



Free Reign: The Rhetorical Capture of Pro-Freedom Values by Authoritarian Populists in the West

by

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Abstract

Do pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values? Conventional wisdom in the comparative politics literature would suggest so. This research complicates those assertions. Using survey and social media data, I find that pro-freedom values are not only integral to the rhetorical strategies of authoritarian populist parties and politicians in the West, but that constituents who support those parties express stronger pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. These findings would suggest that authoritarian populists are decidedly more pro-freedom than previously theorized; casting significant doubt upon the claim that pro-freedom values and pro-democratic values are inherently linked. It concludes by considering the implications of these findings on the rise of authoritarian populism, and the study of freedom in comparative politics.

Disclaimer: This work is substantially my own, and where any part of this work is not my own, I have indicated this by acknowledging the source of that part or those parts of the work. Replication materials are available at <https://github.com/j-nikolovski/MA-Thesis>.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2004, Geert Wilders tendered his resignation to the *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy*. A ferocious critic of Islam, Wilders had broken ranks with the party over its support for Turkey's accession to the European Union (Vossen 2011; Moffitt 2017). Banished to the crossbench, his political star only grew, and just two years later he formed a party of his own. He named it the *Party for Freedom*. Had freedom and democracy begun to chart a divergent course? To most scholars of political science, that suggestion would border on the absurd. In the literature, these two concepts are intrinsically linked. This research strives to test that assertion by asking whether pro-freedom values do indeed beget pro-democratic values?

1.1: Outline

It will endeavor to do so in six main parts: Chapter 2 will survey the literature on the ubiquitous rise of pro-freedom values, paying particular attention to the democratizing force they are promised to possess. Yet while these pro-freedom values soar to new heights in the West, so too do the autocratizing forces of authoritarian populism – a trend that is explicated in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 asks how we might reconcile these seemingly oxymoronic trends? If freedom-lovers are indeed innately democratic, we arrive at two primary hypotheses: firstly, that authoritarian populist political actors scarcely deploy the language of freedom (the supply-side hypothesis); and secondly, that authoritarian populist voters are less pro-freedom than those who support more pro-democratic parties (the demand-side hypothesis). Chapters 5 and 6 consider each of these hypotheses in turn. Chapter 5 surveys the rhetorical landscape of authoritarian populist parties in the West, concluding that the value of freedom is foundational to their rhetorical strategies. While Chapter 6 surveys the landscape of authoritarian populist voters in the West, marshaling an array

of survey and social media data that finds authoritarian populist voters to be decisively *more* pro-freedom than their democratic counterparts. In combination, this evidence is grounds to reject these two hypotheses, casting significant doubt on whether pro-freedom values and pro-democratic values are intrinsically linked. Chapter 7 concludes by taking stock of this finding, thereby considering its implications for the study of authoritarian populism, and the study of freedom.

1.2: Definitions, Case Selection, and Scope

Before turning to this analysis, it is worth briefly outlining some of the overriding principles that will guide this research. Firstly, I am choosing to define pro-freedom and pro-democratic values in the most narrow and functional sense possible. Individuals are taken to be pro-freedom if they say they are pro-freedom, however it might be internally defined. I save normativity and semantics to philosophers and theorists. Similarly, individuals are taken to be pro-democratic if they vote for, or otherwise support, a party who upholds the tenets of liberal democracy – as measured in the Global Party Survey (Norris 2020a).

Secondly, contrary to the wording of my research question, I will pay little mind to the issue of causality. Despite the best efforts of some researchers in the field, definitively proving that pro-freedom values *cause* people to become more pro-democratic is an unenviable task, and one that is well beyond the scope of this research. I treat the question, *do pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values*, as a reflection of the almost unanimous assumption that these two values are intrinsically bound. This research endeavors to put that assumption under the microscope, not prove or disprove it outright.

Lastly, the method by which cases have been selected for study in the ensuing analysis is as follows. The value of freedom could be richly studied in every corner of the globe, but this research restricts its analysis to the ‘West’. I borrow this term from the literature (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Welzel 2013), where it is loosely defined as encompassing Western Europe, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Not only is the West subject to a particularly novel rise in authoritarian populism (Norris 2016), but it is also the “culture zone” in which the proliferation of emancipative values “has made its longest strides” (Welzel 2021a, p.132).

Within the West itself, there is no foolproof way of classifying a party or politician as being either authoritarian or populist, let alone both, and doing so is certainly beyond the scope of this study. In turn, the classification of each party as authoritarian populist is sourced from the Global Party Survey (Norris 2020a). A survey of 1,861 experts across 163 countries, the Global Party Survey asks respondents to score political parties by their disrespect for liberal democratic principles, norms and practices, and by their use of populist rhetoric (Norris 2020b). Each is measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Any party described by this research as authoritarian populist received a score of 6 or greater in each measure.

2. The Democratizing Rise of Pro-Freedom Values

The first pillar of the problématique motivating this research is the global rise of pro-freedom values, and the democratizing force that they are purported by the literature to possess. The bedrock of this study is Christian Welzel’s (2013) book *Freedom Rising*, which attempts to account

for the “rapid expansion of universal freedoms and democracy” that had occurred throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Building upon Ronald Inglehart’s (1977) famed work on postmaterialism and their joint work on self-expression values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), Welzel finds that one of the key causal factors accounting for this trend is a rise in what he terms ‘emancipative values’ – a belief in the “freedom of choice and the equality of opportunity” (Welzel 2013, p.xxv). Using data from the World Values Survey, Welzel (2013, p.59) derives an index of emancipative values designed to measure “how strongly people claim authority over their lives for themselves”. To do so, Welzel combines twelve variables into four factors: autonomy, equality, choice, and voice. Measured across time and place, Welzel charts an almost ubiquitous, six-decade rise in this measure – a trend predominantly led by the West. This trend is depicted by ‘culture zone’ in Figure 2.1. To Welzel, this yearning for freedom drove a widespread thirst for political empowerment that only democracy could quench.

Welzel is not alone in linking the concepts of freedom and democracy. Russell Dalton’s (2014) book *Citizen Politics* similarly argues that individuals have become “more interested in protecting individual freedoms”, and his work with To-ch’ol Sin and Willy Jou echoes the seemingly inexorable link between freedom and democracy (Dalton, Sin and Jou 2007). They find that survey respondents worldwide primarily define democracy by the presence of freedom and liberty – the provision of which they consider to be the “essential goal” of democracy (Dalton, Sin and Jou 2007, p.144). On the individual level, they conclude that “people want freedom, liberty and control over their lives – and that they see democracy as the means of achieving these goals” (Dalton, Sin and Jou 2007, p.153).

