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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Academic Freedom as a Contested Public Good: Ideology, Trust and Public Attitudes in the UK and Japan

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ABSTRACT

Academic freedom is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic society, yet its public legitimacy remains contested. This article examined how citizens in two democracies (Japan and the United Kingdom) understand and evaluate academic freedom across different issue domains. Drawing on original survey data ($N = 3352$), we explored whether public support for academic freedom is associated with ideological orientation and institutional trust. We proposed a theoretical framework distinguishing between autonomy and accountability logics: while some citizens treat academic freedom as a non-negotiable principle, others view it as contingent on social responsibility or moral alignment. Our analysis showed that support for academic freedom is associated with political polarization: right-leaning respondents consistently favor autonomy, particularly in cases involving controversial research or offensive ideas, whereas left-leaning individuals show greater support for limiting academic freedom in the name of social sensitivity. These patterns are robust across both countries, despite contrasting institutional contexts. We also find that trust in scientists is strongly associated with pro-autonomy attitudes, especially in Japan. By treating academic freedom as a contested public good, this study sheds light on how normative commitments, political ideology, and institutional trust interact to shape public attitudes toward knowledge, expertise, and university governance.

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Stockemer, D. 2025. "Is the US Moving Toward Autocracy? A Critical Assessment." *Politics & Policy* 53, no. 3: e70032. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70032>.

摘要

学术自由被广泛视为民主社会的基石，但其公众合法性仍存在争议。本文考察了两个民主国家（日本和英国）的公民如何理解和评价不同议题领域的学术自由。基于原创调查数据（ $N = 3352$ ），我们探讨了公众对学术自由的支持是否与意识形态倾向以及制度信任相关。我们提出了一个区分自主逻辑和问责逻辑的理论框架：一些公民将学术自由视为一项不可妥协的原则，而另一些公民则认为它取决于

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社会责任或道德立场。我们的分析表明,对学术自由的支持与政治极化相关:右倾受访者始终倾向于自主,尤其是在涉及争议性研究或冒犯性观点的情况下;而左倾人士则更倾向于以社会敏感性为由限制学术自由。尽管两国的制度背景截然不同,但这些模式在两国都具有稳健性。我们还发现,对科学家的信任与支持自主的态度密切相关,尤其是在日本。本研究将学术自由视为一种存在争议的公共产品,阐明了规范性承诺、政治意识形态和制度信任如何相互作用,从而塑造公众对知识、专业技能和大学治理的态度。

RESUMEN

La libertad académica se considera ampliamente una piedra angular de la sociedad democrática, pero su legitimidad pública sigue siendo cuestionada. Este artículo examina cómo los ciudadanos de dos democracias (Japón y el Reino Unido) comprenden y evalúan la libertad académica en diferentes ámbitos temáticos. Basándonos en datos originales de la encuesta ($N=3352$), exploramos si el apoyo público a la libertad académica está asociado con la orientación ideológica y la confianza institucional. Proponemos un marco teórico que distingue entre las lógicas de autonomía y rendición de cuentas: mientras que algunos ciudadanos tratan la libertad académica como un principio no negociable, otros la ven como contingente a la responsabilidad social o la alineación moral. Nuestro análisis muestra que el apoyo a la libertad académica está asociado con la polarización política: los encuestados de derechas favorecen sistemáticamente la autonomía, especialmente en casos que involucran investigación controvertida o ideas ofensivas, mientras que los individuos de izquierdas muestran un mayor apoyo a limitar la libertad académica en nombre de la sensibilidad social. Estos patrones son robustos en ambos países, a pesar de los contextos institucionales contrastantes. También encontramos que la confianza en los científicos está fuertemente asociada con actitudes proautonomía, especialmente en Japón. Al considerar la libertad académica como un bien público controvertido, este estudio arroja luz sobre cómo los compromisos normativos, la ideología política y la confianza institucional interactúan para moldear las actitudes públicas hacia el conocimiento, la experiencia y la gobernanza universitaria.

1 | Introduction

Academic freedom, the principle that scholars may pursue knowledge and express ideas without censorship or coercion, is widely seen as fundamental to scientific progress and democratic governance (Börzel and Spannagel 2025). It is rooted in the Humboldtian ideal of the autonomous university, where teaching and research are guided not by external mandates but by scholarly inquiry itself (Günther 1988). Liberal democracies have historically treated this principle as a core academic norm, institutionalizing it unevenly but valorizing it in law, policy, and public discourse (Özmen 2024; Suissa and Sullivan 2021). The post-1945 liberal international order, anchored in commitments to democracy, rights, and liberty, has further reinforced this ideal (Lerch et al. 2024). Yet academic freedom has always existed in tension with competing pressures, including nationalist, authoritarian, and moral claims, which can constrain scholarly autonomy through formal regulation or social sanction.

Recent years have seen heightened contestation over academic freedom across democratic contexts. Governments have introduced new speech-related regulations and political actors increasingly frame universities as ideologically biased institutions. In the UK, for example, the Prevent duty has regulated campus expression in the name of counter-terrorism, while new “free speech” laws compel universities to host speakers across the ideological spectrum, sometimes at odds with community norms or scholarly judgment. In Japan, long-standing political sensitivities and neoliberal university reforms have created powerful informal boundaries: scholars “read the air” and learn to self-censor in the absence of overt bans (Kingston 2023). In both settings, institutional norms of open inquiry are being reinterpreted under pressure from politics, policy, and culture. These dynamics have been magnified by high-profile controversies surrounding speech on colonialism, race, gender, and international conflict (Garry 2023; Pritchard 2024).

At the same time, public attitudes toward universities are shifting. In democratic societies where higher education is publicly funded and politically regulated, citizen opinion can have direct implications for academic governance. Recent surveys reveal significant and growing mistrust: in the US, confidence in higher education declined from 56% to 20% among Republicans between 2015 and 2024 (Jones 2024); in the UK, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found just 46% of the public in 2022 believed that universities have a positive impact on society (HEPI 2023). These sentiments are deeply polarized. Respondents in the US who express low confidence in the university system are particularly likely to hold ideologically charged views, often characterizing universities as being too liberal or politically one-sided. These attitudes reflect broader culture-war dynamics rather than neutral evaluations of institutional quality.

