The Political Consequences of Intolerance: Cultural Conformity and Political Freedom

James L. Gibson


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0554%28199206%2986%3A2%3C338%3ATPCOIC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The American Political Science Review is published by American Political Science Association. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/apsa.html.

The American Political Science Review
©1992 American Political Science Association

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2003 JSTOR
THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF INTOLERANCE: CULTURAL CONFORMITY AND POLITICAL FREEDOM

JAMES L. GIBSON University of Houston

I demonstrate that the intolerance of ordinary citizens matters for real politics even if strong linkages to policy outputs do not exist. In particular, the model I test posits that cultural intolerance constrains the liberty of individual citizens. Focusing on how people perceive political freedom, several hypotheses coupling tolerance and freedom are explored. Data from a national survey show that tolerance and freedom are connected. Those who do not feel free to express themselves politically are more likely to be intolerant of others, to have less heterogeneous peer groups and less tolerant spouses, and to live in less tolerant communities. Ultimately, the importance of mass political intolerance in the United States is that it establishes a culture of conformity that seems to constrain individual political liberty in many important ways.

When scholarly inquiry into political intolerance began nearly 40 years ago, there was little doubt about the political relevance of mass commitments to democratic values. Having just survived a world war against authoritarian dictators who seemed to have been abetted by their citizenries, there was widespread concern about whether democracy could exist in the face of the antidemocratic tendencies of the people. Just as the authoritarian movements of Europe and the Far East seemed to find succor in the hearts and minds of the people, the antidemocratic movement of McCarthyism threatened liberty in the United States. Few would have doubted whether citizen beliefs about majority rule and minorities rights mattered for politics.

Though 40 years of research has consistently shown a deep strain of intolerance in U.S. mass political culture, there is now a growing concern about whether these research findings have any real political implications. It is clear, for instance, that mass political intolerance is not a prerequisite to democratic government and that relatively democratic regimes can exist even when citizens hold fairly antidemocratic beliefs. Indeed, some have even suggested that the intolerance that we have so long measured and attempted to explain (both in terms of its consequences and etiology) has no meaningful existence in the first place (Mueller 1988). Absent any clear understanding of whether mass political intolerance does or does not matter, there is a growing uncertainty about the utility of further inquiry into the democratic beliefs of ordinary people.

Consequently, it is important for those who study mass political intolerance to move beyond simple descriptions of political beliefs and to demonstrate the political relevance of the antidemocratic values of citizens. I offer a theoretical means of linking these attitudes with politics. The linkage hypothesized is not through the traditional opinion–public policy process but instead, directed at the mass political culture. I focus on perceived political freedom—how people view the availability of liberty. My basic hypothesis is that intolerance matters for politics by constraining the freedom available to ordinary citizens. On the basis of this theoretical framework, survey data on the political relevance of political intolerance are presented, and several hypotheses are tested.

In particular, I consider this problem of cultural intolerance using three different analytical strategies: (1) I link intolerance and freedom within the minds of individual survey respondents; (2) I examine how intolerance within the peer group (especially the family) constrains political freedom; and (3) I posit that lack of freedom is a function of local cultural values and community sentiments. Throughout much of this investigation, I employ a contextual form of analysis. Each of the analytical strategies I pursue is assuredly incomplete. None of the analysis is irrefutable. My objective is to explore some of the ways in which cultural intolerance impinges upon the beliefs and behaviors of ordinary citizens. At the risk of some disjointedness, I am therefore presenting three different (but related) processes through which intolerance constrains freedom. The strength of the argument presented here is most fairly judged by the cumulative picture that emerges, not by the results of the tests of individual hypotheses. In light of the paucity of research on the implications of intolerance, this incomplete, but broad, research design is preferable to a comprehensive but narrow one (which is at the moment impossible anyway). In keeping with my desire to move beyond a simple micro analysis of intolerance, I close with some observations about the implications of these findings for a broader theory of the role of public opinion in democratic politics and the allocation of political freedom.

CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELEVANCE OF MASS POLITICAL INTOLERANCE

The initial impetus for the empirical study of the democratic beliefs of citizens was largely provided by
democratic theorists (e.g., Griffith, Plamenatz, and Pennock 1956). The mass-based totalitarian political movements of the period of World War II and its aftermath led scholars to examine more closely the nexus between democratic political institutions and the beliefs of citizens (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Lipset 1960). The debate that ensued was structured around the issue of whether citizen commitments to democracy were a prerequisite to democracy. The assumption that the survival of democracy as a process requires citizens to hold certain values received quite a jolt from the empirical evidence from surveys of the beliefs of ordinary people (e.g., McClosky 1964; Prothro and Grigg 1960). Citizens of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s (assuming this to be a democracy) were found to be quite intolerant of political nonconformists.

