

“Trusting and Tolerating: Finding Ways to Tolerate Each Other”

Robert Postic

The University of Findlay

Department of History and Political Science

USA

“I certainly was prepared to dislike him...but there he was—charming, intelligent, and agreeing with me on First Amendment Rights.”¹

Introduction

While it is generally true that anecdotes are not the best way to begin an academic essay, that is where I choose to begin. And, since I am breaking a norm, I had might as well make it a personal anecdote. A number of years ago, I received one of the many email forwards that we all tend to receive... and hate. Upon opening the email, my first thought was: “Not another one of these stupid, sappy emails that I’m supposed to forward on to 10 more people or my life will be reduced to shambles. Sigh.” Nevertheless, I chose to glance through the email only at the end looking to see what “idiot” had sent this to me. (I know. I need to work on my patience.) Upon seeing who sent it, my attitude toward the email completely changed. The person who sent it was a good, family friend (“Janice”) who is known for her compassion for others. When I saw it was from her, the anger that I had just a few minutes previously turned into thoughts of: “Oh, how sweet. That’s just like Janice to send something like this to people to encourage them.” Later, when I asked my wife if she had received the email, she responded: “You know, I did. Still, when I first saw that someone was sending me another forward, I thought ‘I don’t have time for this stuff.’ Then I saw that it was Janice who sent it. Wasn’t that sweet of her?”

The point of the story is that the feelings and attitudes that we have formed toward others have direct implications regarding how we treat those individuals’ behavior. Those people who we do not know tend to be thought of in harsher and less tolerant terms. But the behavior of those people who we know and who we “like” (or, maybe, who we just better understand) tends to be viewed differently and judged differently. This appears to be true, even though the behavior does not differ from the one situation to the next. The reason is that we have a connection with those individuals and we trust them. In part, drawing on this concept, Putnam (2000) popularized the term social capital, which includes the idea of interpersonal trust. One of the effects of increased social capital is that individuals are “more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others” (p. 288). The purpose of this present essay is to examine the effects that interpersonal trust has upon expressed levels of political tolerance.

Literature Review

Since the 1950s, the topic of political tolerance has received a considerable amount of attention. The seminal work on tolerance is Stouffer’s (1955) study. Stouffer found that majorities of Americans were unwilling to extend civil liberties to various nonconformist target groups. Nevertheless, Stouffer was hopeful that tolerance levels would increase over the years, relying on the effects of increased education levels. And some subsequent studies have suggested that Americans may actually be increasing in their levels of tolerance. For example, Davis (1975, 509) concluded that in the 1970s “Americans [had become] more tolerant, regardless of their cohort or education group.” Echoing Davis, other scholars also suggested that tolerance levels had increased since the 1950s (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978). Refuting the idea that tolerance levels were increasing, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1979, 1982), utilized a different approach to measuring tolerance. Rather than using preset target groups, Sullivan and his colleagues used a least-liked approach by allowing respondents to select their target groups. Using this approach, the authors found that there were no changes in tolerance levels from the 1950s to the 1970s. Sullivan and his colleagues concluded that Americans may be as intolerant as before only choosing different target groups toward which to demonstrate their intolerance. Subsequent studies appear to confirm the results of Sullivan et al.

¹ The quote is by Marlene Roeder of the ACLU on David Duke’s appearance on Tom Snyder’s late-night talk show. Tomorrow. Quoted in Golebiowska (2001). The original quote is from Wade (1987).

In particular, Mondak and Sanders (2003) concluded that any increases in tolerance since the 1950s is extremely modest, at best. While the debate on whether or not overall levels of tolerance have increased or not is an important one, the focus here is twofold. First, what factors are important in shaping political tolerance. And, second, of those factors that do shape political tolerance, does any of them suggest an increase in tolerance toward specific target groups. Even though there may not be increased tolerance overall, certain target groups have seen increases over the years. Sullivan et al's thesis does allow for this.

As to the first question regarding the factors that affect political tolerance, the literature suggests that a couple factors that stand out as having direct influences. First, education has been highlighted as the one factor that works to increase political tolerance. That is to say, the more education that a person has, the more likely the individual is to embrace tolerance as a norm (Bobo and Licari 1989; Nie et al. 1996; Nunn, et al. 1978; Stouffer 1955). Still, some suggest that the effects of education may not be as strong, when other factors are considered (Lawrence 1976; Sullivan et al. 1982). Even so, in normal situations, rather than extraordinary ones, education emerges in most studies as being a statistically significant factor (Bobo and Licari 1989). Another important factor is religious belief or religiosity. Biblical literalism affects tolerance judgments, with those holding to a literal view of the Bible being more likely to demonstrate lower levels of tolerance (Wilcox and Jelen 1990). Additionally, conservative Protestants have traditionally demonstrated lower levels of political tolerance (Reimer and Park 2001). Nevertheless, Smith (2000, 64) argues that the majority of conservative Protestants or evangelicals are actually tolerant and that it is only a minority of evangelicals who embrace intolerant views. This echoes the work of Hunter (1984, 1987) who argues that the next generation of evangelicals is more tolerant. And, indeed, with the growing acceptance of homosexuality, Hunter may yet prove to have a valid point.

One of the more interesting recent articles that is especially relevant here is Golebiowska's (2001) article that examines the timing of when individuals disclose group membership in unpopular groups (for example, a political candidate being gay). Golebiowska found that individuals may be tolerated more when they disclose membership in that group earlier rather than later. Moreover, the author found that individuals were tolerated more than the target group when participants were given considerable amount of information regarding the individual. As Golebiowska notes, this has important implications since the positive feelings that one has toward the individual could transfer to the group. The research also demonstrates the pliability or malleability of tolerance judgments, suggesting that tolerance judgments are not fixed (p. 1,035). In other words, both the timing of the disclosure and the amount of information that one has regarding the individual can have a considerable effect on the tolerance that people demonstrate toward both the individual as well as possibly toward the target group that the person represents.

