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Freedom of Expression and Social Conflict

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Abstract: The association between freedom of expression – freedom of speech and the freedom of the media – and social conflict is theoretically ambiguous and politically highly contested. On one side of the debate, people argue that freedom of speech and freedom of the media create social conflict by giving people and organized interests the opportunity to disagree in public, creating visible conflicts and enabling people to insult and incite hatred against other groups and attempt to marginalize them. On the other side of the political debate, the proponents of the freedom of expression argue that free speech and free media act as safety valves that allow substantial disagreement to be expressed in a peaceful manner instead of turning into violence, enabling deliberation among different groups, and furthering the understanding and potential acceptance of substantially different points of view. In this paper, we therefore take the association to the test. We combine data on freedom of expression from the V-Dem database and conflict data from the Banks dataset with additional data on economic performance and political institutions. In a large panel dataset, we find evidence of a negative association between the freedom of expression and social conflict. Further tests suggest that this association is specific to countries with democratic political institutions while the empirical association in autocracies is ambiguous.

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1. Introduction

The association between freedom of expression – freedom of speech and the freedom of the media – and social conflict is theoretically ambiguous and politically highly contested. On one side of the debate, people argue that freedom of expression can be abused to create social conflict by giving people and organized interests the opportunity to spread disinformation and disagree in public, creating or exaggerating visible conflicts and political polarization as well as enabling people to incite hatred against other groups in attempts to marginalize them. This approach is institutionalized in the constitutions or criminal law of most European democracies as well as in Article 20 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2021). The case law of the European Court of Human Rights also reflects the belief that “hate speech” - including statements “offensive” or “insulting” to minority groups may lead to democratic collapse and ultimately genocide unless kept in check by “militant democracy” (Feret v. Belgium, 2009 and Vejdeland v. Sweden, 2012). According to the European Court of Human Rights: “[T]olerance and respect for the equal dignity of all human beings constitute the foundations of a democratic, pluralistic society. That being so, as a matter of principle it may be considered necessary in certain democratic societies to sanction or even prevent all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on intolerance” (Erbakan v. Turkey, 2006).

On the other side of the political debate, the proponents of freedom of expression argue that free speech and free media act as safety valves that allow substantial disagreement to be expressed in a peaceful manner reducing the risk of physical violence (Mchangama, 2022). Freedom of speech and media enables deliberation among different groups and furthers the understanding and potential acceptance of substantially different points of view. Moreover, opponents of limiting even extreme speech frequently highlight that restrictions on speech is a cure worse than the disease and can be abused to target dissent and criticism of the powers that be (Mchangama, 2022; Strossen, 2018). This view is more aligned with the Supreme Court’s current interpretation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which holds that “Freedoms of speech and press do not permit a State to forbid advocacy of the use of force or of law violation except where such advocacy is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action” (Brandenburg v. Ohio, 395 U.S. 444, 1969).

The debate on where to draw the line on extreme speech is hardly new. In 1937 German professor Karl Loewenstein accused European democracies faced by fascist movements of having “gravely sinned by their leniency, or by too legalistic concepts of the freedom of public opinion”

(Loewenstein, 1937, 653). During the drafting and negotiation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR Western democracies and the Soviet Bloc clashed repeatedly on whether to include an obligation to prohibit hate speech or not. The spread of social media and the resulting amplification of hate speech and extremism has given this debate new life, and several democratic governments, including Germany and France, have taken wide-ranging steps to counter online hate speech out of fears of social, ethnic and racial violence. Some countries, including Spain and Russia, have, in recent years, taken the additional step of directly criminalizing public comments that can, for example, be construed as glorifying terrorism and justifying terrorist acts (Mchangama and Alkiviadou, 2020). Given the prominent role of private platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, much hate speech is governed by and moderated in accordance with the terms of service or community standards of these private platforms, which typically are more speech restrictive than what follows from human rights standards, leading to a dramatic increase in the purge of hateful and extremist content (Mchangama, Fanlo and Alkiviadou, 2023).

Academically as well as politically, the question whether freedom of speech creates or alleviates social conflicts remains highly disputed and unresolved (e.g., Siegel, 2020), and most evidence relates to extreme forms of social conflict such as terrorism (Walsh and Piazza, 2010; Piazza, 2013; Eskildsen and Bjørnskov, 2022) or coups (Bove and Nisticò, 2014). In this paper, we therefore take the association to the test. We combine data on freedom of expression from the V-Dem database and conflict data from the Banks dataset with additional data on economic performance and political institutions.¹ In a large panel dataset, we find evidence of a negative association between the freedom of expression and social conflict. Further tests suggest that more free speech leads to less social conflict in countries with democratic political institutions while the empirical association in autocracies is ambiguous.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We discuss the legal question and political economy of restrictions on freedom of speech in section 2 where we sketch their association with social conflict. Section 3 describes our data and empirical strategy, which we implement in section. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes.

2. How would freedom of expression affect social conflict?

In the following section, we briefly review a set of theoretical mechanisms through which freedom of expression could affect social conflict. As is often the case in the overall debate about freedom of

¹ Throughout the paper, we use ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘freedom of speech’ interchangeably, as one concept is included in the other.

expression, the theoretical landscape is decidedly mixed with competing theories and its implications are ambiguous. We therefore first present a set of theoretical mechanisms through which freedom of expression might create social conflict, and next a set of mechanisms through which freedom may discourage or prevent social conflict. This includes the possibility that the net effect is typically zero if mechanisms offset each other, and that no mechanisms actually apply and freedom of expression is irrelevant for the occurrence and degree of social conflict. We end this section with a short discussion of the conditions under which separate mechanisms may work. We do not intend to provide a comprehensive survey of the literature, but only a main impression of broad theoretical considerations.

