

# Academic Freedom and Democratic Development in the Philippines: Findings from Expert-coded V-Dem Data

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**Abstract** In this paper, we argue that academic freedom is not only an indispensable mechanism for producing knowledge but is also vital in maintaining a strong democracy. Leveraging on the newly released dataset assessing the state of academic freedom globally, we empirically demonstrate how higher levels of academic freedom are associated with greater increases in democratic development using the Philippines as a national case study. Multiple regression analysis shows that a one-unit increase in the level of academic freedom index is associated with an 11% increase in the liberal democracy index score, which suggests a positive linear relationship. Overall, the findings have implications for policymakers and other stakeholders. Ultimately, we hope that teachers will not be discouraged from fostering critical thinking, but also that students are able to exercise these hard-fought ideals and principles towards better understanding the persisting enigma that is Philippine society.

**Keywords:** *academic freedom, democracy, higher education institutions (HEI), Philippines, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)*

## Introduction

Although numerous scholars have debated what it is, why it matters, and how it matters, academic freedom remains an exciting subject of scholarly analysis that merits greater examination (Altbach, 2001; Bartel, 2019; Blessinger & de Wit, 2018; Thomas, 2010; Vrieling et al., 2011). It matters a great deal in developing democracies like the Philippines, where, although academic freedom is enshrined in its Constitution, its hard-fought ideals remain insecure. Its overriding significance is even more pressing with the challenge brought about by disinformation and misinformation peddling the so-called ‘post-truth’ narratives not only in the public sphere but also in the academic arena (Grodzicka & Harambam, 2021; Oleksiyenko & Jackson, 2021). The preservation and cultivation of academic freedom have gained such traction that even academic organizations have dipped their fingers and joined in the debate.

Despite the abundance of theoretical suppositions undergirding the importance of academic freedom for democracy, there is little to no empirical research that critically examines this relationship, especially in the Philippine setting. Part of the problem is the availability of the dataset, which can span several years, to be able to gauge thoroughly the overall state and condition of the country’s extent of academic freedom. Amidst this challenge, a new expert-coded dataset called Academic Freedom Index came out from a reputable research institute—the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.<sup>1</sup> This dataset contains various

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<sup>1</sup> For more information and access to their data, please visit: <https://www.v-dem.net/>

indicators drawn from over 2050 country experts, and has enabled teachers and policymakers to comprehensively assess the levels of academic freedom across time and space' (Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022). For this study, we filtered the data specific to the Philippine context to better understand the particularities of the state of its academic freedom. Specifically, this paper asks: Does academic freedom enhance a country's level of democratic development? In other words, is the right to exercise academic freedom *positively associated* with greater consolidation of liberal democracy?

This study is significant because extant studies on academic freedom have mostly looked at the general landscape of academic freedom, without looking at key developments in specific countries, which may be different from the broader picture (Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022). In the case of the Philippines, despite the plethora of journalistic and qualitative accounts on the state of academic freedom in the country (Aquino, 2011; Nemenzo, 1978; Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021), there remains a scarcity of empirical research that is objective, quantifiable, and verifiable. Overall, this study contributes to the limited research on the impact of academic freedom on democracy in the Philippines as a national case study.

## **Literature Review**

### **Academic Freedom and Higher Education**

Building on the rich literature on academic freedom that sprang up over the last few years (Karran & Mallinson, 2019; Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Ramanujam & Wijenayake, 2022; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022; Stachowiak-Kudła, 2021; Stachowiak-Kudła et al., 2023), we *theorize* that academic freedom *fosters* greater degrees of democratic development.

Academic freedom is *sine qua non* for higher education institutions (Vrieling et al., 2011). It is through this that HEIs serve the common good by creating an environment that fosters independent and critical thinking (Vrieling et al., 2011). This allows a vibrant discourse in the teaching and learning process that leads to new knowledge as institutions continue to seek the truth, as HEIs are the ‘marketplace of ideas’. Hence, the right to free inquiry and discourse must be at the core of its system.