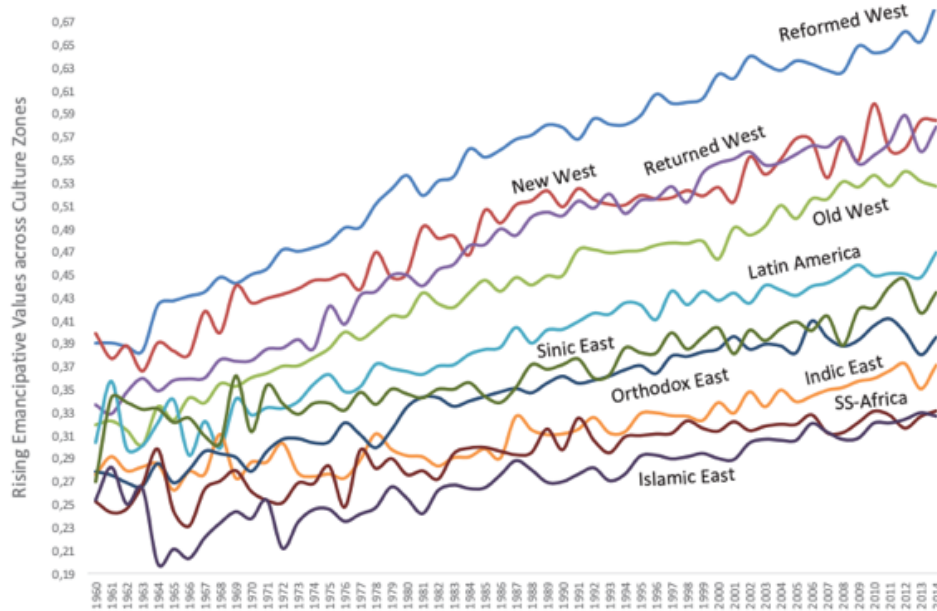


Figure 2.1: “Trajectories and cycles in the global rise of emancipative values by culture zone” (Welzel 2021b, p.1001)

At this juncture, you might ask whether Welzel’s stance has softened in the decade since? Writing in 2013, *Freedom Rising* predates the events of Trump and Brexit (among others) that burst the literature on democratic erosion in the West into life. On the contrary, Welzel’s belief in the democratizing force of emancipative values remains resolute. Welzel (2021a, p.132) acknowledges the “momentary challenges” with which democracy is presently faced, but argues that the “tectonic cultural transformation” that his emancipative values index represents still bends the arc of politics toward democracy. In his own words, he concludes that the “almost ubiquitous ascension of emancipative values will lend more, not less, legitimacy to democracy in the future” (Welzel 2021b, p.992).

In fact, the union of these two terms is subject to an almost-unanimous consensus in the comparative politics literature. Freedom House (2022), for example, publishes a widely cited

measure of freedom that is a direct function of the health of a nation's democracy. Adam Przeworski (2016, p.8) too, while casting philosophical doubt upon the true extent of freedom in modern democracies, acknowledges "that democracy is the only system that allows people to live in freedom". Welzel (2021b, p.1012) concurs: "in its essence, democracy is about freedoms".

3. The Autocratizing Rise of Authoritarian Populism in the West

3.1: Democratic Erosion

The second pillar of the problématique sits within a flourishing literature striving to account for a democratic backsliding that is occurring across the West. To most clearly portray that trend, consider Figure 3.1 from the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg (Boese et al. 2022). Through the late twentieth century, a vast number of countries were moving toward a more democratic form of governance – a historic "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1991). Yet, from the turn of the 21st century, that trend began to dramatically reverse. Since then, an increasing number of countries, encompassing an increasing share of the world's population, have seen the strength of their democracies erode.

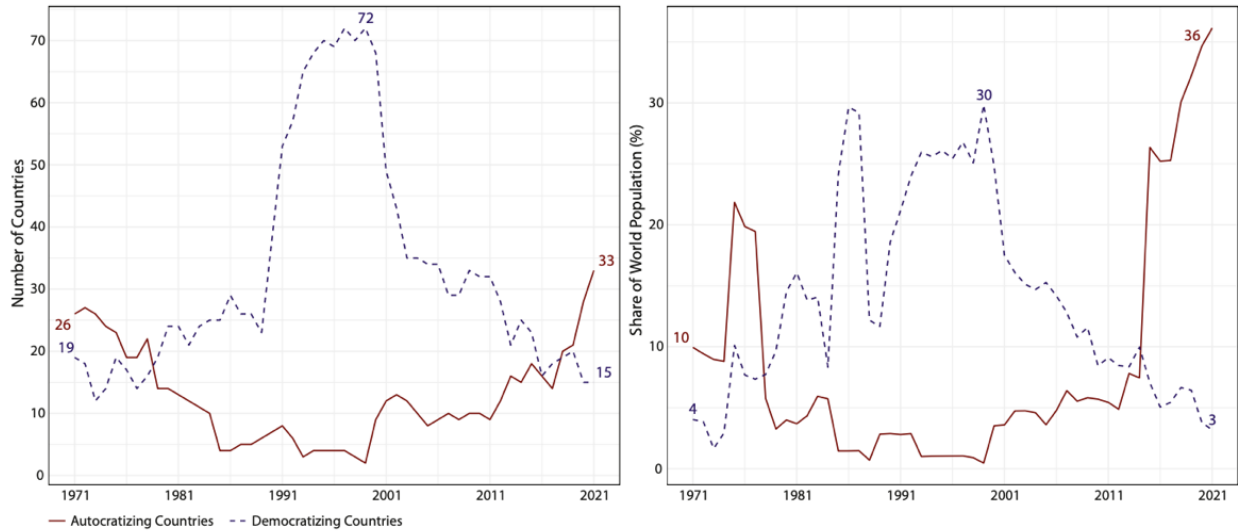


Figure 3.1: Patterns of autocratization and democratization (Boese et al. 2022)

The process of democratic erosion is not novel to history, but its modern form has taken on a different shape. Less frequently are democracies subverted by bloodshed and brazen fraud, but by a slower and more ambiguous form of “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016). To Nancy Bermeo (2016), coups d’état are now frequently veiled with the empty promise of democratic restoration; outright election fraud is replaced by the subtle and strategic manipulation of elections; and executive power is vexingly aggrandized to lock out opposition and subvert the rule of law. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) focus on the latter two, noting that the forces of democratic erosion increasingly come from within the electoral process itself. They identify an array of elected officials who are exhibiting what they call “authoritarian behaviors” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p.26). Leaders who exhibit these tendencies typically reject the “democratic rules of the game”, undermine the political legitimacy of their rivals, tolerate (or even encourage) violence, and willingly restrict the freedoms of those who oppose them (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p.26-7).

3.2: The Rise of Authoritarian Populism

While Levitsky and Ziblatt's book may have primarily been motivated by the election of Donald Trump, his story does not stand alone. He is one of numerous elected parties and leaders in the West to exhibit such authoritarian behaviors, and one of many who came to power on the back of a distinctly populist message (Oliver and Rahn 2016). According to Pippa Norris (2017, p.15), this blend of authoritarianism and populism has been a key driver of democratic backsliding in the West, with populist rhetoric serving to “undercut the legitimacy of the checks and balances of liberal democracy”. Thereby paving the way for those with authoritarian tendencies to slowly work on breaking down these democratic norms. Norris (2016; 2019) not only finds that an increasing number of parties and leaders are exhibiting these behaviors in the West, but that their political salience is growing too (Lewis et al. 2018).