We define social conflict as any situation in which two or more groups or factions of society interact purposefully in a competitive setting, and where the “means chosen by the parties in pursuit of their goals are likely to inflict damage, harm or injury” on other parties (Oberschall, 1978, 291). As such, the parties in a social conflict need to be aware that their mutual positions are incompatible and willing and able to employ force to push through their preferred outcome. In principle, social conflict is a broad concept that stretches from strikes and demonstrations to coups and civil war. In the following, we focus explicitly on types of social conflict related to political events that are likely to occur in democracies as well as autocracies. These types include strikes, anti-government and anti-establishment demonstrations, and riots, but for example exclude warfare, revolutions, coups, and political assassinations. As noted in the introduction, a separate literature has explored terrorism, coups and civil war.

Throughout, we follow the standard conceptualisation of freedom of expression in Article 19 of the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2015): “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. Media freedom is thereby a subset of overall freedom of expression, which is nevertheless easier to observe and measure quantitatively: Violations of the freedom of expression of a large organization such as a newspaper are substantially more difficult to keep secret – not least because the purpose of, e.g., a newspaper or many modern internet media is to publish newsworthy stories, including government violations of rights – than violations of the freedom of expression of individual citizens, small firms or small organizations.

2.1. Why freedom of expression would create social conflict

As noted in the introduction, a strand of the literature as well as a tradition in law holds that extensive freedom of speech and freedom of the media can create social conflict. Some lawyers and social

scientists argue that freedom of speech and freedom of the media create social conflict through three separate mechanisms.

First, extensive freedom of expression gives both individuals and organized interests the opportunity to disagree in public (Eyerman, 1998; Li, 2005; Egorov et al., 2009). This not only makes latent conflicts visible to the broader public but may also lead to actual conflicts that would not have happened, had the disagreement not become public knowledge instead of being kept private or within closed political fora. In addition, different parties may align themselves with different public points of view in competitive democracies, making such conflicts particularly salient in public debate. This and parallel problems are regularly discussed in connection with the ways populist politicians exploit latent social conflict (cf. Legatum Institute, 2015; Eichengreen, 2018). More dramatically, Adena et al. (2015) show how effectively Nazi Germany made use of pro-government broadcasting in the 1930s, and Yanigazawa-Drott (2014) finds that the Rwandan government used the radio to encourage violence against the country's Tutsi minority in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In the digital age, the government of Myanmar used Facebook to incite mass atrocities – which some have characterized as genocide – against Rohingya Muslims (Mozur, 2018). Moreover, social media played an important role in fomenting and inciting the attack on the US Capitol on January 6th 2021 by supporters of then President Donald Trump, who spread conspiracy theories claiming that the 2020 Presidential election had been rigged (Peters et al., 2020)

Second, it is occasionally argued that freedom of expression and free media enable organizations with illegal interests, such as terrorist organizations and organized crime, to recruit members and supporters and subsequently incite them to commit violent crimes (cf., Siegel, 2020). Mchangama (2016) for example describes how the European Court of Human Rights has accepted that laws criminalizing apologies for or glorification of terrorism can be enforced in democracies without violating citizens' right to freedom of expression. Restricting such expressions is believed to be necessary to constrain problems relating to terrorism and is deemed a proportional remedy to the threat, and therefore legitimate state action because restrictions prevent organizations from effectively recruiting new members and supporters.

Third, extensive freedom of expression enables people to incite hatred against or insult other individuals and identifiable groups and attempt to marginalize them. One of several arguments in favour of limiting freedom of expression and in particular of bringing media under political control rests on the claim that different groups in society have unequal access to expression and the media. The argument therefore is that some level of political control over the media and their editorial policies is necessary to allow marginalized groups a voice in public (cf. Bayer et al., 2021; OAS, 2010). The

conjoined arguments that effective freedom of expression is curtailed by unequal access to media and that such problems can be addressed by political regulation without creating other undue problems are related to the broader claim that the judicial system must keep expression within acceptable bounds in order to ensure that individuals are treated with some acceptable level of respect and avoid suffering mental distress or being socially ostracized (Coliver et al., 1992; Siegel, 2020). With uncontrolled freedom of expression, such problems may presumably eventually result in more open social conflict. However, it remains an open question if such problems are specific to autocracies (see, e.g., Krishnarajan et al., 2017). This problem also applies to alternative mechanisms, discussed next, and we pick up such discussion again in section 2.3.

2.2. Why freedom of expression would reduce social conflict

On the other side of the political debate, the proponents of freedom of expression argue that free speech and free media actively reduce the level of social conflict in society. Four separate mechanisms are discernible within this strand of the conflict literature.

First, freedom of expression may act as a safety valve that allows people to vent their frustration and express substantial disagreement in a peaceful manner instead of turning into violence (Ravndal, 2017). Similarly, freedom of expression and the existence of free media outside of political control enables deliberation among different groups, which may either further the understanding and potential respect of substantially different points of view or acceptance of the fact that people may hold different points of view for honourable reasons.²

Second, Egorov et al. (2009) emphasize that implementing limits on the freedom of expression implies that government, security forces and secret services, as well as most civil society organisations come to have only limited information. Regulating information flows easily comes to be a self-defeating policy because lawmakers need complete and unbiased information in order to avoid policy failures (see Munger, 2008). Egorov et al. (2009) for example stress that autocracies that allow some level of press freedom thereby effectively gain more information that allows policy makers to adjust policies and avoid coup attempts. As restricting or regulating the freedom of expression eradicates information, restrictions may thus have similar self-defeating effects as the consequences of regulating market prices (cf., Laffont and Tirole, 1986). Restrictions imply that intelligence services and other authorities come

² Berggren and Nilsson (2013) suggest very similar arguments to explain the strong association between market-oriented policies and institutions and tolerance towards others. Some of the institutions dealt with by Berggren and Nilsson are known to be associated with both press freedom and democracy (e.g., Lawson and Clark, 2010; Bjørnskov, 2018).

to lack precise information about the threat level and the degree to which latent social conflicts exist (Egorov et al., 2009; Eskildsen and Bjørnskov, 2022).

Arrese (2017) provides examples that several autocracies strategically allow the business press more freedom to publish without censorship in order to gain information. Eskildsen and Bjørnskov (2022) suggest that similar mechanisms allow democracies with substantial degrees of press freedom to avoid terrorist attacks and combat attacks more effectively, as the incumbent regime gathers valuable information from a free press.