This politicization raises a core theoretical question: to what extent do public attitudes about academic freedom reflect broader political worldviews? Drawing on theories of motivated reasoning, we posit that ideological priors shape how individuals interpret academic controversies (Taber and Lodge 2006; Kahan 2015). In this view, debates over controversial research, speech norms, or institutional partnerships become proxy battles in wider political struggles. We therefore expect support for academic freedom to diverge systematically by political identity, especially along left–right lines and cultural-attitudinal dimensions.

To assess whether these patterns are generalizable or context-dependent, we analyze original survey data from two democracies: the United Kingdom and Japan. Both countries formally protect academic freedom but differ in institutional histories and political culture. The UK’s higher education sector operates in a highly adversarial public sphere, with vocal media scrutiny and active parliamentary intervention. Japan’s system, by contrast, is characterized by greater deference and consensus, but also by subtle constraints and a strong aversion to political controversy in academic life. Both, however,

confront rising pressures to demonstrate ideological neutrality and societal relevance.

Our survey examines public opinion in both countries on four academic freedom scenarios, ranging from university partnerships with controversial regimes to whether offensive ideas should be protected on campus. We test whether support for academic freedom in these cases is shaped by respondents' political ideology, cultural values, or trust in public institutions. Consistent with our expectations, we find that right-leaning and socially conservative respondents in both countries express significantly lower support for academic freedom, particularly in contentious or polarizing scenarios. These effects remain robust when controlling for age, gender, education, and institutional trust.

The similarity of these findings across two otherwise distinct contexts suggests that public perceptions of academic freedom are shaped less by national policy regimes than by broader ideological dispositions. What appears to be a debate over university governance is, in effect, an extension of partisan and cultural divides.

This study contributes to a growing literature on political attitudes toward academic institutions (see also Gross 2013; Norris 2023) by offering a rare cross-national comparison of public opinion on academic freedom. While existing research has examined elite controversies, legal frameworks, or student activism, few studies explore how ordinary citizens navigate the normative tensions between scholarly autonomy and social accountability. Our theoretical framework links support for academic freedom to broader ideological worldviews and trust in institutions, showing how these logics diverge across specific issue framings. By examining responses in two contrasting democracies, we demonstrate that support for academic freedom is not a stable, universal value but a politically filtered judgment shaped by culture, ideology, and epistemic trust. In doing so, we bridge debates on higher education politics, democratic legitimacy, and the politicization of expertise, and provide new comparative evidence on how academic norms are contested in the public sphere.

1.1 | Theoretical Framework: Autonomy Versus Accountability in Academic Freedom

Academic freedom has long been understood as a tension between two institutional logics: autonomy and accountability. Scholarly autonomy is rooted in Mertonian norms such as disinterestedness and universalism. This view maintains that universities should be insulated from political and social pressures in order to pursue truth on its own terms (Elford 2023; Börzel and Spannagel 2025). The 1915 Declaration of Principles by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) codified this idea: the academic contract offers scholars liberty in exchange for a disciplined pursuit of knowledge, free from interference by governments, corporations, or public opinion (AAUP 1915). In this framework, research should be evaluated on scholarly merit, regardless of whether its findings offend prevailing moral or ideological norms.

On the other side is a logic of democratic accountability. Universities do not exist in isolation; they rely on public funds, regulatory legitimacy, and societal support. From the standpoint of resource-dependence theory, institutions that rely on external actors for survival are shaped by those actors' preferences (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). In practice, this means that if external stakeholders, such as governments, donors, and voters, perceive certain types of scholarship as politically biased or socially harmful, they may exert pressure to restrict it. Recent cases show how public outcry or social media mobilization can lead to canceled lectures, retracted articles, or funding restrictions (Garry 2023). Such episodes suggest that, in democratic societies, academic freedom may not be absolute: institutions must also answer to the values and sensibilities of the publics that sustain them.

These competing logics are reflected in a broader culture war over the university's role. For some, academic freedom is being eroded by an internal climate of political correctness, social media outrage, and ideological conformity. These phenomena have been grouped by some critics under the rubric of "cancel culture" (Pritchard 2024; Garry 2023; Norris 2023, 2024). Norris' (2023, 2024) work on this aspect of the issue stands out for its strong theoretical and empirical grounding. Drawing on a global survey of political scientists, she finds that in post-industrial societies with liberal political cultures, right-leaning academics perceive stronger pressures on expression and professional opportunity. Her findings therefore treat "cancel culture" not as a universal crisis, but as a patterned perception linked to political and cultural context.

For others, the main threats stem from external regulation or politically motivated efforts to restrict curricula (Özmen 2024). In either case, debates over what universities may research or teach have become flashpoints for wider political conflict. This is evident in controversies such as bans on teaching Critical Race Theory in U.S. states (Giersch et al. 2024) or calls to boycott academic institutions affiliated with regimes accused of rights violations, such as those in Israel or Russia (Suissa and Sullivan 2021). While the AAUP previously maintained a categorical opposition to academic boycotts (AAUP 2006), it has more recently acknowledged that, in some contexts, such actions may represent legitimate responses to severe violations of academic freedom and fundamental rights (AAUP 2024). Public support for boycotts often increases when these situations are framed as moral emergencies.

These dynamics raise key questions about how the public understands and values academic freedom. Moral-psychological research suggests that support for autonomy or accountability will often be filtered through ideological priors. Drawing on moral foundations theory, liberals tend to emphasize care and harm avoidance, making them more sensitive to speech or research perceived as discriminatory or exclusionary. Conservatives, by contrast, emphasize loyalty and authority, making them more concerned with fairness toward their own political group and more distrustful of perceived institutional bias (Haidt 2012; Grady and Lewis 2024). Grady and Lewis (2024) find that liberal-identifying individuals more readily perceive discrimination and support limitations on

harmful discourse, whereas conservative-identifying individuals are more attuned to ideological bias and therefore more likely to defend controversial speech in the name of academic freedom.

These orientations are reflected in contemporary survey data. In the U.S., Gallup polling shows that confidence in higher education among Republicans dropped from 56% in 2015 to just 20% by 2024, while Democratic confidence remained stable above 50% (Gallup 2024). In the UK, a survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that conservative voters are more likely to perceive a “free speech crisis” on campus, whereas Labour and Liberal Democrat voters are more inclined to believe that universities already accommodate open debate (HEPI 2023). Crucially, the HEPI data also reveal that while abstract support for free speech remains high (56% support the principle), support drops when respondents are asked about offensive or upsetting speech in practice (46%), a gap that suggests a tension between theoretical support and practical limits.

