Freedom is one of America’s most cherished values. The cognitive scientist George Lakoff considers it the nation’s “most important idea… at the center of all other important ideas.” Likewise, in his studies of American values in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the social psychologist Milton Rokeach found that freedom was by far America’s most important political value, ranked behind only world peace and familial security in the nation’s hierarchy of values. Behind this commonplace agreement on the centrality of freedom in American life, however, lurk three fundamental questions.
First, how free do Americans actually perceive themselves to be and what factors affect their perceptions? Second, do Americans believe they are becoming more or less free? Finally, what are the potential threats to the realization of freedom in the United States? To answer these questions, we take a specifically empirical, sociologically based approach to the study of people's values and beliefs. In our analyses, we use data from the Freedom in America Survey, a nationally representative survey of 1,014 Americans we fielded in the summer of 2015.

the income-freedom gradient

It is not our goal to assess the extent to which American political life measures up to some “objective” standard of freedom. Rather, we explore freedom as a value system, examining Americans’ perceptions of how much of it they have and exploring the major factors underlying these perceptions. This is what we call, following the psychologist Ivan Steiner, perceived freedom.

Perceived freedom entails, regardless of the actual conditions experienced by individuals, “antecedents and consequences that deserve attention.” To measure perceived freedom in our 2015 survey, we asked Americans “How much freedom do you have today?” For simplicity of exposition, we categorized respondents as either having a high or a low level of perceived freedom. (Respondents who reported “Complete Freedom” or “A Great Deal of Freedom” were categorized as “high,” while those who reported “A Moderate Degree of Freedom,” “Not Much Freedom,” or “No Freedom at All,” were categorized as “low.”)

Overall, we found that a majority of Americans reported a substantial degree of perceived freedom: about 59% reported a high level of freedom. One’s own sense of freedom is closely related to the perceptions of the amount of freedom experienced by other Americans. Specifically, among those who say they have a low amount of freedom, 85% say that Americans in general have a low amount of freedom. Likewise, among those who say they have a high amount of freedom, 82% say that
The perception of high levels of freedom is not a universal experience—its sociological realization is contingent upon one's material resources.

all Americans have a high amount of freedom. This reaffirms the general sociological claim that, when asked to evaluate the experience of others in their own social group, people tend to generalize from their own life experiences.

Perceived freedom varies only weakly, if at all, across a number of factors, including gender and racial or ethnic identity. There is, however, one factor that is by far the most important for explaining one's sense of freedom: those who feel the most free are, in general, those who have the most money. This relationship is so persistent that we call it the income-freedom gradient. The income-freedom gradient from our 2015 survey is shown in the figure above. The vertical axis gives the probability of reporting a high rather than low level of freedom, while the horizontal axis lists household income in U.S. dollars.

The implications of the income-freedom gradient are profound. The perception of high levels of freedom is not a universal experience—its sociological realization is contingent upon one's material resources. In a society such as the United States, with and services, substantially reduced barriers to entering any number of social positions, superior legal representation and much lower sentences for similar crimes committed by the poor, and greater access to powerful political actors.

Another implication of the income-freedom gradient is that the reduction of poverty—or the guarantee of a “baseline” threshold of resources—will not necessarily result in the fulfillment of one's own freedom. Consider, for example, a married White male living in the Midwest with no children. If this person receives $20,000, then his probability of reporting a high level of freedom is .52. In contrast, his counterpart receiving $100,000 has a probability of .67 and his counterpart receiving $200,000 has a probability of .82.

Our data suggest that, regardless of one's income level, every additional dollar acquired increases the probability of having a high level of perceived freedom. Note, however, that the income range in our data is truncated at the top end; it is unresolved whether the income-freedom gradient flattens out at extremely high incomes.

the obama effect

Besides asking about their current level of freedom, we also asked respondents about perceived changes in their own freedom—what we call perceived relative freedom. Specifically, in our 2015 survey, we asked, “Do you personally now have more, less, or the same amount of freedom as in the past?” Overall, about 25% of Americans reported having less freedom, 54% the same, and 21% more. We found virtually no evidence of a relationship between income and perceived relative freedom.