What Golebiowska did not test for is whether or not individuals felt close to the member of the target group. In 2007, Pew Research conducted a survey and concluded that having a friend or family member who is gay has a direct effect on tolerance toward gays (Neidorf 2007). Specifically, the survey found that those respondents who reported having a close friend or family member who is gay were much more likely to support gay marriage. Interestingly enough, there were distinct patterns that emerged among respondents. For example, liberal Democrats were much more likely (59%) than conservative Republicans (33%) to report having a close friend or family member who is gay. Race appears to play no role and age plays only a minor role, with those over 65 being much less likely to report having a close friend or family member who is gay than those under 65. What may be more important, however, is which groups expressed tolerance toward gays or lesbians. When asked if gays should be allowed to marry, of those respondents who stated that they have a close friend/family member who is gay, 55% supported gay marriage; of those respondents who had no close gay friend/family member, only 25% supported gay marriage.

Based on the Pew survey, it appears that the positive feelings that one has toward another individual can possibly become the basis for increased tolerance of the group that the person represents. What effect the timing of that disclosure might have is uncertain. Golebiowska's (2001) study would suggest that earlier disclosure is better than later disclosure. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the effects that large amounts of information appear to have on tolerance judgments. In the case of personal relationships, it may be the case that knowing the individual before disclosure of membership in an unpopular group could actually work to increase tolerance toward the individual and the group. This would seem especially to be the case if one had positive feelings for the individual develop before membership in the group is revealed.

While that certainly cannot be the case for target groups that are racially defined or for groups that do not or cannot conceal group membership, it would seem that it could easily be the case for groups that are defined by characteristics that are not easily observable or can be fairly easily concealed (for example, homosexuality). While it may work for a politician to reveal membership in an unpopular group earlier rather than later (Golebiowska 2001), it may be that individuals, on a personal level, find greater tolerance by first forming that closeness and then disclosing that membership. Unfortunately, the Pew study does not address the timing issue.

Noting that attitudes toward gays and lesbians have changed considerably over the years, Brewer (2003) suggests that Americans' feelings toward gays, which moved from negative feelings toward neutral feelings, had the effect of increasing support for gay rights. What Brewer did not examine is why there was this movement in feelings toward gays in the 1990s. There have been various suggestions. One suggestion is that Americans are changing in their opinions as to when sexual orientation is determined. In examining Gallup data, the numbers are quite striking. In 1977, only 13% of respondents indicated that they believed sexual orientation is something that is determined at birth. Thirty years later, that number has more than tripled to 42%.² Since Americans seem to be embracing the idea that sexual orientation is something that is fixed, then they may be more willing to extend both tolerance and civil liberties to gays or lesbians (Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Even so, it should not be overlooked that 35% of respondents still maintain that sexual orientation is due to "environment/upbringing."

Another suggestion as to why tolerance toward gays may be increasing is that gays and lesbians have been portrayed more positively in the popular media. The prime-time TV shows of *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* as well as the very successful daytime TV show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* may have worked to help Americans form more positive feelings toward gays and lesbians (see Berger 2003). While that may be true, that does not establish whether or not those positive feelings for fictional characters or for a single person, however successful, necessarily translate into feelings of tolerance toward the group that the person represents. Golebiowska's (2001) study would seem to suggest that it might. The problem is that the timing of the knowledge of the person's homosexuality and the development of feelings for the character or person are almost, if not, simultaneous. There is little, if any, time lag. Nevertheless, if it is true that positive feelings for individuals translate into positive feelings (or feeling of tolerance) for the group, then this has important implications going forward.

Regardless of the timing of the disclosure, it may be the case that positive feelings trump all else, when dealing with interpersonal relationships. That is to say, if individuals have developed positive feelings toward another person, when that person reveals membership in an unpopular group (for example, being gay or lesbian), that could result in people taking their positive feelings that they have for that individual and transferring those feelings to the group, resulting in increased tolerance toward the target group. Indeed, people could even decide to change their position on various issues due to the fact that they have already developed these positive feelings toward the gay or lesbian individual person that they happen to know. This may explain why tolerance levels toward gay or lesbians have been changing over the last few years, even as Americans remain relatively intolerant. As Americans have realized that they have close friends or family members who are gay or lesbian, Americans may be reevaluating their stances on issues that affect the target group that these friends and family members represent.

Taken together, the above suggests that closeness to a member of a target group may have an effect on how people are willing to treat that target group. I argue that there is a certain trust that is built by closeness that produces this effect. This essay is intended to accomplish two things. First, I intend to demonstrate the connection that trust has with political tolerance. Specifically, I demonstrate that interpersonal trust has a direct effect on political tolerance, with those respondents demonstrating higher levels of trust also demonstrating higher levels of political tolerance. Previous research (Putnam 2000) predicts that levels of trust have the effect of increasing tolerance. This is also consistent with intergroup contact theory, which suggests that contact between groups can increase affective ties and reduced anxiety when there is continued interaction (Pettigrew 1998). Second, I provide some initial thoughts as to why political tolerance toward gays or lesbians has been increasing the past few years. In particular, I offer initial evidence that the positive feelings that have developed over the years toward gays or lesbians has worked to increase political tolerance toward that target group.

² See Gallup article: "Tolerance for Gay Rights at High-Water Mark" (May 29, 2007). Available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27694/tolerance-gay-rights-highwater-mark.aspx#1> . Last accessed April 17, 2010.

Data

The data are taken from the 2008 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a biennial survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The first GSS was conducted in 1972; the most recent version available is 2008. While the most recent version of the survey includes 2,013 respondents, not all of those respondents make into the models that I estimated. The reason is twofold. First, the GSS uses a split-ballot design, which means that not all questions are posed to all respondents.³ Approximately, two-thirds of the respondents were asked the tolerance questions that provide the basis for my dependent variable (political tolerance). Additionally, once independent variables are included in the analysis, the number of respondents falls to approximately one-third of the original number. The second reason that the number of respondents is reduced is that, for simplicity of analysis, I recoded all variables to eliminate don't know and no answer respondents. I was then left with between 544 and 600 respondents. Due to the varying numbers of DK/NA responses, the number varies from model to model. Nevertheless, the demographics of the various models approximate the demographics for the full survey. For example, for the model that included all of the tolerance questions and targets (and, therefore, had the fewest respondents) the mean age of the respondents is 47.84, with 54.8% of respondents being female and 45.2% of respondents being male. With respect to race, 80.7% are white, 12.5% are black, and 6.8% are other. The mean level of education of respondents is 13.73 years. This is not too dissimilar from the full survey.⁴

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable is political tolerance as measured by the various tolerance questions in the GSS. The GSS asks three basic questions for six target groups. The target groups include the following: atheists, communists, homosexuals, militarists, Muslims, and racists.⁵ For each of the target groups, the GSS asks virtually the same three questions, asking if the respondent would allow a member of the target group to take part in a particular activity.⁶ The three activities are: give a speech, teach at a college or university, or place a book in the library advocating the views of the target group. All of the responses were recoded so that an intolerant response equals 0 and an intolerant response equals 1. See Appendix A for the full text of the questions.

