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Ideological Polarization, Academic Freedom, and the Political War on Higher Education: A Comparative Review of Literature

Frederick Arthur*
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University

Abstract

Universities have emerged as crucial institutions for political, social, and ideological struggles that influence their independence, administration, and public reputation. With the aid of comparative case studies from Turkey, Hungary, the US, China, South Africa, and Australia, this review of literature investigates how political interventions by state and non-state actors redefine the purpose and autonomy of higher education. It emphasizes how colleges function as both contested sites of resistance and tools of political control by drawing on academic freedom scholarship, democratic backsliding, and governance theory. By highlighting context-specific solutions to issues like market pressures, authoritarian attacks, and the politicization of efforts to promote diversity, the review makes the case for renewed university commitments to democratic governance. It argues that revitalizing university governance requires adaptive and pluralistic models that respond to contemporary challenges while reaffirming the university's public mission and role in sustaining democracy. This research focuses heavily on political science governance models since the discipline provides methods to generate ideas and study universities as semi-autonomous political institutions that are part of larger social and political systems. It presents a programmatic vision for the future of higher education as a stronghold of critical inquiry and democratic engagement by placing contemporary issues within theoretical and historical frameworks.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, University Governance, Academic Freedom, Ideological Polarization, Political Interference.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, it is common to view universities as places where people can think and ask questions freely without fear or pressure from political forces, donors, and other stakeholders. But they are actually places where significant political, social, and ideological contention transpires (Peters, 2023). Universities have grown into an untenable position where education, politics, and society intersect. Beyond being neutral, universities are both actors who affect democratic and social change and are institutions that can be politically challenged and controlled (Gutmann, 1999; Rowlands, 2017).

This tension has become more pronounced in recent high-profile cases. The Turkish government forcibly imposed politically aligned rectors on Boğaziçi University, which led to

*Corresponding Author Email: frederick.arthur10@okstate.edu
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strong protests from students and faculty. This incident suggested how weak academic freedom is under authoritarian regimes (Aytac, 2022). Hungary's Orbán government also forced Central European University to relocate by passing a law that made it illegal for foreign-funded schools to have ideologically objectionable views (Enyedi, 2018). In the US, conservative-led states have intervened in the governance and curriculum of public universities and have made attempts to ban Critical Race Theory as well as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Slater, 2023; Downs, 2024). On the other hand, though Chinese universities have considerable global goals, they are controlled by a single political party, which shows how challenging it is to make higher education more international while still keeping an eye on ideology (Sahlins, 2015). At the same time, South African universities are still dealing with the effects of apartheid through internal disagreements over governance, curriculum, and institutional change (Berrey, 2015). Australia's market-based system shows a different kind of tension, where universities have to struggle with economic pressures and unstable funding because they rely on international student tuition (Marginson and Considine, 2000; de Wit and Altbach, 2021).

This phenomenon raises compelling questions of concern, such as, how do these changes maintain or compromise the autonomy of the university and public trust? How do colleges and universities cope with or fight against political pressure? How can political science come up with the best governance models for protecting the university's mission in different parts of the world? To answer these questions, we need to separate the politics of higher education, which looks at how universities are run, organized, and pressured from the outside, from higher education as politics, which looks at how academic practices themselves become places of political contentions (Weber, 1919; Bourdieu, 1988). The university is both a semi-autonomous institution that deals with the needs of the state, the market, and society (Clark, 1983; Olsen, 2007) and a place where people have conversations about democracy and pluralism (Gutmann, 1999; Rowlands, 2017).

The main point of this review is that universities are both subjects and agents of political struggle today. They negotiate their independence, governance, and legitimacy in the face of authoritarian state control, market-driven commodification, ideological polarization, and conflicts over internal governance. The tensions that come from these issues make it challenging for universities to find a balance between academic freedom, democratic governance, and social inclusion in political environments that are not always equitable and are often contested. It is important to recognize and resolve these problems not only to protect the university's public mission but also to protect democratic pluralism as a whole.

