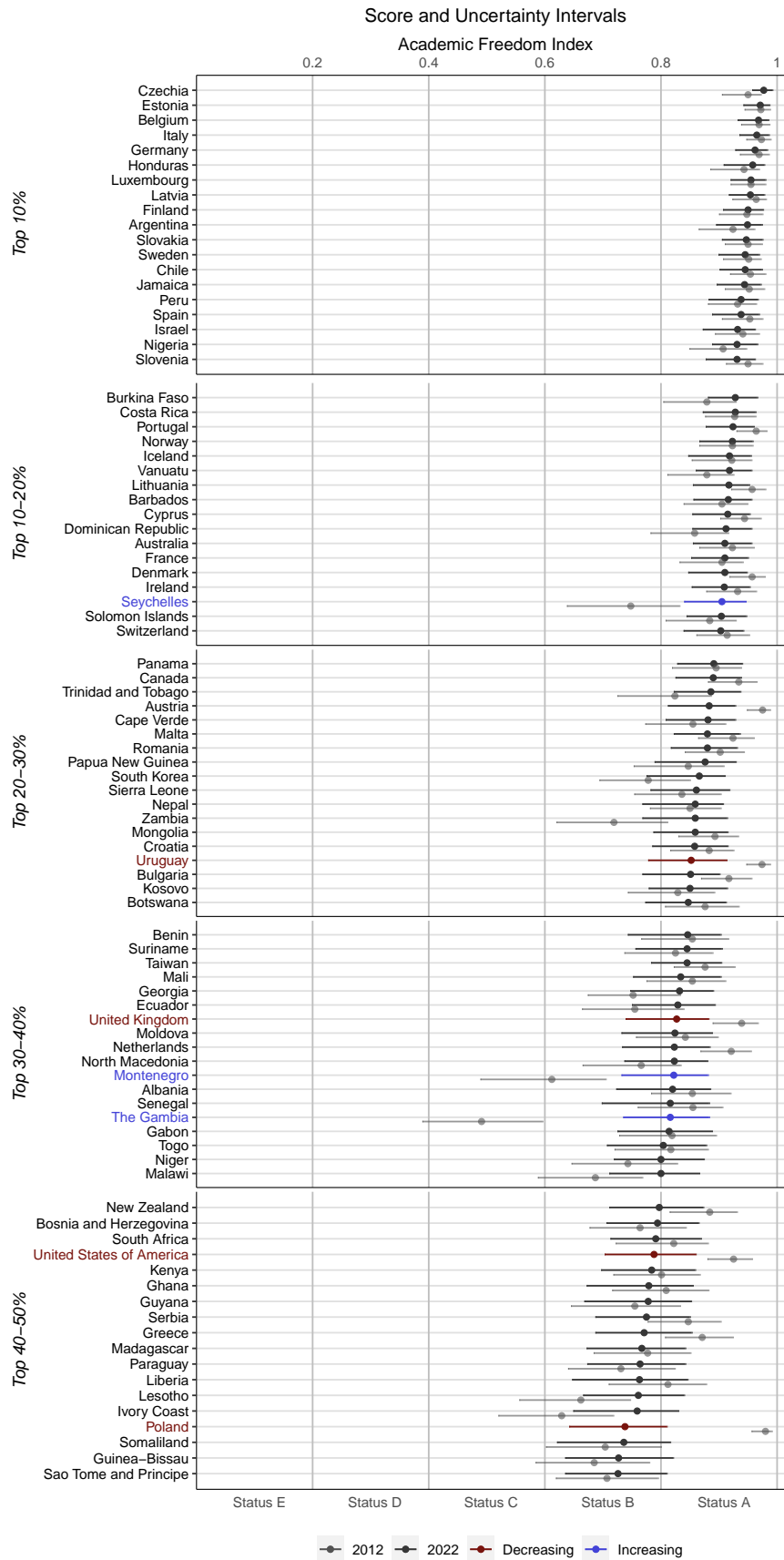


Figure 2: Countries by score, Academic Freedom Index, 2012 compared to 2022. Notes: Red country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant decreasing cases of academic freedom over the past 10 years. Blue country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant increasing cases of academic freedom. Horizontal lines indicate the uncertainty intervals around the point estimates drawn from the V-Dem Bayesian IRT method. Countries with overlapping uncertainty intervals are statistically indistinguishable. Status groups represent the quintiles of the AFI.

