

## Determinants of political tolerance : a literature review

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**Determinants of Political Tolerance:  
A Literature Review**

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**Abstract** This paper reviews the current literature on political tolerance with particular reference to its individual- and aggregate-level determinants. Individual-level determinants such as authoritarianism, education, contact, and threat perception are found to have robust effects on tolerance. What are less known are the mediating factors that enhance or reduce these effects. In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward the impact of contextual factors on threat and contact effects.

**Keywords:** political tolerance, authoritarianism, education, contact, threat, ethnicity

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## **Introduction**

This paper reviews the current literature on political tolerance with particular reference to its individual- and aggregate-level determinants. The section that follows discusses conceptual and operational definitions of tolerance. The subsequent two sections examine individual- and aggregate-level determinants respectively, and the final section concludes the paper with a summary of the main findings. The aim of this review is to gain an understanding not only of the major determinants of tolerance but also of the methodologies and contexts in which empirical research findings have been drawn. As this review shows, different methods and contexts have often yielded different results.

## **Defining and Measuring Tolerance**

Tolerance, and political tolerance in particular,<sup>1</sup> can be defined as a willingness to put up with disagreeable ideas and groups (Gibson 2007, 410). Tolerance is conventionally measured as a willingness to allow varying degrees of civil rights to those groups that the respondent likes least, in order to ensure the objection precondition in the conceptual definition of the term.<sup>2</sup> Although an expansion of the least-liked list to include the second (and third) least-liked groups has been proposed (Gibson 1992), the conventional least-liked approach remains the standard measurement of political tolerance. This is in general terms an improvement on Stouffer's (1955) tolerance scale that measured individual attitudes regarding the rights of nonconformists that consisted of socialists, atheists, and (suspected or admitted) communists.

Yet, too strict an application of the objection precondition and the least-liked approach can give rise to practical problems. The most serious of these is that the least-liked groups most often turn out to be extremist groups espousing goals that deny democratic values. It is doubtful that tolerance toward groups such as neo-Nazis, the Ku-Klux-Klan, or other racist groups, reflects political tolerance in its original meaning. Second, the explicit objection precondition may excessively limit the sampling frame of the population. If there is a potentially conflicting relationship between groups, there is no need to apply the objection precondition for measuring tolerance.

Among the subtypes of tolerance, tolerance toward ethnic groups, hereafter called ethnic

tolerance, has been the most extensively studied. Yet in the context of established democracies, ethnic tolerance more often pertains to immigrants or foreign workers (Weldon 2006; Crepaz and Damron 2009; Cote and Erickson 2009) than to native ethnic groups. Because most of the respondents have not been immigrants or foreign workers but have been native citizens, it has been easy and common to apply the objection precondition to survey research by asking questions aimed at measuring tolerance only to respondents who have expressed discomfort over the presence of immigrants or foreign workers. Applying the objection precondition to samples that include native ethnic groups is far more difficult. Under those circumstances, ethnic tolerance is for practical reasons measured as out-group tolerance. In fact, Gibson (2006) did not apply the objection precondition when he treated interracial tolerance as a type of out-group tolerance.

Trust and prejudice are often discussed in similar contexts to those relating to tolerance but they are conceptually distinguished from tolerance for two reasons. First, trust, or more specifically generalized trust, consists of in-group and out-group trust (Uslaner 2002) whereas tolerance by definition pertains to attitude toward objectionable groups or, by a less strict definition, to out-groups. Second, in the literature, prejudice is generally understood as negative ethnic prejudice, which was defined by Allport as "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" that is either "felt or expressed" and "directed toward a group as a whole" or "an individual ... of that group (1954, 9)." Theoretically, (ethnic) tolerance must be indifferent to the presence or absence of prejudice but in practice, empirical findings have often shown that strong prejudice reduces tolerance. In this sense, research on tolerance shares extensive areas of common interest with prejudice studies. While acknowledging these similarities and differences, this literature review draws on findings relating to trust and prejudice that are applicable to the analysis of tolerance.

### **Individual-level Determinants**

There are four main individual-level determinants of tolerance, namely authoritarianism, education, contact, and threat. The first two are more inherent in individuals and the last two are more external.