Among all people who voted for Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for U.S. president in 2012, about one-quarter reported having more freedom than in the past. In contrast, just one-in-ten people who voted for Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate in 2012, reported having more freedom. We found a similar pattern when examining party identification, with Democrats reporting more freedom in their own lives than Republicans. This partisan divide in relative freedom held even after adjusting for a range of background variables, including income, gender, and racial or ethnic identity.

The data also reveal a substantial divide in perceived relative freedom between White and Black Americans. Among Black Americans aged 65 and older, over three-quarters said they had more freedom than in the past; none said they had less. This suggests that the Civil Rights Movement had a deep effect, lifting a generation of Black Americans into higher levels of freedom. However, perhaps surprisingly, our survey indicates that over 30% of White Americans reported having less freedom than in
the past. Among White Americans who voted for Romney, the proportion was almost 40%.

To examine the role of the Obama presidency in more depth, we asked respondents directly how they felt the Obama presidency had affected the relative freedom of five different groups: Black people, White people, rich people, women, and the young. We find substantial evidence of an “Obama Effect.” Overall, Americans felt the Obama presidency increased the freedom of rich people the most, followed by women, Black people, young people, and, finally, White people. These results, however, mask substantial differences in the evaluation of freedom in the Obama era across different groups.

Most striking, one-third of White Americans claimed that Whites, overall, had less freedom due to the Obama presidency, while just under 4% of Black Americans thought the same. Likewise, nearly 38% of Whites thought Black Americans had more freedom under Obama, while about 28% of Black Americans agreed with this statement.

Although we found no substantial relationship between one’s own perceived relative freedom and income, we uncovered evidence that richer Americans viewed the Obama administration as threatening to the freedom of richer Americans. Among those in the top quarter of the income distribution, about 23% believed Obama decreased the freedom of rich Americans, while just over 9% of respondents in the bottom quarter of the income distribution thought the same.

These findings raise an important puzzle: why do Whites, especially White conservatives, feel as though the Obama presidency decreased not only their own freedom but also the freedom of all White Americans? This is particularly vexing because income appears to have a minor role in explaining this perceived decline. The income-freedom gradient implies that wealth redistribution will, in fact, decrease perceived levels of freedom among the richest Americans. Accordingly, one might be tempted to conclude that White conservatives would feel considerably less free due to the policies of the Obama administration, some of which, such as the Affordable Care Act, entailed a certain amount of wealth redistribution. However, among those who received more than $112,500 annually (the 75th percentile in the income distribution in our data), about 34% said they felt less free in 2015. Yet surprisingly, among White Americans who voted for Romney and received less than $32,500 annually (the 25th percentile in the income distribution), over 30% reported feeling less free in 2015. In short, our study shows little evidence that income explains the perceived decline in relative freedom among White Americans.

The reaction against Obama was not just the usual partisan political backlash, but a cultural movement and rebranding of the Republican Party. This represented a reactivation of a zero-sum view of freedom and its powerful association with Whiteness.

The surveillance state and American plutocracy

We now turn to an examination of additional factors that pose a threat to perceived freedom in the United States, in particular, the rise of the surveillance state and the consolidation of American plutocracy. The 9/11 attacks resulted in major changes in the nation, notably the emergence of the seemingly endless “war on terror” which entailed important new constraints on Americans’ civil liberties. Most significantly, it allowed the demand for greater security to be used as a political cover for an assault on a wide range of American liberties. The many abuses and threats are too well known to enumerate at length here, but some of the most egregious include the secret tapping of telephone conversations and probing of citizens’ library usage, intelligence agencies’ secret shift toward domestic spying, the by-passing of the Federal Judiciary and the use of extra-judicial
organizations such as military commissions and detention centers, indefinite detention, the skirting of habeas corpus, the jailing of journalists and other attacks on the press, executive branch efforts to restrict Congressional access to information, the rejection of the Geneva Convention and the justification of the use of torture in the interrogations of enemy combatants and suspected enemies (who were sometimes innocent).

