# Driven by politics? Comparative evidence on journalists' perceived political influences over time

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**Abstract**

This study explored how journalists' perceptions of political influences altered over nearly a decade, between the mid-2010s and the mid-2020s, using comparative data from 54 countries collected in two waves of the *Worlds of Journalism Study* and data assessing the political contexts of these countries. To interpret the temporal dynamics, we proposed a 'filter model' that links the broader political context to perceived political influences through successive stages, each of which can dampen, redirect or override systemic factors. Examining the interplay between political influences and external political developments, the study showed that journalists' perceptions were consistently related to indicators of democratic performance, underscoring the importance of national and regional contextual factors that shape journalistic cultures. Rather than a universal increase or decrease, perceived political influences evolved unevenly across countries. These uneven trajectories correlated with changes in democracy measures, such as

the Freedom in the World index, although less strongly than expected. This pattern is consistent with the filter model: organisational structures, journalistic practices and routines and individual perspectives can absorb, redirect or even mask changes in the political environment, so that journalists' perceptions do not simply mirror the changes in political realities.

## Introduction

A key concern at the heart of journalism scholarship has been understanding how, and to what extent, journalists are influenced in their work by a vast range of forces, thereby contributing to a more complex understanding of the news production process (Firmstone, 2023). Standing out in this regard is Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) highly influential conceptual work that differentiates between five levels – the individual, routines, organisational, institutional and social system.

Most studies have confirmed the existence of different levels of influences, with much work recently focusing on how journalists themselves perceive influences on their work. Notably, such studies have increasingly explored these across national contexts, aiming to identify how different media systems and political influences shape the conditions under which journalists work (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In particular, political pressures and changes in a political environment may, according to scholars, affect journalists' work at both the macro and micro levels (Lauk & Harro-Loi, 2017; Rupar et al., 2021; Kotisová & Waschková Císařová, 2023). At the same time, the vast majority of scholarship has focused on snapshots of journalists' perceptions of political influences at a single moment in time. Far less scholarship has been concerned with changes over time, thereby inhibiting an understanding of the dynamism of influences that may or may not reflect changes in media systems.

This appears particularly timely in the case of political influences on journalism. According to different international surveys, civil liberties, political rights, democratic institutions and, thus, the political environments in which journalists operate have been deteriorating for more than a decade. The 2025 *Freedom in the World* report noted that 2025 was 'the 19th year of declining freedom' (p. 2), while the 2025 *Reporters Without Borders* report stated that 'for over ten years, the Index's results have warned of a worldwide decline in press freedom'' (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) *Democracy Index* reports 'a continuing democratic malaise' (EIU, 2025, p. 8), and Freedom House (2025) observed an 'overall global decline in freedom' (p. 1).

To address how these changes at the systemic level influence journalists' work, this study examines the development of journalists' perceptions of political influences over approximately a decade. It does so by drawing on data from the second (2012–2016) and third (2021–2025) waves of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), allowing for a timewise comparison. While previous scholarship has examined a wide range of influences on journalism, a framework focused specifically on political influences, and how they enter journalistic work, remains lacking. We address this gap on two levels. Theoretically, this study proposes a model linking the broader political context to perceived political influences. Empirically, based on responses from 54 countries included in both waves, the study provides, to the best of our knowledge, the first comparative mapping over time of how journalists perceive political influences on their work, how these perceptions relate to external indicators assessing the state of national political contexts and how these relationships have shifted over time.

## Theoretical background

A key theoretical approach to understanding influences in journalism is Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, 2014) hierarchy of influences model, which conceptualises the production of news as shaped by influences ranging from the individual to the broader social system. The model's theoretical premises are also echoed in empirical scholarship. However, this empirical categorisation of influences does not necessarily imply a fixed ranking or strict hierarchy between them. Rather, it reflects a useful analytical distinction that can be interpreted in more flexible ways. Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022), for instance, emphasised the centrality of organisational and cultural dynamics, arguing that the organisational level exerts the most consistent influence on journalists' everyday work. Similarly, Firmstone (2023) advocated a practice-based model that resists fixed hierarchies and instead highlights how different influences intersect in context-dependent ways. These critiques suggest the model may function better as a heuristic for identifying types of influence than as a ranking of these influences' relative strength.

Based on survey data from more than 27,500 journalists in 67 countries, Hanitzsch et al. (2019) identified five layers of influence on news production: political, economic, organisational, procedural and personal networks influences. Their analysis further revealed that journalists across a broad range of countries perceived procedural and organisational pressures as the most influential in their daily work. In contrast, political and economic factors were consistently rated as less influential. Importantly, the authors stressed that these findings might not reflect the actual absence of such macro-level constraints. Instead, they proposed that editorial management anticipates and absorbs political and economic forces, whereby they become embedded in newsroom routines and, thus, rendered less visible in journalists' self-perceptions. This dynamic supports Shoemaker and Vos's (2009) argument that many structural influences become naturalised over time and are taken for granted as the 'normal' way of doing journalism.

Thus, the hierarchy of influences may be better understood as a conceptual map distinguishing levels of perception rather than as a model of actual power distribution. Accordingly, WJS indices of perceived influence provide insights into how journalists interpret the forces shaping their professional environment. Political influences are particularly important in this regard because they shape the conditions underpinning journalists' autonomy and their relationship to power (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). What is at stake is not professional autonomy alone but the public access to information – that is, the extent to which political forces shape what journalists can report and which actors they can hold to account, as well as the extent to which they affect what citizens can know about those in power (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). When such influence intensifies or becomes naturalised, it can erode media pluralism and leave news organisations vulnerable to capture (Dragomir, 2024). As political influences may be perceived in different aspects of journalistic practice, this study uses Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, 2014) hierarchy of influences as a useful framework for organising previous research and distinguishing the contexts in which journalists encounter political influences. Consequently, we organise the review around four domains in which political influence is encountered, adapting the hierarchy of influences to the political domain rather than reproducing it strictly.

### *Political context*

Within Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, 2014) hierarchy of influences model, the social system level represents the broadest layer, covering political institutions, laws and prevailing ideologies. These macrostructures create the political context for journalists' practice. Scholars have explored the effect of political systems on how journalism is shaped for decades, reaching back

as far as Siebert et al.'s (1956) influential normative study on how the press is formed by the political system within which it operates. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal classification of media systems identified journalism's political context as a major differentiating force. More recent work has empirically established the influence that political systems such as authoritarianism and democracy have on how journalists perceive influences on their work. Hanitzsch et al. (2010) found that journalists working in democracies tend to feel more autonomy in their work where press freedom is strong.