These competing logics lead to a testable distinction. If the public primarily values autonomy, we should observe strong support for academic freedom even in cases involving controversial or offensive research. If accountability dominates, public support will be more conditional, driven by whether the research is seen as aligned with social values or national interest. Furthermore, these orientations should correlate with political ideology. Conservatives, perceiving academia as hostile to their values, are more likely to frame academic freedom as a shield against left-leaning orthodoxy. Liberals, concerned with systemic harm and inclusion, are more likely to favor limits on speech or research perceived as perpetuating inequality or offense (Henry and Napier 2017; Norris 2024).

Our framework thus treats academic freedom not as a universally shared value but as a contested ideal which is interpreted through partisan filters and responsive to national context. In the empirical section that follows, we test whether attitudes toward academic freedom scenarios in the UK and Japan follow these ideological contours. We anticipate that public support for controversial research and speech policies will differ systematically by political identity, with consistent cross-national patterns shaped by both ideology and institutional culture.

1.2 | National Contexts and Public Attitudes Toward Academic Freedom

We compare public attitudes toward academic freedom in two democracies: the United Kingdom and Japan. Though both are highly developed, stable political systems with formal protections for scholarly inquiry, they differ markedly in their institutional configurations, political cultures, and historical trajectories. These contrasts offer a compelling basis for structured comparison. By examining how citizens in each country respond to specific scenarios involving controversial research or campus speech, we can assess whether support for academic freedom is shaped primarily by national context or by broader ideological dispositions.

In the United Kingdom, the higher education sector operates within a liberal-pluralist democracy that historically valorises academic freedom and free expression. Yet over the past decade, this ideal has been increasingly contested. Universities have become lightning rods for wider political debates, with the former Conservative government framing academia as a bastion of “wokeness” and left-liberal orthodoxy. In response, it introduced a series of policy reforms, most notably the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which mandates active promotion of free speech and establishes a new Director for Academic Freedom within the higher education regulator (OfS). While defenders view this legislation as a necessary corrective to ideological homogeneity, critics warn that it opens the door to political interference and may chill scholarly critique on contentious topics such as colonialism, gender identity, or race (Karran et al. 2022).

These developments occur against a backdrop of weak statutory protections for individual academics. The UK lacks a constitutional guarantee of academic freedom, and tenure was formally abolished in 1988. While institutional autonomy remains relatively strong, individual scholars often report pressures to self-censor, especially on politically sensitive issues (Karran et al. 2022). Surveys indicate that UK academics disproportionately identify as liberal, and studies suggest that both Remain/Leave divides and broader ideological tensions can constrain debate, leading some scholars to avoid controversial subjects or political engagement (Adekoya et al. 2020). Norris (2023) reports similar patterns for the UK as for the US in that academics identifying with the right on a left-right scale self-report an increasingly challenging academic environment. Public perceptions of academia have also shifted. Since Brexit, universities have been painted by some politicians and media as culturally distant from ordinary voters, exacerbating mistrust. These dynamics position the UK as a pluralist, adversarial case where academic freedom is highly salient but politically polarized.

Japan represents a very different institutional and cultural configuration. While academic freedom is formally enshrined in the postwar constitution and universities enjoy nominal autonomy, the operational reality is more constrained. Japanese higher education remains closely tied to state institutions, particularly through the Ministry of Education (MEXT), which oversees performance-based evaluations, funding, and governance reforms. These reforms, often framed in terms of global competitiveness, have reinforced managerialism and incentivized bureaucratic conformity (Yonezawa 2014). Scholars working on controversial subjects, such as wartime history, nuclear energy, or gender rights, often report subtle but effective constraints on research agendas and publication opportunities.

The 2020 Science Council of Japan incident marked a flashpoint. The then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declined to appoint six scholars to the council, all of whom had previously criticized government policy with opposition left-wing parties. This move sparked widespread condemnation from the academic community and was widely interpreted as an infringement on academic freedom. This episode surprised the public because the Japanese government had clearly demonstrated a

preference for compliant academics at the exclusion of critical voices. Previous administrations had not shown such overt exclusion, even when similarly critical academics participated in the Science Council. Instead, they often employed indirect methods, such as excluding scholars from advisory positions or grant opportunities. These pressures are compounded by cultural norms such as *sontaku* (reading the air), where individuals anticipate the preferences of authority figures and conform accordingly (Kingston 2023). Unlike in the UK, protests and activist responses to censorship are rare, and university campuses are generally marked by consensus and deference, not contestation.

These two cases therefore illustrate contrasting modes of constraint. In the UK, the challenge to academic freedom is overt and politicized, driven by ideological polarization, high-profile media disputes, and legislative action. In Japan, constraints are more subtle, shaped by institutional hierarchies, bureaucratic incentives, and cultural expectations. In both settings, however, the politicization of academia has intensified, and universities have become sites where broader anxieties about identity, authority, and legitimacy are expressed.

These contextual differences inform our expectations. In the UK, we anticipate that support for academic freedom will be closely tied to political ideology and attitudes toward cultural and institutional trust. Given the adversarial political culture, academic freedom is likely to be viewed through a partisan lens, with conservatives more skeptical of universities and liberals more likely to support protections for controversial scholarship, albeit with possible limits on offensive speech. In Japan, by contrast, we expect public attitudes to reflect institutional deference rather than ideological conflict. Citizens may be more likely to assess controversial research in light of social harmony and respect for authority rather than personal political identity.

This comparative design allows us to test whether public support for academic freedom is conditioned by national institutional culture or by broader ideological dispositions that transcend context. In both cases, academic freedom is not merely a normative ideal but a contested concept, shaped by legal arrangements, institutional design, and the social meaning of dissent. By embedding our analysis in these contrasting national contexts, we seek to understand the relationship between political structure, public opinion, and academic autonomy.