To address the potentially corrosive impact of this expansion of the surveillance state on perceived freedom, we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “Americans must be willing to give up their privacy in order to be safe from terrorism.” We found a strong, robust link with perceived level of freedom. Over 58% of those who strongly disagreed with this statement reported a low level of freedom, in contrast to about 37% of those who strongly agreed. Likewise, we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “The government has taken away too many of our freedoms in the fight against terrorism.” The data again suggest a corrosive effect of the war on terror on perceived levels of freedom. Among those who strongly agreed with this statement, over two-thirds reported a low level of freedom, while among those who strongly disagreed, under one-quarter said they had a low level of freedom. Finally, we asked respondents whether or not they agreed with the statement “The police are a threat to my freedom or rights.” Again, we found a persistent relationship, with about 56% of those strongly agreeing reporting a low level of freedom and one-third of those strongly disagreeing reporting the same.

The other prevailing threat to perceived freedom is the consolidation of an American plutocracy. To address this issue, in our 2015 survey we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “The very rich have too much influence in the United States.” We found substantial evidence that this perception of the United States as a plutocracy is linked to declines in one’s perceived freedom. For example, among those who strongly agree that America is under the control of the very wealthy, just over half report a low level of perceived freedom; in contrast, among those who strongly disagree, the portion reporting a low level is only a little over 30%.

The consolidation of American plutocracy has important consequences for the income-freedom gradient. In the three-panel figure on p. 31, we examine the income-freedom gradient in relation to three different outcomes. In Panel A, we examine whether or not respondents report viewing freedom as a top-five value from a list of 19 fundamental values, including equality, wisdom, national security, and so forth. Our results show that the rich are less likely to value freedom, even after adjusting for a range of background factors. In Panel B, we show the relationship between income and the probability of defining freedom in terms of political participation (specifically, we asked whether respondents agreed that “Freedom is participating, in some way, in the elections and politics of my country”). After controlling for a variety of background factors, rich Americans were much more likely to view freedom in terms of political participation than the poor. Finally, in Panel C, we examine the probability of being satisfied with the state of U.S. democracy. Again, we find a striking income gradient, with the rich being more satisfied than the poor, even after controlling for background variables.

Together, these findings highlight a potentially dangerous feedback effect for American democracy. Although those who are most poor feel the least free, they value freedom the most. Yet the rich, who are more likely to view freedom in terms of political participation, are more likely to be satisfied with the functioning of American democracy.

Strongly worded question, the agreement was near-universal: 78% of Americans agreed with this second statement. We found substantial evidence that this perception of the United States as a plutocracy is linked to declines in one’s perceived freedom. For example, among those who strongly agree that America is under the control of the very wealthy, just over half report a low level of perceived freedom; in contrast, among those who strongly disagree, the portion reporting a low level is only a little over 30%.

Focusing on perceived freedom, our findings reveal a substantial and persistent income-freedom gradient. In general, those who have more money feel more free. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which this pattern holds in other countries and economic systems. Our analysis also shows that a large proportion of Whites, particularly White conservatives, believe that their own freedom as well as the freedom of White Americans as a group declined during the Obama era. This finding reflects, in part, one of the most disturbing aspects of Americans’ conception, and perceived level, of freedom, rooted in the nation’s past of racial slavery, Jim Crow, and Northern racism:
the identification of freedom with Whiteness and the zero-sum conviction that progress and more freedom for Blacks necessarily entails a decline in social status and freedom for Whites. Further, the rise of the surveillance state and the consolidation of American plutocracy are twin threats to Americans’ sense of freedom, making it increasingly likely that those who are poor and non-White will feel their freedom eroding in coming years.

recommended resources


George Lakoff. 2006. *Whose Freedom? The Battle Over America’s Most Important Idea*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Argues that conservatives have largely won the contest over the meaning of freedom and proposes ways progressives can reclaim the nation’s most important social and political idea.


Richard C. Leone and Gregory Anrig, eds. 2007. *Liberty Under Attack: Reclaiming Our Freedoms in an Age of Terror*. New York: Public Affairs. Shows how, in the name of security, American liberties have been curtailed in the form of threats to the independence of the judiciary, press intimidation, and invasions of privacy—actions that are counterproductive in preventing future terrorism.


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