Governance, Autonomy, and the Political University

Universities serve as complex political organizations that are at the intersection of state power, market forces, and the demands of civil society. To understand how they are run, it is necessary to examine the different theoretical traditions that explain how power, freedom, and responsibility are shared and fought over in these institutions and in the larger political world around them.

Governance as a Political and Institutional Concept

Governance is a broad term that describes the ways and structures individuals and groups use to make decisions, share power, and carry out authority (Keping, 2017; Bevir, 2013). Governance theory has become a rich yet complicated field in political science that looks at how state and non-state actors interact when it comes to governance issues, policy implementation, and the legitimacy of institutions (Rhodes, 1997; Fischer, 2003).

Burton Clark's (1983) idea of the university as a "buffered organization" illustrates how universities maintain a certain level of independence by balancing outside political and economic pressures with their own academic standards. This buffer, on the other hand, is not solid and is open to changes in government type, market conditions, and social expectations (Olsen 2007).

Again, according to Olsen (2007), universities are "semi-sovereign" institutions that are part of regional political systems where the relationship between the state and society affects their independence and how they are run. For instance, in liberal democracies, universities may have more say in how they are run and more academic freedom. In authoritarian settings, on the other hand, governance structures may be changed to be used as tools of control (Enyedi, 2018; Aytac, 2022).

Academic Freedom as a Governance Principle

In debates about higher education, academic freedom is a critical issue. Academic freedom, which is based on liberal political theory, protects scholars' rights to seek knowledge without outside interference. This is what makes the university a guardian of truth and democratic discussion (Shils, 1972; Fish, 2014).

But the limits of academic freedom are always changing and up for debate, thanks to social values, legal cultures, and institutional pressures. Recent problems include attempts by lawmakers to limit certain types of curriculum (like Critical Race Theory), rules about what can be said on campus, and research agendas set by donors (Downs, 2024; Furedi, 2011). The paradox is finding a balance between the right to free inquiry and worries about student safety, fairness, and the reputation of the institution. This phenomenon shows that governance is a contested political area rather than a neutral administrative process.

University Governance Models

University governance models show how decisions are made, authority is used, and academic objectives are pursued in higher education institutions. It describes the structures, processes, and power relationships that make these things happen. These models are very different from one region to another and from one type of institution to another. This variation is attributed to factors such as history, the law, politics, and new problems, including globalization, marketization, and politicization.

There are a variety of ways that universities are run, but some of the most common are the Napoleonic, Humboldtian, and Anglophone traditions. There are also unitary and dual

governance systems, which are often mixed with elements of shared, fiduciary, managerial, and ideological governance.

Table 1. University Governance Models: Characteristics and Regional Examples

Model/Type	***Description***	***Key Features***	***Regional Examples***
Napoleonic Model	State-centric, bureaucratic governance	Strong hierarchical state control	France, Continental Europe
Humboldtian Model	Integrated research and teaching with faculty autonomy	Faculty self-governance, emphasis on scholarship	Germany, Scandinavia
Anglophone Model	Shared governance between faculty, admin, board	Distributed authority, strong faculty voice	United States, UK, Canada, Australia
Dual Governance	Separate governing board and academic senate	Fiduciary and academic authority divided	Some UK (Oxbridge), European universities
Unitary Governance	Unified board with combined fiduciary and academic powers	Streamlined decision-making	Some private US universities
Shared Governance	Collegial model including faculty, staff, students	Collaborative decision-making	Public universities in the US
Fiduciary Governance	Trustees act as stewards on behalf of public interest	Mission-driven oversight	Many US universities
Ideological Governance	Governance driven by partisan or ideological aims	Top-down ideological control	Emerging in some US states, authoritarian regimes

This table presents important governance models (Napoleonic, Humboldtian, Anglophone, Dual, Unitary, Shared, Fiduciary, Ideological), their main characteristics (like state control, faculty autonomy, and distributed authority), and examples from different regions (like France, Germany, and the US). It shows the trade-offs between centralized control and institutional autonomy, giving us a way to look at how governance changes in different political situations.