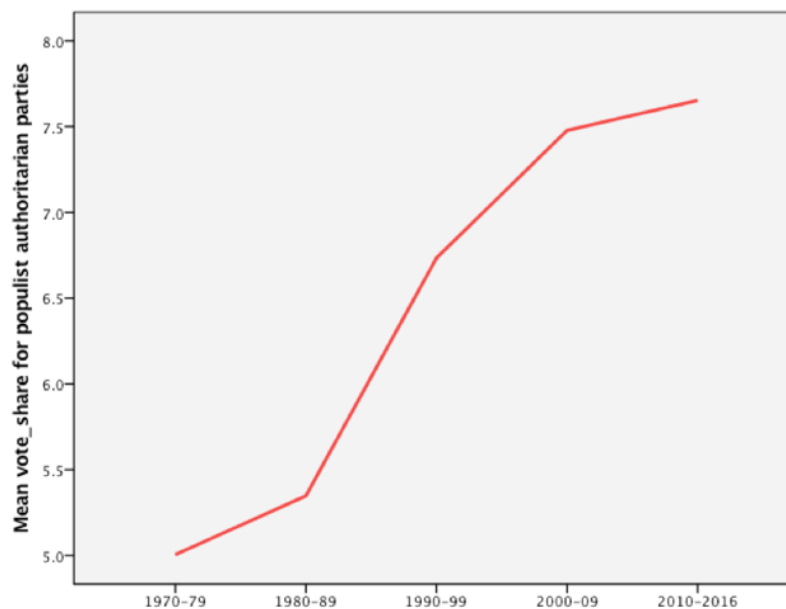


Figure 3.2: Rise in the mean vote share of authoritarian populist parties in the West (Norris 2016)

4. Reconciling These Trends

How can we reconcile these two seemingly oxymoronic trends? If emancipative values, headlined by a yearning for freedom, are a growing and democratizing force, then we should expect the processes of democratization to be ongoing (Welzel 2021a). Yet, as portrayed above, in the Western world almost the opposite is true. How can the vote share for authoritarian populist parties rise in tandem with these emancipative values?

Perhaps the answer is simple? While pro-freedom values are exceedingly common, they are not unanimously so. Nor is any political party elected with unanimity. More directly, authoritarian populists – despite their growing prominence – still represent a minority of total vote shares throughout the West (Norris 2016). Perhaps that same minority is yet to be subsumed by the allure of emancipation. In other words, maybe those who vote for authoritarian populist parties are simply not pro-freedom at all?

The existing literature works unanimously in advance of this simple hypothesis. Just as freedom and democracy are considered to be inherently linked, freedom and authoritarianism are considered to be inherently juxtaposed. Not just philosophically, but individually too. To Welzel (2021a, p.132) himself, democratic values prioritize freedom and choice, while authoritarian values “stress deference and conformity”. Norris and Inglehart (2019, p.8) concur, arguing that authoritarian populists favor order and security, while democrats strive to protect civil liberties. Karen Stenner (2005) argues that this incompatibility between freedom and authoritarianism is due to freedom and autonomy producing difference, which authoritarian personalities oppose.

Accordingly, Stenner (2005, p.142) concludes that what authoritarians stand for “can never include individual freedom”. Authoritarianism is not alone in its purported incompatibility with freedom either. According to Benjamin Moffitt (2017, p.112), populism too is considered to be an “illiberal phenomenon”. If it is required in any clearer terms, Bob Altmeyer’s (1988) book on right-wing authoritarianism is simply titled *Enemies of Freedom*.

4.1: Hypothesis Formation

On the basis of this evidence, a clear delineation is to be made. Those who are pro-freedom ought to be more inclined to vote democratically, while those who are anti-freedom ought to be more inclined to vote in support of authoritarian populists. Thus, when asking whether pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values, we arrive at one clear hypothesis: pro-freedom values *do* beget pro-democratic values. It is from this foundation that I embark on this research.

H: Pro-freedom values *do* beget pro-democratic values.

Operationally though, the pro-freedom (or anti-freedom) position of authoritarian populists can conceivably be registered from two different angles: the supply-side, and the demand-side. Larry Bartels (2021, p.222) argues that the increase in support for populist parties in Europe over the past forty years is driven by “political entrepreneurs (who) have become increasingly energetic and skilled at translating existing populist sentiment into votes”. In other words, that “the populist ‘explosion’ is about supply, not demand” (Bartels 2021, p.222). Accordingly, any inquest into the pro-freedom values of authoritarian populists necessitates the examination of the rhetorical strategies that these political actors employ. If my chief hypothesis is to hold true, I would expect

authoritarian populist politicians and parties to scarcely deploy the language of freedom. Thus, the hypothesis motivating the supply-side of this research is as follows:

H_s: Authoritarian populist political actors scarcely deploy the language of freedom.

While Bartels (2021) supposes that the rhetorical strategies of authoritarian populist leaders are proving increasingly successful, it is insufficient to judge the pro-freedom values of authoritarian populists on the above grounds alone. Supposing that our supply-side hypothesis will hold true, there is always the possibility that authoritarian populist voters are more pro-freedom than the parties and politicians they support. As such, this research question must be interrogated from the demand side too. Again, holding the chief hypothesis true, and considering the aforementioned incongruence between authoritarian populism and freedom, I would expect authoritarian populist voters to exhibit weaker pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. Accordingly, the demand-side hypothesis of this research can be registered as:

H_d: Authoritarian populist voters exhibit weaker pro-freedom values than democrats.

It is these two hypotheses that guide the structure and design of this research. The following two chapters will strive to test each in turn. In Chapter 5, I will conduct a broad qualitative assessment of the rhetorical strategies employed by an array of authoritarian populist parties throughout the West; considering the ways in which they highlight freedom in both name and message. In Chapter 6, I will turn to the demand-side hypothesis, where I will appraise a slew of survey and social media data that tests the pro-freedom values of authoritarian populist voters themselves.

5. Supply-Side Results

Assessing any one political party's rhetorical strategy is no mean feat. Simultaneously assessing that of many borders on the impossible. Accordingly, this supply-side hypothesis has been somewhat strategically set. Supposing that authoritarian populists are innately anti-freedom, and that pro-freedom rhetoric should thus be scarcely detected in their work, I am consciously establishing a low burden of proof. Freedom is a ubiquitous concept and a common phrase; any close analysis is likely to detect the presence of pro-freedom sentiment at some point in transcripts and speech. As such, the qualitative analysis in this chapter is consciously cursory and broad. If I am unable to detect any pro-freedom sentiment in the names and primary messages of these authoritarian populist parties, I would consider this sufficient support for my supply-side hypothesis.

5.1: Freedom in Name

What's in a name? For political parties, it is a marker of their identity. Particularly for the many parties who strive to set themselves apart in the multiparty democracies of Europe. Any cursory search for the presence of authoritarian populist pro-freedom sentiment ought to start there. Consider the names of the European parties classified as authoritarian populist by the Global Party Survey (Norris 2020a). They are listed in Table 5.1.