Third, although one could argue that extensive freedom of expression creates conflict, the risk of judicial overreach and political abuse of limits on freedom of expression remain salient in most societies. As indicated by Bjørnskov and Voigt (2021), although most modern constitutions include clear protection of free speech and media freedom, those provisions are generally ineffective and even stably democratic governments routinely appear to ignore the constitutionalized limits on their control of the media. In 2018, Spanish courts for example used its so-called ‘gag law’, Article 578 of the Spanish Criminal Code, to convict a rapper for “glorifying terrorism” and insulting the king (Bohórquez, 2018). The law, which had been substantially amended in July 2015, among other things includes a ban on “humiliating victims of terrorism” (Amnesty International, 2018, 6). Amnesty International (2018, 4) assesses that the amendments effectively give Spanish states “the power to criminalize a wide range of expression that does not meet the high threshold of incitement” required by international agreements. Yet, Spanish authorities claim that the law is instrumental in combatting terrorist threats.

Such strategic use and misuse of political limitations of freedom of expression may create conflicts *per se*, as illustrated by examples from around the world. Saiya (2015) for example shows how restrictions on religious freedom is associated with substantially increased levels of religious extremism and violence. In Pakistan, private misuse of blasphemy laws that limit free speech is a common problem in disputes over land ownership, particularly against religious minorities, that can at times turn violent (Freedom House, 2010). At the political level, the Press Act of 1910 instituted by the British colonial authorities in India, aimed at curbing what was rising support for Indian nationalism through a convoluted way of limiting press freedom: the colonial authorities demanded that all publishers deposited large financial securities with the government, which could confiscate them in the event that something was published that was critical of the British Empire, its policy, or the army (Riley, 2021). Similarly, simple uncertainty of the extent of freedom of speech may constitute a limitation, as the mere threat of a court case can be prohibitive, particularly if not backed by influential special interests, and

may lead to self-censorship. Such policy removes the safety valve effect of freedom of speech and limits the information that is actually present in the public sphere.

Finally, while limitations on the freedom of speech may reduce social conflict by preventing criminal and terrorist organizations from recruiting members and supporters, they may also prevent peaceful, legitimate civil society organizations from recruiting and working towards peaceful goals. Activity in civil society arguably prevents social conflicts and is often thought of as a central factor in transitions out of severe social conflict towards peaceful rebuilding of society (see e.g., van Leeuwen and Verkoren, 2012). Bjørnskov and Voigt (2020) also show that across democratic, developed societies, stronger civil society organizations are associated with substantially lower likelihood of terrorist events. As such, this complication underlines how very similar mechanisms – here the recruitment efforts of criminal organizations versus civil society – associated with limiting the freedom of speech can yield directly opposite consequences for the likelihood of observing social conflict.

2.3. Are effects different in democracies?

A final question to ask is if some of these mechanisms are more likely to apply in democracies than in autocracies and vice versa. Autocracies by definition differ, as limitations on freedom of expression – and particularly on press freedom – prevent opposition politicians from participating fully in whatever public debate there may be, and in countries like Russia allows government substantial control of elections (Enikolopov et al., 2011). This is nevertheless not an issue in the following, as our operational definition of democracy implies that regimes that successfully prevent the opposition from participating cannot be categorised as democracies.

However, other mechanisms may arguably be stronger in some regime types. First, democracies tend to have stronger veto players and polities that are more respectful of constitutional limits (Tsebelis, 1999; Gutmann et al., 2022).³ Both factors may strengthen the positive effects of freedom of expression, as they make it less likely that such freedom is reneged next year and thereby more certain that public expressions critical of the regime are not retrospectively punished. Second, although citizens in democracies and autocracies may enjoy the same *de facto* freedom of expression, the latter may arguably have less incentive to use such freedom to express disagreement in public, as it is less likely to change public policy. As such, freedom of expression may lead to more political polarization in democracies, but have a stronger ‘safety valve’ effect than in autocracies.

³ Justesen (2014) for example shows that the otherwise well-known effects of property rights protection on long-run economic development mainly arise when property rights institutions are combined with strong veto institutions.

Third, as noted above, freedom of expression may both help terrorist organisations and other illegal associations recruiting new members and acolytes, but also help civil society organisations recruiting. These efforts may nevertheless be partially thwarted in autocracies, as such regimes also have other ways of preventing organisations not aligned with the regime from recruiting, including outright bans. As such, we cannot theoretically say whether this type of mechanism is more positive or negative in democracies, but merely that whatever net effect we observe is likely to be stronger. Fourth, freedom of expression may have the consequence that certain groups become marginalised in public. Yet, most examples of this type of effect appear to be from autocracies – e.g., the vilification of Jews in Germany in the 1930s and or the marginalisation of the Tutsi minority in Rwanda in 1993-94 – and be a result of the incumbent government actively supporting the process. To the extent that effective marginalisation depends on government supporting marginalising expressions made freely in public, this is more likely in autocracies. Finally, we note that democratisation often entails a relatively sudden increase in freedom of expression, which might well lead to negative effects such as those outlined in section 2.1 in the short run, but positive effects in the longer run.

Overall, there are thus good theoretical reasons to expect that effect of freedom of expression may be different in democracies than in autocracies. However, we cannot, with certainty, say that effects are stronger in one type of regime than another. We take this into account in the empirical strategy in the following section 4.

3. Data and empirical strategy

In order to assess how freedom of expression affects social conflict, a first problem is how to measure it, which represents two separate challenges. First, which elements of freedom of expression are necessary and how maximalist or minimalist a conception fits the purpose. Second, one has to separate the actual protection of rights from what James Madison called “parchment barriers”, as the *de facto* status is often far removed from the *de jure* rules (cf. Voigt, 2013; Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2021).