Curiously, many journalists still downplay political or economic pressures, even when those influences are clearly present. This gap between structural realities and personal perceptions was further explored by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011), who suggested that journalists in most countries consider routine and organisational factors to be the most influential, while political pressures are often treated as peripheral. Zielonka (2015) further argued that the relationships between media and politics are dynamic and adapt to broader societal changes that challenge established assumptions about how media operate and the extent of their autonomy. In more restrictive regimes, political control can quietly blend into newsroom routines and professional norms, making it harder to recognise in everyday discourse. Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) demonstrated that structural and procedural pressures tend to undermine journalists' sense of autonomy, whereas democracy and press freedom reinforce it. Political influence, they argued, rarely works through direct interference; rather, it manifests through the broader conditions that define newsroom life. Consequently, Dragomir (2024) argued that political actors increasingly exert their influence through indirect mechanisms, leaving media organisations vulnerable to forms of capture that affect professional journalistic standards and constrain media pluralism.

Several regional studies have illustrated how these dynamics vary across media systems. Lauk and Harro-Loit (2017) noted that journalistic autonomy in Central and Eastern Europe remains historically and culturally fragile, challenged by political interference, concentrated media ownership and precarious working conditions. Similarly, Rupar et al. (2021) showed that in countries such as the Czech Republic and Serbia, journalists often declare high autonomy yet operate within systems marked by managerial loyalty, self-censorship and economic dependence. Even when overt political pressure appears minimal, these subtle constraints persist beneath the surface. Van Dalen (2012) examined how political influence shaped news values, and his content analysis indicated that government institutions were often treated as inherently newsworthy, creating a built-in bias towards covering state actors. In this sense, the political system shapes journalism not through visible coercion but through the very logic of news selection and professional norms.

*Organisational structures*

Scholars have long emphasised that newsroom organisation serves as a mediating layer between broader systemic forces and individual autonomy (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In practical terms, this means that ownership patterns, management habits and the increasingly precarious nature of journalistic work all shape how political influence filters down into daily editorial life. For example, studies of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe have pointed to the close ties between domestic investors, political elites and dominant media groups (Štětka, 2010). As several authors have noted, this web of connections blurs the line between business and politics in ways that directly influence newsroom independence. Örnebring (2012) described this as the instrumentalisation of media – that is, the strategic use of news organisations to pursue power interests and maintain clientelist networks. This pattern has weakened journalism's traditional

'watchdog' role, making some outlets appear less like observers and more like participants in power structures (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). In their recent book, Benson et al. (2025) investigated four different types of media ownership: stock market, private, civil society and public. The authors conducted interviews and collected data in three wealthy democracies – the US, Sweden and France – to establish how ownership type shapes journalistic practice. In the Czech Republic, Kotisová and Waschková Císařová (2023) showed how ownership changes reshape newsroom culture. After Prime Minister Babiš acquired *Mafra*, journalists described two kinds of autonomy: value-based, when departing the newsroom felt like the only option, and practical, when staying meant adapting within constraints. Their study captured how journalists negotiate freedom under growing political–organisational pressure.

Ceron et al. (2019) showed that political influence also works through newsroom hierarchies and career incentives. Instead of direct pressure, it often takes the form of subtle rewards and quiet signals of approval. In polarised media systems, journalists who share their editors' views tend to enjoy more freedom and better positions, while ideological distance limits both autonomy and career growth. Autonomy, in this sense, becomes less a professional right and more a reward. A similar pattern appears in Goyanes and Demeter's (2020) study of Spain. They found that journalists in public media or on temporary contracts faced the strongest internal editorial pressures. However, the authors suggested that political influence in public organisations is not exerted directly but channelled through the organisation itself, through the appointment of politically aligned managers and editors, so that what journalists experience as internal editorial influence may in fact be political influence in another guise.

*Practices and routines*

An extensive body of research has focused on the power dynamics between political actors and journalists. The interaction between these groups is evident in everyday routines, such as sourcing, and constitutes a contested and conflictual field of mutual dependencies. The relationship between political actors and journalists has been seen as so closely intertwined that scholars used the metaphor of a dance (Gans, 2004 [1979]; Schudson, 2003) – or, emphasising the conflictual power dynamics between both groups, a 'tug of war' (Gans, 2004 [1979], p. 81).

The interaction between journalists and politicians exercises political influence in both directions: while politicians can influence what and how journalists report (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Napoli & Royal, 2025), journalists, in turn, may affect how politicians represent their policies (e.g. Esser, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008) and what they prioritise (e.g. Walgrave, 2008). The mutual dependency between journalists and politicians is reflected in the extent to which politicians have integrated their constant contact and exchange with journalists into their own thinking, using journalists not only to represent and promote their work but also to gauge the political mood and developments in their field (Davis, 2009). Social media have further amplified this interdependency (Ekman & Widholm, 2015).

*Individual perspectives*

The close interaction and mutual influence between journalists and political actors has been observed predominantly in democratic media systems. However, comparative research has found that different professional journalistic cultures are affected to different degrees by external influences. Based on data from the second wave of the WJS, Hanitzsch, Vos et al. (2019) found

that journalists' adherence to monitorial and collaborative roles was strongly related to perceived political influences. At the country level, the subjective importance of a collaborative role – in which journalists conceive of themselves as partners of the government – increased with the amount of political influence collectively perceived by the journalists ($r$ = .70). In contrast, emphasis on a monitorial role – namely, journalists acting as the 'Fourth Estate' – declined as journalists experienced greater political influence ($r$ = -.49). The same study noted differences in journalists' perceived political influences for a range of contextual factors. Political influence was rated significantly higher in countries that perform poorly on measures of media freedom, democratic performance, rule of law, human development and acceptance of power inequality (Hanitzsch, Ramaprasad et al., 2019). Differences in perceived political influence have also been noted between Western democracies that diverge in their degree of political parallelism (Maurer, 2019).