The modern idea of academic freedom is deeply rooted in liberal thought. Nineteenth-century theorists such as John Stuart Mill (1859) emphasized the pursuit of knowledge as both an individual right and a collective safeguard against dogma, a principle that later became embedded in university norms of free inquiry. Yet, as Gross (2013) shows, the institutionalization of these ideals within universities has also produced a persistent political asymmetry: academic communities tend to lean liberal, while conservatives often view the academy as ideologically exclusionary. This tension forms part of the background against which contemporary disputes about “cancel culture” and political correctness unfold. Recent research by Norris (2023) suggests that concerns about academic freedom are most salient in

post-materialist societies where liberal values dominate public life; perceptions of restriction therefore arise not simply from censorship itself but from a sense of imbalance in who defines legitimate speech. Situating our study within this lineage helps explain why support for academic autonomy may vary not only across individuals but also across political cultures such as the UK and Japan, where liberal norms have developed under different historical conditions.

In our framework, ideology provides the most direct lens through which to understand these divisions. We treat the left-right self-placement scale as a pragmatic summary of broader value orientations that, in practice, map onto the autonomy-accountability divide: right-leaning individuals are more likely to emphasize freedom from interference, whereas those on the left tend to prioritize social responsibility and harm avoidance. While this one-dimensional measure cannot disentangle cultural from economic values, it remains the most widely used comparative indicator of political orientation and aligns closely with recent cross-national work on moral and ideological foundations. Demographic factors such as age and gender are included not as proxies for “moral conservatism” but as correlates that often condition political and moral outlooks. This approach allows us to examine whether patterns associated with ideology persist across groups that differ in generational experience or social position. More recent work has introduced multidimensional measures such as the Progressive Values Scale (Proulx et al. 2023), which captures fine-grained variation within the political left. Our survey questions were designed before this instrument was published and widely validated, and to ensure cross-national comparability we retained the conventional left-right self-placement scale. Future research should employ such more nuanced measures.

1.3 | Hypotheses

Based on this framework, we derive several testable expectations concerning public attitudes toward academic freedom. First, if members of the public endorse an autonomy-based logic, they should support academic freedom consistently, even in cases involving controversial or offensive research. Individuals who place high trust in scientists, as proxies for epistemic expertise, are expected to defend the principle of unrestricted inquiry across scenarios.

H1. *Individuals with greater trust in scientific institutions will show stronger support for academic freedom across all issue areas, including politically or morally contentious topics.*

Second, we expect some members of the public to adopt a more conditional view of academic freedom, emphasizing its potential impact on public norms or institutional legitimacy. While our data do not include direct measures of moral conservatism, proxies such as gender, age, and general trust in institutions may reflect broader orientations toward social harmony and normative constraint.

H2. *Older respondents and women will be more likely to support limiting academic freedom in order to avoid public offense or moral harm.*

Third, political ideology is expected to structure these orientations. Right-leaning individuals, who are more sensitive to perceived liberal dominance in universities, are expected to prioritize autonomy, particularly when they perceive academic freedom as protecting dissent. Left-leaning individuals, by contrast, are expected to prioritize harm prevention and inclusion.

H3. *Right-leaning individuals will show greater support for unrestricted academic freedom, while left-leaning individuals will be more supportive of limits on offensive or controversial research.*

Taken together, these hypotheses frame academic freedom as a contested public good: valued for its role in advancing knowledge and democracy, yet shaped by ideological commitments and institutional trust. By linking these theoretical expectations to empirical indicators across the UK and Japan, we assess whether support for academic freedom is context-specific or reflects broader cross-national patterns of political belief and institutional orientation.

1.4 | Data and Methodology

We analyze original public opinion data collected through online surveys fielded in 2024. In Japan, data collection was conducted by Rakuten Insight in April; in the United Kingdom, YouGov administered the same instrument between April and June. This yielded 1493 respondents from Japan and 1859 from the UK. Respondents were recruited from each company's large, regularly maintained online panel, using demographic quotas to approximate national distributions. Such panels follow established professional standards in academic and policy research. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. We did not apply survey weights: Rakuten did not supply weights for Japan, and to maintain comparability both samples are analyzed unweighted. The UK sample includes a somewhat higher share of women (55.6%), so all models include age, gender, and education as covariates to minimize bias from demographic imbalance.

The survey instrument was designed to capture attitudes toward academic freedom in concrete scenarios. Respondents were presented with the following question: "Thinking about research done in [British/Japanese] universities, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" They were then asked to indicate their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (7). Each item was framed to probe a distinct facet of academic freedom, ranging from protections for controversial research to institutional partnerships with politically or morally contentious actors.

The four items are:

1. Universities should not do research that could cause offense among marginalized groups.
2. Universities should work with everyone, including political regimes in countries that violate basic human rights.
3. Universities should work with everyone, including multinational corporations.
4. Research must be free and university employees must be protected to research and publish their results, regardless of whether they cause offense.

Items 2–4 are positively framed in relation to academic freedom and thus higher values are interpreted as greater support. The first item is negatively framed, such that higher values imply support for restricting academic inquiry in the name of social sensitivity. For analytical clarity, we retain the original scale coding but interpret a lower score on item 1 and higher scores on items 2–4 as indicative of a stronger orientation toward academic freedom.

Each item serves as a separate dependent variable in our analysis. This approach enables us to examine whether predictors of support for academic freedom are consistent across different types of normative tensions, such as moral offense, international partnerships, corporate influence, or speech protections. Our aim is not to construct a single latent index but to treat each scenario as a discrete test of public commitments to academic autonomy.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

Variable	UK	Japan
<i>N</i>	1859	1493
Mean age (SD) [range]	49.70 (17.68) [18–88]	50.35 (16.19) [18–79]
Women (%)	55.6	49.6
Men (%)	44.4	50.4
University-educated (%)	38.2	49.1
Mean left–right (SD), 1–7	4.83 (2.15)	5.00 (1.54)
Mean trust in other people (SD), 1–7	3.58 (1.61)	3.12 (1.55)
Mean trust in government (SD), 1–7	2.66 (1.49)	3.10 (1.48)
Mean trust in Prime Minister (SD), 1–7	2.62 (1.63)	2.85 (1.52)
Mean trust in scientists at universities (SD), 1–7	4.79 (1.41)	4.16 (1.31)

Our core independent variables include age, gender, and university education, along with political ideology (measured on a left–right self-placement scale from 0 to 11). To explore the role of epistemic and institutional trust, we also include four trust measures: trust in scientists, trust in the government, trust in the Prime Minister, and general social trust. Each is measured on a seven-point scale.