While there is no ideal way of addressing these challenges, we employ a set of different factors in the following. We use six variables from the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-DEM) database, which we both use as single indicators and combine to form an average (Coppedge et al., 2016). These variables are coded by experts at the V-Dem project to capture the *de facto* status of government censorship effort, harassment of journalists, media self-censorship, freedom of discussion for men, freedom of discussion for women, and freedom of academic and cultural expression. All variables are coded in such a way that

higher values imply more freedom of expression. Furthermore, all six variables correlate highly with each other and form a single, well-defined index (cf. Eskildsen and Bjørnskov, 2022).⁴

Our other main set of dependent variables capture different elements of social conflict and derive from the large dataset in Banks (2004) as updated by early 2020. The Banks dataset includes eight separate indicators of terrorism and guerrilla warfare, assassinations, revolutions, purges, major government crises, riots, anti-government demonstrations, and general strikes. As our focus is on social conflict and not major political events, we use the three latter indices as measures of lower-level conflict. We prefer to use the sum of the three indices, as such events may not only have similar effects but can also be difficult to categorize precisely. It can, for example, be difficult to draw the line between a riot and an anti-government demonstration, and the former can, under some conditions, be a particularly violent form of the latter. We nevertheless also provide results with each of the three indices, as the correlations between the three range from .42 between general strikes and riots to .61 between riots and anti-government demonstrations indicate at least some covariation.

In addition, we also form a measure of whether any social conflict took place in a given year. We do so because approximately two thirds of our country-year observations exhibit no social conflict. The conflict variables are, in other words, strongly censored, which may necessitate that we separate the extensive margin – whether any conflict took place – from the intensive margin – how many and how severe conflicts took place. Although we provide a set of Heckman two-step estimates that do so, we must nevertheless also emphasize that the distinction between the extensive and intensive margins in the Banks dataset is not perfect. It remains possible that very small-scale conflicts are coded for countries that rarely see major conflicts while such conflicts would not be coded in countries with a tradition of social conflict, which would make the separation of the two margins fuzzy.

We make an additional distinction in the following section, based on our theoretical outline above. In order to separate effects in democracies from those in different types of autocracies, we use Bjørnskov and Rode's (2020) update and expansion of the Democracy and Dictatorship dataset in Cheibub et al. (2010), which itself is a further development of Alvarez et al. (1996). We do so because the dichotomous democracy indicator is based on a minimalist definition of democracy, which does not include any elements directly associated with repression or social conflict. Had we used a measure

⁴ The corresponding variable names in the V-Dem dataset are v2mecenefm, v2meharjrn, v2meslfcen, v2cldiscm, v2cldiscw, and v2clacfree, respectively. We aggregate them into a single index as a simple average, as Eskildsen and Bjørnskov (2022) find that a principal components analysis yields approximately equal loadings on a single factor. As such, we cannot say with any statistical certainty that the loadings are different, and therefore use a simple average as a simple and transparent aggregation choice that conforms with the structure of the data.

resting on a more maximalist definition, we could not have asked the present question.⁵ We more specifically use a new feature in Bjørnskov and Rode (2020) who separate political institutions into four categories: full democracies, electoral autocracies, single-party regimes, and regimes without elections. The difference between the two former categories is that while multi-party elections in full democracies can and do lead to changes of government, electoral autocracies employ strategies in order to make it highly unlikely that elections can lead to *de facto* political change.⁶ The definition of single-party regimes is evidently that only candidates from one party appear on the ballot while regimes without elections are defined either as regimes in which no elections are scheduled or where scheduled elections have been cancelled or postponed for more than a year.

Although former studies in conflict literature do not provide any consensus of which additional variables to include, we follow recent studies in our choice of control variables. We first add the size of the population, as larger countries are both more diverse and may be more difficult to govern. Second, we add the trade volume as an indicator of openness and globalization, which is often found to be associated with the overall protection of human rights (Dreher et al., 2012; de Soysa and Vadlammanati, 2013). We also add the price of capital goods relative to consumption prices, which can be interpreted as an indicator of the business climate, and the structure of income by government spending, measured as percent of GDP. Finally, we control for average income by including the purchasing-power adjusted GDP per capita, as social conflicts as well constraints on the freedom of expression may be more likely during economic downturns. All of these data derive from the Penn World Tables, mark 9.1 (Feenstra et al., 2015). The entire dataset consists of 8506 annual observations from 161 countries during the period 1960-2017; the data are summarised in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

⁵ Examples of such maximalist measures of democracy include the much-used Freedom House index of political rights and the liberal democracy index from the Varieties of Democracy project. The former includes measures of safeguards against corruption and transparency of government operations while the latter also includes indicators of the constitutional protection of civil liberties and the independence of the judiciary. Using such measures thus confounds effects of democratic political institutions with those of a number of other institutions that may not require democratic oversight to function well.

⁶ Examples of electoral autocracies include Russia, Turkey and Cameroon, but also Namibia and South Africa. The latter countries have had free and fair elections for years but are still not coded as democracies as none of their elections have led to government change. Due to the conservative coding rule applied in Cheibub et al. (2010) and Bjørnskov and Rode (2020), these countries cannot be coded as fully democratic until an election within the current constitutional set-up leads to an actual change of government.

Our estimation strategy is two-fold. First, we provide a set of two-way fixed effects (year and country) ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates, which effectively take conflict history and traditions into account and only identify effects based on within-country developments over time. Second, we follow recent papers in separating the extensive and intensive margins (cf. Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020). In other words, in a separate section of the paper we separately estimate if *any* conflict events occurred in a given year, and given that, *how severe* the events were. We do so by employing Heckman's two-step estimator, which separates the intensive and extensive margins. As the Heckman procedure does not allow for adding country fixed effects, we instead control for region fixed effects (Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa and the Middle East, the Pacific, and Sub-Saharan Africa) in these estimates. The estimates thus distinguish between whether any conflict occurred in a given year and how severe conflict was, as conflict arguably often either does not appear or comes in cascades (cf., Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020). Our two choices for estimation strategy thus alleviate different types of problems.