#### *Authoritarianism*

Authoritarianism has been regarded as a major characteristic embedded in the individual who

is prone to prejudice and intolerance. Having undertaken a multi-disciplinary analysis of prejudice, Adorno et al. (1950, 971) concluded that "a basically hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative parent-child relationship is apt to carry over into a power-oriented, exploitively dependent attitude toward one's sex partner and one's God and may well culminate in" a disposition to appraise the strong and depreciate the weak. Their statistical evaluation of the interview results revealed that ethnic (including anti-Semitic) prejudice was associated with the personality that is characterized by (1) repression (the readiness to repress undesirable instincts); (2) externalization (blaming others or the environment for what one feels); (3) conventionalism (the lack of genuineness in personal relationships); (4) power-orientation (and lack of affection); and (5) rigidity (and rejection of ambivalence) (Adorno et al., 1950, 468-653).

Similarly, Stouffer (1955) found that individuals who support rigid categorization as well as authoritarian and conformist childrearing values tend to be intolerant toward communists and atheists. More generally, Stenner (2005) demonstrated that various kinds of intolerance (including racial, political, and moral) originate from authoritarianism, and that the effect of authoritarianism on intolerance is reinforced by a perceived normative societal threat that consists of social dissonance (such as diverse goals and values) and failed leadership.<sup>3</sup> An authoritarian predisposition also hampers learning effects on tolerance including the effect of political activism (Hinckley 2010).

### *Education*

In most studies, education is treated as a control variable because it has been well established ever since Stouffer (1955) that more educated individuals are more tolerant, although the specific processes that connect education to tolerance have yet to be explored. Education, it is argued, reduces ethnic prejudice by disseminating knowledge and information, empowering cognitive capacities, and introducing universal values and norms (Coenders and Scheepers 2003, 317; Hagendoorn 1999). Yet Coenders and Scheepers (2003) found that the effect of education on mitigating ethnic exclusionism (measured separately for immigrants, political refugees, and in-group membership) was significantly smaller in emerging than in established democracies, presumably because it takes time for liberal democratic values to permeate through national educational systems. For former Yugoslavia, the effect of education on tolerance has been reported to be moderate (Hodson et al. 1994). Marquart-Pyatt and Paxton (2007) have shown that individual-level predictors of tolerance including education were generally weaker in Eastern than in Western Europe. They also suggested that in

questionnaire surveys, the inclusion of illegal groups among least-liked group lists suppressed the tolerance level in all countries other than the United States.

### *Contact*

The contact hypothesis largely draws on Allport's contention that various forms of contact, ranging from casual to more intense, reduce prejudice against ethnic groups (1954, 261-282).<sup>4</sup> Wilner et al. (1955) showed that whites' contact with, and attitude toward blacks were positively affected by their dwelling units' proximity to black neighbors in both integrated and segregated types of collective housing projects. Although the attitudes of white residents toward blacks were similar in racially integrated housing projects and segregated housing projects prior to their settlement, the percentages of those who reported a favorable change in their attitudes were much higher in the integrated than in the segregated projects (Deutsch and Collins 1951, 97).

More recently, Persell, Green, and Gurevich (2001) found that inter-community socialization may be positively associated with tolerance while intra-community socialization has a slightly negative effect.<sup>5</sup> Mutz (2002) further showed by way of survey analysis that simple exposure to views different from one's own cannot generate political tolerance unless such exposure helps one to become aware of rationales (cognitive mechanism) or enables one to forge personal relationships (affectionate mechanism). Although intolerant attitudes may in turn result in few contacts with out-groups, which would represent reverse causality, a meta analysis of the literature (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) points to a stronger effect of contact on attitudes than the reverse effect.

In emerging democracies too, the contact hypothesis is supported by the limited number of studies carried out so far. In South Africa, interracial and political tolerance are related to interracial contact and threat perception respectively, but not to group identities (Gibson 2006).<sup>6</sup> Besides direct contacts with out-groups, political participation in either collective or unconventional action helps citizens in emerging democracies to acquire tolerance toward out-groups that frequently use such democratic rights (Hinckley 2010; Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003).