While our dependent variables are ordinal in nature, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as our primary analytical method for ease of interpretation and comparability across models. As a robustness check, we also estimate ordered logistic models, which yield substantively identical results in terms of coefficient direction and significance. For transparency and replicability, all data and code are available from the Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/previewurl.xhtml?token=24b714b2-1a22-4c9c-bb8e-4a94be968ebe> [this link has been anonymized for peer review].

To visualize public orientations toward academic freedom, Figure 1 displays response distributions for each question by country. Across all four items, Japanese respondents tend to cluster around the middle of the scale, reflecting more moderate or ambivalent positions. UK respondents, by contrast, show greater dispersion and somewhat higher endorsement of academic autonomy, particularly on protecting controversial research and engaging with corporate partners. Support for collaboration with political regimes that violate human rights is low in both contexts, though again more concentrated at the midpoint in Japan. These patterns suggest that while the overall direction of opinion is similar across countries, the intensity and confidence with which respondents take a stance differ. Rather than a simple national divide, the data reveal variation in the strength and certainty of commitment to academic freedom, consistent with our argument that it is a conditional and context-dependent public value. Because these distributions vary systematically across

scenarios, we treat each item as a separate dependent variable in subsequent models to test whether the same ideological and trust-based predictors operate consistently or diverge by issue.

1.5 | Limitations

As with all observational survey data, the relationships reported here are associational rather than causal. Our design allows us to identify patterns of ideological and trust-based alignment with academic freedom but not the mechanisms that produce them. The left–right self-placement scale offers a parsimonious and widely used measure of political orientation, though it cannot capture the full spectrum of cultural and economic values that may underlie views on academic freedom. The item concerning partnerships with regimes is necessarily broad, and respondents may have interpreted it differently; for example, as referring to research collaboration, institutional funding, or broader diplomatic engagement. Similarly, trust in the Prime Minister may also capture partisan identification rather than institutional confidence, so its effects should be interpreted with caution. Moreover, while both panels approximate national populations, modest demographic skews, such as the higher proportion of women in the UK sample, mean that our estimates should be interpreted as broadly indicative rather than strictly representative. These caveats notwithstanding, the surveys provide a high-quality comparative snapshot of public attitudes toward academic freedom in two mature democracies augmenting the research focused on the perceptions of the issue by academics (e.g., Norris 2023).

2 | Results

Our models control for age, gender, education, left–right ideology, and trust (in scientists, government, the prime minister,

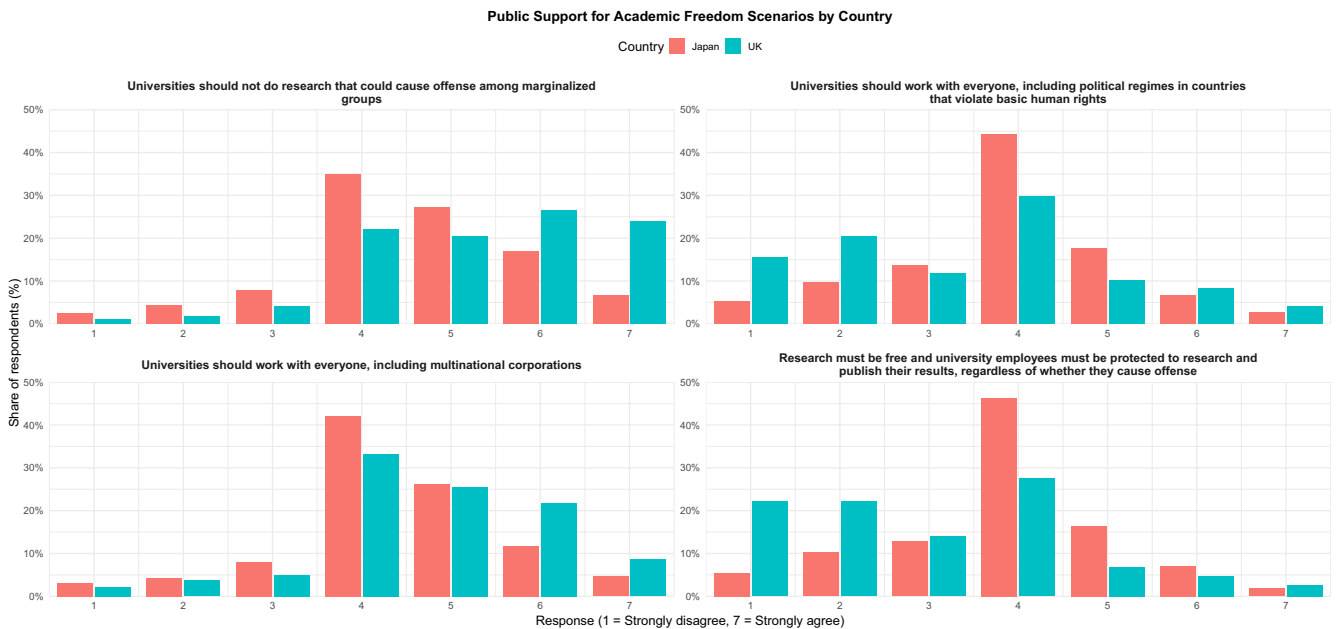


FIGURE 1 | Public support for academic freedom scenarios in the United Kingdom and Japan.

and general social trust), using OLS on the 7-point agreement scales. In Table 2 we report the significant predictors for each dependent item, comparing the two countries.

2.1 | Universities and Offense (Restrict Research on Marginalized Groups)

This negatively framed item (higher scores indicate support for restricting research to avoid offense) finds a clear ideological and demographic divide in both countries. In the UK, older respondents are significantly less likely to endorse research restrictions (age has a negative coefficient, $p < 0.01$), indicating that older Britons favor letting potentially offensive research proceed. Women, by contrast, are more willing than men to back restrictions: British women score significantly higher on agreement that “universities should not do research that could cause offense” ($p < 0.01$). This gender pattern is consistent with broader findings that women tend to express greater concern about potential harm and social offense (Clark 2021). Most strikingly, a respondent’s left–right self-placement strongly predicts this attitude. In the UK model, right-leaning citizens disagree with the offense restriction (they have lower agreement), reflecting greater tolerance for controversial research on the right. Education and trust variables show no strong effect for this item in the UK sample. In Japan, we observe a similar ideological pattern: right-wing Japanese respondents are also significantly less supportive of offense-based restrictions ($p < 0.05$). Gender has the same sign: Japanese women are significantly more likely than men to support restricting research for social sensitivity ($p < 0.01$). Trust in scientists has a small positive association ($p < 0.05$) in Japan, meaning that higher trust in scientific authorities slightly increases the likelihood of supporting the restriction on offensive research. Age and education have negligible effects in the Japanese regression. Thus, on the offense scenario both countries exhibit a comparable left–right cleavage (rights protecting academic freedom vs. left-leaning caution) and a consistent gender effect (women favoring accountability), though only Japan shows any notable trust-in-scientist effect for this item.