Finally, in order to deal with the potential endogeneity problem inherent in our basic question, we follow an approach, which rests on the insight that the systematic heterogeneity of effects under fairly common conditions can be interpreted as causal (Nizalova and Murtazashvili, 2016; Dreher et al., 2018). In our context, the identification problem comes from the possibility that increased social conflict could lead governments to increase suppression by for example limiting the freedom of expression. The reverse causal direction thus potentially biases our estimates downwards. However, this mechanism is substantially stronger the less democratic a country is, as both constitutional constraints and norms are more likely to be binding in more democratic countries, which typically have stronger veto institutions and checks and balances on political power, and where voters' acceptance of restrictions is a more effective limit on repressive policy making (cf., Justesen, 2014). As such, the endogeneity bias is likely to be strongest in single-party regimes and least likely in full democracies (cf., Eskildsen and Bjørnskov, 2022). Systematic heterogeneity thus reveals the degree of bias: a strong endogeneity problem will be visible as larger and more negative interaction terms for less democratic regimes while the causal direction hypothesized above will be reflected as larger negative interaction terms for democracies. In other words, the degree of endogeneity can be assessed – although not perfectly alleviated – through the relative size of the interactions between freedom of expression and the regime type categories.

4. Empirical findings

Figures 1a-c provide a set of first impressions of the cross-country association between freedom of expression and social conflict. All three figures depict the average conflict level among countries with below and above-median freedom of expression; Figure 1a employs the full sample while Figures 1b and 1c, respectively, employ only observations with multi-party autocracy and full democracy. All figures separate the extensive and intensive margins

Insert Figure 1 about here

The first figure indicates that countries with more freedom of expression experience both more years with any conflicts and more severe conflicts. Those below the sample median experience 17 percent fewer years and eight percent fewer conflicts than the average country while those above the median experience 17 percent more years and six percent more conflicts. However, restricting the sample to only multi-party autocracies – and thus excluding all single-party regimes – the overall pattern changes. Within this regime type, countries below the median freedom of expression experience seven percent fewer years with conflict and those above the median experience seven percent more years, but the number of conflicts in the former group is seven percent higher than the average and that in the latter group is five percent lower. Turning to full democracies in Figure 1c, the pattern is fully reversed from the full sample. Among democracies, more freedom of expression appears to be clearly associated with fewer conflicts. Our overall expectation of structural differences across regime types thus bears out in the data at first sight.

4.1. The overall patterns – fixed effects results

We therefore turn to the more detailed analysis in Table 2, which reports our fixed effects estimates. In column 1, where we do not separate effects across different regimes, we find that only international trade and successful coups significantly affect the overall level of social conflict. While the estimate of freedom of expression is negative, it remains insignificant. Restricting the sample to only include democracies in column 2 yields a large estimate of freedom of expression, which nevertheless remains poorly identified

Insert Table 2 about here

However, the results of comparing different regimes while allowing the effects of freedom of expression to differ across these regimes in column 3 exhibits support for our overall considerations. We find that while the association between freedom of expression in single-party regimes is positive and significant, it is strongly negative and significant in full democracies. This pattern is repeated when we focus on either riots or anti-government demonstration, but not the much rarer general strikes.

As we noted above, establishing causality is a challenge, as it remains an option that governments react to increased social conflict by restricting the freedom of expression. However, this option would lead to a statistical pattern where the interaction terms would be most negative in the least democratic regimes and least negative in full democracies. As is obvious in Table 2, we find the exactly opposite pattern of heterogeneity in the association between freedom of expression and social conflict. While we cannot reject some level of endogeneity bias, it is therefore likely to be small in democracies and relatively inconsequential.

4.2. Separating the extensive and intensive margins

A more serious problem is the potential bias arising from the censored nature of the conflict data. We alleviate such concerns in Table 3, which reports the results of our Heckman two-step estimates; columns 1, 3 and 5 provide estimates at the extensive margin while columns 2, 4 and 6 provide those at the intensive margin. We must nevertheless note that the precision of these estimates rests on the identification of the selection stage, i.e. whether any social conflict occurred in a given year. As noted above, the identification of the extensive margin may not be entirely precise, which implies that our identification in the following cannot be as accurate as in the preceding section.

Insert Table 3 about here

In the full sample, we first observe that communist regimes are less likely to have any conflicts while countries experiencing a successful coup almost by definition have more (cf., Gerling, 2017). We also see that more populous countries as well as countries with larger government spending are more likely to experience conflict. At the intensive margin, we find only significant evidence of a negative effect of openness to trade and a positive effect of income.

Turning to regime differences and freedom, we observe that single-party regimes have fewer years and multi-party autocracies have more years of conflict. On average across the sample, freedom of expression is not associated with the extensive margin or conflict although that changes substantially when we limit the sample to only democracies in columns 3 and 4. At both margins, the estimate of freedom of expression in democracies is negative and substantial, but only significant at the extensive margin. As such, the insignificant estimate in Table 2 may be a consequence of a precisely identified association at the extensive margin and a very noisy identification at the intensive margin.

The full sample estimates in columns 5 and 6 in which we separate the effects of freedom of expression by adding a set of interaction terms essentially confirm the findings in columns 3 and 4 for democracies. However, we also note that freedom of expression is associated with a higher conflict risk at the extensive margin in single-party regimes and multi-party autocracies. These findings are unlikely

to be driven by simple reverse causality, as noted above, because a standard story of endogeneity would induce a negative bias in particularly non-democratic estimates. Conversely, the large and negative significant estimate at the intensive margin for multi-party autocracies must be treated with care, as it could in principle be a result of reverse causality.

4.3. *Additional robustness tests*

The overall findings above turn out to be robust to a number of additional tests.⁷ In the appendix, we first for example rerun the main estimates from Table 2 but using each of the six indicators of freedom of expression instead of the overall index. While their statistical precision varies, we cannot reject that all estimates are statistically similar. Second, we have added Henisz's (2002) Political Constraints III index – a direct measure of the strength of institutional veto players – to the specification and interacted it with freedom of expression. The findings pertaining to democracies remain unchanged and are not affected by the veto player measure. However, the additional findings also imply that the results in Table 3, columns 5 and 6, pertaining to multi-party autocracy are driven by different sets of autocracies. The positive and significant effect of freedom of expression on the extensive margin of social conflict appears to be driven by multi-party autocracies with particularly weak veto institutions while the negative and significant effect on the intensive margin is driven by the subset of multi-party autocracies with relatively strong veto institutions. In other words, we find that multi-party autocracies with relatively strong veto institutions to some extent behave similarly to full democracies.