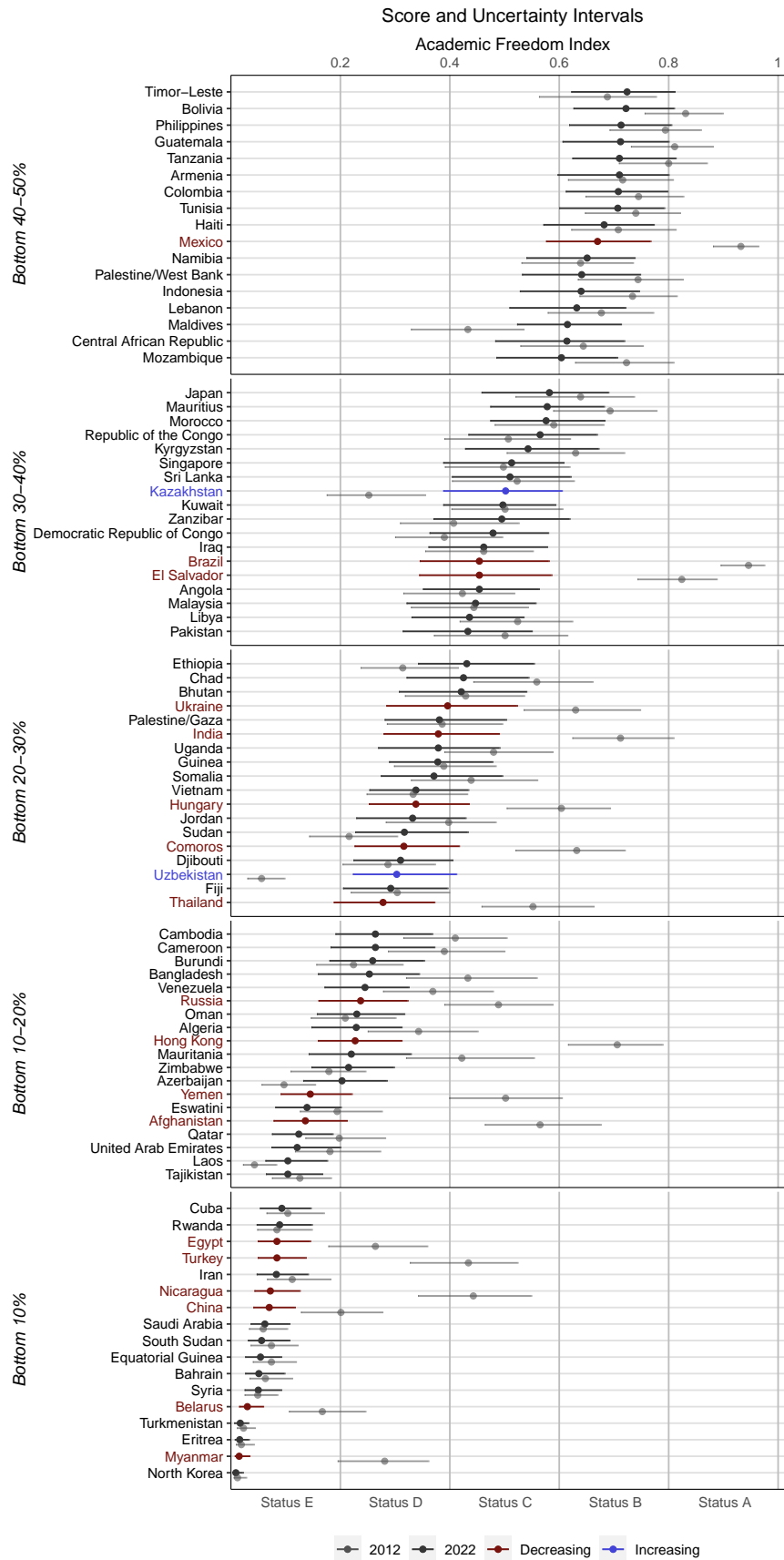


Figure 3: Countries by score, Academic Freedom Index, 2012 compared to 2022. Notes: Red country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant decreasing cases of academic freedom over the past 10 years. Blue country names indicate cases of substantial, statistically significant increasing cases of academic freedom. Horizontal lines indicate the uncertainty intervals around the point estimates drawn from the V-Dem Bayesian IRT method. Countries with overlapping uncertainty intervals are statistically indistinguishable. Status groups represent the quintiles of the AFI.

Measuring a latent phenomenon like academic freedom is a challenging endeavor. The AFI dataset meets high academic standards and uses the best available model for aggregating expert assessments.² Figure 2 and Figure 3 present the point estimates and uncertainty intervals for all assessed countries at year-end 2022. They also show every country's academic freedom in rank order, as well as the change over the last ten years. We recommend that users consider the reported **uncertainty intervals** when making comparisons over time or between countries, ranks, and status groups. In Figure 2 and Figure 3, countries highlighted blue represent the five cases of significant improvement; the 22 countries in red have undergone significant and substantial declines in academic freedom since 2012.