Academic freedom, which comes along with university autonomy, is a fundamental requirement for any democratic society (Vrieling et al., 2011). When HEIs are provided with a safe avenue to exercise the fundamental human right to free expression, it allows the students to be prepared for their participation as citizens of the State—one that is proactive, not passive and unconcerned. In this case, the notion of ‘academic freedom as an individual right’ is shifted to ‘academic freedom as a collective duty’ (Thomas, 2010, p. 85) towards the safekeeping of the country’s democracy. It gives teachers and students the right to challenge one another’s views, but not to penalize them for holding such views. Equally important is the acknowledgement that it is also an academic’s or scholar’s responsibility to know its limits since this special right does not also save them from the basic law of a country. In other words, encouraging academic freedom is akin to deepening a responsible democracy in one’s country.

Academic freedom is in accord with the larger academic goals of pursuit of knowledge, and any critical debate about its posterity has to be situated in this context. In this way, academic freedom implies a notion of knowledge that is “...neither fixed for all time, nor reducible to ideology, but takes objectivity from its social composition. This in turn assumes individuals with a capacity to reason and test out ideas” (Williams, 2016a, 2016b, p.195-199). The real test and goal of academic freedom, therefore, is for all stakeholders

to engage in reasoned discussion and encourage the free flow of ideas. It is only through this that we can say that academic freedom has been fundamentally in place since "...academic freedom can only survive through being continually exercised in the classroom, in writing, and in the public square. If not exercised, academic freedom quickly becomes reduced to rhetoric or dead dogma" (Williams, 2016a, 2016b, p.195-199).

### **Academic Freedom in the Philippines**

In the Philippines, the 1987 Constitution maintains that academic freedom shall be enjoyed in all higher education institutions (HEIs). This was further substantiated in the mandate of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in 1994, as it expresses the provision that:

‘...the State shall likewise *ensure* and *protect* academic freedom and shall promote its exercise and observance for the continuing intellectual growth, the advancement of learning and research, the development of responsible and effective leadership, the education of high-level and middle-level professionals, and the enrichment of our historical and cultural heritage’ [emphasis added]. (Official Gazette of the Philippines, 1994).

History has redefined the meaning of academic freedom since its theoretical meaning is an open principle (Tabora, 2021). Sulit (2019) has compared the provisions of academic freedom encompassing the 1935, 1973, and 1987 Philippine Constitutions. The 1935 Constitution states, ‘*Universities established by the State shall enjoy academic freedom.*’ During this period (from the Commonwealth 1935-1946 to the Third Republic 1946-1972), sole emphasis was given to the University of the Philippines (UP), which was the only state university at that point. This provision was

modified in the 1973 Constitution in which, ‘all institutions of higher learning shall enjoy academic freedom’, following the Frankfurter four essentials of freedom ‘*who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study*’. This has widened the avenue where academic freedom can be enjoyed not just in UP but across HEIs in the country. The 1987 Constitution has further recognized the dynamic concept of academic freedom, expanding its frontiers not only to the institution but also to the teachers and students, as it states, ‘Academic freedom shall be enjoyed in all institutions of higher learning’ (Official Gazette of the Philippines, 1987).

Although academic freedom is established in the 1987 Constitution, it still lacks a clear definition of what it exactly means (Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021). As the word itself is dynamic in form, the courts are left to determine its parameters (Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021), using its institutional autonomy to determine what it encompasses (Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021). Therefore, when institutions face academic freedom-related circumstances, the validity of claims depends on different considerations (Fossey & Wood, 2004), including power relations with the government that have always affected the state of academic freedom not just in the Philippines but in many other countries as well (Akerlind & Kayrooz 2003; Karran 2007). Higher education faces a conundrum because of the inherent liberal nature of academic freedom. Since academic freedom is *progressive* in nature as it requires inquiry, critique, deliberation, and problem solving (Thomas, 2010, p. 89), it is inherently viewed as radical and nonconforming. Although academic freedom is enshrined, to varying degrees, in most Constitutions of many countries, much of the threat to it also comes from the government itself. Even if it is recognized, it is still struggling. It is by no means secure globally (Altbach, 2001). Unfortunately, the lack of an agreed definition of

academic freedom has brought more tension than clarity. HEIs that value academic freedom cannot be run with a corporate style of management and accounting. If that is so, it cannot fully function as a marketplace of new knowledge and innovation—the very essence of higher education.