Finally, we have ascertained that the negative association in democracies is not a transitory phenomenon. Rerunning the analysis in Table 3, columns 2 and 3, and adding an interaction between an indicator for established democracies – coded as a dummy taking the value of one if a country has had uninterrupted full democracy for at least ten years – shows that our findings are *not* due to new democracies. Instead, we find that all previous democracy results are driven by established democracies (cf., Piazza, 2013). With this potentially important caveat in mind, and a reassurance of the statistical robustness of our findings, we proceed to discuss them.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The freedom of expression is an important feature of all established democracies, although the degree of freedom defined by their *de jure* status may vary with the enforcement offered by judicial institutions of varying quality. However, where, when and how to limit freedom of expression and the freedom of

⁷ With the exception of the table in the appendix, these additional results are available upon request.

the media remains debated. Part of this debate is a discussion of the nature of the association between freedom of expression and social conflict. The literature is characterised by competing theories and the question remains politically highly contested as it involves what is arguably one of the central human rights.⁸ Our point here is to offer empirical evidence to sort out these different views.

Theoretically, one side of the debate claims that freedom creates social conflict by making disagreement publicly visible, by creating conflicts that would not have existed without a public debate, and by enabling people to marginalise vulnerable groups through incitement to hatred and offense. This side is pitted against another side of the political debate where opponents of constraints argue that free speech works as safety valve that allows disagreement to be expressed in a peaceful manner, enables tolerance and informed deliberation among different groups, and furthers the potential acceptance of substantially different points of view. The former point of view is reflected in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights while the latter view is, for example, reflected in the case law of the US Supreme Court.

In this paper, we take this association to the test by combining new data on freedom of expression from the V-Dem database with social conflict data from the Banks dataset. In a large panel dataset covering 161 countries observed between 1960 and 2017, we find substantial evidence of a heterogeneous relation between freedom of expression and social conflict. While it appears that increasing the freedom of expression is associated with more conflict in single-party regimes, we find unambiguous evidence of a negative association in established democracies. In other words, our results are consistent with a stable and large role of extensive freedom of expression in reducing social conflict in modern democracies. We also find indications that the same is the case in multiparty autocracies with relatively strong veto institutions.

Our results align quite well with findings from other studies that likewise may inform public policy. Recent research in Eskildsen and Bjørnskov (2022) for example shows that freedom of expression also substantially reduces the likelihood of terrorist attacks. Earlier research in Dragu (2011) also emphasises theoretically that the agencies responsible for enforcing limitations on freedom of expression may have an interest in such limitations *per se*, regardless of whether they reduce terrorism and conflict. Similar problems often apply to states of emergency that are declared for perfectly legitimate reasons but lead to misuse as governments increase censorship and violate other rights (Haffner-Burton et al., 2011; Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020).

⁸ This discussion is embedded in a broader discussion of freedom of different kinds and how they relate to conflict. Recent research in Lawson (2022) for example indicates that higher degrees of economic freedom are associated with substantially fewer riots, strikes and demonstrations.

There may still be valid reasons to believe that freedom of expression can lead to social conflicts, but our results and those of similar recent research emphasise the dangers of limiting this freedom. Our findings underline the likelihood that restrictions will lead to more conflict, a consequence that to some extent may be driven by government misuse of restrictions. Such problems are more often than not ignored by the legal and political literature on the topic. While Persilly and Tucker (2020) for example provide an interesting discussion of how data sharing between private media providers and government could reduce problems, they entirely ignore the likelihood of government misuse. Likewise, political misuse remains a relatively minor problem in Milczarek's (2021) discussion of the complex legal issue surrounding censorship through online content blocking and freedom of expression. Despite these studies, much recent literature emphasises the problems of enforcing de jure human rights including the freedom of expression, as even democratic governments regularly violate rights (cf., Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2021; Guttman et al., 2022).

As such, our findings in this paper highlight that overall, extensive freedom of expression is associated with less social conflict in established democracies. Noting that more freedom of expression is not only associated with simple social conflict, as in this paper, but also terrorism and that the protection of formal rights is often deficient, further questions the legitimacy and effectiveness of restricting citizens' personal freedom.

Appendix

In this paper, we combine six different measures of freedom of expression into a single measure, although the V-Dem project interprets them as separate elements of an overarching topic. While the aggregation is strongly supported by the high inter-item correlation and further tests, these indicators may hide subtle differences. Eskildsen and Bjørnskov (2022) for example find that the elements relating to discussion freedom are more strongly associated with terrorism than elements relating to media freedom. We therefore provide a set of estimates of our baseline specification – column 3 in Table 2 – in which we enter each of the six subindices instead of our overall index of freedom of expression. We report the results in Table A1.

Insert Table A1 about here

Although the estimates within democracies range from -4.2 to -6.8, they all fit within the same confidence interval. We therefore cannot state with any statistical certainty that the six different elements have different associations with social conflict. Likewise, we cannot with any certainty claim that such effects apply to the average multiparty autocracy. While five out of six estimates in multiparty autocracies are negative, none are near statistical significance.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Observations
Index	1.573	5.816	9360
General strikes	.139	.669	9360
Riots	.575	2.089	9360
Anti-government demonstrations	.858	3.292	9360
Freedom of expression index	.518	.217	10939
Single-party regime	.128	.334	10803
Multi-party autocracy	.288	.453	10803
Democracy	.428	.495	10803
Communist	.083	.276	10939
Successful coup	.022	.151	10939
Trade share	.475	.576	9066
Investment price level	1.549	4.407	9066
Log GDP per capita	8.727	1.217	9066
Government spending	.188	.107	9066
Log population size	1.981	1.722	9066
Cold war period	.562	.496	10939

