

Does legal freedom satisfy?

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Abstract. Much political conflict in the world revolves around the issue of how much freedom to accord people. Liberal democracies are characterized by, e.g., the rule of law and a strong protection of civil rights, giving individuals a great deal of legally guaranteed freedom to lead their lives as they see fit. However, it is not known whether legal freedom suffices to make people satisfied with the freedom they perceive to have. Our study explores that issue by relating seven indicators of legal freedom to the satisfaction people express with their freedom of choice. Using a sample of 133 countries over the period 2008–2018, and taking a panel-data approach, we find that only one of the indicators, freedom of assembly, contributes robustly to satisfaction with freedom. However, when exploring conditional associations by interacting the indicators with social trust, the rule of law is also positively and increasingly related to satisfaction with freedom above a threshold level. Freedom of assembly is more positive for satisfaction with freedom the higher the GDP per capita and in democracies. Thus, for some types of legal freedom, formal legal institutions are complementary with culture, income and the political system in generating satisfaction with freedom.