List of Authoritarian Populist Parties in Europe

- | | |
|--|---|
| - Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) | - Brothers of Italy (FdI) |
| - Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HdSSB) | - Union of the Centre (UdC) |
| - Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) | - Five Star Movement (M5S) |
| - Dawn - National Coalition (Dawn) | - Party for Freedom (PVV) |
| - ANO 2011 (ANO) | - Law and Justice (PiS) |
| - Conservative People's Party (EKRE) | - People's Party - Our Slovakia (LsNS) |
| - The Finns Party (PS) | - Slovak National Party (SNS) |
| - National Front/National Rally (FN) | - We Are Family (SME) |
| - Alternative for Germany (AfD) | - Slovenian National Party (SNP) |
| - Golden Dawn (XA) | - Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) |
| - Fidesz | - Sweden Democrats (SD) |
| - Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) | - UK Independence Party (UKIP) |
| - Forza Italia (FI) | - Conservative and Unionist Party (CON) |
| - Lega Nord (Lega) | - British National Party (BNP) |

Table 5.1: List of Authoritarian Populist Parties in Europe as defined by the Global Party Survey (Norris 2020a)

This simple task alone has a damning effect on the supply-side hypothesis: firstly, three parties – the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD), and the Party for Freedom (PVV) – are all explicitly named for freedom itself; secondly, Forza Italia and the Brothers of Italy previously served in coalition together as *Il Popolo della Libertà* – The People of Freedom (Fella and Ruzza 2013); and lastly, various combinations of the above-listed parties have caucused together in the European Parliament as the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), and the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

For these parties, the defense of ‘freedom’ – however they might choose to define it – is the bedrock of their identity, and they have ridden that identity to considerable success. The FPÖ and the PVV in particular, are two of the West’s most electorally successful authoritarian populist parties (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Bartels 2021). A closer examination of each proves that freedom serves not just as a mindless naming convention, but as a key pillar of their rhetorical strategies writ large.

Founded in 1956, the FPÖ has a long history in Austrian politics. From fringe party to coalition government, their electoral success has fluctuated throughout their history (Meret 2010). As too has their rhetorical approach (Turner-Graham 2008). For the purposes of this research, the most significant such shift came in the wake of party chairman Jörg Haider’s departure in 2005. Heinz-Christian Strache assumed leadership of the party and began to move it in an even more “radical” rightward direction (Meret 2010, p.188). The foundation of Strache’s platform was the *Handbuch Freiheitlicher Politik* – the “Handbook of Freedomite Politics” (Krzyżanowski 2013). Despite consistently undermining the tenets of liberal democracy, Strache’s “Austria First” platform called for “freedom, security, peace and well-being for Austria”, and a commitment to the “freedom and responsibility of the individual” (FPÖ 2011, author’s translation). In Strache’s own words, his stewardship of the party was finally leading the FPÖ in a “truly freedomite” direction (Krzyżanowski 2013, p.146).

Like Strache, Geert Wilders – the founder and leader of the Dutch PVV – consistently invokes the value of freedom in his rhetoric. For Wilders though, his status as a pro-freedom fighter may be even more pronounced. As Matthew Levinger (2017, p.6) describes, “for Wilders, freedom is a

core value” – an identity that has earned him a global reputation among likeminded authoritarian populists as a “heroic defender of freedom” (Vossen 2011, p.187). Benjamin Moffitt (2017, p.112) gives Wilders’ brand of populism the oxymoronic moniker ‘liberal illiberalism’. To Moffitt (2017), Wilders’ Manichean worldview is unique in its attempted inclusion of typical authoritarian populist out-groups – such as homosexuals and women – whose ‘freedom’ he attempts to pit against the tenets of Islam. For Wilders, even this anti-Islam rhetoric is couched in the language of freedom. Wilders has consistently argued that “Islam and freedom are not compatible” (Hjelmgaard 2017), and his appeal to Islamic voters themselves calls for Dutch Muslims to “opt for freedom” (Brubaker 2017, p.1197).

Moving outside of Europe, this pro-freedom naming convention extends to the sub-party level too. Skocpol and Williamson’s (2016) work on the American Tea Party movement credits the movement’s early success – at least in part – to the work of libertarian advocacy group FreedomWorks. FreedomWorks’ message of economic conservatism called for “lower taxes, less government, more freedom” (Skocpol and Williamson 2016, p.9). That success saw the Tea Party movement convert its grassroots efforts into votes, and its members caucus together in the US House of Representatives as the House Freedom Caucus. Many of its members went on to occupy highly influential posts in the Trump Administration, including Mark Meadows and Mick Mulvaney, who each served as Trump’s Chief of Staff. Now seen as the face of authoritarian populism in the West, Trump’s current for-profit speaking circuit is named the *American Freedom Tour* (Fowler, Dawsey and Arnsdorf 2022).

5.2: Freedom in Message

It should come as no surprise that freedom features so heavily in the rhetoric of an American political party. After all, ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ form part of the nation’s founding creed. For generations, one might argue that the rhetorical fight for freedom belonged to the abolition of slavery, and the fight for civil rights (Rieder 2014). Yet today, it is the Republican Party (GOP) that seemingly takes ownership of the phrase. Lindsey Cormack’s (2022) database, *DCinbox*, stores every official e-newsletter distributed by each member of Congress since 2009. Performing a simple string-search for the terms ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ returns the results found in Table 5.2. These results show that, over the past 12.5 years, Republicans have been 4.4 times more likely to invoke freedom and/or liberty in their messaging. This discrepancy is further depicted in Figure 5.1.

	Republican Party	Democratic Party
‘Freedom’	16,882	3,981
‘Liberty’	7,099	1,460
Total	23,981	5,441

Table 5.2: Number of Congressional e-newsletters containing the terms ‘freedom’ and/or ‘liberty’ by party (Cormack 2022)

Members of the GOP are not only featuring freedom in their Congressional communications, but in their campaign messaging too. One need look no further than the website of the Republican National Committee (2022a) – the GOP’s fundraising arm – whose homepage leads with the

phrase “Freedom Matters”. Delving deeper, the preamble to the party’s current platform simply states that “ours is the party of liberty” (RNC 2022b).

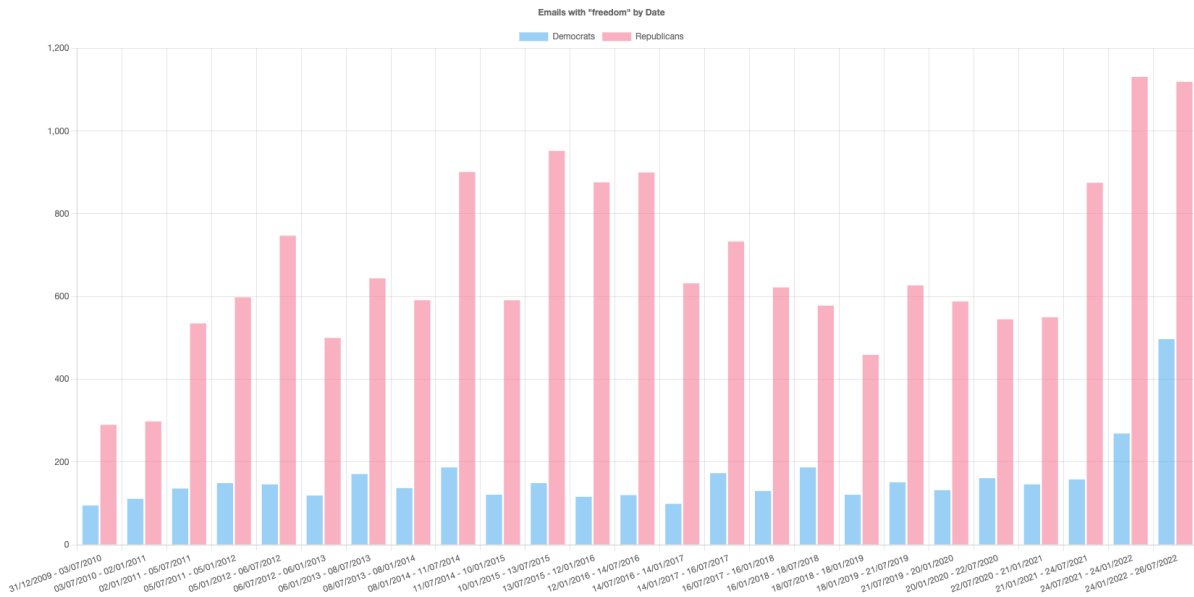


Figure 5.1: Number of Congressional e-newsletters containing the term ‘freedom’ by party (Cormack 2022)