For each of the target groups, I constructed a scale, summing the responses for the three questions, resulting in the following six scales: an atheist scale (Cronbach's alpha = .683), a communist scale (Cronbach's alpha = .780), a homosexual scale (Cronbach's alpha = .814), a militarist scale (Cronbach's alpha = .767), a Muslim scale (Cronbach's alpha = .833), and a racist scale (Cronbach's alpha = .723). Since there are three questions for each target group, the scale is a 4-point scale, running from 0 to 3, with 0 being perfectly intolerant (i.e. providing an intolerant response for each question) and 3 being perfectly tolerant (i.e. providing a tolerant response for each question). Additionally, I constructed an overall 19-point tolerance scale by summing the responses for all 18 questions (6 target groups, with 3 questions each). The political tolerance scale (Cronbach's alpha = .919) has the advantage of including both left-wing and right-wing targets. Even so, since the main independent variable that I am interested in is trust, whether the target group is a right-wing target or a left-wing target is inconsequential. I mention this since the GSS (as well as Stouffer) has been criticized for over-emphasizing left-wing targets (Mueller 1988).

Independent Variables

The independent variables include the standard demographic variables of age, sex, race (white or non-white), and education.

³ For an overview of the GSS's ballot design and how it has changed over the years, see Appendix Q. Available at <http://www.norc.org/NR/rdonlyres/21C53AAC-1267-43B6-A915-A38857DC9D63/1298/AppendixQ.pdf>. Last accessed April 10, 2010.

⁴ The sample actually reflects the full dataset quite nicely. For the full dataset, the mean age is 47.71, with 54.1% being female and 45.9% male. The mean education level is 13.43. With respect to race, 77.1% are white, 13.9% are Black, and 9.0% are other.

⁵ Over the years, the GSS has included various target groups, including socialists from 1972 to 1974. Starting in 1976, the GSS settled on the five target groups of atheists, communists, homosexuals, militarists, and racists. In 2008, the GSS added the sixth target group of Muslims.

⁶ While the questions are not identical in form, they are substantively the same. For example, for the target group of communists, the GSS asks to consider if a member of the target group were teaching in a college. The respondent is then asked if the person should be fired or not. For the other target groups, respondents are simply asked if a member of the target group should be allowed or not allowed to teach at a college. For the full text of all of the questions, see the Appendix.

In addition, I included a 7-point political ideology variable that extends from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7). Given the greater polarization over the years and the claims by intolerance by both sides, it will be interesting to see if ideology emerges as having a significant effect on tolerance. I also included a religious belief variable. In the GSS, they ask respondents what their view of the Bible is. There are three possible responses: the Bible is a book of fables; the Bible is the inspired Word of God, but not everything in it is literal; and the Bible is the actual Word of God and should be taken literally. I recoded the variable so that 0 equals book of fables; 1 equals inspired, but not literal Word of God; and 2 equals literal Word of God. Following Tuntiya (2005), I entered the Bible variable as a numeric value rather than entering it as a categorical value and excluding one category for comparison.

A religious belonging variable is also included and ranges from 0 (never attend) to 8 (attend more than once a week). The literature predicts that church attendance has an effect on tolerance, with more regular attenders demonstrating lower levels of tolerance (Beatty and Walter 1984). For the homosexual scale dependent variable, I also included a question regarding whether or not respondents felt that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is wrong or not. While there are four possible responses, I recoded the variable to be a dichotomous variable (0 = not wrong at all; 1 = sometimes wrong, almost always wrong, or always wrong). Finally, I constructed an interpersonal trust variable. It is this variable that is the primary focus of the present essay.

In the GSS, there are three questions that tap into the concept of trust. The first question asks respondents whether or not they believe that most people can be trusted. The second question asks respondents if they believe that most people are trying to be helpful. And the third question asks respondents if they believe that most people are trying to be fair. Each of the questions were recoded so that a response that suggests trust is equal to 1 and a response that indicates a lack of trust equal 0. Since the GSS allows respondents to provide an "it depends" response, those responses were recoded as .5, indicating that they are halfway between trusting and not trusting. The interpersonal trust scale extends from 0 (not trusting) to 3 (trusting); Cronbach's alpha equals .670.

Results

Before turning to the OLS regression models, I first look at some descriptive statistics, determining simply how tolerant individuals are toward the various target groups. In Charts 1 thru 4, I provide an overview of the percentage of respondents who provided a tolerant response for each of the questions by target group. There are two things to note about the data. The first is that the target group of homosexuals is the group that Americans exhibit the most tolerance toward on each of the three questions. For example, for the speech question, 83% of respondents indicated that they would allow a homosexual to give. This is almost 7 percentage points higher than any other target group and 40 points higher than the target group of Muslims. A second point worth noting is that the target group of Muslims is the group that Americans exhibit the least tolerance toward. This is unsurprising. What may be a bit surprising, however, is the very low level of tolerance that is displayed. For the speech question, 42.7% of respondents would allow a Muslim to give a speech, "preaching hatred of the United States."

For the teach question, the percentage is even lower, with only 30.7% of respondents allowing a Muslim, who preaches hatred, to teach at a college or university. For each of the questions, the target group of Muslims lags behind the next lowest target group (racists) by an average of 16 percentage points. The fact that Americans generally do not demonstrate tolerance for Muslims seems to confirm Sullivan et al's (1979, 1981) premise that Americans are not becoming more tolerant as much as we are finding new targets for our intolerance. The question to be addressed next is what factors are important in determining who does demonstrate tolerance. Using OLS regression, I estimated a number of models with political tolerance as the dependent variable. Tables 1 thru 7 present the results of the regression analysis. The first 6 tables use the various target groups as the dependent variable. As a reminder, I calculated a tolerance scale for each group by summing the three tolerance questions, with 0 for an intolerant response and 1 for a tolerant response. The seventh table is a model that has the 19-point tolerance scale as the dependent variable. The key variable that I am examining is the interpersonal trust variable.