2.2 | Partnering With Human-Rights-Violating Regimes

This positively framed statement (“universities should work with political regimes that violate human rights”) reveals consistent age effects and contrasting patterns of ideology and trust. In the UK, older respondents are significantly less willing to endorse academic collaborations with offending regimes (age coefficient negative, $p < 0.01$), again favoring accountability over autonomy as people age. University education also predicts greater caution ($p < 0.01$). Trust in scientists has a small but significant negative association ($p < 0.05$), suggesting the individuals with higher confidence in scientists are somewhat more wary of politically sensitive collaborations. Other trust measures show no significant effects.

In Japan, the age effect is again negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that older Japanese likewise oppose partnering with human-rights violators. Gender effects are

stronger than in the UK: women express greater support than men ($p < 0.01$). Ideological self-placement is not significant in Japan, suggesting that support for international cooperation with controversial regimes cuts across left–right lines. Instead, trust in scientists ($p < 0.01$) and in the Prime Minister ($p < 0.05$) both predict greater support, implying that confidence in institutions may shape tolerance for politically delicate engagement. In sum, cooperation with human-rights–violating regimes elicits a clear generational divide in both countries, a modest ideological split confined to the UK, and in Japan additional links with gender and institutional trust. These patterns underline how attitudes toward academic collaboration are filtered through both political and epistemic forms of confidence rather than ideology alone.

2.3 | Partnering With Multinational Corporations

The question of working with corporate sponsors (“including multinational corporations”) again yields a notable ideological gap in Britain but a different profile in Japan. UK respondents’ agreement rises with right-wing identity (positive left–right coefficient, $p < 0.01$) and falls with higher education (university graduates are significantly less supportive of blanket corporate partnerships, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that UK conservatives and non-graduates are more comfortable with industry links, while liberals and educated citizens are warier. Neither age nor gender is significant in the British model for this item. Trust in scientists and government plays no significant role on this question in the UK. By contrast, Japanese support for academic ties to businesses does not vary by ideology or age. Instead, two factors stand out: women in Japan are much more likely than men to approve partnerships with corporations ($p < 0.01$), and trust in scientists is very strongly positive ($p < 0.001$), indicating that those who have confidence in science institutions overwhelmingly favor corporate engagement. Trust in the prime minister is not a factor, nor is education. Thus, on the corporate partnership scenario the UK exhibits a clear right–left split (and a negative effect of higher education), whereas Japan’s outlook is driven largely by gender and epistemic trust: a sharp cross-national contrast.

2.4 | Protecting Controversial Research (Academic Autonomy)

Finally, when asked whether “research must be free and university employees must be protected to publish... regardless of offense,” ideological factors re-emerge strongly in both settings. In the UK, right-leaning citizens express significantly higher agreement ($p < 0.01$), signaling a broad defense of academic autonomy among conservatives. In addition, British university graduates are more supportive than non-graduates ($p < 0.05$) of this protection, and women slightly less supportive than men ($p < 0.05$). Trust in the Prime Minister ($p < 0.01$) and trust in scientists ($p < 0.001$) also correlate with stronger endorsement of academic freedom in the UK. In Japan, the pattern is broadly similar: higher self-reported right-wing position predicts greater support for unfettered research ($p < 0.01$). In the aftermath of the Science Council of Japan incident, it has become evident that right-wing ideology plays a more significant role in supporting

TABLE 2 | Regressions.

	Dependent variable							
	Avoid offense		Work with regimes		Work with MNCs		Protect research regardless	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Age	-0.010*** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.005** (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.006*** (0.002)
Women	0.433*** (0.073)	0.205*** (0.068)	0.012 (0.077)	0.210*** (0.069)	-0.135** (0.060)	0.249*** (0.065)	-0.307*** (0.062)	-0.025 (0.066)
University	-0.167** (0.077)	-0.094 (0.068)	-0.376*** (0.081)	-0.064 (0.069)	0.172*** (0.064)	0.042 (0.065)	0.307*** (0.065)	0.147** (0.066)
Left-right	-0.132*** (0.019)	-0.050** (0.022)	0.106*** (0.021)	0.019 (0.022)	0.095*** (0.016)	0.013 (0.021)	0.092*** (0.016)	0.079*** (0.022)
General trust	-0.007 (0.024)	0.015 (0.023)	-0.041 (0.026)	-0.030 (0.023)	0.009 (0.020)	0.010 (0.022)	0.022 (0.021)	-0.056** (0.023)
Trust govt.	0.048 (0.040)	0.032 (0.037)	0.045 (0.042)	-0.026 (0.037)	-0.022 (0.033)	-0.018 (0.035)	-0.073** (0.034)	-0.036 (0.036)
Trust PM	0.067* (0.037)	0.031 (0.036)	0.058 (0.039)	0.072** (0.036)	0.105*** (0.031)	-0.004 (0.034)	0.004 (0.032)	-0.027 (0.035)
Trust scientists	-0.030 (0.028)	0.056** (0.028)	-0.063** (0.030)	0.096*** (0.028)	0.105*** (0.023)	0.173*** (0.027)	0.138*** (0.024)	0.275*** (0.027)
Constant	3.822*** (0.201)	3.501*** (0.187)	3.720*** (0.213)	3.558*** (0.190)	3.501*** (0.167)	3.518*** (0.179)	3.918*** (0.171)	3.044*** (0.182)
Observations	1843	1468	1843	1468	1843	1468	1843	1468
R ²	0.072	0.024	0.062	0.026	0.067	0.042	0.081	0.090
Adjusted R ²	0.068	0.019	0.057	0.021	0.063	0.036	0.077	0.085
Residual std. error	1.529 (df = 1834)	1.263 (df = 1459)	1.617 (df = 1834)	1.283 (df = 1459)	1.270 (df = 1834)	1.211 (df = 1459)	1.296 (df = 1834)	1.232 (df = 1459)
F statistic	17.671*** (df = 8; 1834)	4.496*** (df = 8; 1459)	15.040*** (df = 8; 1834)	4.879*** (df = 8; 1459)	16.433*** (df = 8; 1834)	7.942*** (df = 8; 1459)	20.141*** (df = 8; 1834)	17.949*** (df = 8; 1459)