### **Academic Freedom: The Case of the University of the Philippines**

An authoritarian government is the nemesis of academic freedom. Although academic freedom is enshrined in the Constitution of the Philippines, it has not seemed to translate to an academic's protection of expression on social and political issues in the Duterte administration. The unilateral termination of the 1989 University of the Philippines-Department of National Defense Accord<sup>2</sup> (UP-DND Accord) by the Defense Secretary under the Duterte Administration has wreaked havoc on the academic freedom of the university. Being the national university of the country, UP plays a major role in providing a sanctuary of learning (Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021) for academics to advance knowledge without undue restraint (Sta. Maria, 2021). The UP-DND Accord has protected UP's best interest to keep the principle of higher education as the 'marketplace of ideas'. Academic freedom allows academics and scholars to engage in intellectual discussion, contest thoughts, and articulate themselves without fear of undue restraint (Romualdo, 2021; Sta Maria, 2021). With the abolition of this Accord, professors and students are highly vulnerable to threats—one that comes from their own government. This threat should not only concern UP but should warrant heightened awareness among all HEIs nationwide to ensure that academic freedom

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<sup>2</sup> The reason we put emphasis on UP is not because we are privileging one university over the other. We certainly do not claim that only UP has the monopoly on academic freedom. Our study basically started with this 'empirical event', i.e., the abrogation of the DND and UP accord of 1989, which motivated us to dig deeper into this issue and look at the matter at the national-level. We also leverage a recently released academic freedom index, which allows us to critically evaluate the state of the country's level of academic freedom with clear quantifiable indicators.

is respected. This apparent onslaught on UP mirrored the precarious state of schools' academic freedom globally, especially at Hungary's Central European University (Enyedi, 2018; Zaccagnino, 2020). This event has, in a way, become part of the motivation to conduct a study that is not limited to journalistic and qualitative accounts but advances the arguments regarding academic freedom in the country by using a more quantifiable and objective basis.

Overall, we put forth the following hypothesis: *The effect of academic freedom on liberal democracy is positive. That is, higher levels of academic freedom increase the level of liberal democracy in the country.*

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design, Study Context, and Data Source**

The data for this study comes from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (version 13) (Coppedge et al., 2023), which contains the required items on academic freedom and liberal democracy necessary to test their hypothesized relationship. This study relies on multiple country-experts to code the main variables. Methodologically, V-Dem usually collects data from five experts per country-year observation, using a pool of over 3,700 country experts who provide judgment on different concepts and cases, in this case, academic freedom and democracy. These experts will answer a battery of questions to evaluate the factual and objective conditions in a particular country at a particular point in time. Of course, just like other methodologies, they have their own limitations, and expert-coded data poses such problems as well.

For instance, asking experts to rate concepts inevitably raises judgment, which may differ between and across experts. Since there are intrinsic challenges in coding



historical data using experts' opinions, primarily because experts themselves make "stochastic mistakes because they lack perfect information about the latent trait" (Marquardt & Pemstein, 2018, p.437), V-DEM employs Bayesian item response theory (IRT) modeling techniques. This approach estimates the latent country coding unit characteristics from the collection of expert ratings. It allows patterns of cross-rater (dis)agreement to estimate variations in reliability and systematic differences in *threshold* between *ordinal* response categories to adjust estimates of the latent concept in question (Teorell et al., 2016). This similar approach has been used in other fields where expert-coded judgments are considered valid and reliable (Hooghe et al., 2010; Marquardt et al., 2019; Steenbergen & Marks, 2007).

From the 2,050 country-experts, we subset<sup>3</sup> the data to the Philippine context, representing the time 1900 to 2022 ( $n=123$  country experts). These experts, whose identities are not revealed<sup>4</sup>, were recruited based on their validated, contextual, and localized expert knowledge of the country, willingness to devote time to the project and answer survey questions impartially and based on their professional background. Recruited experts may also update and change their rating back in time to account for new information, but as a general rule, they are required to use the most recent data for information and analysis (Kinzelbach et. al., 2023).