Historical Evolution of University–State Relations

Historically, the relationship between universities and states has been shaped by changing political, economic, and social needs. Understanding how this has changed over time is

important for understanding state-led interventions and governance conflicts today. The modern research university has its roots in medieval European schools. In the 19th century, the German Humboldtian ideal had an immense effect on modern research universities. This ideal stressed the connection between research and teaching, as well as academic freedom and institutional independence (Scott, 2006). This model saw universities as independent institutions that were not directly controlled by politics or the market. Their job was to produce knowledge and train the elite. Politics or the market did not directly control universities but allowed them to be centers that produce knowledge for the betterment of the state and society.

In the 20th century, especially in democratic countries like the United States, universities worked side by side with the government to help the country grow. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 in the U.S. created land-grant universities with clear public missions for agricultural and technical education. This made education more accessible to everyone and helped the economy grow (Thelin, 2011). At the same time, World War II and the years after the war solidified the university's role in building the nation and advancing science, thanks to large amounts of state funding and research grants (Metzger, 1987).

But this partnership showed that there were problems between independence and responsibility. The McCarthy era (1940s–50s) showed how easy it is for academic freedom to be attacked by politics. For example, professors were investigated for being communist sympathizers (Heineman, 1993). In the 1960s and 1970s, student activism pushed universities even harder to make changes to the curriculum, fight racism, and improve society. These initiatives turned campuses into places where people could argue about politics and try out new ideas.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, higher education became more accessible and globalized. This was followed by a neoliberal shift that focused on competition, marketization, and efficiency (Marginson and Considine, 2000; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Governments changed how they gave money to schools, often making students pay more and making schools more responsible for their performance. This change made it harder for the university to do its job as both a public entity and a business, which weakened some traditional governance structures and its independence (Berman and Paradeise, 2016).

As higher education has become more global, universities have become important players on the world stage, using soft power to help with both national strategy and international cooperation (Nye, 2004). As campuses become more international through student mobility, research partnerships, and branch campuses, they have to deal with tensions between cosmopolitan engagement and sovereign oversight. These tensions have effects on governance, academic freedom, and the legitimacy of the institution.

Contemporary State-Led Interventions and Democratic Backsliding

Over the past few decades, there has been an evident increase in state involvement in university governance across a range of political systems. This is in line with larger trends of democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. Universities have traditionally had different levels of independence based on academic freedom and institutional self-governance. However, these protections have weakened as populist, nationalist, and authoritarian movements have grown.

The subsequent section will look at how state actors manipulate university governance, funding, and curricula directly, often in the name of national identity, security, or cultural restoration. These changes negatively impacted pluralism and academic freedom.

The classical liberal idea of academic freedom posits that scholars have the right to seek the truth without interference from the government or private individuals (Shils, 1972; Metzger, 1987). This freedom was based on long-standing legal and cultural traditions in Germany and the US, though there were some important exceptions during times like McCarthyism (Heineman, 1993). McCarthyism is the name given to a time in American history, mostly the 1950s, when there was a lot of political repression and a campaign of fear to identify and punish people who were thought to be communists or Soviet sympathizers. It is most closely linked to Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, who made unsubstantiated claims that communists were getting into the U.S. government and other organizations (Heineman, 1993).

Subnational Authoritarianism and Culture Wars in the United States

The United States is still a mature democracy with strong legal protections for academic freedom. However, state-level politicians have been getting more involved in running universities as part of larger partisan cultural contests. Florida and other conservative-led states have appointed trustees who share their views on public universities and ideology, most notably New College of Florida (Florida Governor's Office, 2023). At the same time, they have passed laws that limit the teaching of Critical Race Theory and limit efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Slater, 2023; Downs, 2024). These changes to the curriculum and governance structures often do not directly violate academic freedom, but they do so through indirect means like political pressure and budget control.

These kinds of actions show a decentralized, polycentric form of democratic backsliding, where the loss of university autonomy is caused by differences in political will and ideological polarization at the subnational level. These interventions work within democratic institutions, but they make the university less of a place for diverse inquiry and critical engagement by putting it under the control of political parties.