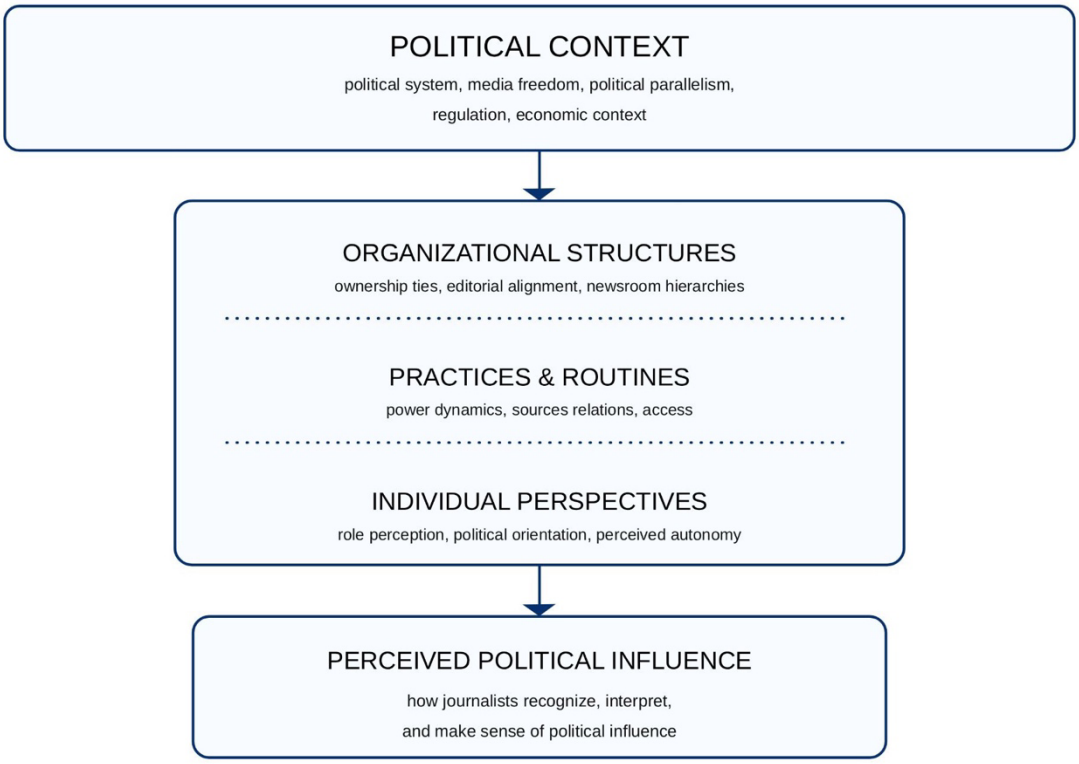
Overall, the literature suggests that political influence on journalism is not best captured by a fixed hierarchy of levels but by the way political context is progressively filtered before being registered in journalists' perceptions. We therefore propose a model in which the political context constitutes the macro-level input (Figure 1). Its effects do not reach journalists directly but pass through three filter layers: organisational structures, practices and routines, and individual perspectives. The outcome is perceived political influence: how journalists recognise, interpret and make sense of political forces in their work. This conceptualisation clarifies why structural constraints documented at the systemic level are often downplayed in journalists' self-reports: they are absorbed and naturalised as they pass through each layer.

The political context that feeds this model is not static; rather, it evolves over time with changes in regimes, governments, legislative frameworks the enforcement of laws, or simply the political climate surrounding media–politics relations (Zielonka, 2015; Cotta & Isernia, 2021). Such shifts call for a more systematic view of how perceived influences evolve. This study therefore adopts a timewise and cross-national perspective, comparing the evolution of the political context with that of perceived political influence over nearly a decade – a comparison to which we return in the discussion. Consequently, it addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1: How did journalists' perceptions of political influences change between the two waves of the WJS?*

*RQ2: To what extent are these perceptions correlated with the evolution of the political environment?*

*Figure 1: A filtering model of perceived political influence on journalists.*




**Methodology**

The analysis builds upon the theoretical and empirical foundations laid out in Hanitzsch, Ramaprasad et al. (2019) and related work examining perceived influences on journalistic work. This study relies on a composite index derived from the WJS dataset. The political influences index is based on four items ('politicians', 'government officials', 'pressure groups' and 'business representatives') worded identically across both waves, using the same five-point Likert scales, thereby allowing for direct cross-wave comparison. The index was constructed from journalists' responses to the following question: '*Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work*.' The index represents the arithmetic mean of responses to relevant items, with scores ranging from 1 (not influential) to 5 (extremely influential). The WJS indices were developed following a formative measurement approach rather than a reflective one (Lauerer & Hanitzsch, 2019), meaning that the items are not assumed to be caused by an underlying latent construct but instead collectively define the conceptual domain of influence.

To ensure methodological consistency, harmonised datasets from Waves 2 (WJS2) and Wave 3 (WJS3) were used (Lauerer et al., 2025), with only countries that participated in both waves retained ($N = 54$). The overall sample comprised 22,558 journalists in WJS2 and 24,128 journalists in WJS3. Most included country datasets featured representative surveys of the respective

journalist population with a maximum margin of error of 5.1%, with a few exceptions[1]. For a comprehensive outline of the WJS methodology, see Lauerer and Hanitzsch (2019) and Lauerer and Grünewald (2025).

In the second stage, since the aim of this research was to place perceptions of political influence in perspective with the actual developments observed within the countries under study, we drew on data from four indices covering the political sphere in a broad sense. Press freedom, civil and political freedoms, democratic performance and the rule of law are widely regarded in the literature as the key political conditions shaping the environment in which journalism operates (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011). We therefore selected the four indices that most directly and authoritatively captured these dimensions and that are among the most widely used in comparative journalism and democracy research: The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index and the Freedom House Freedom in the World index. Their methodologies – particularly their network of investigators and experts, the way concepts are defined and measured and the number of indicators used – are not identical and raise some issues, particularly in the way they rate countries' levels of democracy. As the methodological nuances of these indices sometimes lead to different empirical results (Högström, 2013), it was necessary to include a set of widely used indices, since 'no single index offers a satisfactory response' to the three most common challenges in such an endeavour: 'conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation' (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 28).

The Freedom in the World index evaluates the state of freedom around the world. Each country is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. The indicators are grouped into the categories of political rights and civil liberties, whose totals are weighted equally to determine whether the country has an overall status of free, partly free or not free. The index 'assesses the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, rather than governments or government performance per se' (Freedom House, 2025, p. 23).

The Economist Intelligence Unit's index of democracy, on a scale of 0 to 10, is based on the ratings for 60 indicators, grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture. Each category has a rating on a scale of 0 to 10, and the overall index is the average of the five category indices. The index values are used to place countries within one of four types of regimes: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024).

The Rule of Law Index presents information on eight composite factors that are further disaggregated into 44 specific sub-factors. It is 'designed to offer a reliable and independent data source (…) to assess a country's adherence to the rule of law as perceived and experienced by the average person, identify a country's strengths and weaknesses in comparison to similarly situated countries, and track changes over time' (World Justice Project, 2025, p. 6). These factors are constraints on government power, absence of corruption, fundamental rights, open government, regulatory enforcement, order and security, civil justice and criminal justice. The country scores and rankings presented are built from more than 550 variables.

[1] Non-representative datasets Wave 2: Bulgaria, Singapore and South Korea, Turkey; non-representative datasets Wave 3: Ecuador, Hong Kong, Hungary, the Netherlands, Serbia and Singapore.

The Press Freedom Index gives a more direct examination of the links between the journalistic field and the political environment. The ranking, whose methodology was updated in 2022, is based on a score assigned to each country, ranging from 0 (lowest press freedom) to 100 (highest). The score is calculated based on two components: a quantitative assessment of abuses committed against media outlets and professionals in the course of their professional activities, and a qualitative analysis of the situation in each country, measured through the responses of press freedom specialists to a questionnaire. Each country's score is based on five contextual indicators. The political context indicator (35 questions and sub-questions) aims to assess 'the degree of support for, and respect of, media autonomy in the face of political pressure exerted by the state or other political actors within society; the level of acceptance of a diversity of journalistic approaches that adhere to professional standards, including politically aligned as well as independent forms of journalism; the extent to which media outlets are supported in fulfilling their role of holding political actors and government authorities accountable, in the public interest' (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

To measure political change between the two waves of the WJS, we considered, for each country, the year in which the fieldwork was carried out. When fieldwork extended over several years, the most recent year was retained. WJS fieldwork ranged from 2012 to 2016 for WJS2 and from 2021 to 2025 for WJS3. Because the Rule of Law Index began in 2015, earlier years could not be included. For this index alone, countries whose WJS2 fieldwork occurred between 2012 and 2015 were analysed with 2015 as a reference year.