In addition, this study uses an *inferential* statistical design and regression modeling approach, which constitute powerful tools in analyzing numerical data (Cohen et al., 2018; Wooldridge, 2020). This is done by enabling researchers to predict "the specific value of one variable when we know or assume the values of the other variable(s)" (Cohen & Holliday, 1996, p. 88, as cited in Cohen et al.,

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<sup>3</sup> In subsetting the data, we use the statistical programming software Stata (version 16.1). The raw data is uploaded to the first author's GitHub account.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/>

2018). Table 1 shows the summary statistics of the V-Dem data, which illustrates the general description of the country across a variety of indicators.

**Table 1**

*Summary Statistics*

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Liberal democracy index	123	.226	.128	.038	.444
Academic freedom index	123	.503	.218	.097	.794
Property rights	123	.589	.215	.204	.822
Women's empowerment	120	.553	.211	.194	.857
Political corruption	123	.717	.074	.631	.891
GDP Per Capita	120	2.866	1.44	1.129	7.552

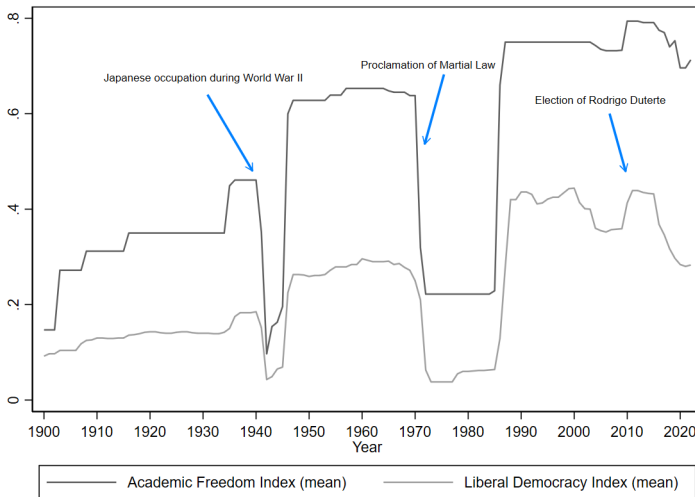
First, the liberal democracy index mean score (.226) of the country is below the standard democratic threshold (>.5), which indicates a lower degree of democratic development. Second, the mean score for the academic freedom index of the Philippines reaches *barely* above the midpoint average (.503), which suggests a modicum of respect for and exercise of academic freedom. Lastly, other indicators are consistent with the realities on the ground in the country, that is, there is a good deal of citizen enjoyment of property rights (mean =.589) and women are politically empowered (mean =.553) on one hand, while political corruption remains pervasive (mean =.717) and with low GDP per capita (mean =2.866) on the other hand, corresponding to the institutional performance of the political-economic domain.

## Main Dependent Variable

The main outcome variable of interest in this study is V-Dem's *Liberal Democracy Index* (LDI) (v2x\_libdem), which measures the extent to which the ideals of liberal democracy, such as constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances, limit the exercise of executive power.<sup>5</sup> Generally, LDI emphasizes the importance of protecting *individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state* and the tyranny of the majority (Coppedge et al., 2023).

### Figure 1

*Time-Series Plot of the Academic Freedom Index and Liberal Democracy Index in the Philippines from 1900 to 2022* Source: *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*



Country experts rated on a five-point scale (0-4) annually for more than 100 countries for the period of 1900–2022. Then, their ratings were converted to a single continuous latent scale and thereby estimated values of the

<sup>5</sup> To see the actual wording of the main variables, see Coppedge et al. (2023).

concept (Marquardt et al., 2019; Marquardt & Pemstein, 2018). For a country to be called *liberal democratic*, it must reach the  $> .5$  cut point (Kasuya & Mori, 2019). As shown in Figure 1, experts have always rated Philippine (liberal) democracy to be below the democratic threshold, which suggests chronic underdevelopment and backsliding.