One-Party Control of Ideology in China, Neocolonialism in South Africa, and the Market Economy in Australia

In regimes like modern-day China, on the other hand, party ideology severely limits academic freedom, directly limiting research topics, organizational affiliations, and international collaboration (Sahlins, 2015). The Chinese way of doing things mixes academic prestige and global involvement with clear, non-negotiable limits. For example, they censor topics that are seen as politically sensitive and require state-mandated ideological education (Sahlins, 2015).

There is a constant struggle between strong democratic protections and the effects of apartheid and structural inequality in South Africa's academic freedom. Universities are places where people argue over what academic freedom means and where it ends. This is especially true since decolonization movements like #RhodesMustFall have called for big changes to the curriculum, more inclusion, and the removal of colonial symbols from academic spaces (Berrey, 2015; Jansen, 2019). The South African constitution protects academic freedom, but

the government often gets involved in ways that are not direct, like through funding models and policy mandates that are linked to transformation, language policy, and redress (Subotzky, 2003). University leaders have to deal with complicated demands from both the state and activist groups, which leads to institutional autonomy that is both contested and lively. Sometimes, these pressures can put academic independence at risk. For example, institutions are trying to fix past wrongs while also worrying about the possibility of new orthodoxies and ideological conformity in the academy (Jansen, 2019).

Strong traditions of shared academic governance and legal protections have traditionally protected academic freedom and university independence in Australia. However, these are becoming more difficult to maintain due to outside pressures (Marginson and Considine, 2000). Most of the time, state-level interventions have been about keeping an eye on finances, making rules, and making markets work better. Both the federal and state governments have done this (Bexley, James, and Arkoudis, 2011). Universities were economically vulnerable and under more government scrutiny because they relied heavily on international student tuition as a source of income, which was especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic (de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Policy changes have included changing how money is distributed and adding performance-based metrics, which may encourage compliance and risk aversion over academic freedom (Marginson and Considine, 2000). State intervention that is openly ideological is not as common in Australia as it is in some other places, but the changing landscape of public accountability and market-driven reforms poses subtle but serious threats to the breadth and independence of scholarly inquiry and teaching in Australian higher education (Bexley et al., 2011).

Authoritarian Instrumentalization in Turkey and Hungary

Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is an outstanding case of how authoritarian state actors use higher education for their own ends. The appointment of Melih Bulu as rector of Boğaziçi University in 2021, a prestigious public university that has always been run by university elections, went against normal academic procedures and led to protests from faculty and students (Aytac, 2022). The government responded with police crackdowns, arrests, and firing of people who disagreed, which was a direct attack on academic freedom and self-governance. This intervention shows how universities can be used to enforce loyalty to the regime. Controlling the curriculum, leadership, and funding are all ways to strengthen political power.

Hungary has also used legal means to limit university freedom and push a nationalist, illiberal educational agenda under Viktor Orbán. The "lex CEU" law that passed in 2017 effectively forced Central European University (CEU) out of Budapest by putting strict rules on foreign-funded institutions (Enyedi, 2018). This action, which was framed in terms of the rule of law, limited academic pluralism and was part of a larger effort to change civil society to fit state ideology. Hungary shows how democratic backsliding can happen through actions that seem legal and bureaucratic but actually adversely affect institutional diversity and dissent.

Table 2. Case Studies of Contemporary State Interventions in University Governance

Country/Region	***Key Intervention***	***Nature of Intervention***	***Regime Context***	***Primary Political Aim***	***Consequences***
Turkey	Appointment of rector at Boğaziçi University (2021)	Politicized rector appointment, repression	Competitive authoritarian	Regime consolidation, loyalty enforcement	Protests, repression, erosion of self-governance
Hungary	"Lex CEU" Law forcing Central European University relocation (2017)	Legal restrictions on foreign-funded institutions	Illiberal democracy	Enforce ideological conformity	Restriction of academic pluralism, international condemnation
United States	State bans on Critical Race Theory and trustee appointments (since 2020)	Legislative bans on curriculum, politicized trustee appointments	Federal democracy with polarized states	Culture war, partisan influence	Academic self-censorship, restructuring of curricula
China	Party control over curricula and leadership	Centralized party appointments, censorship	Authoritarian one-party state	National ideological control	Restricted academic freedom, pervasive self-censorship
South Africa	#RhodesMustFall and decolonization protests	Student activism demanding symbolic and curricular reform	Democratic, postcolonial legacy	Address structural inequality	Intense institutional transformation debates, contested governance
Australia	Heavy reliance on international students; COVID-19 funding shocks	Market-driven funding with government oversight	Liberal democracy, market-oriented	Economic recovery, funding stability	Funding vulnerabilities exposed, calls for reform