Half the World's Population Affected

Figure 4 illustrates substantial and statistically significant declines and improvements in academic freedom over the past 10 years. Dots in proportionate size to country populations indicate how many people are affected by the changes.

The 22 countries where academic freedom has fallen are home to more than 50% of the world's population. In **India** and **China** the substantial declines affect a total of 2.8 billion people. During the same period, academic freedom levels have improved in only five small countries, home to just 0.7% of the world's population. The most populous of these is Uzbekistan, a closed autocracy with a population of 34 million people. The country's comparatively low AFI score, however, shows that universities and scholars still face severe limitations.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, declines in academic freedom clearly relate to autocratization, notably in **Poland**, **Hungary**, **Russia**, and **Belarus**. Threats to academic freedom also arise in liberal democracies, however, as the data for two academic powerhouses illustrate: the **United States of America** and the **United Kingdom** are among countries for which the AFI reports significant declines.

Latin America is also heavily impacted, with deteriorations in **Uruguay**, **Mexico**, **Nicaragua**, **El Salvador**, and **Brazil**. In Asia-Pacific, more countries than in Latin America – with even larger populations – experience declining academic freedom. Political developments in several countries – besides **China** and **India** – have severely reversed promising developments in the academic sector: this is notable in **Afghanistan** and **Burma/Myanmar**.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of decliners (**Comoros** and **Mauretania**) equals the number of advancers (**The Gambia** and **Seychelles**). This mixed finding remains true when we account for population size: on average, academic freedom stagnates in Sub-Saharan Africa at a level that indicates stress for academia, but not severe repression (see Figure 5).

This year's most hopeful message, compared to last year's findings, is that the number of countries with improvements in academic freedom grew from two (**The Gambia**, **Uzbekistan**) to five countries (**The Gambia** and **Uzbekistan** plus **Seychelles**, **Montenegro**, and **Kazakhstan**). Overall, however, the AFI data signals a shift toward less academic freedom in the world, with declines in all regions and across all regime types.

²Daniel Pemstein et al., "The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data," in *V-Dem Working Paper No. 21. 8th Edition*, 2023.