Out of a variety of empirical survey evidence was born the elitist theory of democracy. This theory, which has many variants, accepts as an empirical fact the intolerance of the mass public but argues that under most circumstances this intolerance is neutralized. Except under extraordinary political conditions, the antidemocratic mass public is immobilized by its own ignorance and apathy, leaving the relatively more democratic elite free to rule in a democratic fashion. This theory argues that mass opinion is important, since in times of political crisis the masses can be mobilized by antidemocratic elites, but that during times of ordinary politics these beliefs have few direct political consequences.

Studies that attempt to test hypotheses linking public opinion and public policy on matters of political tolerance and democratic rights have been rare, however. Focusing on changes in public opinion and their impact on public policy, Page and Shapiro (1983) discovered that in eight of nine policy changes in the area of civil liberties, there was congruence between public policy and public opinion. What the public generally wanted, it seems to have got. On the other hand, I investigated the hypothesis that mass political intolerance was connected to the adoption of repressive public policy by the states during the McCarthy era (Gibson 1988) but found no such relationship. Nor is there evidence that intolerant mass opinion directly spurred the state legislatures to adopt repressive statutes against dissent on university campuses during the Vietnam War era (Gibson 1989a; see also Gibson and Tedin 1988). This research, though limited in many important ways, cast some doubt on the elitist theory’s presumption that mass intolerance causes outbreaks of political repression during times of political crisis. Nonetheless, it is important for my concerns here because it fails to identify any direct political consequences flowing from mass opinion.

Absent direct linkages to public policy, is mass political opinion irrelevant? Perhaps not. Public policy is not the only dependent variable worthy of consideration. Even when opinion does not directly set policy, it may nonetheless constrict the choices of policymakers by setting broad limits on acceptable policies. And even when government is unresponsive to citizen preferences, citizens may well constrain the actions of their fellow citizens. Indeed, the political life of a community may be strongly influenced by the beliefs and values of its citizens even in the absence of direct citizen influence on public policy. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider other mechanisms through which mass political intolerance matters for politics.

THE CONTEXTUAL–CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL INTOLERANCE

Perhaps the true significance of mass political intolerance lies in its contribution to the creation of a culture of political conformity, a culture in which political liberty is limited by the intolerance of ordinary citizens. In this sense, mass beliefs about the political rights and liberties of those with unpopular political views circumscribe how citizens interact with one another (see Chilton 1988; MacKuen 1990). The political relevance of political intolerance, then, can be found in the constraints on political thought and action that citizens impose upon each other. Thus, I hypothesize that people learn from the political culture that intolerance is widespread, that it is acceptable, and that there are tangible risks to asserting views that the intolerant culture finds objectionable. Political intolerance can thus define the context of politics for many citizens.

This suggests that the relevance of intolerance must be understood through a contextual analysis of the political culture. Those who study public opinion and electoral behavior have long been concerned with contextual effects on opinion formation and political action, and there seems to be fairly widespread agreement that individuals form their opinions not in isolation but in interaction with their social environments. For instance, according to McPhee’s (1963) theory of social reality testing, individuals consume information from their environments, develop personal understandings of the information, and then test hypotheses through interpersonal interaction (see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988, 1989, 1991). Through this reality-testing process, pressures toward conformity occur. It is rare that individuals reject the reactions of their peers. Though some scholars (e.g., Noelle-Neumann 1984) view this as a coercive process in which social isolation is imposed on recalcitrant nonconformists, individual citizens may conform through what they perceive as more or less voluntary processes.