Figure 1 also shows that *dips* in the level of academic freedom and state of liberal democracy in the country occurred during three major political episodes. First, Japanese occupation (1942-1945) during the Second World War, where the horrors of war, bloodshed, and brutalities transpired with regularity. Second, when Ferdinand E. Marcos declared Martial law in the Philippines (1972-1986) under the guise of addressing civil and political unrest, which ultimately rolled back years of liberal democratic achievements and censored the free press and even the rights of academics. Lastly, the state of liberal democracy and academic freedom in the country suffered another major blow during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte with his controversial drug war policy and the dissolution of a decades-long agreement between the University of the Philippines and the Department of National Defense Accord. Many scholars generally perceive that the preceding two political events (the martial law declaration and the Duterte administration) are ‘authoritarian’ governments and ‘autocratic’ political leadership (or at least display prominent features of them) (McCoy, 2017; Thompson, 2016), which not only undermined liberal democracy in the country but also curtailed academic freedom.

### **Main Independent Variable**

The main independent variable of interest in this study is V-Dem’s *Academic Freedom Index* (AFI) (v2xca\_academ), which measures the extent to which academic freedom is respected in the country as well as the HEI’s degree of

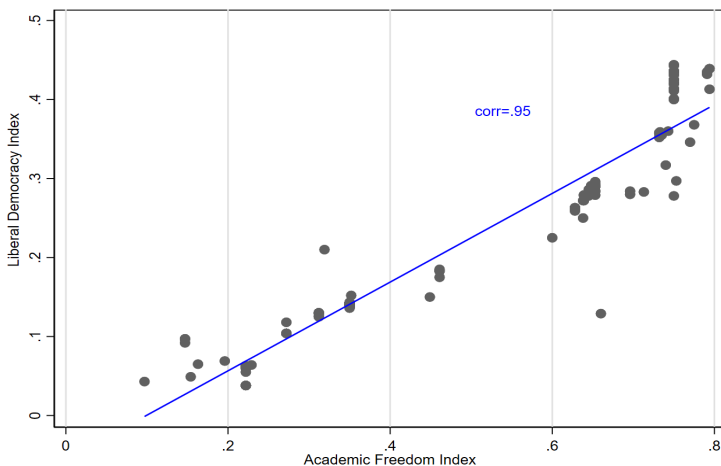
autonomy (Coppedge et al., 2023; Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022). Generally, academic freedom index is understood as the *right of academics*, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, and freedom to freely express their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, among others (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Just like the LDI, AFI is coded by country experts on a predefined scale from 0 to 4, and their ratings are converted into a continuous scale (Coppedge et al., 2023; Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Marquardt et al., 2019; Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2022).

Figure 2 plots the scores of each index, which displays the bivariate relationship between academic freedom and liberal democracy in the Philippines. Furthermore, Figure 2

## Figure 2

*Scatterplot of the Academic Freedom Index and Liberal Democracy Index in the Philippines. The blue-line represents the best-fitting line of the regression. Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*



suggests that there is a positive linear relationship between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient of .95. To strengthen our empirical results, we included potential confounders that are found to be predictors of democratic development in the extant literature: property rights (Rodrik, 2016), women's empowerment (Aubrey, 2001; Sung, 2012), political corruption (Ceva & Ferretti, 2018; Sung, 2004), and GDP per capita (Kotzian, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

Since we want to assess the relationship between one variable, *i.e.*, *academic freedom*, and another variable, *i.e.*, *liberal democracy*, we employ multiple linear regression analysis (Cohen et al., 2018; Wooldridge, 2020). Modeling the relationship between these two variables is essential in teasing out a quasi-causal effect in observational data through a *ceteris paribus* assumption (Cohen et al., 2018; Wooldridge, 2020).