As can be seen by the models, the variable is significant in five of the models: atheist, communist, militarist, Muslim, and the 19-point scale. For the other two models, the interpersonal trust variable barely misses significance for the homosexual scale ($p = .054$) and does not approach significance for the racist scale ($p = .154$). As the literature predicts, education is significant for all of the models. Indeed, in examining the Beta coefficients for each model, it is noteworthy that education consistently has the highest Beta coefficient, indicating its relative strength in determining political tolerance levels.

Also as the literature predicts, Biblical literalism has a significant effect on determining political tolerance, with those respondents who hold to the idea that the Bible is the literal Word of God being less likely to demonstrate political tolerance. Nevertheless, for purposes of this essay, the key variable is the interpersonal trust variable, which performed quite well in the models. Interestingly enough, political ideology only emerged as being significant in two models: the atheist scale and the Muslim scale. In spite of the increased polarization that appears to be taking place in American politics, political ideology does not have a significant role in determining political tolerance judgments.

Discussion

The interpersonal trust variable performed rather well. In the one model (with homosexuals as the target group) a variable was added that taps into respondents' feelings toward homosexuality. That question asked respondents if sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is wrong or not. That variable also emerged significant ($p < .001$), with respondents indicating that it is wrong demonstrating lower levels of tolerance. Even with this added variable, the interpersonal trust variable approached significance. It is only the model with racists as the target group that interpersonal trust failed to approach significance. This particular model also had the worst model fit, with an adjusted R^2 of only .097. With these overall results, it appears that there is a connection between trust and expressions of tolerance toward specific target groups. Nevertheless, it may be that the interpersonal trust variable does not do a very good job in explaining the increases in tolerance toward specific target groups. That is to say, even though we can begin to conclude that those who hold greater feelings of trust are probably more likely to express higher levels of tolerance, this particular trust variable does not seem to explain the change in tolerance levels over time.

As can be seen by Chart 5, the overall levels of interpersonal trust (as measured by the three GSS questions) has actually slightly declined since 1972. Nevertheless, certain target groups (for example, homosexuals) have still seen substantial increases during that time frame. Since 1976, not only has the percentage of respondents who would allow a homosexual to give a speech increased by 19.0 percentage points, but the percent who now would allow the speech is a full 83%. As an aside, this level of increase is not shared by all target groups. By way of contrast, the percentage of respondents who would allow a racist to speak has actually decreased by 2.2 points during that time period.⁷ The point here is that even though interpersonal trust has slightly decreased, four out of the five target groups have seen increases in tolerance, with some of the increases being quite striking. Even so, those increases have not been uniform. The clear beneficiaries has been the target group of homosexuals. I think that the ramifications of the above are twofold. First, trust plays a role in determining levels of tolerance.

Second, feelings of trust overall or general feelings of trust are insufficient to increase tolerance toward a specific target group. It is most certainly the case that other factors, taking the target group into consideration, must be at work for a target group to be the beneficiary of increased tolerance. So, the question becomes why have homosexuals benefitted over the last 30 years, while other groups have lagged behind? I believe that trust does play a role. Nevertheless, it is not the type of more general trust that people feel toward society, which is measured by the interpersonal trust scale. The idea that trusts plays a role in determining tolerance is also suggested by other questions in the GSS as well as in the National Election Studies (NES). Here, the idea of trust is suggestive of an idea of closeness that people feel toward each other. Similar to the story that I began this essay with, we feel both trust and tolerance for those individuals who we are close to. While the GSS does not provide an easy question that allows us to measure the closeness that individuals feel toward individuals, the NES does have a series of feeling thermometer questions that can be used as a proxy measure.

Feeling thermometer questions are of the same basic form. Suggesting a target group or individual, researchers ask respondents if the respondents feel favorable or unfavorable toward the group or individual, with ratings between 50 and 100 being favorable and ratings between 0 and 50 being unfavorable. A rating of 50 would be a neutral response, indicating that the respondent is neither favorable nor unfavorable. I calculated a mean for each year in order to determine if there was any trend in the favorability ratings that individuals were demonstrating toward homosexuals. Additionally, the GSS does have a question that measures how approving or disapproving respondents are of sexual relations between two adults of the same sex. Basically, the GSS asks respondents if they believe that sex between two adults of the same sex is wrong or not.

⁷ The other three target groups saw an average of an 11 percentage-point increase (atheists = 11.7; communists = 10.6; militarists = 10.7), which are quite uniform in their increases.

Even though the GSS provides four possible responses, only one of those responses is an unequivocal response of it is “not wrong at all.” This question has been asked since 1973. See Chart 4. As can be seen in the chart, for the tolerance questions and the feeling thermometer question, there is a clear upward trend that begins around 1990 and that starts to level off around 1998. The question asking respondents if they believe that sexual relations between two people of the same sex appears to be still increasing. The point here is to determine if society, as a whole, is demonstrating more favorability toward this target group resulting in a change of attitude (i.e. tolerance) toward this group. Certainly, the data suggest that society is doing just that. While it is difficult to determine, from the data, why this trend has been heading upward, the data are suggestive of the idea that Americans are exhibiting shifting attitudes toward gays and lesbians. One might be tempted to simply suggest that, as a whole, society is becoming more permissive and that is the reason for the increase. Nevertheless, that may not be the case. Another question in the GSS can be used to address that possibility of a more permissive society. When respondents were asked if they believe that extramarital sexual relations are wrong, the percentage of respondents who say that it is “not wrong at all” has always been below 5%. Indeed, today (2008 GSS) that percentage (1.5%) is lower than what it was in 1973 (4.1%).⁸ So, if society is becoming more permissive, it is being very selective in what it chooses to be permissive about.

