



Gorodenkoff/Shutterstock



We believe in the
free flow of
information

Republish our articles for
free, online or in print,
under Creative Commons
licence.

How political leanings affect views on academic freedom – new research



Published: January 26, 2026 5.12pm GMT

Steven David Pickering

Honorary Professor, International Relations, Brunel University of London

Martin Ejnar Hansen

Reader in Political Science, Brunel University of London

Yosuke Sunahara

Professor in Public Administration, Kobe University

DOI<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.jqasrr6cm><https://theconversation.com/how-political-leanings-affect-views-on-academic-freedom-new-research-273408>

Academic freedom is often described as a cornerstone of democratic society. Politicians regularly claim to defend it, universities invoke it in mission statements and most members of the public say they support it in principle.

So why does it provoke such intense disagreement once it becomes concrete? At first glance, these disputes look like arguments about universities. But our [research](#) suggests something else is going on. Public disagreements over academic freedom are not simply about campus policy. They reflect deeper divides over political ideology and trust in expertise.

Debates about [academic freedom](#) have become increasingly prominent in the UK. New [free speech legislation](#) to protect academic freedom in universities was introduced in 2025. Disputes over [offensive research](#), [controversial speakers](#) or [international partnerships](#) routinely make headlines.

Similar tensions exist elsewhere, even if they are less visible. In Japan, for example, academic freedom is formally protected in [article 23 of the constitution](#), but [scholars often report subtle pressures](#) to avoid politically sensitive topics.

In a new study, we [surveyed over 3,300 people in the UK and Japan](#) to examine how citizens understand academic freedom when it is presented in concrete terms rather than abstract slogans.

Instead of asking whether people support “academic freedom” in general, we asked how much they agreed or disagreed with specific scenarios. These included whether universities should protect research that causes offence, and whether academics should be free to publish controversial findings. We also asked whether universities should collaborate with multinational corporations or political regimes accused of human rights abuses.

This approach matters. In surveys, people often express strong support for free inquiry in the abstract. But once academic freedom is tied to real-world trade-offs, such as offence, harm, reputation or political controversy, agreement tends to fracture.

Across both countries, political ideology emerged as one of the strongest predictors of attitudes toward academic freedom.

Right-leaning respondents were consistently more supportive of academic freedom. They were more likely to oppose restrictions on offensive research and more likely to agree that academics should be protected even when their work provokes controversy. This pattern appeared not only in the UK, where universities are deeply entangled in culture-war debates, but also in Japan, where such disputes are less visible in public life.

Left-leaning respondents, by contrast, were more likely to emphasise accountability. They tended to support limits on research perceived as offensive or harmful, reflecting greater concern for social sensitivity and the potential impact of academic work on marginalised groups.

These differences suggest that academic freedom is not a single, universally understood value. Instead, people interpret it through broader political worldviews. For some, it primarily means freedom from interference. For others, it is inseparable from social responsibility.

Trust in scientists matters

Trust also plays a crucial role. In both countries, people who trusted scientists more strongly were more likely to support academic freedom, particularly when asked whether researchers should be protected regardless of whether their findings cause offence.

Trust appears to act as a kind of permission structure. When people believe scientists are acting in good faith, they are more willing to tolerate controversial outcomes.



Levels of trust in scientists affects views on academic freedom. YAKOBCHUK VIACHESLAV/Shutterstock

This effect was especially pronounced in Japan. There, trust in scientists was one of the strongest predictors of support for academic freedom across multiple scenarios. This likely reflects Japan's institutional culture. Deference to expertise remains relatively high and political conflict over universities is more muted than in the UK.

In Britain, by contrast, trust in scientists mattered most when academic freedom was framed as protection for individual researchers, but less so when questions involved partnerships with controversial regimes. In those cases, trust was more conditional. This suggests that even trusted experts are expected to exercise judgement about ethical boundaries.

Taken together, these findings point to a deeper pattern. Public attitudes toward academic freedom are structured by two competing logics.

One emphasises autonomy. This is the idea that scholars must be insulated from political and social pressure in order to pursue knowledge freely. The other emphasises accountability: the belief that universities, as publicly funded institutions, should be responsive to social norms and moral concerns.

Most people do not fully embrace one logic or the other. Instead, they shift between them depending on the issue at hand. Many support free research in principle but draw lines when offence, ethics or international politics enter the picture.

This helps explain why debates over academic freedom so often feel polarised and unresolved. They are not simply disputes about policy details. They are disagreements about which values should take priority when liberal principles collide.

These findings have important implications.

First, they suggest that appeals to "academic freedom" alone are unlikely to persuade sceptics. Because people understand the concept differently, arguments that assume a shared meaning often talk past their audience.

Second, they highlight the importance of trust. Where confidence in scientists and universities is high, support for academic autonomy is more resilient. Where trust erodes, demands for oversight and restriction grow stronger.

Finally, disputes over academic freedom reflect broader tensions within democratic societies between liberty and accountability. These tensions are not new, but they are becoming more visible as universities sit at the centre of political and cultural change.

Rather than asking whether academic freedom is under threat, a better question may be this: how can institutions sustain public trust while defending the autonomy that makes academic inquiry possible in the first place?