## **Results and Discussions**

Table 2 reports the results. The regression analysis, *ceteris paribus*, reveals the effect of academic freedom to be statistically significant. The expected positive effect of academic freedom on liberal democracy is observed in models 1 to 2. Both the *baseline* model (Model 1), where we only have the main predictor; and the *main* model (Model 2), where we controlled for pertinent factors such as property rights, women's empowerment, political corruption, and GDP per capita, showed *positive* coefficient estimates (at  $p > .001$  and  $p > .05$  levels, respectively). The results show that the parameter estimates<sup>6</sup> Model 2 is .11, which suggests

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<sup>6</sup> In interpreting multiple linear regression models, the coefficient of interest is the parameter estimate, which is a measure of the effect of how the response variable will change **on average** with the increase of a variable by 1 unit, keeping all the other variables constant. It relies on the least squares estimator (see Wooldridge, 2020).

that a one-unit increase in the level of academic freedom is associated with an 11% increase in the level of liberal democracy in the country. This finding provides empirical evidence to the assertion that the existence of academic freedom will "...allow us to measure whether democratic ideals and adherence to principles of individual liberty and free expression really exist within a society" (Cole, 2017, p. 862).

**Table 2**

*Multiple Linear Regression Models of Academic Freedom and Liberal Democracy*

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>	<b>Model 5</b>
	<i>Liberal Democracy Index</i>	<i>Liberal Democracy Index</i>	<i>Electoral Democracy Index</i>	<i>Participatory Democracy Index</i>	<i>Deliberative Democracy Index</i>
Academic Freedom Index	.561*** (.0174)	.111* (.0481)	.322*** (.0674)	.105* (.0414)	.180** (.0646)
Property rights		-.259*** (.0656)	-.209* (.0883)	-.149** (.0489)	-.281*** (.0547)
Women's empowerment		.809*** (.0899)	.726*** (.111)	.603*** (.0708)	.833*** (.0964)
Political corruption		-.422*** (.0910)	-.114 (.127)	-.111 (.0738)	-.282* (.110)
GDP per capita		-.0154*** (.00434)	-.00872* (.00383)	-.00747** (.00257)	-.00862 (.00485)
Constant	-.0557*** (.00762)	.231*** (.0552)	-.0202 (.0800)	.0250 (.0466)	.115 (.0720)
N	123	117	117	117	117
R <sup>2</sup>	.907	.956	.957	.966	.960
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.906	.954	.956	.965	.959
F Statistic	1176.2	486.5	499.3	631.8	538.7

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The results of the confounders in Model 2 are also worth noting. First, citizens lack genuine enjoyment of property rights, high political corruption and low GDP per capita (all at  $p > .001$  levels, as shown in Model 2) are all *negatively* associated with the state of the country's liberal democracy. Second, political empowerment of women is *positively* associated with liberal democracy. The findings suggest that to deepen liberal democracy in the Philippine context, greater efforts should be made to boost women's empowerment and *reduce* political corruption. Lastly, the,  $R^2$  coefficient, which is a measure of model fitness and strength, has increased from .91 in Model 1, explaining 91% of the total variance, to .96 in Model 2, which explains about 96% of the total variance.

For robustness checks, we specify alternative outcomes since *liberal* democracy as a measure of democracy may be viewed as endogenous with *academic freedom*. Endogeneity problems occur when the independent variable may be correlated with the error term, which may occur due to measurement problems, omitted variable bias, or even reverse causality that violates the assumption of the least square estimator (Wooldridge, 2020). There are multiple means to deal with this matter, such as instrumental variables and two-stage least squares (TSLS); however, here we deal with the issue of potential endogeneity by adding control variables (which we did) to somehow alleviate the concern. Moreover, although some studies argue that academic freedom is an indicator of liberal democracy (Cole, 2017); here in this study, the operationalization of the former is not part of the measure of the latter (see Coppedge et al., 2023). In addition, we specify different measures<sup>7</sup> of our dependent variable to

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<sup>7</sup> Here we utilize the electoral democracy index (which emphasizes the conduct of elections, which renders rulers responsive to citizens), the participatory democracy index (which emphasizes active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral) and the deliberative democracy index (which focuses on the process by which decisions are reached in a polity) (see Coppedge et al., 2023).



see whether the effect of the independent variables will hold and thus increase confidence in the validity of the results. Although the AFI and the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) both share of one of the major components, i.e. Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression<sup>8</sup>, issue of endogeneity should be relaxed considering that this is *not* the main model (though we acknowledge its overlap).<sup>9</sup> In other words, even if we drop Model 3 altogether, the empirical findings still hold because this alternative specification is merely supplemental.