*p < 0.1.
 **p < 0.05.
 ***p < 0.01.

academic freedom. This highlights the strength of its impact, particularly when considering the left's tendency to focus on academic freedom from a political perspective. Japanese university graduates likewise give stronger support ($p < 0.05$), as do older respondents (age positive, $p < 0.01$). Trust in scientists has the largest effect in Japan for this item ($p < 0.001$), far outstripping any other predictor, while general social trust is weakly negative ($p < 0.01$). Trust in the prime minister is again non-significant. In short, on the free-research question ideology and education shape attitudes in the same direction in both countries (right +, graduate +), and trust in scientists strongly amplifies support, underscoring the autonomy logic.

Across all scenarios the models' explanatory power is modest (R^2 values typically below 0.10), reflecting the complexity of public attitudes. However, the side-by-side comparisons reveal clear patterns: right-leaning respondents in both countries tend consistently toward academic autonomy (disagreeing with offense-based limits and favoring controversial research and partnerships), whereas left-leaning respondents often favor accountability to social values (especially on the offense issue). Gender and age effects vary by context: women are generally more sensitive to offensive research (supporting restrictions) in both countries, but Japanese women also paradoxically champion international collaboration; older citizens in both samples lean toward protecting researchers, not restricting them. Trust in scientists aligns uniformly with pro-freedom attitudes (especially in Japan), while trust in political leadership shows a weaker, country-specific imprint. These findings set the stage for interpreting how ideological worldviews and institutional trust jointly filter normative judgments about academic freedom.

3 | Discussion

Our results illustrate how public views on academic freedom are channeled through competing logics of autonomy and accountability. Citizens do not treat academic freedom as a single, uniform principle; instead, their responses reflect whether they privilege scholarly autonomy or social accountability in each scenario. In both the UK and Japan, conservatives reliably side with autonomy, while liberals show more deference to accountability. This is clearly demonstrated by two items that asked for opinions on academic freedom. On both outcome variables, right-wing respondents oppose restricting research on offensive topics, suggesting that conservative ideology is associated with an uncompromising commitment to intellectual liberty. Conversely, left-leaning respondents favor social sensitivity over unfettered inquiry, invoking the accountability logic. This ideological divide aligns with theories of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006; Kahan 2015) and echoes recent scholarly observations that debates over campus speech often fall along partisan lines (reflecting a wider culture-war framework) (e.g., Norris 2023, 2024).

Nevertheless, the specific way autonomy and accountability manifest varies by issue. In the UK, ideology and educational background shape attitudes toward accepting controversial organizations as collaborative research partners, whereas no comparable pattern is observed in Japan. Right-leaning individuals in the UK tend to be more tolerant of such partnerships, a

tendency absent in Japan. University graduates in the UK show stronger aversion to partnerships with problematic regimes and a preference for multinational corporations. In the UK, where international research collaboration and industry-academia partnerships are more common and where accountability is more frequently emphasized than in Japan, the selection of research partners appears more likely to become a politically contested issue. At the same time, older citizens in both samples are more cautious about partnering with rights-violating states, which may reflect generational respect for established international norms. This supports our second hypothesis in part, indicating that age is associated with greater sensitivity to reputational or moral costs in academic partnerships: an accountability logic.

Trust in scientific institutions emerges as a key “filter” for endorsing autonomy. In both countries, trust in scientists is strongly associated with agreement on protecting academic freedom, suggesting that trust provides the foundation for free research. However, the relationships with other outcomes differ between the two nations. In Japan, trust in scientists correlates positively with all items, implying an implicit expectation that trusted scientists will act in ways respondents themselves find acceptable. In the UK, however, this pattern does not hold. Specifically, for partnerships with problematic regimes, trust in scientists is negatively associated, suggesting that scientists are expected to be held publicly accountable in such contexts. Trust in the public and in government institutions, including the Prime Minister, may complement trust in scientists, but no consistent effects were observed.

The patterns in our comparative analysis underscore both parallels and divergences. In both countries, ideology is the dominant force shaping attitudes toward core academic freedoms. Right-wing orientation predicts a “free research everywhere” stance across the board. The fact that this is observed even in Japan, where the degree of politicization of academia is lower than in the UK and where memories of left-wing defense of academic freedom remain strong, underscores the intensity of this orientation. This ideological alignment supports our third hypothesis and suggests that attitudes toward academic freedom are deeply rooted in broader left-right world-views, with conservatives consistently emphasizing liberty over normative constraint. This suggests that academic freedom is perceived through a similar lens in these democracies, as an extension of broader worldviews about liberty versus social obligation. Likewise, the tendency for higher-educated respondents to favor autonomy in several models (especially on research protection) appears in both samples. While education was not part of our core hypotheses, this result complements the ideological story by indicating that more educated citizens may also internalize autonomy norms, particularly when paired with trust in scientists. However, the UK shows stronger ideological sorting on issues of corporate partnership and free speech than Japan does; conversely, Japan shows strong gender and trust effects that are muted in Britain. For example, Japanese women's unusually high support for corporate and regime partnerships, in contrast to their British counterparts, may reflect social norms that prioritize harmonious relationships with others and an economic environment with limited bargaining power. Meanwhile, the much larger influence of trust-in-scientist in Japan (versus ideology in the UK) could reflect Japan's institutional culture, where

deference to scientific authority is historically high and partisan debate over universities is more restrained. These differences highlight that national political culture and media discourse modulate how the ideological filter operates.