Table 2. Results, fixed effects

Sample	Full	Democratic	Full	Full	Full	Full
Conflict measure	Index	Index	Index	Gen. strike	Riots	Demonst.
Freedom of expression index	-2.317 (1.624)	-9.746 (5.993)	2.755* (1.527)	.143 (.197)	.911 (.565)	1.701 (1.204)
Single-party regime	-.029 (.269)		-.281 (.749)	-.106 (.091)	-.266 (.302)	.092 (.502)
Multi-party autocracy	.068 (.267)		1.383 (.981)	.030 (.082)	.503 (.402)	.849 (.624)
Democracy	.114 (.402)		5.714*** (2.034)	.289 (.209)	1.862*** (.547)	3.563*** (1.535)
Freedom * single-party regime			.761 (1.820)	.229 (.227)	.745 (.739)	-.213 (1.278)
Freedom * multi-party autocracy			-3.867* (2.151)	-.063 (.203)	-1.032 (.886)	-2.773* (1.419)
Freedom * democracy			- 10.988*** (3.733)	-.414 (.371)	-3.303*** (.969)	-7.271** (2.857)
Communist	.531 (.440)	1.268 (1.366)	.597 (.388)	.075* (.042)	.241 (.159)	.281 (.236)
Successful coup	.816*** (.244)	.378 (.752)	.705*** (.236)	.052 (.053)	.389*** (.134)	.264** (.119)
Trade share	-1.152** (.460)	-1.486* (.769)	-1.143** (.454)	-.051 (.040)	-.134 (.127)	-.958*** (.354)
Investment price level	-.014 (.008)	.039*** (.014)	-.007 (.008)	.003*** (.001)	-.001 (.003)	-.010* (.006)
Log GDP per capita	.548 (.587)	.541 (2.182)	.592 (.585)	.036 (.059)	.059 (.138)	.496 (.456)
Government spending	.032 (.875)	2.010 (2.449)	-.141 (.911)	.023 (.119)	-.324 (.355)	.160 (.566)
Log population size	.116 (.605)	1.384 (2.006)	-.356 (.591)	-.000 (.085)	.099 (.215)	-.456 (.417)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	8506	4076	8506	8506	8506	8506
Countries	161	114	161	161	161	161
Within R squared	.093	.117	.099	.032	.076	.097
F statistic	4.30	41.41	3.87	14.69	4.48	5.25
<i>Marginal effect of freedom index: at</i>						
Single-party regime			3.516** (1.640)	.372** (.188)	1.656** (.657)	1.488 (.961)
Multi-party autocracy			-1.112 (1.914)	.080 (.126)	-.121 (.828)	-1.071 (1.125)
Democracy			-8.233** (3.510)	-.271 (.370)	-2.392*** (.778)	-5.569** (2.734)

Note: *** (**) [*] denote significance at $p < .01$ ($p < .05$) [$p < .10$].

Table 3. Results, Heckman two-step

Sample	Full		Democratic		Full	
Conflict measure	Index		Index		Index	
Freedom of expression index	.056 (.138)	-4.393*** (1.503)	-1.146*** (.246)	-1.958 (2.690)	1.897*** (.366)	-1.668 (3.952)
Single-party regime	- .251*** (.073)	1.143 (.940)			-.233 (.213)	2.844 (2.971)
Multi-party autocracy	.136** (.057)	-.119 (.639)			.437*** (.167)	2.303 (1.899)
Democracy	.116 (.071)	1.136 (.743)			1.878*** (.197)	.829 (2.098)
Freedom * single-party regime					-.053 (.560)	-4.675 (7.639)
Freedom * multi-party autocracy					-1.048** (.419)	-5.826 (4.613)
Freedom * democracy					-3.548*** (.423)	-.745 (4.523)
Communist	- .361*** (.081)		.203 (.318)		-.350*** (.083)	
Successful coup	.406*** (.095)		.216 (.354)		.344*** (.096)	
Trade share		-4.028*** (.625)		-5.152*** (.909)		-3.989*** (.627)
Investment price level	-.001 (.004)		.015 (.010)		-.000 (.004)	
Log GDP per capita	-.037* (.022)	.799*** (.264)	-.118*** (.043)	.359 (.486)	.012 (.023)	.747** (.270)
Government spending	.396*** (.176)		1.124*** (.336)		.332* (.178)	
Log population size	.369*** (.011)		.414*** (.016)		.376*** (.011)	
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Regional fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations		8512		4076		8512
Selected		2857		1649		2857
Wald Chi squared		218.91		138.54		217.94
Log likelihood		-14543		-8239		-14479
<i>Marginal effect of freedom index at</i>						
Single-party regime					1.844* (.439)	-6.343 (6.631)
Multi-party autocracy					.848*** (.218)	-7.494*** (2.503)
Democracy					-1.651*** (.210)	-2.413 (2.124)

Note: *** (**) [*] denote significance at $p < .01$ ($p < .05$) [$p < .10$].