What is also interesting is to compare that upward trend with a similar pattern among the tolerance questions. In the same chart, I provide the percent of respondents who provided a tolerant response for each question. Note that the lines basically mimic the trend line for the feeling thermometer question and the sexual relations question. Indeed, in calculating a correlation coefficient for each pair of questions, the results are quite striking. For each set of questions (feeling thermometer/speech, feeling thermometer/teach, and feeling thermometer/library), the correlation coefficients (Pearson’s r) are .888, .944, and .927 respectively ($p \leq .001$). For the other pairs of questions (sexual relations/speech, sexual relations/teach, and sexual relations/library), the correlation coefficients are .890, .955, and .927 respectively. See Chart 4. It may very well be the case that what is affecting the favorability ratings is also affecting the levels of tolerance that Americans are demonstrating. Indeed, intuitively, one would naturally conclude that the same variable that is affecting both. The Pew Research study and this present study suggest that it is trust or closeness that is affecting both.

Conclusion

In 2004, eleven states passed statutes or amendments to their state constitutions that defined marriage as being between one man and one woman. In 2008, California approved Proposition 8, which had a similar effect. Even so, a large majority of Americans indicate a willingness to demonstrate tolerance toward gays and lesbians. Indeed, the percentage that has been willing to do so has increased dramatically over the years. In this essay, I suggest that a good determinant of political tolerance is the trust that people have for others. In four of the six models, interpersonal trust was a significant variable and in one of the models that it did not achieve significance, trust barely missed significance.

One of the problems with the available data is that it does not specifically measure individuals’ trust of or individuals’ closeness to the target group. I believe that the increases of tolerance levels toward gays or lesbians can be attributed to the fact that people are feeling a particular closeness to or trust of this target group that have not previously felt (at least not before 1990). This trust or closeness may be due to the simple fact that individuals are discovering that there are people close to them who are gay or lesbian. Having now discovered this information, people need to process what that means in relation to bigger questions such as civil liberties. Drawing on work by Pew Research and Golebiowska (2001), I suggest that further research should examine this aspect of tolerance and its determinants. It may be the case that what turns public opinion has less to do with rational arguments about equal rights and the constitutionality of laws than it does whether or not they have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian.

Since I opened with a personal story, I will close with a couple of personal notes as well. While talking with students, friends, and colleagues on this topic over the last few years, I have been struck by the tone of those conversations. In particular, I have noted how people have expressed that their views have changed or how they expressed a willingness to demonstrate tolerance toward gays or lesbians.

⁸ A similar pattern is seen with those respondents who stated that extramarital sex is “always wrong.” In 2008, a full 81.9% of respondents stated that extramarital sex is always wrong. That’s the highest that it has been since the GSS began asking the question and 12.3 percentage points higher than 1973.

What each conversation had in common was that the person basically said: “I now know someone who is gay where before I didn’t. Based on my knowledge of that person, I have to say that my attitudes are somewhat different now[or, my attitude is not to judge].” This seems to confirm what I believe the data to be suggesting. Nevertheless, that is not to suggest that all attitudes change overnight. Recently, at my university, there were two events touching upon gay and lesbian issues. The first was a NO H8 campaign event⁹ and the second was a diversity event. For both events, the sponsors used Facebook to promote the campaign. The sponsors of the event reported receiving various hate messages regarding the events. What may have been especially unsettling is a response that the faculty sponsor received to an email that she sent out to faculty and staff. The email had simply suggested that faculty and staff encourage students to attend the events. One of the emailed responses to her was: ‘It’s disgusting that [you] would support something like this on campus.’¹⁰ While trust emerged as a significant variable in the models, it remains the case that there are other variables at work (for example, Biblical literalism) that continue to reinforce attitudes of intolerance. It remains to be seen if feelings of trust or closeness will trump these other variables.

Appendix: Full Text of the GSS Political Tolerance Questions and Listing of Independent Variables

Atheist target group

There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against churches and religion. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your city/town/community against churches and religion, should he be allowed to speak, or not?

There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against churches and religion... b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not? There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against churches and religion. If some people in your community suggested a book he wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book or not?

Communist target group

Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a communist. Suppose this admitted communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?

Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a communist. Suppose he is teaching in a college. Should he be fired, or not?

Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a communist. Suppose he wrote a book which is in your public library. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?

Homosexual target group

What about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?

Consider a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

What about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? If somebody in your community suggests that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Militarist target group

Consider a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community, should he be allowed to speak, or not? Consider a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

⁹ For information on the campaign, see <http://www.noh8campaign.com/>.

¹⁰ Michelle Billen, “‘UNITED, NOH8 Events Receive Some Negative Response About Tolerance Events,” *The Pulse*, vol. 24, no. 24, April 1, 2010, pp. 1, 11. Available at http://www.findlay.edu/Pulse/PDF/Archive/Pulse_04_01_2010.pdf. Last accessed April 17, 2010.

Consider a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Suppose he wrote a book advocating doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?

Muslim target group

Now consider a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community preaching hatred of the United States, should he be allowed to speak, or not?

Consider a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not? If some people in your community suggested that a book [a Muslim clergyman] wrote which preaches hatred of the United States should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Racist target group

Consider a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community claiming that Blacks are inferior, should he be allowed to speak, or not?

Consider a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

Consider a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior. If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote which said Blacks are inferior should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Independent Variables

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Values</u>
Age	18 to 90
Sex	0 = Male 1 = Female
Education	0 to 20
Race	0 = non-White 1 = White
Church Attendance	0 = Never attend 1 = Attend less than once a year 2 = Attend once a year 3 = Attend several times a year 4 = Attend once a month 5 = Attend 2-3 times a month 6 = Attend nearly every week 7 = Attend every week 8 = Attend more than once a week
Bible	0 = The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man. 1 = The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word. 2 = The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.
Political ideology	1 = Extremely liberal 2 = Liberal 3 = Slightly liberal 4 = Moderate 5 = Slightly conservative 6 = Conservative 7 = Extremely conservative
Interpersonal trust scale	Calculated from the following three GSS questions (see next page); Cronbach's alpha = .670

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in life?

0 = You can't be too careful in life.

.5 = Depends

1 = Most people can be trusted.

Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?

0 = They are mostly just looking out for themselves

.5 = Depends

1 = People try to be helpful.

Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?