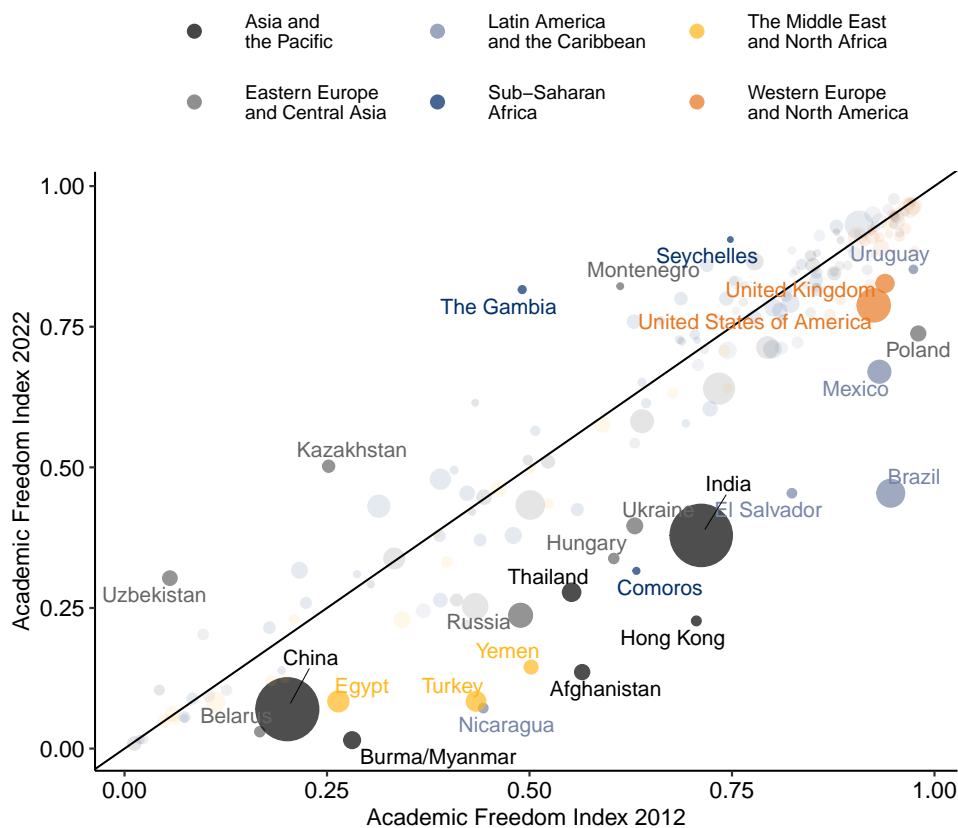


Figure 4: Increasing and decreasing scores on the Academic Freedom Index, 2012–2022. Academic freedom increased in countries above the diagonal line and decreased in countries or territories below it. Countries are labelled if the difference between 2012 and 2022 was statistically significant and substantially meaningful. The size of the points indicates the population size of the countries/territories (Data from the World Bank: World Development Indicators).

Regional Comparison

In last year’s report,³ we analyzed the average level of academic freedom across countries and compared it to the global average weighted by population size. The population-weighted perspective provides a strict egalitarian perspective on academic freedom, since academic freedom concerns people’s right and opportunity to freely pursue science that does not end at national borders.

Figure 5 re-estimates the two perspectives on academic freedom from 1960 to 2022, showing country-based averages on the left and population-weighted averages on the right. The thick pink line represents the most likely global average value of the *Academic Freedom Index*, with the uncertainty interval shaded light pink.

Figure 5 confirms last year’s finding that academic freedom started to decline globally around 2008, but that the decrease remains within the uncertainty interval if we consider country-based averages alone. That said, some global regions are clearly more affected than others: **Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean,**

³Katrin Kinzelbach et al., “Academic Freedom Index – 2022 Update,” 2022, <https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-fau/frontdoor/index/index/docId/18612>.

and the **Middle East and North Africa** show the most visible declines. However, **Western Europe and North America** also fall back. The drawback of this perspective is that the Seychelles, with under 100,000 inhabitants, carries the same weight as a highly populous country like India with its population of over 1.3 billion.

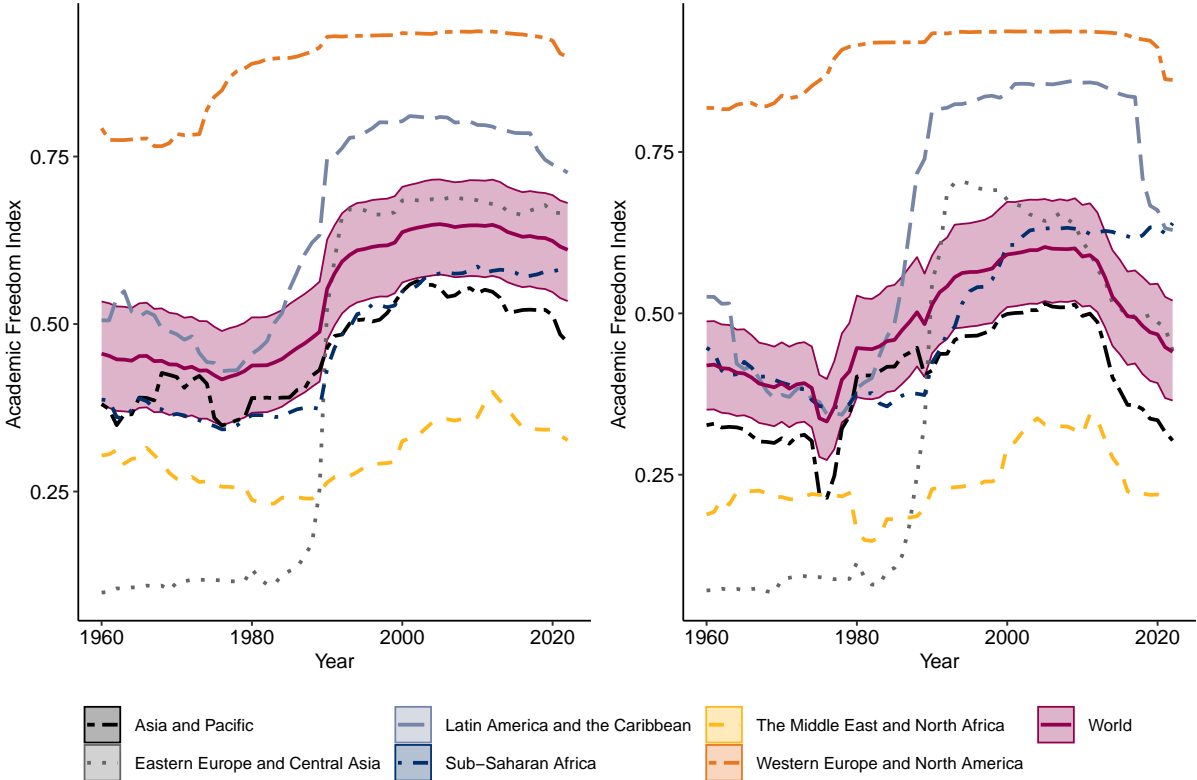


Figure 5: AFI, global and regional averages, 1960–2022 (right-hand side: population-weighted). Population data from the World Development Indicators.