**Findings**

*Changes in perceived influences over time*

In terms of changes in perceived political influences during the analysed periods (RQ1), there was a degree of similarity between WJS2 and WJS3, with no statistically significant differences in 22 of the 54 countries studied (see the upper part of Table 1). However, statistically significant differences emerged in the rest of the sample: in 17 countries, journalists reported increased political influences, while in 15 countries they reported decreases. Notably, more strongly perceived political influences were apparent in countries as diverse as Brazil, Tanzania, Hong Kong, Egypt and Portugal, all of which showed a medium-sized effect, as measured by Cohen's *d*. Statistically significant differences indicating higher perceived political influences, but with small effect sizes, were present in parts of South-Eastern Europe (Moldova, Kosovo, Albania and Turkey), South and South-East Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia and India) and Canada and Italy. However, there were also decreases in the perceived strength of political influences. The strongest – at least medium-sized – effects in this regard were observed in Singapore and Thailand, whereas at least a small effect was identified in parts of South-Eastern Europe (Serbia and Croatia), Latin America (El Salvador, Mexico and Ecuador), South Asia (Bhutan), Western Europe (Ireland, Sweden and Denmark) and Australia. As this brief overview demonstrates, it is difficult to identify any regional tendencies in the results, reinforcing the argument that systemic factors more specific to national media systems were at play.

*Table 1:Perceived political influence over time - Worlds of Journalisme Study data*

| **Country** | **WJS2 (2012-16)** | | | **WJS3 (2021-25)** | | | **Mean difference** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *Mean* | *SD* | *N* | *Mean* | *SD* | *Delta* | *d* |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Albania | 295 | 1.88 | 0.83 | 272 | 2.19 | 1.12 | .31*** | .324 |
| Argentina | 352 | 2.26 | 0.94 | 361 | 2.30 | 0.98 | .04 | .039 |
| Australia | 604 | 2.25 | 0.84 | 345 | 2.01 | 0.87 | -.24*** | -.277 |
| Austria | 774 | 1.58 | 0.64 | 827 | 1.65 | 0.70 | .07* | .104 |
| Belgium | 587 | 1.68 | 0.80 | 549 | 1.69 | 0.72 | .01 | .015 |
| Bhutan | 90 | 3.18 | 0.96 | 88 | 2.83 | 1.03 | -.35*** | -.352 |
| Brazil | 376 | 2.09 | 0.93 | 590 | 2.80 | 1.02 | .71*** | .724 |
| Bulgaria | 219 | 2.01 | 1.10 | 364 | 2.01 | 0.96 | 0 | .001 |
| Canada | 351 | 1.65 | 0.81 | 376 | 1.98 | 0.85 | .33*** | .393 |
| Chile | 449 | 2.17 | 1.11 | 388 | 2.09 | 0.91 | -.08 | -.078 |
| China | 647 | 2.91 | 0.78 | 1138 | 2.89 | 0.82 | -.01 | -.015 |
| Colombia | 547 | 2.56 | 1.17 | 370 | 2.36 | 1.13 | -.20** | -.175 |
| Croatia | 545 | 2.15 | 1.25 | 304 | 1.84 | 0.88 | -.31*** | -.276 |
| Czech Republic | 288 | 1.64 | 0.78 | 316 | 1.69 | 0.74 | .05 | .072 |
| Denmark | 1295 | 1.98 | 0.83 | 439 | 1.79 | 0.85 | -.19*** | -.232 |
| Ecuador | 363 | 2.79 | 1.20 | 287 | 2.49 | 1.05 | -.30*** | -.264 |
| Egypt | 396 | 2.64 | 1.09 | 370 | 3.21 | 1.16 | .57*** | .503 |
| El Salvador | 249 | 2.81 | 1.16 | 204 | 2.45 | 1.13 | -.35** | -.309 |
| Estonia | 274 | 1.72 | 0.71 | 261 | 1.74 | 0.84 | .02 | .025 |
| Ethiopia | 345 | 3.15 | 1.18 | 353 | 3.11 | 0.95 | -.03 | -.031 |
| Finland | 364 | 1.97 | 0.82 | 399 | 1.85 | 0.79 | -.13** | -.157 |
| Germany | 755 | 1.58 | 0.63 | 1171 | 1.56 | 0.58 | -.02 | -.034 |
| Hong Kong | 458 | 2.25 | 0.87 | 267 | 2.83 | 0.97 | .58*** | .638 |
| Hungary | 366 | 1.98 | 0.99 | 190 | 1.89 | 0.84 | -.09 | -.092 |
| Iceland | 181 | 1.61 | 0.74 | 218 | 1.76 | 0.90 | .15 | .177 |
| India | 517 | 2.54 | 1.06 | 435 | 2.78 | 1.03 | .24*** | .224 |
| Indonesia | 659 | 2.30 | 0.97 | 720 | 2.70 | 1.10 | .40*** | .385 |
| Ireland | 300 | 2.14 | 0.93 | 324 | 1.88 | 0.83 | -.27*** | -.301 |
| Israel | 340 | 1.71 | 0.85 | 301 | 1.72 | 0.90 | .01 | .013 |
| Italy | 387 | 1.63 | 0.79 | 622 | 1.95 | 0.93 | .31*** | .354 |
| Kosovo | 194 | 2.16 | 1.10 | 218 | 2.58 | 1.08 | .42*** | .382 |
| Latvia | 339 | 1.42 | 0.62 | 426 | 1.53 | 0.70 | .12* | .176 |
| Mexico | 369 | 2.53 | 1.05 | 443 | 2.30 | 1.04 | -.23** | -.223 |
| Moldova | 221 | 1.83 | 0.91 | 286 | 2.29 | 0.93 | .46*** | .494 |
| Netherlands | 512 | 1.89 | 0.80 | 247 | 1.99 | 0.86 | .11 | .130 |
| New Zealand | 490 | 2.02 | 0.92 | 328 | 2.05 | 0.94 | .03 | .029 |
| Norway | 548 | 1.82 | 0.68 | 893 | 1.94 | 0.73 | .12** | .169 |
| Philippines | 337 | 2.39 | 0.94 | 332 | 2.79 | 1.05 | .40*** | .405 |
| Portugal | 405 | 1.60 | 0.80 | 365 | 2.04 | 0.54 | .45*** | .644 |
| Romania | 339 | 1.80 | 0.94 | 330 | 1.78 | 0.97 | -.02 | -.018 |
| Serbia | 405 | 2.13 | 1.07 | 249 | 1.71 | 0.75 | -.42*** | -.440 |
| Sierra Leone | 218 | 2.73 | 1.02 | 224 | 2.83 | 1.08 | .10 | .094 |
| Singapore | 91 | 2.91 | 0.94 | 178 | 2.42 | 0.83 | -.49*** | -.564 |
| South Africa | 371 | 2.39 | 0.96 | 289 | 2.21 | 1.00 | -.18* | -.182 |
| South Korea | 352 | 2.67 | 0.90 | 365 | 2.73 | 0.91 | .05 | .058 |
| Spain | 389 | 2.23 | 0.93 | 386 | 2.20 | 0.90 | -.03 | -.028 |
| Sweden | 645 | 1.67 | 0.60 | 424 | 1.48 | 0.66 | -.19*** | -.303 |
| Switzerland | 901 | 1.88 | 0.68 | 1121 | 1.90 | 0.76 | .02 | .031 |
| Tanzania | 272 | 2.55 | 0.56 | 861 | 3.20 | 0.83 | .65*** | .840 |
| Thailand | 370 | 3.73 | 0.86 | 378 | 2.97 | 1.05 | -.76*** | -.788 |
| Turkey | 95 | 3.03 | 1.20 | 369 | 3.39 | 0.96 | .37** | .361 |
| UAE | 219 | 3.10 | 1.23 | 291 | 3.15 | 0.95 | .05 | .045 |
| UK | 689 | 2.05 | 0.82 | 995 | 2.03 | 0.91 | -.02 | -.023 |
| USA | 414 | 1.93 | 0.83 | 1281 | 1.93 | 0.81 | -.01 | -.007 |
| **Total (N = 54)** | **22,468** | **2.19** | | **24,040** | **2.23** | | **.04** | |
| Bangladesh | 320 | 2.15 | 1.13 | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Botswana | 185 | 2.82 | 1.12 | | | | |
| Cyprus | 204 | 1.72 | 0.81 | | | | |
| France | 219 | 1.47 | 0.57 | | | | |
| Greece | 378 | 1.91 | 1.04 | | | | |
| Japan | 741 | 1.87 | 0.75 | | | | |
| Kenya | 336 | 2.62 | 0.92 | | | | |
| Malawi | 170 | 2.87 | 1.05 | | | | |
| Malaysia | 363 | 3.29 | 0.84 | | | | |
| Oman | 256 | 3.03 | 0.74 | | | | |
| Qatar | 412 | 2.65 | 0.94 | | | | |
| Russia | 390 | 2.24 | 0.78 | | | | |
| Sudan | 271 | 3.16 | 1.42 | | | | |
| Bolivia | | | | 400 | 2.02 | 0.90 | |
| Costa Rica | | | | 215 | 2.15 | 1.00 | |
| Cuba | | | | 329 | 2.75 | 1.08 | |
| Kazakhstan | | | | 233 | 2.99 | 1.02 | |
| Lithuania | | | | 296 | 1.84 | 0.84 | |
| Nepal | | | | 394 | 3.16 | 1.04 | |
| North Macedonia | | | | 216 | 1.92 | 1.06 | |
| Northern Cyprus | | | | 117 | 3.02 | 1.16 | |
| Pakistan | | | | 361 | 2.82 | 0.91 | |
| Paraguay | | | | 677 | 2.22 | 0.96 | |
| Peru | | | | 315 | 1.97 | 1.14 | |
| Poland | | | | 409 | 2.28 | 1.15 | |
| Seychelles | | | | 56 | 2.27 | 1.04 | |
| Slovakia | | | | 300 | 1.82 | 0.90 | |
| Slovenia | | | | 331 | 1.80 | 0.73 | |
| Taiwan | | | | 438 | 2.18 | 0.94 | |
| Ukraine | | | | 181 | 2.03 | 0.87 | |
| Uzbekistan | | | | 478 | 2.55 | 0.81 | |
| Venezuela | | | | 395 | 2.82 | 0.94 | |
| Yemen | | | | 283 | 3.70 | 0.74 | |
| Zambia | | | | 269 | 3.21 | 1.14 | |
| **Total** | **26,803** | **2.25** | | **30,821** | **2.31** | | **.04** |