0 = Would take advantage of you

.5 = Depends

1 = Would try to be fair

References

- Beatty, Kathleen Murphy, and Oliver Walter. 1984. "Religious Preference and Practice: Reevaluating Their Impact on Political Tolerance." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 48: (Spring): 318-329
- Bobo, Lawrence, and Frederick C. Licari. 1989. "Education and Political Tolerance: Testing the Effects of Cognitive Sophistication and Target Group Affect." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53 (Fall): 285-308.
- Brewer, Paul R. 2003. "The Shifting Foundations of Public Opinion about Gay Rights." *The Journal of Politics* 65 (November): 1,208-1,220.
- Davis, James A. 1975. "Communism, Conformity, Cohorts, and Categories: American Tolerance in 1954 and 1972—1973." *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (November): 491-513.
- Golebiowska, Ewa. 2001. "Individual-Targeted Tolerance and Timing of Group Membership Disclosure." *The Journal of Politics* 63 (November): 1,017-1,040.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1984. "Religion and Political Civility: The Coming Generation of American Evangelicals." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (December): 364-380.
- . 1987. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lawrence, David G. 1976. "Procedural Norms and Tolerance: A Reassessment." *The American Political Science Review* 70 (March): 80-100.
- Mondak, Jeffery J., and Mitchell S. Sanders. 2003. "Tolerance and Intolerance, 1976—1998." *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (July): 492-502.
- Mueller, John. 1988. "Trends in Tolerance." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (Spring): 1-25.
- Neidorf, Shawn. 2007. "Four-in-Ten Americans Have Close Friends or Relatives Who are Gay: Survey finds Familiarity Is Closely Linked to Greater Tolerance." Available at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/485/friends-who-are-gay>. Last accessed April 17, 2010.
- Nie, Norman H., Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry. 1996. *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nunn, Clyde Z., Harry J. Crockett, and J. Allen Williams. 1978. *Tolerance for Nonconformity: A National Survey of Americans' Changing Commitment to Civil Liberties*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pettigrew, Thomas F. 1998. "Intergroup Contact Theory." *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (February): 65-85.
- Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Reimer, Sam, and Jerry Z. Park. 2001. "Tolerant (In)civility? A Longitudinal Analysis of White Conservative Protestants' Willingness to Grant Civil Liberties." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (December): 735-745.
- Smith, Christian. 2000. *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stouffer, Samuel. 1955. *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sullivan, John L., James Piereson, and George E. Marcus. 1979. "An Alternative Conceptualization of Political Tolerance: Illusory Increases, 1950s—1970s." *American Political Science Review* 73 (September): 781-794.

Sullivan, John L., James Piereson, and George E. Marcus. 1982. *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wade, Wyn C. 1987. *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*. New York: Simon and Schuster

Wilcox, Clyde, and Ted Jelen. 1990. "Evangelicals and Political Tolerance." *American Politics Quarterly* 18 (January): 25-46.

Wilcox, Clyde, and Barbara Norrande. 2002. "Of Moods and Morals: The Dynamics of Opinion on Abortion and Gay Rights." In *Understanding Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. Eds. Barbara Norrande and Clyde Wilcox. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 121-148.

Chart 1: Percent of Respondents Who Would Allow a Member of the Target Group to Give a Speech

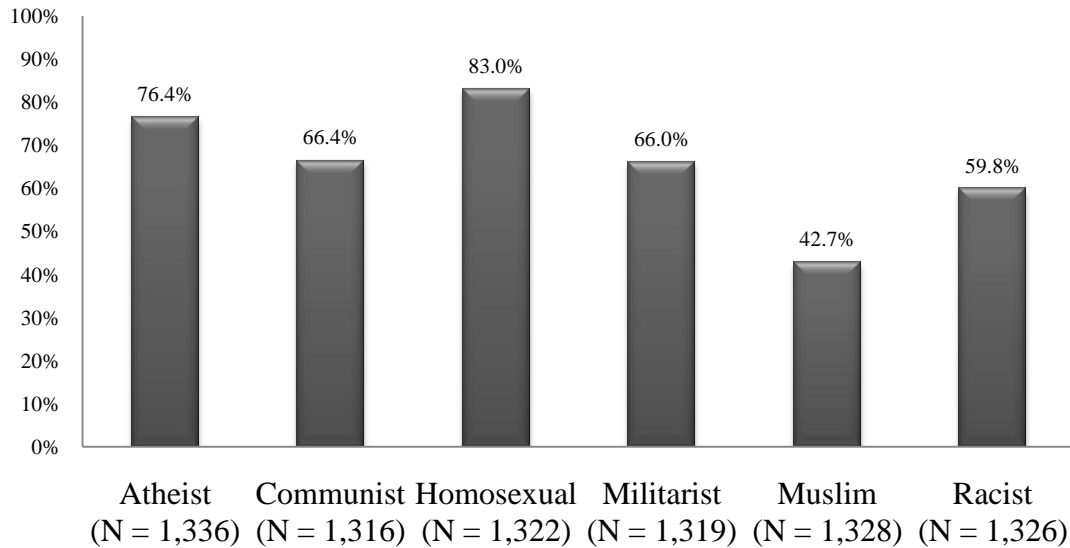


Chart 2: Percent of Respondents Who Would Allow a Member of the Target Group to Teach

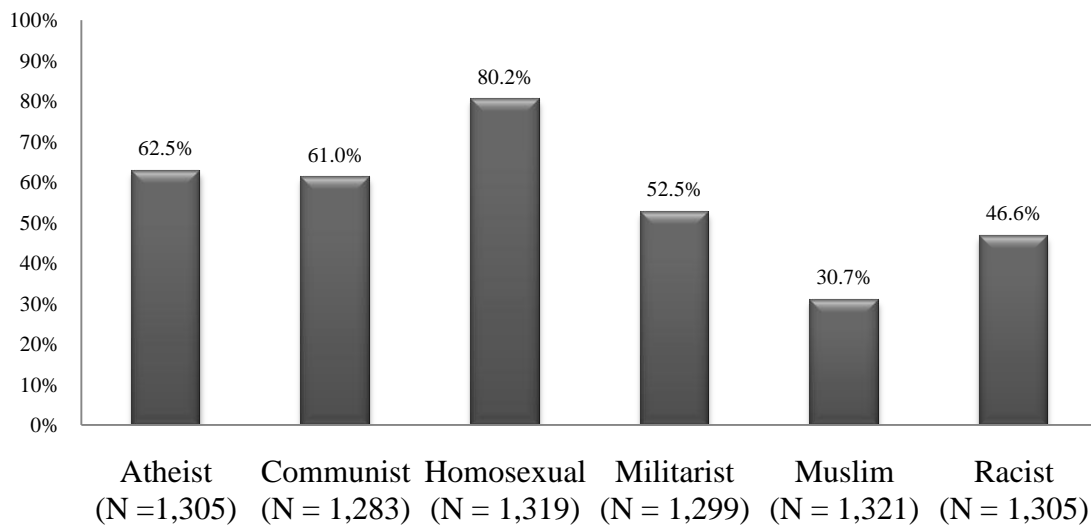


Chart 3: Percent of Respondents Who Would Allow a Member of the Target Group to Place a Book in the Public Library