### *Threat and competition*

Perceived threat, not to the individual but to society (Gibson and Gouws 2003; Huddy et al. 2005), or sociotropic threat, is a strong exogenous determinant of tolerance. The literature on tolerance thus focuses on the mediation between threat perception and tolerance.

Experimental research has shown that the effect of threat perception on tolerance is significantly conditioned/mediated by the predispositions of the individual. Marcus et al. (1995) systematically accounted for tolerance by presenting it in terms of an interaction between antecedent considerations and contemporary information. While people who are more predisposed to threat perception are more intolerant than those who are less predisposed, their intolerance (decision) is more elastic to current threat information than is the intolerance of those who are less predisposed to threat perception (Marcus et al. 1995, 101-113).<sup>7</sup> Marcus et al. (2005) also demonstrated by way of experiments that externally-derived anxiety induces people to rely on current information rather than on their predispositions and that extrinsic anxiety is a catalyst for positive or negative change in tolerance.

Among pseudo-experimental studies, Lavine et al. (2005) found that perceived threat (mortality salience) more strongly inclines authoritarian than non-authoritarian individuals to use information congruent with their own attitude and thus makes the former more resistant to a change in opinion (on capital punishment). Davis and Silver (2004) showed that American citizens were more willing to give up civil rights when they perceived a greater societal (but not necessarily personal) threat, whose effect is enhanced by their trust in government. In both Bulgaria and Romania, the perceived threat from the homeland of the ethnic minority was the single most important determinant of ethnic tolerance (McIntosh et al. 1995). Eisenstein (2006) found that religion *indirectly* increases intolerance because religious commitment strengthens threat perception while doctrinal orthodoxy leads to greater closed-mindedness and less self-esteem. Threat perception is also extensively studied in the context of ethnic heterogeneity, as shown below.

For reasons similar to threat but in a more specific way, competition over jobs and scarce resources between the majority and emerging minorities makes the majority more intolerant. Olzak (1992) argued that in the urban context, inter-ethnic competition over the same labor market (niche overlap) motivates the dominant group to repress new groups. In particular, she showed on the basis of historical data that occupational segregation contributed to fewer ethnic conflicts in American cities (Olzak 1992). Kunovich and Hodson (2002) found in relation to pre-war Bosnia and Croatia that occupational segregation (lack of job competition) as well as ethnic diversity (demographic balance) reduced ethnic prejudice while ethnic residential segregation had no significant effect. As regards the ethnic war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the extent of the decline of the (former majority) Serb population relative to the Muslim population accounted for variation in the level of Serb hostilities across municipalities, where public posts had been allocated according to ethnic population shares

(Slack and Doyon 2001).

### **Contextual Determinants**

In recent years, the context in which individual-level variables affect tolerance has drawn increasing attention, and studies have been inspired particularly by arguments on contact and threat effects. So far as methodology is concerned, it has become conventional to use hierarchical linear models for analyzing the effect of residential-, district-, or state-level variables on individual-level tolerance.

#### *State system and policy*

The state system and state policy such as the constitutional, welfare, and citizenship regimes of established democracies substantially affect tolerance at the state level. Peffley and Rohrschneider (2003) showed by analyzing World Values Survey data that political tolerance is enhanced by democratic stability and federalism at the macro-level. Weldon (2006) examined the effect of citizenship regimes (individual vs. collective and civic vs. ethnic) on ethnic tolerance to show that individualist-civic countries were the most tolerant and collectivistic-ethnic countries the least tolerant. Crepaz and Damron (2009) found that universal, non means-test based welfare systems reduced the antipathy of indigenes toward immigrants.

#### *Ethnic heterogeneity*

The impact of ethnic heterogeneity on ethnic tolerance is complex since it involves dual effects.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, ethnic heterogeneity (without substantial segregation) is conducive to frequent contacts between the majority and minorities.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the presence of a sizable minority can become a breeding ground for sociotropic threat perception on the part of the majority. While ethnic heterogeneity is thus expected to increase both contact and threat perception, the net impact on tolerance is not uniform but depends on which effect becomes more manifest in different contexts. The burgeoning literature indicates that the contact effect is relatively stronger than the threat effect (1) when there is a moderate level of ethnic heterogeneity and (2) when ethnic heterogeneity is measured at a low level of aggregation.