Notes: ···$p < .001$ (two-tailed); overall mean difference for countries included in both waves, with each country given the same weight

*Relationship between perceived influences and system-level indices*

Before examining the extent to which these changes in perceived influences might be related to systemic developments, it is first important to examine the degree to which these two factors actually correlated at their respective time intervals. As Table 2 shows, the ways in which journalists perceived political influences was very strongly correlated with externally assessed media system indices. Regardless of which index was considered, there were clear overall negative correlations between perceived political influences and political contexts during the 2012–2016 period. This means that the more restrictive a political context (meaning it is assigned a lower score in an index), the higher journalists perceive the impact of political influences on their work. As Hanitzsch, Ramaprasad et al. (2019) stated in their analysis of WJS2, 'Associations were particularly strong for political and economic pressures' (p. 126). The analysis of WJS3 data confirmed this finding, showing that the negative correlations actually strengthened across all of the four indices considered.

*Table 2: Country-level correlates of perceived political influence*

| | WJS2 (2012-16) | | WJS3 (2021-25) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | *r* | *N* | *r* |
| Press freedom (RSF) | 67 | -.651*** | 74 | -.756*** |
| Freedom in the World (FH) | 67 | -.752*** | 75 | -.782*** |
| Democratic performance (EIU) | 66 | -.691*** | 72 | -.728*** |
| Rule of law (WJP) | 67 | -.481*** | 66 | -.633*** |

Note: ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed)

These results further reinforce the argument that journalists' perceptions of political influences are consistently explained by indicators of democratic performance, supporting the importance of national and regional contextual factors in shaping journalistic cultures. Specifically, both WJS2 and WJS3 showed that the strongest correlation was with the Freedom in the World (Freedom House, 2025) index, with a Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient of greater than .75 in each case. It thus appears that this index is a particularly strong predictor of how journalists perceive political influences in their work.

*Changes over time in the relationship between political influences and systemic factors*

Having established the strong correlation between media system variables and journalists' perceived political influences, we now move to examining the extent to which changes at the media system level reflect changes in perceived influences at the journalist level (RQ2). Each of the four indices used in this study depicted very similar global trends. All four indices reported predominantly negative developments within our sample. For each index, a clear majority of countries experienced a deterioration in their political situation over the timespan of this study (see the Appendix). While we concentrate here on two specific points in time, reports from the four organisations consistently highlighted a long-term trend: the observable deterioration of political contexts does not result from the particular years selected but rather reflects a decade-long decline, with only a few notable exceptions.

We begin our analysis by focusing on the relationship between respondents' perceived political influences and the Freedom in the World index, which, as noted earlier, was particularly strong. Of the 54 countries, 37 showed a decline in terms of freedom, most pronounced in Tanzania, Turkey, Egypt, Hong Kong and El Salvador, all of which dropped considerably over the timespan of the study. At the other end, countries such as Kosovo, Colombia and Ecuador showed some improvement in their index scores.