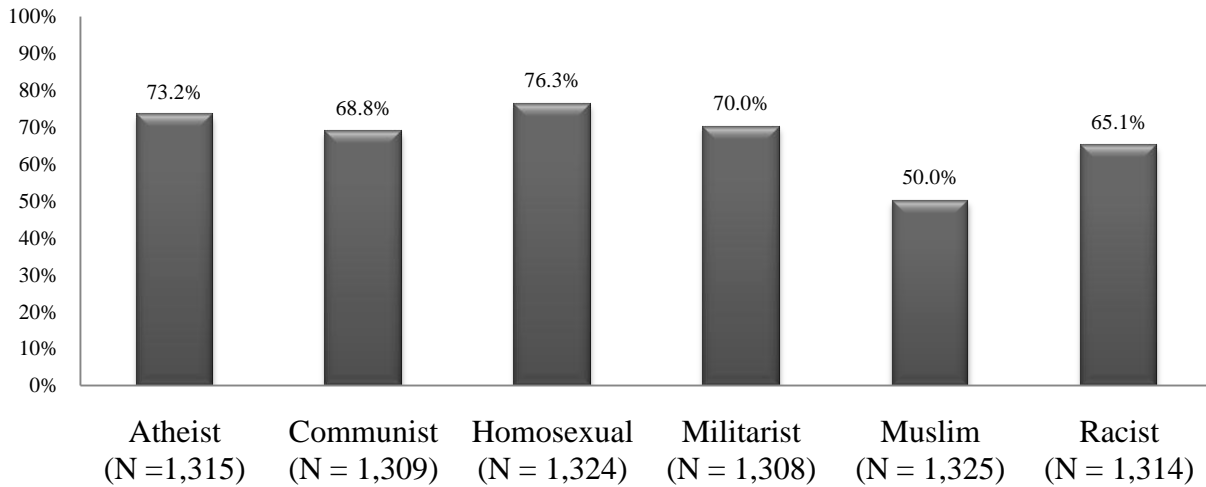
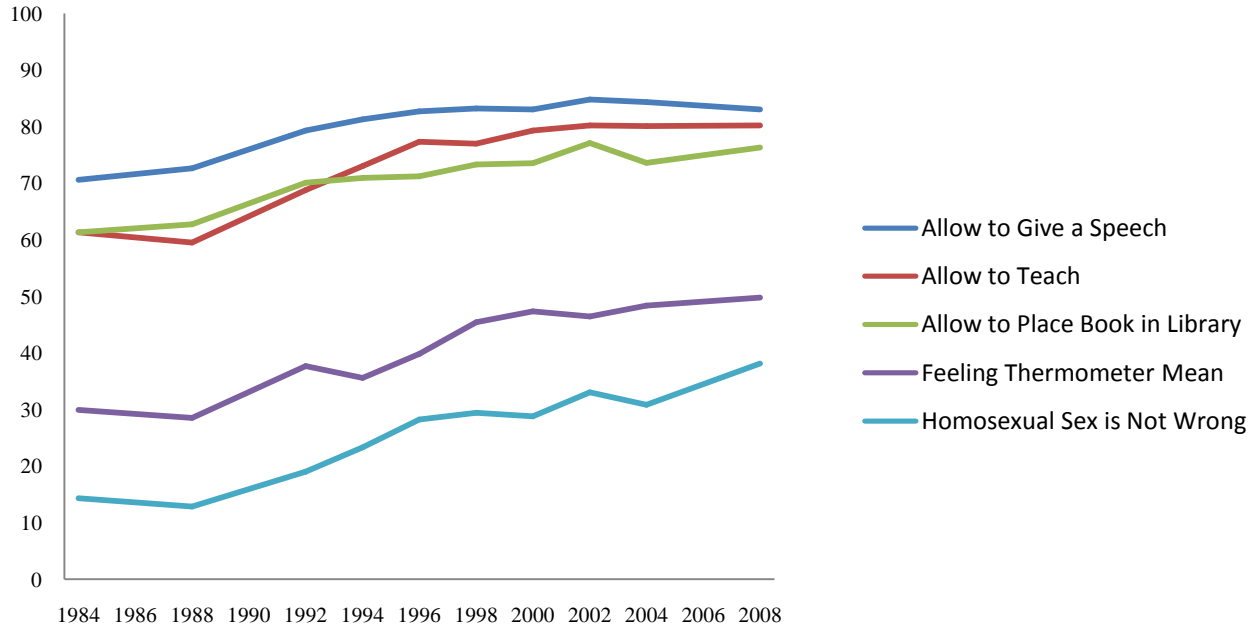
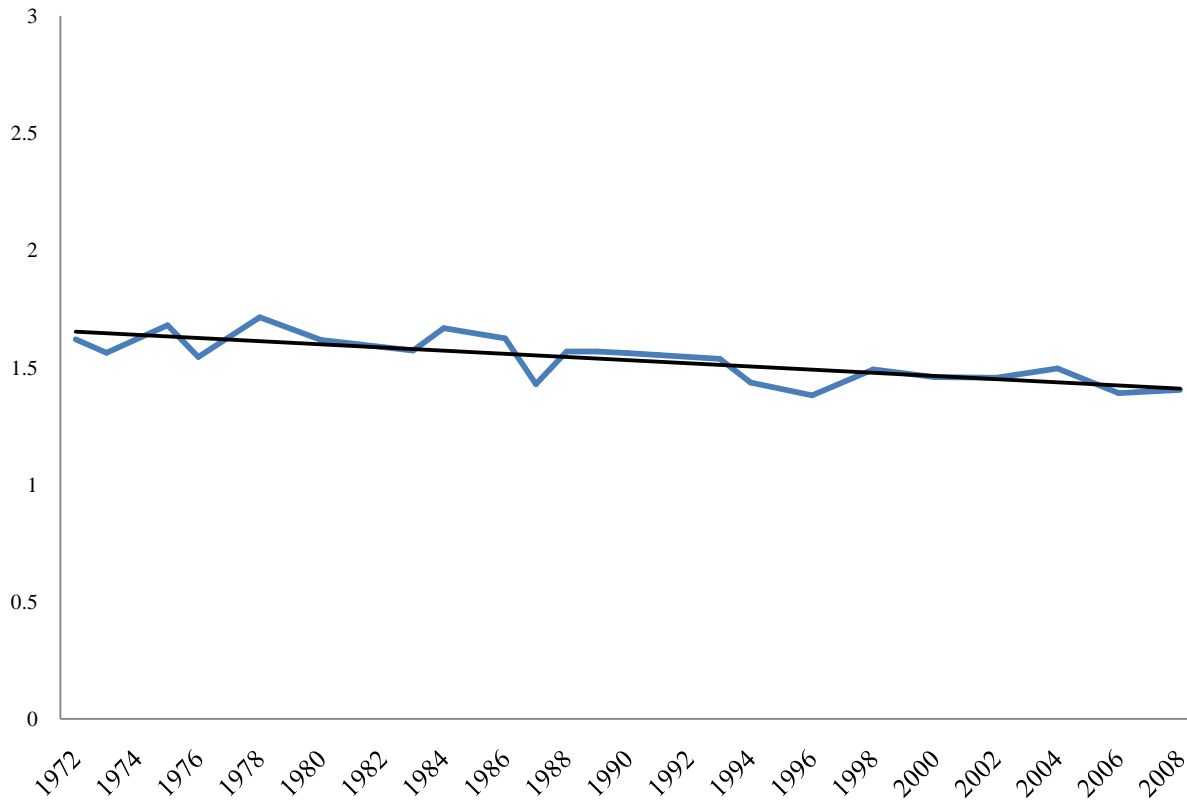