Regarding the impact of ethnic heterogeneity on the relative effects of contact and threat,

there seems to be an inverted-U shaped relationship. The presence of moderately sized minorities enhances tolerance by favoring the contact effect over the threat effect, whereas excessively large minorities dampen the tolerance harbored by the majority by significantly increasing their threat perception. Massey, Hodson, and Sekulic (1999) showed that while majority groups were more intolerant than minority groups, both types of groups exhibited stronger intolerance when they lived in minority enclaves than when they inhabited nationally-mixed communities.<sup>10</sup> Semyonov and Glikman's (2009) analysis also supports the enclave hypothesis by showing that the individual's anti-foreigner attitudes are weaker in a mixed neighborhood, but stronger in a non-European neighborhood than in a European neighborhood. Similarly, in former Yugoslavia, the equality of ethnic group distribution in each republic was strongly associated with greater tolerance (Hodson et al. 1994).<sup>11</sup> This finding seems to reflect the first half (from majority dominance to moderate diversity) of the inverted-U shaped relationship between ethnic diversity and tolerance.

Second, most recent studies that have addressed the contact-threat question have revealed that the effect of ethnic heterogeneity depends on the unit of measurement. The contact hypothesis has been supported by evidence at a neighborhood/community level and the threat hypothesis at higher levels such as those of metropolitan areas and counties. This is because what affects tolerance negatively in ethnically heterogeneous contexts is not an individual but a sociotropic threat that often emanates from political discourse at the national level (Wagner et al. 2006, 387).

Among the analyses carried out at lower levels, Oliver and Wong (2003) showed that ethnic diversity at the neighborhood level reduced out-group prejudice.<sup>12</sup> At the zip-code area level in the United States,<sup>13</sup> whites' attitude toward blacks was found to be unaffected by the black population density (Oliver and Meldelberg 2000).<sup>14</sup> Wagner et al. (2006) reported that for Germany at the level of the administrative district (with a mean population of about 180,000), the proportion of the ethnic minority population was negatively related to prejudice. Semyonov et al. (2004) showed for Germany that the actual foreign population size at the level of the governmental district, which forms the basic unit of each state of the federation, did not affect discriminatory attitudes (threat perception and intolerance) toward foreigners whereas individuals' perception of the foreign population percentage reinforced such attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

At higher levels, ethnic heterogeneity was found to be associated with negative attitudes toward ethnic groups. Stein et al (2000), using data from Texas, showed that whites' attitudes toward Hispanics were negatively affected by the Hispanic population size at the county

level.<sup>16</sup> At the metropolitan level,<sup>17</sup> prejudice toward ethnic out-groups was stronger in ethnically more diverse than in less diverse areas (Oliver and Meldelberg 2000; Oliver and Wong 2003). Dixon's (2006) multilevel analysis of U.S Census data systematically revealed that whites' prejudice toward blacks was subject to the contact effect (measured by "knowing" and "feeling close") at the community level and the threat effect (measured by the out-group population percentage) at higher levels such as those of the municipality and county.

Yet these findings contain certain group and country differences. According to Dixon (2006), the threat effect was not observed for whites' prejudice toward Hispanics and Asians, which suggests the influence of historical and cultural effects. His findings thus imply that contact/threat effects work differently depending on whether target groups are perceived to be more threatening (blacks in the United States and foreigners in Western Europe) or less threatening (Latinos or Asians in the United States and native ethnic groups). McLaren (2003) showed that the foreign population percentage at the country level did not significantly affect anti-immigration attitudes although it did account for threat perception. McLaren's (2003) findings also imply that the extent to which perceived threat arouses negative attitudes toward its source varies according to country-level factors.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has reviewed the current literature on political tolerance with particular reference to its individual- and aggregate-level determinants. Individual-level determinants such as authoritarianism, education, contact, and threat perception are found to have robust effects on tolerance. What is less known is the nature of the mediating factors that enhance or reduce these effects. More attention has been given recently to the impact of contextual factors on threat and contact effects.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Political tolerance gained currency as a result of Stouffer's (1955) seminal study.