This table compares state interventions in Turkey, Hungary, the US, China, South Africa, and Australia. It looks at important actions (like appointing rectors, making laws that limit freedom of speech, and banning certain subjects from the curriculum), types of interventions (authoritarian, legal, or market-driven), regime contexts, main goals (like regime consolidation or ideological conformity), and effects (like protests, censorship, and funding vulnerabilities). It shows different dangers to academic freedom and independence.

Universities as Laboratories of Political Regime Dynamics

These real-life examples show how universities can be "laboratories" for larger regime strategies, either as places of resistance or as tools of control (Apple, 2012). Authoritarian

governments use universities to teach people to be politically loyal and keep people from speaking out. They do this through legal, administrative, and coercive means. At the same time, politicized governance and culture wars are slowly but surely invading democracies, which hurts the independence of institutions.

These kinds of changes make us question basic ideas about what role the university should play in democratic societies. Universities cannot teach people how to be critical citizens and participate in deliberative democracy as well when academic freedom and governance pluralism are weakened (Gutmann, 1999). If universities do not have strong protections for autonomy and models of participatory governance, they could end up being extensions of state or partisan power, which would negatively affect knowledge production, social inclusion, and the legitimacy of democracy.

Regional Patterns of Resistance and Responses to Threats on University Autonomy

How universities, scholars, and civil society respond to outside interference and protect academic freedom or institutional autonomy depends a great deal on the phenomenon. Political regime type, the strength of civil society, the histories of institutions, and the specific nature of state or non-state threats all affect how these regions respond.

In various national contexts, academic resistance to external interference in university autonomy and academic freedom manifests in diverse forms and intensities. In the United States, coalitions of faculty, students, and civil rights groups mobilize legal and public campaigns against partisan interventions, resulting in uneven resistance shaped by political climates and funding contingencies (Slater, 2023); in Turkey, despite harsh repression including arrests and dismissals, faculty and students protest, self-censor, migrate, and seek international solidarity to sustain advocacy (Aytac, 2022); Hungary's academic community, notably at CEU, has mounted legal, diplomatic, and global advocacy efforts against illiberal reforms, with continued but limited resistance amid political divisions (Enyedi, 2018); Chinese scholars and institutions, operating under strict ideological control, often pursue resistance indirectly through coded scholarship, limited international alliances, and bureaucratic negotiation, as open dissent is swiftly curtailed (Sahlins, 2015); South African academic activism is robust and democratic, as movements like #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall lead to policy changes, curricular debates, and frequent public contestation, all enhanced by union and media engagement (Berrey, 2015; Jansen, 2019); and in Australia, united opposition from institutional leaders, unions, and sector groups centers on defending public funding and academic independence, with collaborative responses during crises and active engagement with policymakers and the media (Bexley et al., 2011).

Table 3. Comparative Regional Resistance and Responses

Country/Region	***Primary Resistance Actors***	***Typical Strategies***	***State/Regime Response***	***Contextual Dynamics***
United States	Faculty unions, student groups, civil rights orgs	Litigation, protest, public advocacy, lobbying	Varied: from negotiation to punitive funding	Federal democracy; polarized, uneven outcomes
Turkey	Academics, students, int'l networks	Protests, international solidarity, quiet resistance	Repression: arrests, dismissals, censorship	Authoritarian, high risks for activism
Hungary	University leaders, students, EU, NGOs	Legal challenge, international pressure, protest	Legal pushback, intransigence, media control	Illiberal hybrid regime, legal battles
China	Academics (indirect), int'l partners	Subtle negotiation, research migration, coded debate	Suppression of overt resistance, surveillance	State control, indirect/private forms prevail
South Africa	Students, faculty, labor unions	Direct protest, task forces, negotiation	Responsive engagement, policy reform, sometimes inaction	Vibrant, participatory, postcolonial tensions
Australia	University leaders, unions, sector associations	Advocacy, policy submission, public campaign	Economic/rule-based response, regulatory oversight	Market orientation, institutional cooperation