To measure the extent to which the observed changes in journalists' perceived political influences reflected changes in their countries' Freedom in the World index scores, we conducted a correlation analysis between each country's delta score (i.e. the difference between means) for journalists' perceived political influences and its Freedom in the World index score. Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a statistically significant relationship with a medium-sized effect ($r = -.34$, $p < .05$), supporting the argument that changes at the system level broadly

reflect changes in journalists' perceptions[2]. However, the strength of this relationship was substantially lower than what might have been expected, given the strong correlations at the individual time points noted previously ($r > .75$). This finding therefore warrants further detailed inspection of the individual countries in our sample.

*Figure 2: Changes in perceived political influences and changes in Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index*

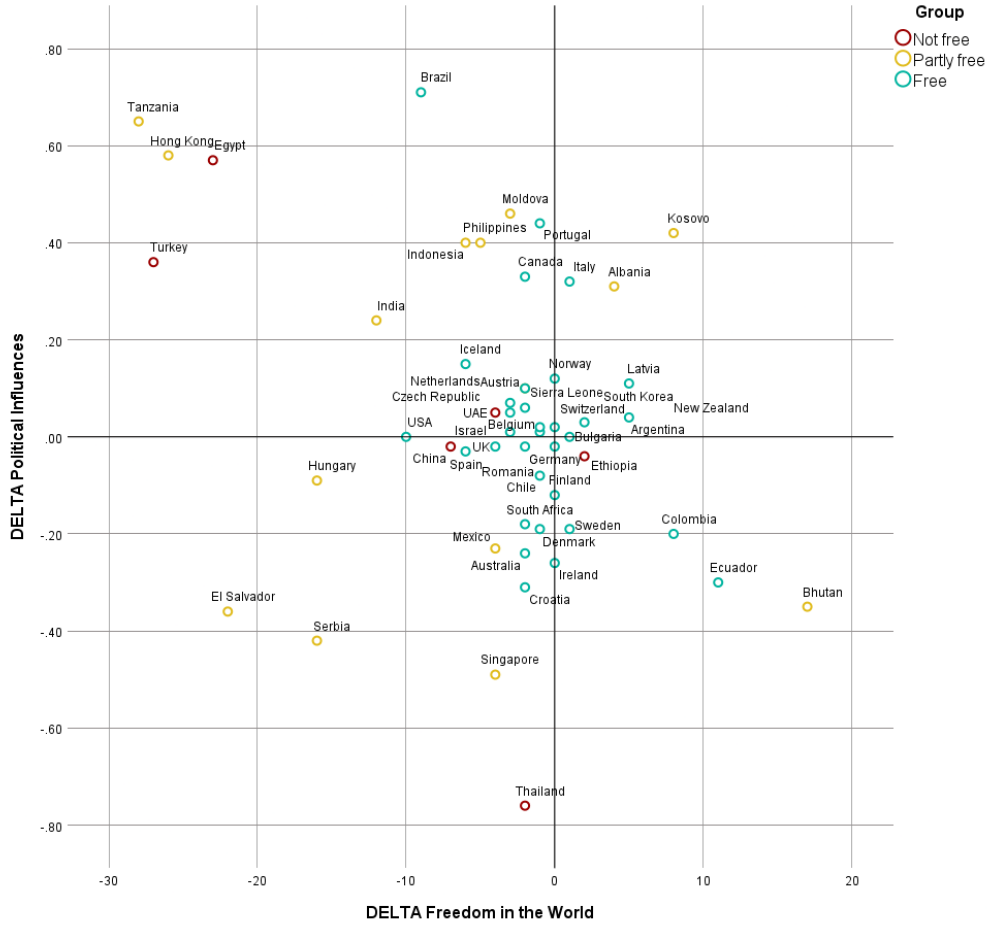



Figure 2 presents the results for easier interpretation, with the upper-left quadrant showing countries in which freedom decreased and perceived political influences increased. Correspondingly, countries in the lower-right quadrant experienced an increase in freedom and a decrease in the strength of perceived political influences. If a decline in freedom universally led to an increase in perceived political influences among journalists, countries would be expected to line up from the upper left of the figure to the lower right. Tanzania, Hong Kong and Egypt showed the strongest correspondence between the two variables, with a marked decline in political freedom accompanied by stronger perceptions of political influences between the two waves. These results are consistent with the widely documented deterioration of press freedom in these countries over recent years, including ongoing autocratic rule in Tanzania (Danso et al., 2025), the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020 (Lee et al., 2023) and increasing authoritarian tendencies in Egypt (Badr, 2020). Similarly, journalists in Turkey also reported a strong increase in perceived political influences, which is unsurprising given the

[2] The correlations for the other indices were as follows: RSF: $r = -.26$, ns; EIU: $r = -.22$, ns; RoL: $r = -.01$.

democratic backsliding during the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan over the past decade (Akser & Baybars, 2023).

In Brazil, journalists reported the strongest increase in perceived political influences, even though their country's freedom score did not drop quite as substantially. The recent decade has been relatively turbulent in the Latin American country, characterised by the institutional crisis during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (Marques, 2023). In contrast, Colombia and Ecuador both reported a small improvement in their political contexts and a slight decrease in political influences. We also observed a large number of countries clustering around the centre in Figure 2, indicating only very small changes in both perceived political influences and freedom scores. Most of these countries are classified as 'free' by the Freedom House index, while those further away from the centre of the two axes tend to be 'partly free'.

Results from the remaining two quadrants were surprising. Located in the upper-right quadrant were countries in which journalists perceived increases in political influences, but their countries had actually improved in terms of freedom, while in the lower-left quadrant, journalists perceived weaker political influences even though freedom had decreased in their countries. These counterintuitive findings deserve further discussion. In particular, journalists in El Salvador, Serbia, Singapore and Thailand reported substantially weaker political influences, even though their respective countries' freedom had worsened, at least according to Freedom House. Hungary's freedom score also decreased substantially, but its journalists reported a small weakening of political influences, although this change was not statistically significant. In the case of both Hungary and Serbia, the samples were not representative, as it was difficult to achieve representativeness in deteriorating political environments, where many journalists feared repercussions if they spoke up. Singapore also did not include representative samples in either wave of the WJS. However, the results are more difficult to explain in the case of El Salvador, which has undergone a particularly tumultuous period for press freedom under President Nayib Bukele. In the case of Thailand, there was only a slight decrease in freedom but a substantial weakening of perceived political influences, which may have been partly due to the end of the military regime in 2019. At the other end of Figure 2, journalists in Kosovo, in particular, reported stronger political influences, but their country had actually improved on the freedom index.

While our results broadly show a correlation between changes in a country's score on the Freedom in the World index and changes in journalists' perceived political influences, the outliers noted above demonstrate that this relationship is not as strong as one might expect. One reason may be that the more tumultuous a national environment became over the course of our study period, the more journalists' responses may not align with expectation. Put simply, journalists' perceptions of political influences may take time to reflect changes in the broader system. The literature suggests that journalistic cultures more generally may be slow to change (Hanitzsch, 2007), providing at least some support for this argument. On the other hand, the more stable a system, the less journalists' perceptions of political influence may fluctuate. In this regard, it is noteworthy that countries located around the middle of Figure 2 were those classed as 'free' by Freedom House. The only exceptions were China, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, all of which had been authoritarian contexts for quite some time and could also be classed as stable in that respect.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study sought to determine whether shifts in perceived influences on journalists over a period of approximately 10 years corresponded to parallel changes in the political environments of a sample of 54 countries. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how journalism cultures adapt to changing contextual conditions and how the negotiation of political influences unfolds over time within varied media systems. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first study to offer a comparative mapping over time of how journalists perceive political influences on their work in a large sample of countries and in relation to external indicators assessing the state of political freedoms in their countries.