Many have thought about contextual effects of this sort in terms of short-term attitude change and change in announced voting intentions and behavior. While one can imagine that there are such effects on these attitudes and actions, politics is rarely salient enough for people to engage in continuous reality testing. The stronger effects are likely to be in terms
TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY PROPOSED</th>
<th>PERCENT BELIEVING GROUP SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MOST DISLIKED GROUP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run for office</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legally exist as a group</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a speech</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold public rallies</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach in schools</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make phone calls untapped</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All activities</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Approximate weighted Ns: most and 2d most disliked, 1,205; 3d most disliked, 1,065; 4th most disliked, 655. The last two items in the table were not asked of the 3d and 4th most disliked groups.

of more basic political orientations and change over longer periods of time. In no area of political life are these social interactions more important than in the area of conformity and political tolerance. In arriving at political beliefs and behaviors, citizens continually test hypotheses about what is and what is not acceptable within the cultural context. The range of acceptable beliefs varies in conjunction with variation in political culture, in conjunction with variation in levels of political tolerance that individuals experience.

It is useful to distinguish between the macro and micro environments of the individual. The macro environment is the larger social and political community within which the respondent resides, while the micro environment is made up of the specific friendship and family groups relevant for the respondent. My guiding hypothesis is actually quite simple: I expect that more political freedom is perceived where these environments are more tolerant and that the environments are the most tolerant when they are the most diverse politically.

Thus, the challenge for research on political intolerance is to demonstrate the cultural relevance of these antidemocratic beliefs. Is there a culture of conformity in the contemporary United States? Is Tocqueville's observation, "In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion" (Tocqueville 1948, 264), a valid assessment of contemporary levels of perceived freedom? Do individuals hold views that they perceive to be unpopular with their fellow citizens? Are they reluctant to express those views? To what degree is there self-censorship in the United States as a result of this perceived political intolerance? I will attempt to address these questions by testing the general hypothesis that mass political intolerance creates a culture of conformity and that this culture significantly affects citizens' perceptions of the freedom that is available to them.

INTOLERANCE AND PERCEIVED POLITICAL FREEDOM IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

Before considering the specific hypotheses, I turn for a moment to the conceptualization and operationalization of the key tolerance and freedom concepts. Political intolerance is a concept that has attracted considerable attention from public opinion scholars. Perceived political freedom has not. Thus, after a rather cursory review of the measurement of intolerance, I will consider in some depth how freedom is conceptualized and operationalized.

Levels of Political Intolerance

To what degree are Americans today politically intolerant? Conceptualizing tolerance as "opposition to state actions that limit opportunities for citizens, individually or in groups, to compete for political power" (Gibson and Bingham 1985, 106), we can turn to data from a 1987 survey of the mass public to address this problem (see Appendix).

Table 1 reports willingness to tolerate deviant and unpopular political groups. The data are based on survey items that require the respondents to select the specific political groups that are to be tolerated or not tolerated. The table reports reactions to the four groups in American politics that the respondent most dislikes. Several conclusions are warranted from the data. First, intolerance is quite widespread. This is demonstrated both by the responses to individual items and the overall unwillingness to allow these unpopular political minorities full rights of democratic citizenship. Indeed, it is remarkable that only 6% of the American people would allow the group they most dislike to enjoy the same political rights and opportunities that the rest of the polity enjoys. It
is difficult to imagine how intolerance might be more widespread. Nor is intolerance limited to a single extreme group. Rather, it is generalized across groups that are greatly (even if not extremely) disliked. Though there is some variation in intolerance in Table 1 that is related to the degree of negative affect toward the group, the relationship is neither monotonic nor strong. People probably tolerate groups they only a little dislike (e.g., Democrats probably tolerate Republicans); but it appears that even moderately intense antipathy often translates into intolerance.

Thus, there is little support for full civil liberties for unpopular political minorities. But these data still do not address the question of whether mass political intolerance matters. Does intolerance contribute to restrictions on freedom, self-censorship, and political conformity?

Levels of Perceived Political Freedom

How strongly does the political culture of the United States encourage and reward conformity and discourage and penalize political nonconformity? Perhaps the most appropriate strategy for considering perceptions of political intolerance would be to survey groups that are the contemporary targets of intolerance, such as atheists, Klansmen, communists, fascists, and homosexuals. Such a research design would be difficult to implement (but see Gibson 1987a on the views of homosexuals). An alternative design would be one in which respondents are asked to report on their own perceived political freedom.

According to Preston (1982), people cannot be free unless they perceive opportunities for self-expression, unless they have the capacities and conditions for deliberative choice. To the extent that some citizens perceive constraints on their freedom, liberty is diminished. This view of freedom is useful because it implies that a key element of freedom is the perception of the ability to make such choices freely.