<sup>2</sup> Huckfeldt et al. (2004) argue that political disagreement is a necessary ingredient of the tolerance and deliberation that sustain democracy; they thus challenge the social conformity theory by showing that disagreement endures even among citizens who share the same circle

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of communication.

<sup>3</sup> Following Stouffer (1955), Stenner (2005) unobtrusively measured authoritarianism by childrearing values (but using "appealing words" for student samples) that ranged from discipline and respect for elders to conscience and self-judgment.

<sup>4</sup> While Allport's (1954) major focus was on negative ethnic prejudice the contact hypothesis has been extensively borrowed by tolerance research as well.

<sup>5</sup> Socialization, trust, and economic conditions moderately accounted for tolerance toward both blacks and homosexuals in a very similar way (Persell, Green, and Gurevich 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Interracial tolerance is a measurement of out-group tolerance whereas political tolerance pertains to the least-liked group.

<sup>7</sup> In other words, reassuring information can enhance their tolerance more extensively than the tolerance held by less-threatened people although in the end the former group cannot become more tolerant than the latter. Predisposition means "the subclass of antecedent considerations that are deeply rooted and stable individual characteristics, and that result in generalized predilections to think, feel, and behave in certain ways," and includes

"personality, a global sense of threat, and political expertise" (Marcus et al. 1995, 19).

Standing decisions "refer to the antecedent considerations that are established attitudes and beliefs applied to a specific domain," such as in civil liberties and political tolerance (Marcus et al. 1995, 20). They are not "fixed and clearly bounded positions" but "reflect a general stance that provides for a range of potential responses to any concrete situation" (Marcus et al. 1995, 20).

<sup>8</sup> The distinction between ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity is important. Anderson and Paskeviciute (2006) showed that interpersonal trust was negatively affected by ethnic heterogeneity in established democracies and by linguistic heterogeneity in non-established democracies. The effect of ethnic fractionalization (or heterogeneity) on governance and democracy is far from clear. Many of its effects lost statistical significance when latitude was introduced into the estimation model (Alesina et al. 2003). Another partly related variable is segregation (Alesina and Zhuravskaya 2009) but an absence of segregation does not necessarily mean frequent contact with minority groups. In homogeneous societies, even if there is no segregation, or in other words even if there is equal distribution of ethnic groups across regions, the probability of an individual of the majority group coming across an individual of any minority is significantly small.

<sup>9</sup> The presence of multiple minority groups also helps to blur the intolerance held by the

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majority (Gibson 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Massey, Hudson, and Sekulic (1999, 675) defined intolerance as "strength of identity to a particular racial, national, or ethnic group" but other studies have shown that strong group identity or in-group trust does not necessarily weaken tolerance or trust toward out-groups (Gibson 2006; Bahry et al. 2005).

<sup>11</sup> The equality of the distribution of ethnic group size, measured by the index of qualitative variation, does not take into account the number of ethnic groups.

<sup>12</sup> One of the potential problems is a reverse causality from prejudice to neighborhood selection. Ethnic groups did express preference for living in in-group neighborhoods. Yet even when this self-selection bias was incorporated into the model, the negative effect of ethnic diversity on out-groups remained intact (Oliver and Wong 2003).

<sup>13</sup> In their study, zip code areas had about 10,000 to 40,000 residents (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000, 577, fn5).

<sup>14</sup> But it was affected by educational level of the zip-code area, even when the individual-level effect of education was controlled for.

<sup>15</sup> These two studies refer simply to "districts" but I have added the adjectives "administrative" and "governmental" to the original expressions because it is clear that this is what is meant by the respective authors.

<sup>16</sup> Yet, this context effect was offset by the positive effect of the interaction term between contact (speaking with a Hispanic) and context (the Hispanic population size). In other words, whites who speak frequently with Hispanics and live in a county with a large Hispanic population tended to have a positive view

<sup>17</sup> The mean population size of the metropolitan areas (Standard Statistical Metropolitan Areas) in the United States in 1990 was 696,866 (My calculation from the United States population census in 1990).

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