Importantly, our findings align with the idea that academic freedom is being evaluated as part of a “culture war” over campus values. The fact that people’s positions align with left–right identity implies that assessments of university norms are proxy battles for broader political conflicts. In normative terms, this suggests that appeals to the intrinsic importance of unhindered inquiry (the autonomy argument) resonate more with citizens who already value liberty over equality, while arguments about protecting marginalized communities or avoiding moral harm (the accountability argument) resonate with those who prioritise egalitarian or communitarian values. The public is thus not neutral: academic norms are being interpreted through ideological and institutional prisms.

At the same time, we emphasize that public support for academic freedom is conditional and issue-specific. Fewer than half of respondents in either country strongly endorse a blanket conception of academic freedom. Instead, many draw lines: for instance, some UK respondents strongly support free research but balk at corporate ties, while some Japanese express the opposite pattern. This conditionality has normative implications: policymakers and university leaders should recognize that academic freedom may enjoy broad legitimacy on some fronts (e.g., basic research) but still be contested in others (e.g., partnership ethics or politically sensitive topics).

In the context of rising politicization of higher education, these cross-national results offer a cautionary note. They show that debates over campus governance and academic speech are likely to remain polarized, reflecting citizens’ pre-existing dispositions. However, the universal elements, such as the consistent link between conservatism and autonomy, point to generalizable theoretical insights. The study contributes by demonstrating that even in Japan, which lacks the ferocious public culture war of the West, citizens filter academic freedom through ideology and trust. Thus, scholars should view academic freedom as a contested public good whose legitimacy depends on the interplay of institutional logics and political identities, not merely on institutional design.

In sum, our analysis reveals that both ideological identity and institutional trust function as filters on how the public perceives academic norms. Autonomy and accountability remain competing frameworks, and citizens sort themselves predictably along those lines. Understanding these dynamics helps explain why controversies over university speech and research so often mirror broader political cleavages and suggests that any effort to build consensus around academic freedom must grapple with these underlying value differences.

4 | Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the public’s support for academic freedom depends heavily on how the issues are framed and on citizens’ worldviews. Our UK and Japan surveys show that,

while most people endorse the principle of open inquiry, reactions differ when academics engage in controversial partnerships or cause offense. Conservatives generally emphasize the autonomy of scholars, whereas more liberal respondents place greater weight on accountability and social responsibility. These patterns echo broader findings: for example, a cross-national survey found that in Japan political ideology had virtually no effect on trust in scientific research, whereas in the UK and US it strongly influenced public confidence (Miura et al. 2024). Likewise, the results are supported by studies of particular groups of academics, political scientists, by Norris (2023, 2024).

These results reinforce the utility of an autonomy-accountability framework for understanding public opinion on academic freedom. Citizens clearly value unfettered enquiry; research in the US has found bipartisan majorities believe campuses, not politicians, should decide what is taught (American Council on Education 2023), yet they also expect academics to answer to public interests. In practice, British publics place a very high value on higher education: a recent poll found universities rank only behind the NHS, the armed forces and the monarchy in national esteem, and three-quarters of respondents agreed that university research is “essential” rather than a waste of time (Duffy 2024). This suggests that the public authorizes scholars to pursue knowledge largely because universities are trusted to advance the public good. But with that trust comes the expectation that autonomy should be exercised responsibly.

The findings have implications far beyond the UK and Japan. Academic freedom is under pressure in many countries, even in mature democracies. Global indices report that freedoms for teaching and research have eroded in dozens of states, including recent backsliding in the US and the UK (Kinzelbach et al. 2023). Our UK-Japan comparison suggests the public everywhere will interpret academic freedom through familiar political lenses and trust cues. For instance, the fact that ideology mattered less in Japan, consistent with cultural deference to expertise (Miura et al. 2024) highlights the need to tailor messages: what resonates in one country may not in another. At the same time, the common pattern that people value open debate but also care about harmful or unaccountable speech appears universal. These results thus support the theoretical claim that attitudes to academic freedom are filtered by both ideological orientation and institutional trust.

Several limitations should be borne in mind. First, our analysis is not a time-series: we capture only a snapshot of opinion and cannot trace how attitudes evolve over time. Second, the design is observational and correlational, so we cannot definitively prove causation (e.g., whether ideology *causes* support or simply correlates with it). Third, our study covers just two countries and a limited set of question framings. Experimental or longitudinal research in other settings would help validate and deepen these findings. Moreover, conjoint designs may be able to more directly test how framing autonomy versus accountability influences public judgment.

Our findings show that public orientations toward academic freedom are structured less by national policy environments than by underlying ideological and trust-based dispositions. Across both the United Kingdom and Japan, support

for unrestricted academic inquiry aligns most strongly with ideological self-placement and confidence in scientific expertise, while demographic factors such as age and gender provide secondary nuance. These results reinforce our argument that academic freedom operates as a contested public good: citizens balance the ideal of autonomy against concerns about accountability and harm, and this balancing process is filtered through their broader political and epistemic worldviews.

Rather than treating public disagreement as evidence of a “crisis” of academic freedom, our analysis suggests that such disagreement is inherent to how liberal democracies reconcile plural values. The greater polarization observed in the United Kingdom reflects a more explicitly politicized discourse about universities, whereas the narrower, more centrist patterns in Japan point to a context where the autonomy of academia is accepted but not always salient. Recognizing these contextual differences can help scholars and higher education policymakers understand how debates about academic freedom resonate within distinct cultural and ideological landscapes.

By situating empirical patterns within a comparative theoretical framework, this study contributes to emerging work that links attitudes toward expertise and institutional trust with support for academic autonomy. Future research might extend this approach through experimental or longitudinal designs to trace how exposure to controversies or policy reforms reshapes public attitudes. The present results, however, underline a simpler point: academic freedom remains a widely valued but deeply interpreted norm, sustained not by consensus but by the ongoing negotiation between autonomy and accountability.

In conclusion, our evidence confirms that public attitudes toward academic freedom are shaped by an interplay of messaging, ideology, and trust. The autonomy-accountability lens remains a powerful guide for understanding these attitudes. Recognizing this complexity can help university leaders and policymakers craft policies and communication that sustain broad support for scholarly independence while remaining responsive to public values.

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Ethics Statement

Approval was granted for this study to be carried out by the College of Business, Arts and Social Science Research Ethics Committee, Brunel University London. Approval reference: 35290-LR-Jan/2022-37313-1.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Full replication data and code are available from the Harvard Dataverse, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/SYXK30>.

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