This conceptualization of freedom is also salutary because it renders the concept susceptible to empirical investigation through an assessment of the perceptions of people of the conditions for deliberative choice. Most basically, do people perceive such conditions as available to them? Certainly, those who expect to endure sanctions for political activity have neither the capacity nor the conditions for free action. Though freedom is more than merely perceptual, the beliefs of individuals are important for understanding their own levels of real freedom.

Just what sorts of activities are of concern when we speak of “freedom to act”? Though many domains of activity may be of interest, my concern here is limited to political freedom, mainly within the context of liberal democratic polities. Relying on Dahl’s (1971, 1989) theory of polyarchy, I postulate that in a liberal democracy, citizens must have the opportunity to communicate with their fellows and to join together in political parties and activist groups to press their political demands. Thus, from the perspective of democratic political systems, political freedom includes institutional guarantees of the right to engage in oppositionist political activity by speaking, assembling, organizing, proselytizing, and competing for political power. From the perspective of the freedom of individual citizens, my concern is whether individuals perceive opportunity to express themselves about political matters.

Within this conceptualization of perceived freedom, I recognize two primary sources of constraints on liberty: the larger political system and the immediate interpersonal context. Citizens may perceive that public expressions of their political views are circumscribed by the laws and actions of the state. This external censorship is more consistent with traditional notions of political repression. In addition, however, both public and private expressions may be constrained by interpersonal pressures toward conformity and sanctions for deviance. Local networks of friends, family, and associates may impose substantial restrictions on their freedom. To the extent that the political culture to which the individual is exposed does not reinforce political diversity and respect nonconformity, individuals with unpopular views may perceive significant repercussions for expressing their opinions. Thus, in understanding personal political freedom, we must be sensitive to constraints emanating from the larger political system, as well as from the personal network of the individual.

Perhaps the easiest to measure of these dimensions is perception of what political activity the government will permit. The top of Table 2 reports responses to the question whether the government would allow the respondents to engage in certain types of political activities, prefaced by the premise “Suppose you felt very strongly that something the government was doing was very wrong and you wanted to do something about it.” The responses were collected through a four-point response set, though Table 2 reports percentages based on collapsing the categories probably not allow and definitely not allow. Perceptions of freedom are closely related to the race of the respondent (Gibson n.d.[B]). Because of this and because the survey included a remarkably large and representative oversample of African-Americans (see Appendix), the data are reported separately for blacks and whites.

Table 2 reveals that significant numbers of Americans perceive that the government would not allow them to express their opposition to government policy through conventional and unconventional political activity. Racial differences on these items are dramatic. Blacks are much more likely to perceive constraints on their freedom than are whites. Perhaps most surprising is the substantial numbers of both blacks and whites who feel that the government would not allow them ordinary and quite conventional means of political participation. One-quarter to two-fifths of white Americans believe that the government would prohibit them from expressing their

341


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCEPTION OF FREEDOM</th>
<th>BLACKS</th>
<th>WHITES</th>
<th>FACTOR LOADING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe government would not allow them to</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>79.0**</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize nationwide strike</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>39.5**</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize public meetings</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>35.3**</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize protest marches/demonstrations</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>29.6**</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make speech criticizing government actions</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>28.1**</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publish pamphlets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are reluctant to talk about politics because</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>46.5**</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they do not like arguments</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't want to create enemies</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>18.7**</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry that people will think their views strange</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>12.5**</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry what people would think of them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry the government might find out</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2.4**</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwilling to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put sign in front of home/apartment</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>77.2*</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put bumper sticker on car</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>68.8**</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in demonstration</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear button to work or in public</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign petition for publication in local paper</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>39.1**</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write letter to elected representative</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>30.3**</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The factor loadings are based on a combined analysis of blacks and whites.

aThe question leader read: "Suppose you felt very strongly that something the government was doing was very wrong and you wanted to do something about it. Do you think the government would definitely allow, probably allow, probably not allow, or definitely not allow you to . . . ?" The percentages shown collapse the probabily not and definitely not responses. The approximate number of black respondents is 434; for whites, N = 796.

bThe leader of each of the items is "I am sometimes reluctant to talk about politics because . . . " Response choices were true and false. The number of black respondents exceeds 420, and the number of whites is at least 785.

cThe question read: "Let's say you did have a political view that you knew would be very unpopular with others. Would you be willing to . . . ?" The percentages reported exclude those who would not do the activity under any circumstances, regardless of the popularity or unpopularity of the view. The number of black respondents exceeds 404 and the number of whites is at least 749.