The same is true across the English-speaking West. Amidst the federal election cycle of 2022, the United Australia Party (UAP) spent over AU\$100 million adorning Australia’s televisions and highways with the promise of “freedom forever” (Elias 2022; Rimmer 2022). Elsewhere, upon standing down from his leadership of UKIP, Nigel Farage – whose self-stated political mission has been to restore England’s position as “the land of liberty” (The Spectator 2013) – co-founded Reform UK (née the Brexit Party) (BBC 2019). Driven by an opposition to COVID-induced vaccine mandates and lockdowns, the homepage of Reform UK’s (2022a) website simply reads “Our Freedom, Our Future”. Their policy platform vows to “return all the precious freedoms and liberties that we enjoyed before Covid” (Reform UK 2022b, p.4).

Lastly, we turn to France's *Rassemblement National* (RN), formerly known as the National Front (FN). Like UKIP, the Brexit Party, and Reform UK, "Marine Le Pen too has emphasized the connection between nationalism and universal freedom" (Levinger 2017, p.6). Likewise, akin to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the United States, the birth of the modern French nation is defined by '*liberté, égalité and fraternité*'. As Hugh McDonnell (2015) argues, "conventional wisdom in France had long posited an unbridgeable divide" between FN's "populism, racism, and dubious commitment to democracy", and the three main tenets of the French Republic. Wary of this perception, the party's leader, Marine Le Pen, attempted to "assert ownership" of liberty, equality and fraternity (McDonnell 2015). Ahead of the 2017 presidential election, the very first of Le Pen's 144 Presidential Commitments was to "regain French freedom" (Le Pen 2017; Bastow 2018).

5.3: Summary

It was the goal of this chapter to test the hypothesis that authoritarian populist political actors were scarcely deploying the language of freedom. In the name of parsimony and practicality, this chapter has only done so to a fairly shallow extent. Nevertheless, the broad, cursory evidence that it marshals works in clear and direct opposition to that hypothesis. Authoritarian populist parties across the West are consistently centering freedom at the heart of their rhetorical strategies – both in name, and in message. Yet their continual rejection of democratic norms and principles persists. A clear marker that pro-freedom values do not innately beget pro-democratic values.

6. Demand-Side Results

Of course this only tells half of the tale. Authoritarian populist political actors appear to be staunchly pro-freedom – do their constituents concur? That question is the subject of this chapter. As stated in the introduction to Chapter 5, freedom is a ubiquitous concept and a common phrase. It is difficult to imagine any individual respondent speaking ill of freedom or consciously choosing to reject it. Consequently, the demand-side hypothesis shares a similarly low burden of proof. Rather than seeking to prove that authoritarian populists are anti-freedom, this chapter hypothesizes that they simply exhibit *weaker* pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. To interrogate this hypothesis, this chapter takes a two-step approach. Firstly, I will consider survey data from the World Values Survey – the very source from which Welzel’s (2013) emancipative values index is formed. After assessing these stated pro-freedom preferences, I will strive to test their revealed preferences using engagement data from Twitter.

6.1: Stated Pro-Freedom Preferences

Pursuant to the presumed ubiquity of pro-freedom sentiment, it proved impossible to find survey data that explicitly asks respondents to appraise the standalone value of freedom. Wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS), however, does ask respondents to select whether freedom is more important than equality, and whether freedom is more important than security (Haerpfer et al. 2022). That is where this analysis will begin.

The seventh wave of the WVS polls 87,822 respondents across 59 countries. Only three of those countries represent Western democracies with available political party preference data – Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States of America. Political party data for Australia, New Zealand, and Canada’s nascent authoritarian populist parties is unavailable, and the remaining nations of Western Europe are served by the European Values Study (EVS) which does not ask the two questions of interest (EVS/WVS 2021). Accordingly, I rely solely on the sample drawn from Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. Together, the sample comprises of 4,847 respondents, 1,021 (21.06%) of which signal their support for the predominant authoritarian populist party in their respective nations – Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), and the Republican Party of the United States (GOP). Those respondents are marked by a dummy variable denoting their authoritarian populist support. A value of 1 indicates that the respondent is an authoritarian populist voter, and a value of 0 indicates that they are more democratically inclined.

Norris and Inglehart (2019, p.15) find that authoritarian populist voters are typically older, less educated, poorer, more religious, and male. Accordingly, we can use these covariates to test the balance of our authoritarian populist dummy variable as follows in Table 6.1. Somewhat surprisingly, these two constituencies are fairly well balanced. While unlikely to affect the ensuing regression analyses, some moderate discrepancies exist in the age, sex, education, and religious profiles of the two groups which will be duly accounted for at each turn.

Authoritarian Populist	Age	Sex	Education	Income	Employment Status	Religion
0	49.34370	1.507318	4.807082	1.981404	2.701281	1.134969
1	48.40646	1.384917	4.543564	1.913131	2.643849	1.367691

Table 6.1: Covariate balance table

World Value Survey measures of sex, education, income, employment status and religion can be found in the World Values Survey Codebook (WVS 2022)

Beginning with the question of freedom versus equality, a dummy variable is constructed to represent whether respondents selected freedom as the more important value of the two. Those who did so are assigned a value of 1, those who preferred equality are assigned a value of 0. Returning to our demand-side hypothesis, we would expect authoritarian populist voters to be *less* pro-freedom than their more democratically minded compatriots. Using linear regression to take a simple difference-in-means tells a vastly different story. Table 6.2 compares four estimates for the difference-in-mean estimator. Model 1 uses a simple linear regression model to arrive at its point estimate; Model 2 weights for age, sex, education, and religion within country; Model 3 does the same while additionally providing all three countries (Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States) equal weight in the sample; and Model 4 includes the suite of aforementioned controls.

These models tell a clear and consistent story – authoritarian populist voters in the sample are significantly more likely to prioritize freedom over equality. An increase of 18.5 percentage points. In other words, 71.3% of respondents who vote democratically rank freedom above equality. That number increases to 89.8% among authoritarian populists. This result is robust across all four models, and all four point estimates for the effect are statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.01$ level. Using a binary dependent variable, we can also assess the difference in means probabilistically via

logistic regression. Statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.01$ level, logit models with and without controls return odds ratios of 3.52 and 3.95, underscoring the magnitude of the effect that being an authoritarian populist has on selecting freedom over equality.