Table A1. Separating elements of freedom of expression

Sample	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full
Freedom measure	Ac. freedom	Women disc. freedom	Men disc. freedom	Censorship	Harassment	Selv-cens.
Freedom of expression measure	.335 (1.048)	-.290 (1.470)	2.189 (1.503)	1.567 (1.044)	2.915** (1.387)	2.460** (1.254)
Single-party regime	-.308 (.666)	-1.283* (.731)	-.692 (.826)	-.364 (.452)	.115 (.489)	.153 (.508)
Multi-party autocracy	.606 (.728)	.347 (.823)	1.216 (.988)	.845 (.797)	1.104 (.766)	.771 (.695)
Democracy	2.950** (1.234)	3.803** (1.493)	3.961*** (1.504)	3.089** (1.463)	4.068*** (1.569)	3.199*** (.910)
Freedom * single-party regime	.749 (1.224)	3.103* (1.722)	1.458 (1.852)	1.080 (1.161)	-.534 (1.496)	-.305 (1.289)
Freedom * multi-party autocracy	-1.575 (1.277)	-.987 (1.691)	-3.136 (2.071)	-2.745 (1.864)	-3.760* (1.981)	-2.304 (1.521)
Freedom * democracy	-5.333** (2.098)	-6.535** (2.832)	- 7.435*** (2.792)	-6.638** (2.858)	-9.554*** (3.349)	-6.686*** (1.872)
Communist	.636* (.383)	.407 (.406)	.594 (.404)	.818** (.371)	.573 (.375)	.795** (.376)
Successful coup	.721*** (.233)	.773*** (.237)	.712*** (.231)	.749*** (.237)	.727*** (.242)	.647*** (.233)
Trade share	-1.126** (.453)	-1.152** (.463)	-1.158** (.460)	-1.139** (.447)	-1.185** (.474)	-1.109** (.456)
Investment price level	-.013 (.008)	-.019** (.008)	-.014* (.008)	-.004 (.008)	-.004 (.008)	-.003 (.008)
Log GDP per capita	.544 (.583)	.579 (.586)	.608 (.591)	.628 (.609)	.591 (.579)	.547 (.589)
Government spending	-.119 (.881)	.047 (.889)	-.108 (.919)	-.195 (.893)	-.162 (.905)	-.336 (.913)
Log population size	-.133 (.573)	-.171 (.602)	-.053 (.598)	-.185 (.604)	-.326 (.587)	-.118 (.615)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	8506	8506	8506	8506	8506	8506
Countries	161	161	161	161	161	161
Within R squared	.096	.098	.096	.097	.098	.095
F statistic	4.34	4.38	4.35	3.82	3.98	3.82
<i>Marginal effect of freedom index at</i>						
Single-party regime	1.085 (1.383)	2.813* (1.554)	3.646** (1.542)	2.647** (1.073)	2.381** (1.143)	1.155** (1.023)
Multi-party autocracy	-1.239 (1.238)	-1.277 (1.778)	-.947 (1.684)	-1.178 (1.789)	-.845 (1.734)	.156 (1.100)
Democracy	-4.997** (2.239)	-6.825*** (2.559)	-5.246** (2.361)	-5.071* (2.816)	-6.639** (3.261)	-4.226*** (1.541)

Note: *** (**) [*] denote significance at $p < .01$ ($p < .05$) [$p < .10$].

Figure 1a. Social conflict above and below median freedom, full sample

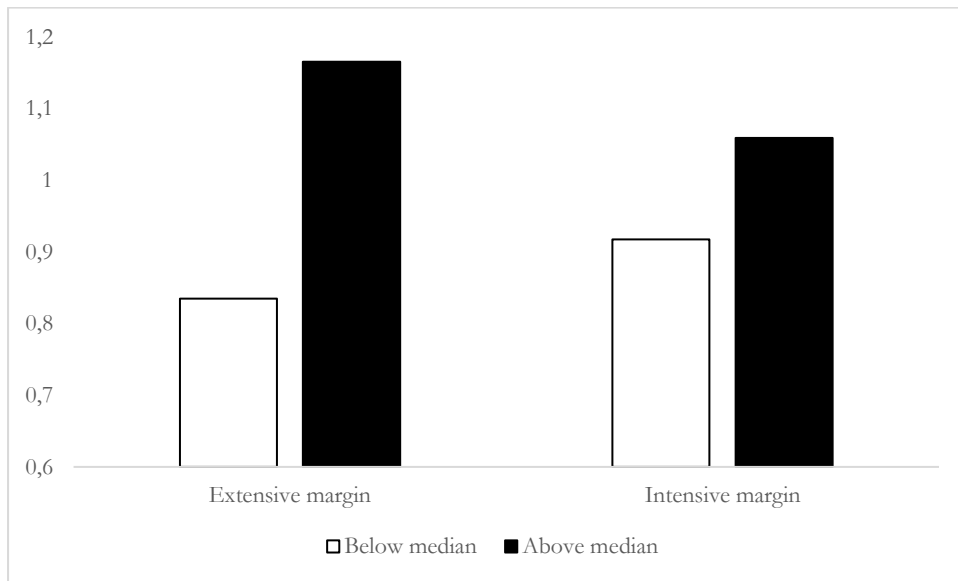


Figure 1b. Social conflict above and below median freedom, multi-party autocracies

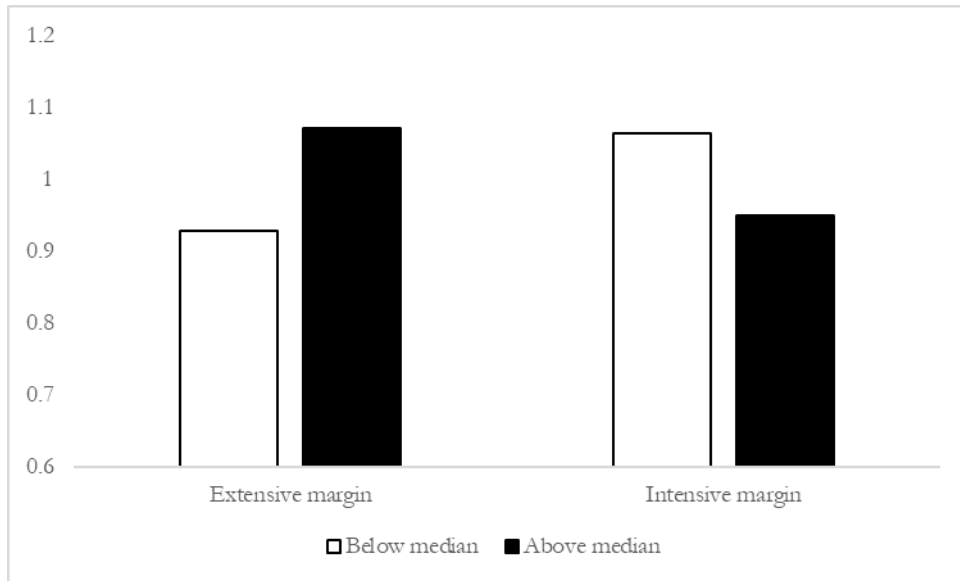


Figure 1c. Social conflict above and below median freedom, democracies