Models 3 to 5 show how the main independent variable, *academic freedom index*, is positively associated with electoral democracy index (at  $p > .001$  level), participatory democracy index (at a  $p > .05$  level), and deliberative democracy index (at  $p > .01$  level). The results hold even if we control for all the potential confounders, which suggests that the positive effect is statistically sound across different model specifications. Furthermore, by using alternative operationalization of democracy, we are able to capture different dimensions of our dependent variable and still demonstrate robust empirical results. After all, democracy remains one of the most contested constructs in the social science discipline (Collier et al., 2006; Dryzek, 2016).

Overall, there is ample empirical evidence to support the main hypothesis of the study. Here, we demonstrate that by encouraging scholars, students, and other stakeholders in the university to freely discuss ideas in a spirit of academic exchange and pursuit of knowledge, everyone is better off. In the words of Kratou and Laakso (2022, p. 820), "...the emergence and ability of intellectuals to criticize and advise governments, political parties, and the

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<sup>8</sup> We thank Reviewer 2 for pointing this out. Although the said Reviewer argued that the said subcomponent is shared by the Liberal Democracy Index and AFI, this is not the case. This overlap only exists with EDI and AFI.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this should not be a major concern since V-Dem transforms the original interval data into a continuous scale using the Bayesian Item-Response Theory estimation strategy, which normalizes the scores.

general public alike *strengthen the democratic competence of society*” [emphasis added].

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this paper, we argue that academic freedom is not only an indispensable mechanism for producing knowledge but is also vital in maintaining a strong democracy. Repression of academic freedom damages quality higher education and operates against democratic principles. It is therefore *sine qua non* to higher learning and to a strong democracy. Literature about academic freedom is rich and robust—clear evidence of how, from ages ago until now, academic freedom has continued to struggle worldwide. If there is a need to write more to raise awareness and ensure academic freedom is safeguarded in higher education institutions, scholars should be relentless in inscribing them.

Methodologically, we leverage the newly released dataset assessing the state of academic freedom globally, and empirically demonstrate how higher levels of academic freedom are associated with greater increases in democratic development using the Philippines as a national case study. Multiple regression analysis shows that a one-unit increase in the level of academic freedom index is associated with an 11% increase in the liberal democracy index score, which suggests a positive linear relationship. The results hold true even after controlling for potential confounders. This study rearticulates previous literature that discusses why effective higher learning institutions *cannot* thrive with ailing academic freedom by taking the case of the Philippines as a national case study, where there are episodes of academic incursions and threats from the authoritarian leadership of its government.

Given the inferential leverage of this study, the following recommendations and implications can be

made. First, the findings add further impetus and renewed fervor for teachers and administrators, both in the public and private domains, to continue becoming *harbingers* of positive change—as agents of democratization. It underlines the significance and critical role that progressive-minded teachers have played in the whole enterprise of democratic (de)consolidation in our country.

Second, the Philippine government should ensure the continuing preservation of academic freedom not only at the University of the Philippines but at all higher educational institutions nationwide. As shown here, fostering academic freedom enhances liberal democracy in the country. That should be one of the top priorities of political incumbents. Lastly, our study speaks well to hard-working students or ordinary citizens whose overriding practical consideration for material relief and comfort *may* blind them from cultivating their right to articulate and speak their mind. We hope students, as the true holders of such ‘academic’ rights, will exercise and apply these hard-fought ideals and principles towards better understanding the persisting puzzle that is Philippine society.

However, due to the nature of the data, the paper cannot fully answer questions of cause-and-effect since it requires a randomized control trial (RCT) or employs causal inference tools. For future research, it would be interesting to conduct a full experimental research design, especially at the classroom-level or student-level to tease out the causal effect of, say, more academic freedom towards liberal democracy (that is, subject to a clear and standardized measure and operationalization).



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