<i>Dependent Variable: Freedom Over Equality</i>				
	Model 1 Simple Linear Regression	Model 2 Weighted by country	Model 3 Weighted across country	Model 4 Controlled
Constant	0.713*** (0.007)	0.725*** (0.008)	0.722*** (0.008)	0.401*** (0.044)
Authoritarian Populist	0.185*** (0.012)	0.169*** (0.016)	0.158*** (0.016)	0.201*** (0.013)
Age				0.003*** (0.000)
Sex				0.011 (0.013)
Education				0.006 (0.004)
Income				0.054*** (0.012)
Employment Status				-0.006* 0.003
Religion				-0.002 (0.003)

Table 6.2: OLS Regression Results: Freedom Over Equality

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Pearson's Chi-Squared Test: $X^2 = 144.3$ ***

While compelling, these results alone are insufficient to reject the hypothesis. Equality is hardly an authoritarian value (Altmeyer 1988; Welzel 2021a), and surveyed respondents were given no

choice but to select between the two. Perhaps freedom is simply *more* desirable to authoritarian populist voters than equality – not desirable in and of itself. Fortunately, the survey’s following question pits freedom against a typically authoritarian value – security. As Karen Stenner (2005) argues in *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, a hallmark of the authoritarian personality is the sacrifice of freedom for security. When faced with that very question in the WVS, our hypothesis would expect respondents to do just that.

<i>Dependent Variable: Freedom Over Security</i>				
	Model 1 Simple Linear Regression	Model 2 Weighted by country	Model 3 Weighted across country	Model 4 Controlled
Constant	0.556*** (0.008)	0.553*** (0.009)	0.537*** (0.009)	0.656*** (0.049)
Authoritarian Populist	0.108*** (0.017)	0.127*** (0.020)	0.121*** (0.020)	0.103*** (0.018)
Age				-0.001 (0.000)
Sex				-0.120*** (0.015)
Education				0.032*** (0.004)
Income				-0.026* (0.014)
Employment Status				0.004 0.004
Religion				-0.004 (0.004)

Table 6.3: OLS Regression Results: Freedom Over Security

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

Pearson’s Chi-Squared Test: $X^2 = 37.7^{***}$

On the contrary though, a majority of authoritarian populists in the sample prioritize freedom over security, and do so to a greater extent than democrats. Repeating the process from above, I find that authoritarian populist voters in the sample are more likely to prioritize freedom over security by 10.8 percentage points. In other words, 55.6% of respondents who vote democratically rank freedom above security. That number increases to 66.4% among authoritarian populists. Again, this result is robust across all four models, and all four point estimates for the effect are statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.01$ level. Using logistic regression models with and without controls returns odds ratios of 1.58 and 1.57 respectively, affirming the positive and statistically significant effect that being an authoritarian populist has on selecting freedom over security.

6.2: Revealed Pro-Freedom Preferences

By stated preference, the above evidence clearly speaks against the demand-side hypothesis. Is this outsized pro-freedom sentiment consistent in the behaviors of authoritarian populist supporters as well? Conducting such an inquest is an unenviable task. How can we empirically observe pro-freedom behavior? The answer offered by this research is found in the use of social media engagement data. Here I ask the following: does a politician invoking the value of freedom online drive more engagement? More specifically though, is this effect larger for more democratically-minded politicians than it is for authoritarian populists? The demand-side hypothesis would suggest so.

To test this theory, this section utilizes a dataset compiled by Laura Wrubel and Daniel Kerchner (2020). It contains 692,936 ‘Tweet IDs’ from the 102 senators that served in the 116th United

States Congress.¹ Tweet data was extracted from these IDs via Documenting the Now's (2020) Hydrator software. Each observation represents an individual tweet by one of the 102 senators from between 2008 and May 2020. For the purposes of this research, tweets from each senator's 'Press' and/or 'Office' accounts have been removed. These tweets typically generate little engagement, are explicitly representative of the senator's office and staff, and are typically reserved for fairly mundane official-business. All tweet data from 'retweeted' tweets have likewise been removed. Each of these steps were taken to ensure that the tweets in question are representations of the individual senators themselves. After cleaning, the dataset comprises of 561,763 unique observations.

Before I begin with this analysis, it is important to outline some of the key assumptions and limitations of this approach. Firstly, using data from the United States alone is an obvious limitation. As Eric Foner (2013, p.13) puts it, there is "no idea more fundamental to Americans' sense of self as individuals and as a nation than freedom". We might expect the engagement effects of invoking freedom to be larger across the board as a result. In turn, it is probable that the ensuing findings are limited in their external validity. Alas the quality, quantity and availability of data necessitates this trade-off. However, as explored in Chapter 5, many Western democracies – including the Netherlands and France – similarly identify freedom as part of their nations' founding creed. Secondly, I am broadly considering Twitter engagements as being *positive* responses to a tweet, and that those who engage with authoritarian populist politicians are themselves so inclined. It is a common adage amongst Twitter users that retweets should not be considered endorsements, and it is not uncommon for things to be retweeted in opposition or in

¹ The additional two Senators represent Kelly Loeffler, who replaced the retiring Johnny Isakson in Georgia, and Mark Kelly, who won a mid-term special election against Martha McSally in Arizona.

jest. For the purposes of this study though, I will assume these effects are broadly consistent across all tweets, irrespective of whether or not they invoke the value of freedom. Finally, I will broadly refer to those engaging with these tweets as individual constituents. Of course, this is not strictly true. As a global platform, many individuals engaging with tweets might live abroad. Similarly, some engagements might come from businesses or organizational accounts. Again, I assume that these effects are roughly consistent across all tweets and variables.

With the above considerations, I proceed to my analysis. Firstly, a string search is performed across all tweets to identify whether or not they invoke the terms ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty’. Observations that do are assigned a dummy variable value of 1, and those that do not are assigned a value of 0. This process identifies 6,215 tweets that invoke the notion of freedom, representing just over 1.1% of the sample. 3,982 of those tweets belonged to Republican legislators (64.07%), while 2,233 belonged to Democrats (35.93%) – lending further credence to my analysis of Congressional newsletters in Chapter 5. Similarly, a dummy variable is created to identify whether the senator is a member of the Republican Party (1) or not (0). Per the Global Party Survey, the GOP is classified as an authoritarian populist party (Norris 2020a). Based on the demand-side hypothesis, we therefore expect those tweets which invoke freedom to incur a smaller change in expected favorites and retweets among Republicans. These effects are measured by way of two simple linear models:

$$1. \text{ Retweets} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Freedom} + \beta_2 \text{Republican} + \beta_3 \text{Freedom} * \text{Republican} + \varepsilon$$

$$2. \text{ Favorites} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Freedom} + \beta_2 \text{Republican} + \beta_3 \text{Freedom} * \text{Republican} + \varepsilon$$

Interacting the *Freedom* and *Republican* dummy variables allows us to determine the unique effects of invoking freedom on favorites and retweets by party – and by extension, by authoritarian

populist sentiment. The results of these two models are presented numerically in Table 6.4 and graphically in Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

Invoked Freedom?	Party	Expected Retweets
No	D	481.49
Yes	D	432.16
No	R	110.07
Yes	R	298.20

Invoked Freedom?	Party	Expected Favorites
No	D	1,820.68
Yes	D	1,376.42
No	R	375.86
Yes	R	715.15

Table 6.4: Expected favorites and retweets by the invocation of freedom, and party