Viewed through the 'filter model' proposed earlier (Figure 1), our design empirically captures the two ends of that model: the political context, operationalised through the four external indices, and perceived political influences, operationalised through the WJS perception measure. This framing helps make sense of our central result: more restrictive contexts and stronger perceived influences go together at each point in time, yet their changes track each other only moderately.

Our findings suggest that in 59% of the countries in our sample, journalists reported statistically significant changes in their perceptions of political influences on their work. In approximately a third of countries, these influences increased, in slightly more than a quarter, they decreased, and in the rest, they stayed roughly the same. The link between changes in journalists' perceptions of political influences and documented declines in democratic freedoms according to the four external indices we used was not as straightforward as we might have assumed. While there was a statistically significant relationship between journalists' perceived political influences and their countries' Freedom in the World index scores, supporting the argument that changes at the system level broadly reflect changes in journalists' perceptions, this relationship was not straightforward when considering the other three indices. Even in relation to Freedom House's index, this relationship was substantially lower than might have been expected, given the strong correlations at the individual time points studied.

Our model offers an interpretation of this imperfect fit. While our design measures only the two ends of the model (political context and perceived political influence), the filtering logic suggests why they diverge: shifts in the political context are not registered directly but pass through organisational structures, practices and routines and individual perspectives, each of which can dampen, redirect or even override systemic factors. An improvement in a country's press freedom, for instance, need not translate into journalists perceiving less political influence if ownership ties, editorial alignment or precarious working conditions continue to expose them to it. Conversely, individual factors, such as professional experience or experiences of threats to their safety, may shape perceptions independently of the broader context. On this reading, perceived political influence is the product not of the political context alone but of what these intermediate layers do to it, which would explain why systemic change and perceived change can diverge. It would also account for the limited movement observed in the most stable contexts, including long-standing authoritarian settings such as China, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, where little systemic change leaves little for these stages to filter or transform.

We should carefully consider our own research instruments and the extent to which we were able to study the intersections (Firmstone, 2023) between the different types and levels of influences. A logical next step is therefore to model these intermediate layers directly, examining how organisational structures, practices and routines and individual perspectives intersect and condition one another in transmitting, or buffering, political context. Capturing these cross-level

dynamics would test the filtering mechanism that our data can only infer and move from mapping the two ends of the model to explaining what happens between them. The external indices we used also have their own methodological limitations. A more thorough analysis at the systemic level would likely also require a grouping of countries based on key systemic differences and similarities – a task for future research. Despite the limitations, our study shows how important it is to examine changes over time in political influences on journalists' work and to enhance our conceptual and methodological apparatus so that we may be better placed to explain how these influences impact on journalistic practice and roles and, ultimately, journalism as a discursive social institution (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

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## Appendix

Figure A1: Evolution of the *Democracy Index* between WJS 2 and WJS3
*Countries in green = Democracy Index evolved positively. Countries in red: Democracy Index evolved negatively - The scores for this index range from 0 to 10. Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit.*

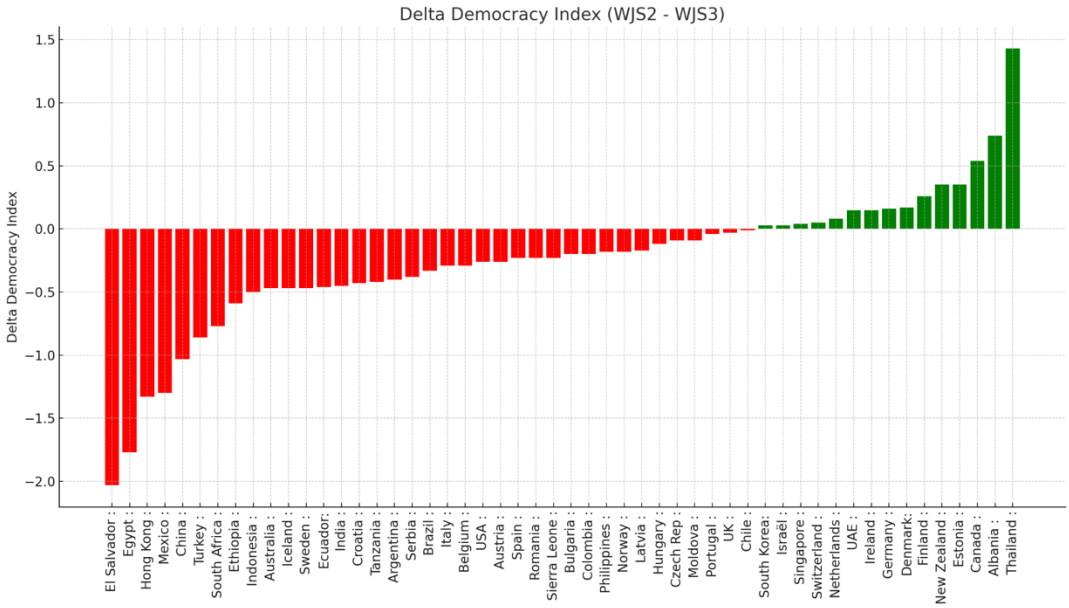



Figure A2 : Evolution of the *Rule of Law* Index between WJS 2 and WJS3
*Countries in green = Rule of Law scores evolved positively. The scores for this index range from 0 to 1. Source: World Justice Project.*

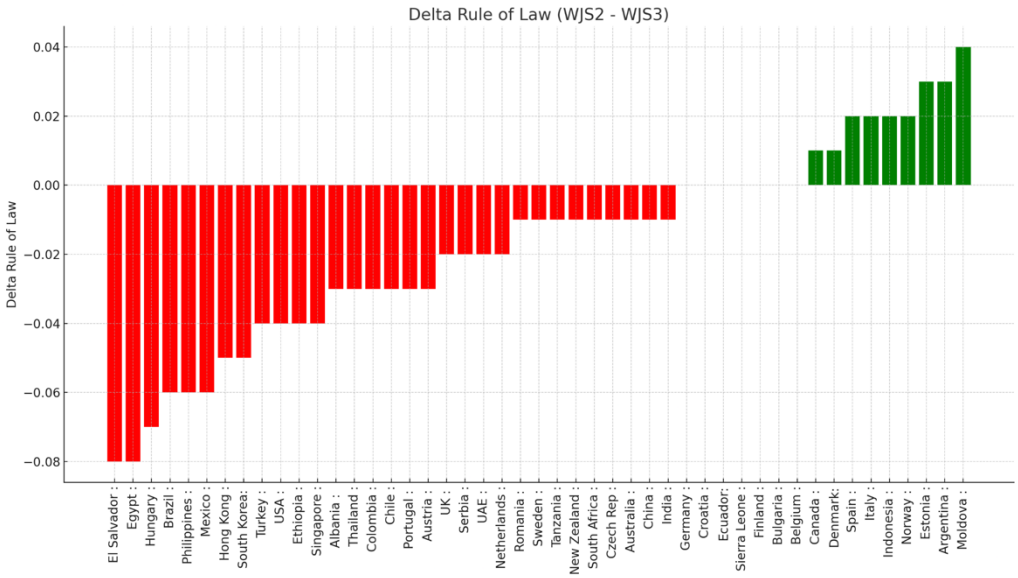



Figure A3 : Evolution of the *Freedom in the World* Index between WJS 2 and WJS3
*Countries in green = Freedom in the World evolved positively. The scores for this index range from 0 to 100. Source: Freedom House.*