The population-weighted average decline in academic freedom is much more pronounced. Here, all world regions except **Sub-Saharan Africa** show substantial declines in academic freedom. For the average global citizen academic freedom is back to a level last registered four decades ago.

Spotlight: Different Patterns of Decline in Populous Countries

China, India, the United States of America and Mexico are among the most populous countries where academic freedom has significantly fallen back over the past decade. These developments have occurred in different political settings and do not all follow the same pattern, as shown by analysis of the AFI’s five composite indicators since 2000 (Figure 6). This disaggregation illustrates differences between the individual and institutional dimensions of academic freedom, and highlights the potential of *Academic Freedom Index* data for detailed analysis of sequences, as well as differing dynamics of infringements.

Upon closer examination, we find that the decline in **China**, depicted in Figure 6, began from a fairly low level, initially with a drop in institutional autonomy, and then an accelerated deterioration around 2010 with pressure on all aspects of academic freedom. As the one-party state launched ambitious education projects in the

1990s to develop world-class universities, some degree of institutional autonomy was granted to promote academic competition.⁴ In July 2010, the State Council issued a 10-year strategy for education reform that maintained references to “autonomous school-running” but also included, as usual in China, a guiding ideology.⁵ Undoubtedly, Chinese universities have remained in a subordinate position to the party-state throughout. The university with Chinese characteristics entails a leadership and management system controlled by the university’s party committee, even if it includes an academic committee and a faculty representative assembly.⁶ This structural condition facilitated deterioration in all dimensions of academic freedom when Xi Jinping assumed office, first as party secretary in 2012 and then as president in 2013. In China, the party sets the boundaries of permissible research, exchange, and academics’ public speech. Since 2017, a newly established party organ has been responsible for overseeing the ideological education and management of teaching staff.⁷ In the last two years, campus integrity has come under further pressure in China while the other indicators have stagnated at a low level. Meanwhile in Hong Kong, a National Security Law enacted in Beijing in the summer of 2020 has put unprecedented pressure on academic freedom in the special administrative region.⁸

In **India**, academic freedom started to decline in 2009 with a drop in university autonomy followed by a sharp downturn in all indicators from 2013. Around 2013, all aspects of academic freedom began to decline strongly, reinforced with Narendra Modi’s election as prime minister in 2014. Campus integrity, institutional autonomy, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression declined more strongly over the following years than the freedom to reach and teach and the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination. During this period, V-Dem data indicate that India’s electoral democracy collapsed in 2016, resulting in an electoral autocracy. These findings align with recent research that argues that “centralization, bureaucratization, and politicization”⁹ has historically produced weak university autonomy in India. It thus makes sense that institutional autonomy was undermined first. Moreover, the attacks on academic freedom under Modi’s Hindu nationalist government were also possible due to the absence of a legal framework to protect academic freedom.¹⁰ What distinguishes India from other cases is notable pressure on the institutional dimensions of academic freedom – institutional autonomy and campus integrity – combined with constraints on academics’ freedom of expression.¹¹ Although there is undoubtedly sub-national variation at institutional level and across disciplines, it is noteworthy that the freedom to research and teach and the freedom to exchange research findings are less constrained than the other dimensions of academic freedom. In summary, India demonstrates the pernicious relationship between populist governments, autocratization, and constraints on academic freedom.

⁴This dates back to a decision of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee in 1985.

⁵National Outline for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020), adopted by the State Council on July 29, 2010, translation available here: <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/outline-of-the-national-plan-for-medium-and-long-term-education-reform-and-development/>

⁶Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, 29 August 1998, revised on 29 December 2018, Art. 39-43, see: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/201901/9df07167324c4a34bf6c44700fafa753.shtml>.

⁷In 2021, this requirement was formally included in the CCP Regulations on the Work of Grassroots Organizations of Regular Higher Education Institutions, Art. 34, see: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-04/22/content_5601428.htm

⁸Hong Kong is coded as a special administrative region of China and has its own Academic Freedom Index.