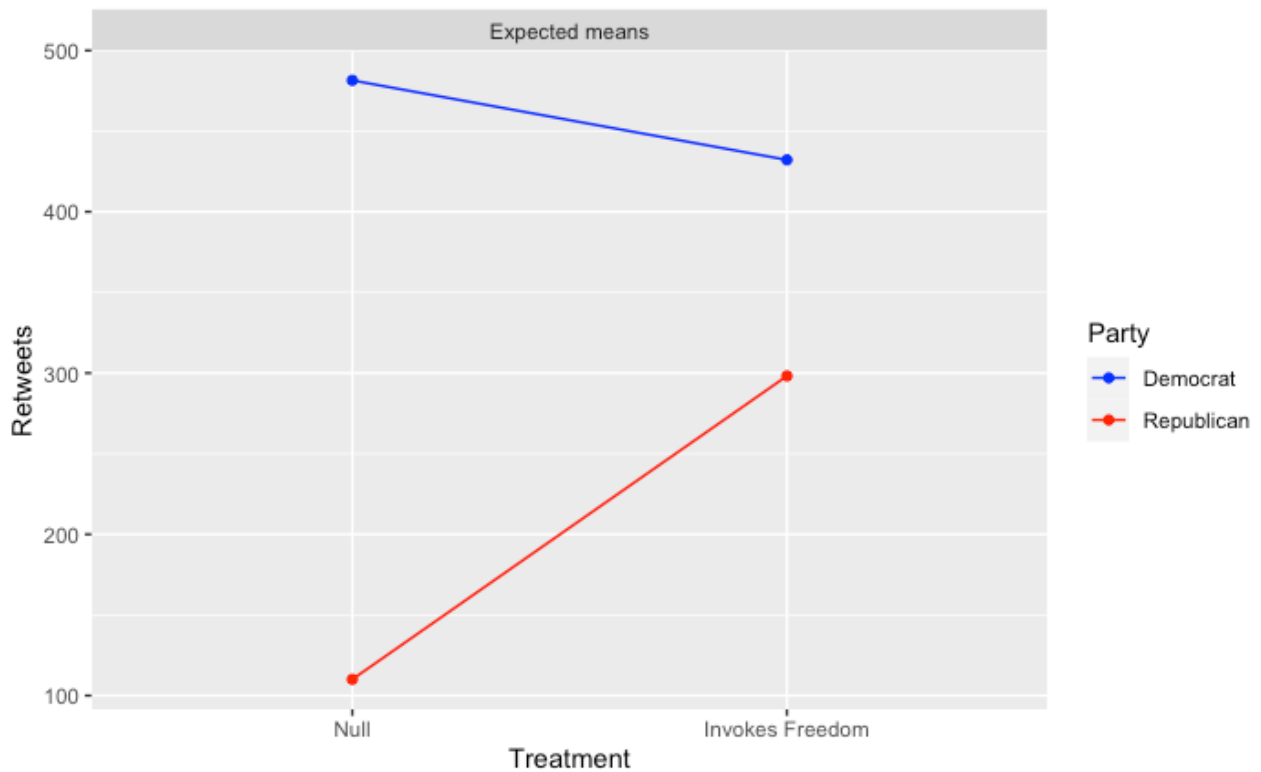


Figure 6.1: Expected retweets by the invocation of freedom, and party

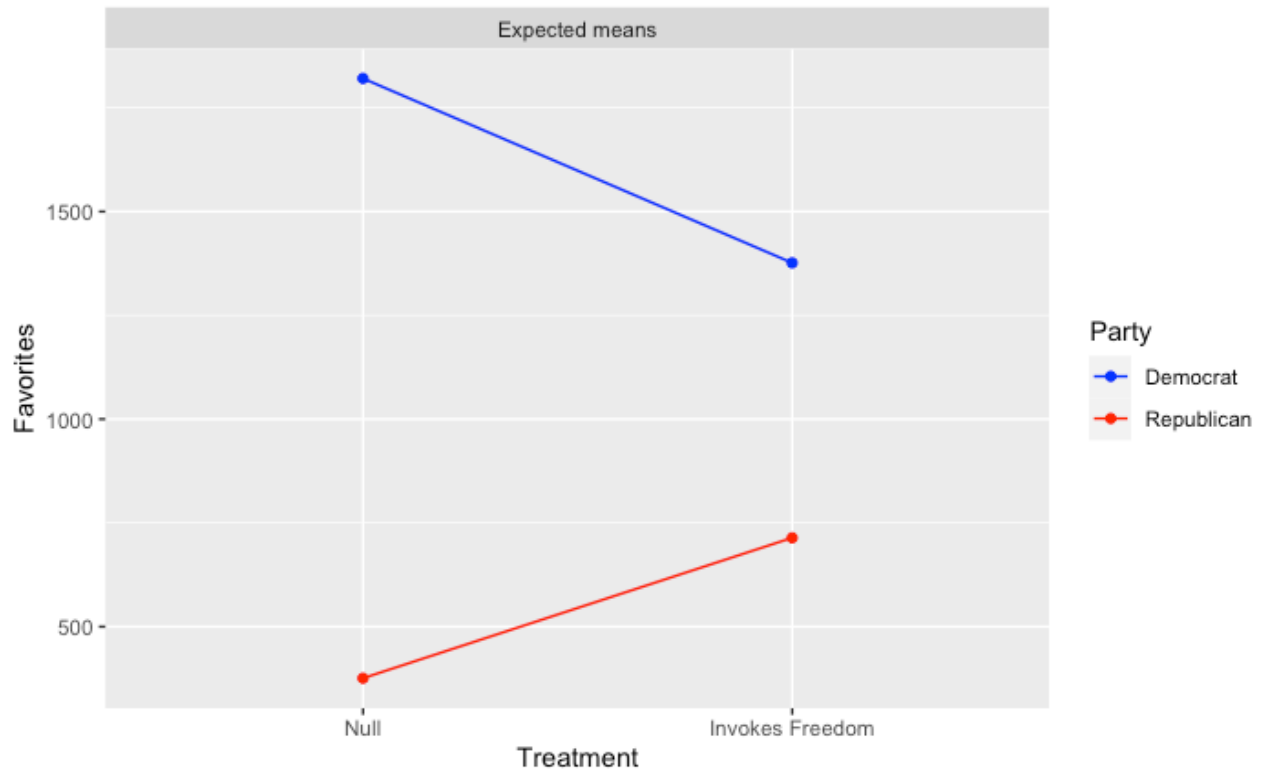


Figure 6.2: Expected favorites by the invocation of freedom, and party

The results are stark. When Republican legislators invoke the value of freedom or liberty in their tweets, engagement increases considerably. The invocation of freedom almost triples the expected number of retweets (271%), and almost doubles the expected number of favorites (190%) among Republicans. The very opposite is true of Democrats.

6.3: Summary

It was the goal of this chapter to test the hypothesis that authoritarian populist voters exhibit *weaker* pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. On the balance of the above empirical evidence, the opposite appears to be true. Dealing with limited national samples, and in the absence of randomized control, questions of external validity are duly noted, and future

studies ought to expand the scope and experimental validity of both the stated and revealed preferences approach. Nevertheless, the data from the WVS and Twitter marshalled in this chapter tell a clear and consistent story: authoritarian populist voters appear to be *more* pro-freedom than their more democratically-minded counterparts. Another clear marker that pro-freedom values do not innately beget pro-democratic values.