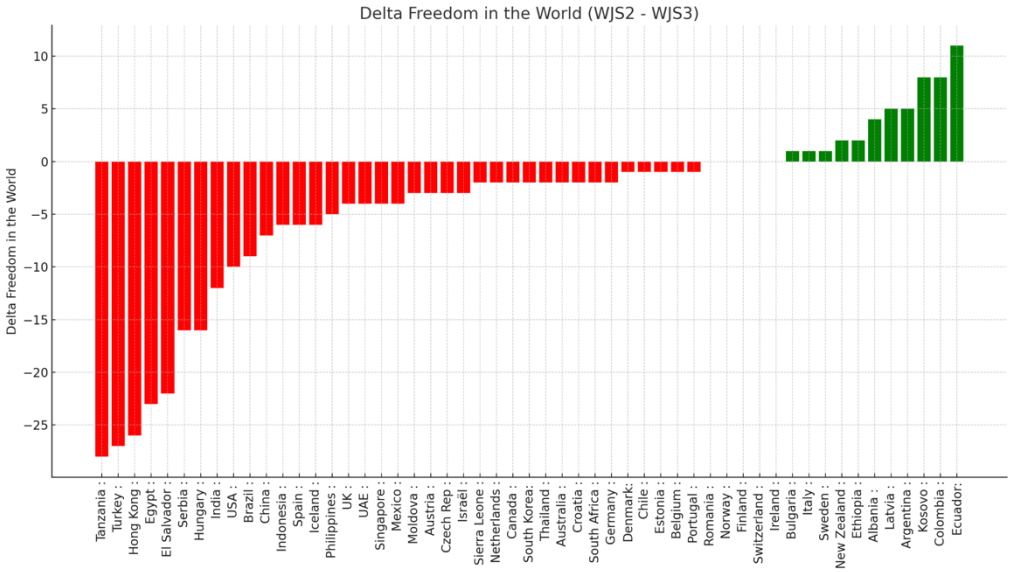



Figure A4 : Evolution of the *Press Freedom* Index between WJS 2 and WJS3
*Countries in green = Press Freedom evolved positively. The scores for this index range from 0 to 100. Source: Reporters Without Borders.*

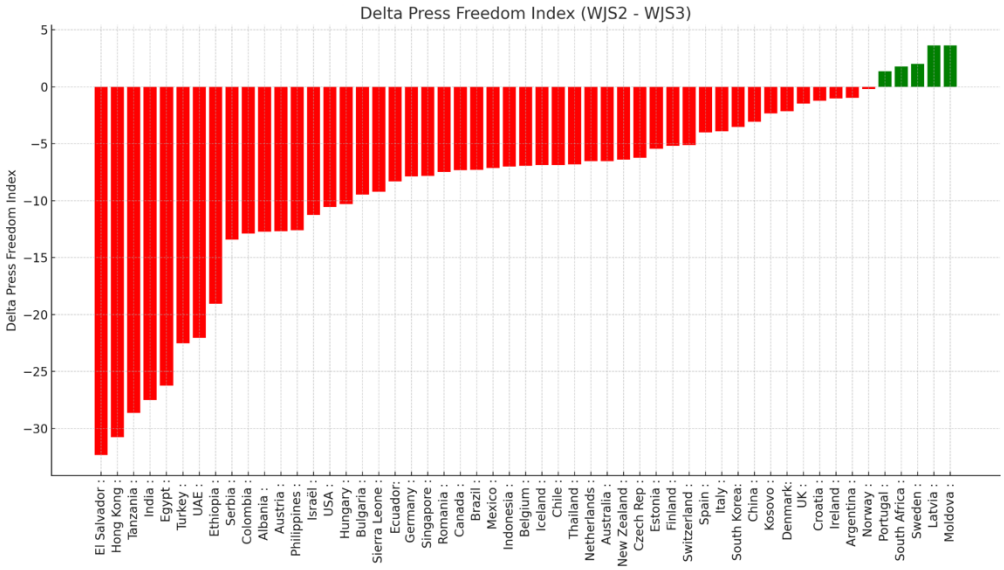



Figure A5 : Evolution of the perceived political influences between WJS2 and WJS3
*Countries in green = political influences are perceived as less influential by journalists. The scores for this index range from 0 to 5. Source: Worlds of Journalism Study*

| Country | **Delta Political Influences** |
|---|---|
| Thailand : | -0,76 |
| Singapore : | -0,49 |
| Serbia : | -0,42 |
| El Salvador : | -0,36 |
| Croatia : | -0,31 |
| Ecuador: | -0,3 |
| Ireland : | -0,26 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Australia : | -0,24 |
| Mexico : | -0,23 |
| Colombia : | -0,2 |
| Denmark: | -0,19 |
| Sweden : | -0,19 |
| South Africa : | -0,18 |
| Finland : | -0,12 |
| Hungary : | -0,09 |
| Chile : | -0,08 |
| Ethiopia : | -0,04 |
| Spain : | -0,03 |
| China : | -0,02 |
| Germany : | -0,02 |
| Romania : | -0,02 |
| UK : | -0,02 |
| Bulgaria : | 0 |
| USA : | 0 |
| Belgium : | 0,01 |
| Israël : | 0,01 |
| Estonia : | 0,02 |
| Switzerland : | 0,02 |
| New Zealand : | 0,03 |
| Argentina : | 0,04 |
| Czech Rep : | 0,05 |
| UAE : | 0,05 |
| South Korea: | 0,06 |
| Austria : | 0,07 |
| Netherlands : | 0,1 |
| Sierra Leone : | 0,1 |
| Latvia : | 0,11 |
| Norway : | 0,12 |
| Iceland : | 0,15 |
| India : | 0,24 |
| Albania : | 0,31 |
| Italy : | 0,32 |
| Canada : | 0,33 |
| Turkey : | 0,36 |
| Indonesia : | 0,4 |
| Philippines : | 0,4 |
| Kosovo : | 0,42 |
| Portugal : | 0,44 |
| Moldova : | 0,46 |
| Egypt : | 0,57 |
| Hong Kong : | 0,58 |
| Tanzania : | 0,65 |
| Brazil : | 0,71 |