⁹Niraja Gopal Jayal, “Academic Freedom in India,” in *University Autonomy Decline* (Routledge, 2022), 64.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹See also Nandini Sundar and Gowhar Fazili, “Academic Freedom in India. The India Forum,” August 27, 2020, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/academic-freedom-india>.

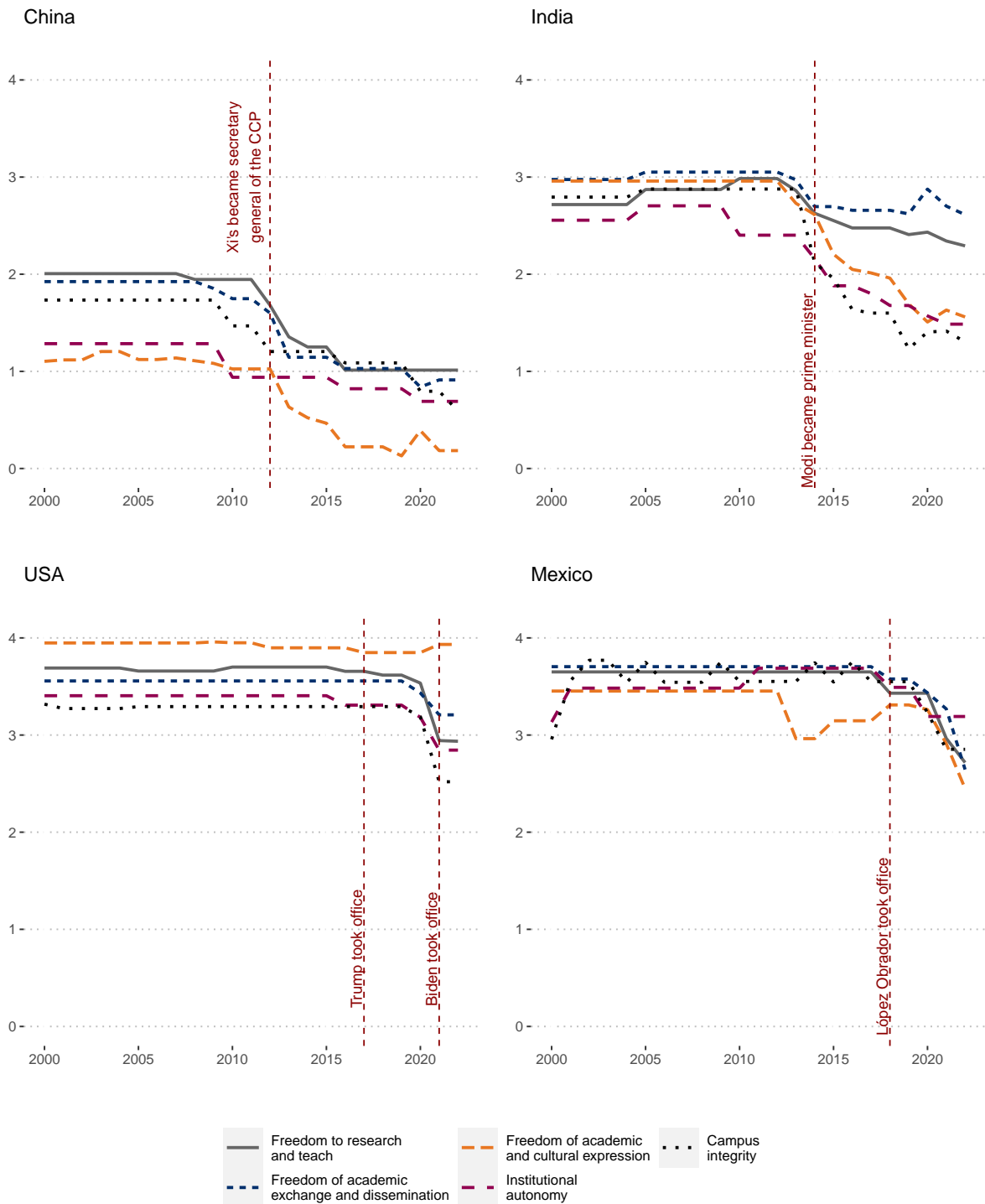


Figure 6: Indicator-level data for China, India, United States of America, and Mexico

The **United States of America** presents a different picture. After a long period of relatively high academic freedom levels, four out of five indicators visibly declined in 2021 – the year after President Donald Trump, who repeatedly made statements highly critical of science and academia,¹² was voted out of office. Although some federal actions detrimental to academic freedom were taken during his administration,¹³ educational

¹²David A. Graham, "What a Direct Attack on Free Speech Looks Like. The Atlantic," July 10, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/trump-universities/614038/>.