This table demonstrates how universities in the US, Turkey, Hungary, China, South Africa, and Australia resist or respond to external pressure. It lists the primary stakeholders (such as faculty unions, students, and international networks), the most common strategies (like lawsuits, protests, and coded debate), the government's or regime's responses (like repression or negotiation), and the context (such as the type of regime or the strength of civil society). It shows how the political climate affects efforts to keep universities free.

Future of University Governance and Policy Implications

Authoritarianism, marketization, ideological polarization, and the pressures of internationalization are just a few of the problems that universities face right now that will

affect how they are run and how they change in the future. These interconnected factors make it necessary for universities to take a hard look at their governance models and come up with new ones. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Instead, good governance needs to be flexible, diverse, and aware of the situation in order to protect academic freedom and keep the public's trust at the same time.

One big problem is that universities are becoming more managerial and corporate, which has made things run more smoothly but has often weakened democratic participation and collegial self-rule (Marginson and Considine, 2000; Deem and Brehony, 2005). To give institutions back their freedom, universities need to make their internal systems of accountability stronger. This includes giving faculty decision making powers, pushing for academic boards, and student representation more power to act as real checks on executive power and outside political or market pressures (Birnbaum, 2004).

It is just as important for universities to be open and honest in their administration as it is for them to rebuild their legitimacy, especially when they are dealing with social and political issues. Public reporting, participatory budgeting, and open-access policies are some examples of practices that encourage more openness and trust among stakeholders. This can help reduce conflicts that divide university communities. There are useful differences in these principles in models from Europe. Scandinavian and some Western European countries, for example, use intermediary bodies to protect universities from direct ministerial control. These bodies give power to public stakeholders while keeping a strong academic voice (Olsen, 2007; Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013). Governance systems like these are important shields against clientelist or partisan interference, which is becoming more common in countries like Hungary and Turkey, as well as in U.S. states like Florida that are politically divided (Enyedi, 2018; Aytac, 2022; Slater, 2023). These examples show how intermediary and multi-stakeholder governance frameworks can help universities stay independent even when they are under pressure from outside sources.

Globalization makes governance even harder, but it also gives people tools to be strong and start over. To fight repression and promote shared values of academic freedom and integrity, universities should use international consortia, accreditation networks, and research partnerships in a smart way. However, these global partnerships need to be carefully thought out to make sure they do not interfere with the independence of the institutions or their ethical standards (Knight, 2013; Altbach and de Wit, 2023).

In the end, the future of university governance should be based on the idea that universities, as important parts of a democratic society, should be open, pluralistic, and encourage critical dialogue. Universities need adaptive, participatory governance structures to deal with more political and economic pressure while still being open places for people to learn and get involved in democracy.

Conclusion

Universities today are under more political and ideological pressure than ever before, which threatens their independence, governance, and mission. These pressures come from both state actors, who can impose political control or get in the way of academic freedoms, and non-state

actors, including donors, corporations, and internal stakeholders, who can change priorities and governance through money and ideas. The case studies of Turkey's authoritarian consolidation, Hungary's legalistic suppression of foreign universities, the United States' polarized culture wars, China's centralized party control, Australia's unstable funding based on the market, and South Africa's struggles to transform after colonialism show that no higher education system is free from debate over governance, academic freedom, and institutional legitimacy.

Universities will always be a contested arena. They cannot become safe havens or just tools of political or market power. They can only be pillars of democracy if they keep up their commitment to pluralism, openness, and open dialogue. Reforming governance requires serious political work that needs ongoing involvement, trust-building among different groups, and institutions that can reflect and adapt. How carefully universities renew their commitment to democratic governance, knowledge as a public good, and social change that includes everyone in different parts of the world will determine the future of higher education as both a political issue and something that is shaped by political forces.

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