7. Discussion

Where does this analysis leave us? I embarked on this agenda with the goal of determining whether pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values in the West. This question was proffered by the observation of two seemingly oxymoronic trends in the comparative politics literature: the ubiquitous rise of pro-freedom values, and the rise of authoritarian populism in the West. By reviewing the literature, the answer seemed to be clear: authoritarianism and freedom are incompatible values. Thus, support for such parties must simply be derived from the minority of Western voters who are yet to be subsumed by the emancipative wave. To test that theory, two simple hypotheses were proposed: firstly, that authoritarian populist political actors must scarcely deploy the language of freedom; and secondly, that their supporters exhibit weaker pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. On the balance of the above evidence, both hypotheses ought to be rejected. Chapter 5 outlined the way in which authoritarian populists center the notion of freedom at the heart of their rhetorical strategies, while Chapter 6 depicts an authoritarian populist supporter base who values freedom significantly *more* than those who vote pro-democratically. Accordingly, do pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values? Clearly,

this is not necessarily so. This final chapter will seek to take stock of this determination, considering its implications for the study of authoritarian populism, and the study of freedom.

7.1: On the Study of Freedom

I presume that the very first criticism levied against this work will be a semantic one – ‘but what these authoritarian populists are striving for cannot rightly be considered freedom’. I would agree, but holding freedom to some normative standard is a mistake all too common in the literature. If there is anything to be taken away from the findings in this study, it is this: in the applied study of political science, freedom ought to be studied as a rhetorical construct, not a normative one. Precisely what freedom means and how one can achieve it is a task best left to philosophers and theorists.

Take Welzel’s (2013) emancipative values index as an example. Welzel (2021b, p.994) constructs a definition of freedom that combines “a libertarian emphasis on individual choice with an egalitarian emphasis on equality of opportunities”. That may well be how he sees it, but the freedom-loving authoritarian populists I have identified in this analysis most certainly see it differently. We can test this assertion empirically, too. In the three Western countries previously analyzed (Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States), democrats score an average of 0.670 on Welzel’s emancipative values index (measured from 0 to 1). Authoritarian populists, on the other hand, score just 0.489. By Welzel’s measure, authoritarian populists *do* exhibit weaker pro-freedom values than their more democratically-minded counterparts. Yet in assessing their stated preference for freedom, the opposite was true. How can this be so?

<i>Dependent Variable: Emancipative Values Index</i>	
Model 1	
Weighted	
Constant	0.670*** (0.003)
Authoritarian Populist	-0.181*** (0.006)

Table 7.1: OLS Regression Results: Emancipative Values Index by Authoritarian Populist Support

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

One potential explanation might be found in Isaiah Berlin’s (1969) two concepts of liberty. Berlin describes liberty as taking on two primary forms: positive liberty – a freedom to; and negative liberty – a freedom from. It can be reasonably argued that the four factors that comprise Welzel’s (2013) index – choice, voice, equality, and autonomy – all represent freedom in its positive form. On the contrary, Ian Carter (2022) argues that, in politics, negative liberty typically underpins the libertarian “arguments against paternalist or moralist state intervention”. To which form of freedom might we assign the rhetoric of the US House Freedom Caucus? What about the anti-lockdown truckers of the Canadian Freedom Convoy (Vieira 2022)? Is it a negative form of freedom that authoritarian populists seek? Some recent studies have sought to use sentiment analysis to code populist rhetoric (Çinar, Stokes and Uribe 2020; Di Cocco and Monechi 2022). Future studies might seek to test this theory using those same techniques, coding populist pro-freedom rhetoric as reflecting liberty’s positive or negative form.

In Chapter 4, we reviewed a literature on authoritarianism that described the authoritarian personality as antithetical to freedom. While this research has proven that authoritarian and pro-freedom values can coexist, it has, as yet, described how this could be so. This inquiry ought to be the subject of its own future research, but for now, I propose one avenue of possible understanding. Beginning with Adorno et al. (1950), the authoritarian personality has been defined in relation to ‘threat’. As Hetherington and Weller (2009, p.109) put it, “threat has come to play a starring role in understanding (authoritarianism’s) effect.” Altmeyer (1988), Stenner (2005), and Welzel (2013) all agree. Perhaps the freedom authoritarian populists seek ought to be defined as the freedom from threat?

7.2: On the Rise of Authoritarian Populism

The rise of authoritarian populism in the West is already defined in similar terms. Welzel’s (2021a, p.137) view on freedom and democracy is founded by the notion that economic development incites a “psychological awakening” that “activates in people a drive toward freedom”; a worldview echoed by Amartya Sen (1999). In other words, that “fading existential pressures open people’s minds, making them prioritize freedom over security” (Welzel 2013, p.xxiii). Just as the absence of threat is considered a democratizing force, so too is the presence of threat seen as an autocratizing force. Norris and Inglehart’s (2019) “cultural backlash” thesis is predicated on this very notion. They argue that a “silent revolution in socially liberal attitudes”, prolonged demographic change, and economic insecurity, represent “threats to social conservatives” that trigger their “authoritarian reflex” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p.33). Bartels (2021) argues that this sentiment does not innately convert to votes; it lies dormant, awaiting the allure of a populist’s silver tongue.

Understanding freedom as a rhetorical construct allows us to see how the negatively-coded language of freedom might be pivotal in activating that reflex. As Norris and Inglehart (2019, p.4) themselves put it, populism requires a “chameleon-like quality which can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles”. Much recent work has been dedicated to depicting the way populists employ their rhetorical camouflage (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016; Sakki and Martikainen 2021; Breyer 2022; Dai and Kustov 2022), but that of most interest here is Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy’s (2016) work on how populists hijack religion. Perhaps we ought to ask how populists have hijacked the notion of freedom?

Moffitt’s (2017) conception of ‘liberal illiberalism’ gives us a template for how such a question might be considered. Moffitt (2017, p.118-9) argues that “populists openly borrow, ape and utilize the language of liberalism” in a brazen attempt to “put a more ‘acceptable’ face on their otherwise illiberal politics”. Halikiopoulou et al. (2013, p.111) concur, arguing that right-wing populist parties seek to evade classification as racist or xenophobic by adopting “a civic rhetoric utilizing the liberal elements of their respective national identities”. For Marine Le Pen and National Rally in France, this strategy is so pronounced that it has been given its own name - *dediabolisation* (demonization) (Ivaldi 2016). Here, freedom is not constructed normatively, it is constructed rhetorically. It is a method of softening images and harnessing threats; a method of excluding folks and winning votes. It is the conclusion of this research that the study of comparative politics ought to understand it as such. Do pro-freedom values beget pro-democratic values? In Welzel’s form, they likely do. In Wilders’ form, they likely do not.

I leave this research with one final, parting parable. In April of 2009, then-leader of the British National Party (BNP) Nick Griffin was invited to Texas to speak at an event hosted by David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (Rodgers 2000; Kay 2019). Griffin, covertly recorded by the BBC's *Panorama* program, told the crowd this:

“There's a difference between selling out your ideas and selling your ideas, and the British National Party isn't about selling out its ideas – which are your ideas too – but we are determined now to sell them, and that means basically to use the saleable words, as I say: freedom, security, identity, democracy. Nobody can criticise them. Nobody can come at you and attack you on those ideas. They are saleable.” –

Nick Griffin (Rodgers 2000)

Fortunately, Griffin and his party have since faded into obscurity. This time, we might not be so lucky. As Bartels (2021, p.225) concludes, “the future of right-wing populism in Europe will hinge primarily on the ability and willingness of political elites to exploit or defuse populist sentiment”. As this research proves, freedom lies at the heart of that mission. And while “people’s desires for freedoms have never been voiced so powerfully, so frequently, and in so many places” (Welzel 2013, p.1), it is imperative that we prevent authoritarian populists from capturing the promise of freedom, lest we enter an era of free reign.

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