¹³Nicola Marrow and Heather L. Weaver, "The Trump Administration Can't Force Colleges to Further Its Anti-Muslim Agenda | ACLU. American Civil Liberties Union," September 27, 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/news/religious-liberty/trump-administration-cant-force-colleges-further>;

matters in the USA are largely regulated by individual states, which have increasingly used their authority to interfere in academic affairs since 2021. At least nine states, all Republican-led, have adopted bills that ban the teaching of concepts related to “critical race theory” in higher education institutions.¹⁴ Several states are also targeting tenure in public universities,¹⁵ adding to the already precarious status of academic employment.¹⁶ Some states now also allow students to record class lectures without the professor’s consent.¹⁷ Furthermore, influential conservative groups are lobbying state legislatures to withdraw funding from scientific fields such as gender, minority studies, and environmental science,¹⁸ and various groups are maintaining public “watchlists” of professors perceived as radical leftists.¹⁹ Despite efforts to polarize and intimidate, AFI data on academics’ freedom of expression indicates that scholars in the USA remain able to publically voice their expertise, even on politically salient issues.

Mexico has experienced a decline in academic freedom since 2017, with both the institutional and individual dimensions initially dropping moderately. However, the freedom of academic and cultural expression remained unaffected until 2019, when the decline in academic freedom accelerated. This decline affected all aspects of academic freedom and was further exacerbated after the election of Mexico’s new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, whose government has undermined university autonomy, a well-established principle governing relations between the state and higher education in Latin America.

Mexico’s new government has weakened institutional autonomy through harsh austerity measures²⁰ and the political prioritization of research addressing “national problems”, defined by the agenda of López Obrador’s administration.²¹ The government has regularly appointed university directors, often resulting in student protests.²² Moreover, the lack of campus integrity has also contributed to the decline of academic freedom, with attacks on students,²³ especially females,²⁴ protests against these harassments, and a drug war fought on university campuses.²⁵

Columbia Law School and Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, “Silencing Science Tracker | Sabin Center for Climate Change Law,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/Silencing-Science-Tracker>; Jeff Tollefson, “How Trump Damaged Science — and Why It Could Take Decades to Recover,” *Nature* 586, no. 7828 (October 5, 2020): 190–94, doi:10.1038/d41586-020-02800-9.

¹⁴CRT Forward Tracking Project, “CRT Forward Tracking Project,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu>.

¹⁵Heather Hollingsworth, “Conservatives Take Aim at Tenure for University Professors. AP NEWS,” January 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-colleges-and-universities-florida-state-government-texas-education-4f0fe0c5c18ed227fabae3744e8ff51d>.

¹⁶Colleen Flaherty, “Tracking the Evolution (and Erosion) of Tenure. Inside Higher Ed,” May 18, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/05/18/tracking-evolution-and-erosion-tenure>.

¹⁷News Service of Florida, “Judge to Hear Lawsuit over Florida’s ‘Intellectual Diversity’ College Campus Surveys. Tampa Bay Times,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2022/12/19/judge-hear-lawsuit-over-floridas-intellectual-diversity-college-campus-surveys/>.

¹⁸David Randall, “Defund Gender Studies. Minding the Campus,” September 6, 2022, <https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2022/09/06/defund-gender-studies/>.

¹⁹For example, “Professor Watchlist. Professor Watchlist,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://professorwatchlist.org/>; Christopher Mele, “Professor Watchlist Is Seen as Threat to Academic Freedom,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/us/professor-watchlist-is-seen-as-threat-to-academic-freedom.html>.

²⁰Lizzie Wade, “Mexico’s New President Shocks Scientists with Budget Cuts and Disparaging Remarks,” *Science*, 2019, <https://www.science.org/content/article/mexico-s-new-president-shocks-scientists-budget-cuts-and-disparaging-remarks>.

²¹Coda Staff, “The Global Attack on Science. Coda Story,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/attacks-hard-sciences/>.

²²Leila Miller, “A Top University in Mexico Becomes a Battleground over Academic Freedom,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-15/la-fg-mexico-cide-strike>; Elizabeth Mistry, “Standoff After New Leader Imposed on Mexican Economics Institute. Times Higher Education (THE),” December 14, 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/standoff-after-new-leader-imposed-mexican-economics-institute>.

²³Scholars at Risk, “2019-11-14 National Autonomous University of Mexico. Scholars at Risk,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-11-14-national-autonomous-university-of-mexico/>.