Chart 4: Comparison of Homosexual Tolerance Questions to Mean Response for Feeling Thermometer and GSS Question if Homosexual Sex is Wrong



The above chart illustrates both the percent of individuals who provided a tolerant response for each of the three tolerant questions along with the calculated mean for the feeling thermometer question. Additionally, the chart includes a question regarding whether or not respondents feel sexual relations between two same-sex adults is wrong (the percent reported is those respondents who stated that it not wrong at all.) The data for the tolerance questions and the question regarding sex between two same-sex adults are taken from the GSS. The data for the feeling thermometer question are taken from the NES. For 1992, there was no GSS administered. I interpolated the data, taking data from the 1991 and 1993 surveys.

Chart 5: Interpersonal Trust Means: 1972-2008



**Table 1: Atheist Political Tolerance Scale
OLS Regression Analysis**

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.006*	.002	-.095
Sex (1 = Female)	.000	.076	.000
Education	.091***	.014	.263
Race (1 = White)	.309***	.095	.121
Church Attendance	-.020	.015	-.054
Bible	-.293***	.060	-.207
Political Ideology	-.075**	.027	-.104
Interpersonal Trust	.097**	.037	.104
Constant	1.525***	.284	
N	601		
Adjusted R ²	.246		

$p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.008**	.003	-.118
Sex (1 = Female)	-.099	.087	-.042
Education	.099***	.016	.255
Race (1 = White)	.110	.111	.038
Church Attendance	-.032 [#]	.018	-.076
Bible	-.321***	.069	-.200
Political Ideology	-.030	.031	-.037
Interpersonal Trust	.116**	.042	.111
Constant	1.545***	.329	
N	596		
Adjusted R ²	.216		
# $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$			

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.008***	.002	-.132
Sex (1 = Female)	.036	.079	.017
Education	.058***	.014	.167
Race (1 = White)	.147	.098	.058
Church Attendance	.018	.016	.049
Bible	-.266***	.063	-.190
Political Ideology	-.009	.029	-.013
Interpersonal Trust	.073 [#]	.038	.080
SexWrong (1 = wrong)	-.422***	.091	-.200
Constant	2.223***	.297	
N	593		
Adjusted R ²			
# $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$			

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.010***	.003	-.150
Sex (1 = Female)	-.021	.088	-.009
Education	.088***	.016	.228
Race (1 = White)	.294**	.110	.102
Church Attendance	-.017	.018	-.040
Bible	-.340***	.070	-.215
Political Ideology	.022	.032	.028
Interpersonal Trust	.091*	.043	.087
Constant	1.202***	.332	
N	602		
Adjusted R ²	.185		
# $p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$			

**Table 5: Muslim Political Tolerance Scale
OLS Regression Analysis**

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.004	.003	-.061
Sex (1 = Female)	-.198*	.093	-.077
Education	.119***	.017	.277
Race (1 = White)	.252*	.117	.079
Church Attendance	-.029	.019	-.061
Bible	-.287***	.073	-.163
Political Ideology	-.085*	.033	-.094
Interpersonal Trust	.182***	.045	.158
Constant	.473	.349	
N	614		
Adjusted R ²	.249		

$p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

**Table 6: Racist Political Tolerance Scale
OLS Regression Analysis**

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	.000	.003	-.003
Sex (1 = Female)	-.220*	.094	-.094
Education	.057***	.017	.147
Race (1 = White)	.268*	.118	.092
Church Attendance	-.034 [#]	.019	-.080
Bible	-.191*	.075	-.120
Political Ideology	-.024	.034	-.029
Interpersonal Trust	.065	.046	.062
Constant	1.444***	.348	
N	598		
Adjusted R ²	.097		

$p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

**Table 7: 19-Point Political Tolerance Scale
OLS Regression Analysis**

	B	S.E.	Beta
Age	-.036**	.012	-.117
Sex (1 = Female)	-.548	.400	-.051
Education	.500***	.072	.278
Race (1 = White)	1.349**	.512	.100
Church Attendance	-.158 [#]	.080	-.081
Bible	-1.636***	.322	-.222
Political Ideology	-.243 [#]	.144	-.065
Interpersonal Trust	.669***	.195	.139
Constant	8.755***	1.500	
N	544		
Adjusted R ²	.287		

$p \leq .10$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$