²⁴Scholars at Risk, “2020-02-04 National Autonomous University of Mexico. Scholars at Risk,” accessed February 28, 2023, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2020-02-04-national-autonomous-university-of-mexico/>.

²⁵Naida Jahic, “Mexico’s Drug War Affects Education. The Borgen Project,” September 4, 2022, <https://borgenproject.org/mexicos-drug-war-affects-education/>.

Budget restrictions and political interference in research have been accompanied by declines in individual academic freedom, as seen in Figure 6. Whether negative developments in institutional and individual academic freedom have affected one another remains unclear. That said, Mexico highlights that university autonomy and individual academic freedom are at risk when a government uses fiscal policy and appointment decisions to further political control of universities.

Background: Assessing Academic Freedom

In this update, we present the fourth iteration of *Academic Freedom Index* data from V-Dem's version 13 release, drawing on contributions by 2,197 country experts from around the world. The AFI now includes data on a total of 180 countries and territories.

The data cover the period from 1900 to 2022. All data are publicly available and include a total of **318,219 observations** at the coder level, five indicators, and an aggregate index on academic freedom, based on a Bayesian measurement model.²⁶ The index defines a range of components “often considered essential to the *de facto* realization of academic freedom based on a review of the literature and in-depth discussions with transnational policymakers, academics and advocates in the higher education field.”²⁷ The *Academic Freedom Index* rests on five key indicators: the freedom to research and teach; the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; the institutional autonomy of universities; campus integrity;²⁸ and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. Through these five indicators, the AFI captures elements of academic freedom “that are a) *comparable* across different university systems around the world and b) *specific* to the academic sector.”²⁹

Users of our data can benefit from the open data approach adopted by the V-Dem project, which also allows for the disaggregation of the AFI. Furthermore, we provide comparative data on additional aspects of academic freedom, notably factual country-year information on constitutional guarantees and commitments to academic freedom under international human rights law.

What is the Difference Between Versions 12 and 13?

V-Dem uses customized Bayesian IRT models to aggregate the expert data to indicators and index values.³⁰ Each year, a new calculation takes all available data into account and optimizes comparability between years and countries. However, comparing absolute values of indicators or the index values between different versions of the dataset can be misleading because (1) experts add data with every annual update; (2) experts may update and change their rating back in time to account for new information; and (3) for every annual update, additional experts are recruited who can also contribute scores for past years. As a general rule, scholars, policymakers, and other interested parties should use the most recent data for information and analysis.

²⁶Pemstein et al., “The V-Dem Measurement Model.”

²⁷Janika Spannagel and Katrin Kinzelbach, “The Academic Freedom Index and Its Indicators: Introduction to New Global Time-Series v-Dem Data,” *Quality & Quantity*, October 13, 2022, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01544-0>.

²⁸The absence of security infringements and surveillance on campus, including online learning platforms.

²⁹Spannagel and Kinzelbach, “The Academic Freedom Index and Its Indicators,” 6.

³⁰Pemstein et al., “The V-Dem Measurement Model.”

Version 13 of the V-Dem dataset expanded historic coverage for 16 countries (497 country-years; e.g. Afghanistan 1932–1991; Honduras 1900–1956; Iran 1900–1918). It also added historical data for the German Democratic Republic (1949–1990). For recent years, Papua New Guinea and Liberia’s scores for 2021 were added, in addition to the worldwide scores for 2022.

The factual dataset on constitutional guarantees of academic freedom (v2caprotac) has been substantially revised in version 13, based on newly available data that provide greater coding reliability and comprehensive coverage.

Version 13 of the AFI benefitted from 141 more contributing coders than version 12, bringing the total to 2,197 coders.

Expert Call and AFI Applications

To continually improve the dataset, we call on scholars with country-specific knowledge and thematic expertise to contribute to the collaborative AFI coding. Apply to become a new coder by filling out the expert call [here](#).

We also call on higher education policymakers, university leaders, and research funders to promote academic freedom in their own academic institutions as well as abroad. The Global Public Policy Institute and Scholars at Risk have published policy recommendations on how to use the *Academic Freedom Index* data for this purpose.³¹

About

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not reflect any official position of the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, the V-Dem Project, or the V-Dem Steering Committee.

Authors: Katrin Kinzelbach, Staffan I. Lindberg, Lars Pelke, Janika Spannagel

Code contribution: Kelly Morrison, Yuko Sato, Lars Pelke

Copy editor: Jonathan Grayson

Cover design: Soapbox and FAU (Ursula Auer)

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³¹ Katrin Kinzelbach et al., “Free Universities. Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action,” *Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI)*, 2020, https://gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2021_Free_Universities_AFI-2020_upd.pdf.