*p ≤ .05 (racial difference of uncollapsed responses).

**p ≤ .01 (racial difference of uncollapsed responses).

opposition through conventional speech and assembly activities. Among blacks, 53–64% believe the same. And although it is perhaps a bit fanciful for ordinary people to imagine organizing a nationwide strike, four in five black and white Americans believe that the government would prohibit such efforts. The level of perceived governmental constraints on political opposition is astoundingly high.

Perceptions of governmental limitations on political freedom represent an external form of censorship. Internal censorship, or self-censorship, can be measured by asking whether individuals are willing to express themselves politically when their views are unpopular with the majority. Consequently, I attempted to measure the beliefs Americans hold that might justify self-censorship. The respondents were given the opportunity to accept or reject a variety of statements that might explain reluctance to talk about politics with their families and friends. Each of these statements represents the belief that there are significant personal costs to be paid for expressing one's views. The middle of Table 2 reports their responses to these statements. Many of these responses suggest strong reservations about political expression. Politics is perceived as sometimes leading to arguments (58% of blacks, 47% of whites) and as creating enemies (42% of blacks, 37% of whites). There is also a substantial minority of respondents that worries about nonconformity. Generally, many believe that political discussions can be associated with unwelcomed repercussions from friends and family.

The racial differences observed in perceptions of the governmental constraints on political action are not as stark here; but neither are they trivial. Blacks are significantly more likely to fear expressing their views because people would think them strange, are more fearful of repercussions from the government, more censor themselves due to a distaste for political argument, and are more fearful about their reputations. Special note should be taken of the nearly 13% of the black sample that is reluctant to talk about politics due to a worry "that the government might find out about me." This is an astonishing level of concern among African-Americans and represents a very serious perceived threat to personal political freedom.

I also asked the respondents whether they would be willing to engage in certain sorts of activities to express views in spite of their being unpopular with others. These items represent a form of behavioral self-censorship. The bottom of Table 2 reports the results from these questions. A substantial number of
Americans are reluctant to express unpopular political views. The figures range from roughly three-fourths who are unwilling to place a sign in front of their home to announce an unpopular view to one-third who would not write a letter to one of their elected representatives. It is not particularly surprising that large majorities would be unwilling to announce an unpopular view with a bumper sticker or a yard sign, since to do so makes one’s property vulnerable to those who find the position offensive. But a majority of Americans are also unwilling to express an unpopular opinion through less risky activities such as wearing a button or participating in a demonstration. Indeed, nearly one-third of the American people would be unwilling to write a letter to an elected representative to express an unpopular political position! Only one-sixth of the respondents would engage in all six of the activities; fully 28% claim that they would do none of the activities. In general, the greater the direct personal accountability for the view, the less likely the respondents are to want to engage in the activity. Once more, we see that a substantial portion of the American people is fearful of public expression of unpopular political views.

Racial differences in behavioral self-censorship are less pronounced than on the other sets of items. Blacks are significantly less likely than whites to be willing to sign a petition that would be published in the newspapers; but for some activities, whites are substantially less likely to be willing to express themselves. For instance, nearly 10% more whites claim they would not put a bumper sticker on their cars (a difference that is significant). The differences in these frequencies suggest that the sources of self-censorship may vary according to race.

In order to examine the causes and consequences of perceived political freedom, it is useful to construct some indices of political freedom. I employ factor analysis to construct the measures, since in factor analysis the items are weighted unequally in the construction of the summary indices. Since all of the factor analysis results support the assumption of the unidimensionality of the measures, scores from the first unrotated factors serve as the specific indices. The factor loadings for each of the three factor analyses are also shown in Table 2.19

According to the results I have presented, political freedom is not widely perceived to pertain in the United States. Levels of perceived governmental constraints on freedom and self-censorship are surprisingly high. Moreover, perceived freedom seems to be allocated unevenly across racial groups. African-Americans perceive themselves as having less liberty, just as they have less of nearly everything else of value in American society. It remains to consider whether variation beyond that associated with race can be accounted for. I begin this inquiry with consideration of the connections between freedom and tolerance within the minds of the individual respondents.

CONNECTING FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

To what degree do tolerance and perceptions of political freedom go together? Do those who are intolerant perceive more limited freedom for themselves? Figure 1 shows the bivariate correlations among the various indicators of perceptions of freedom and the index of political tolerance for both blacks and whites. Generally, the correlations do not differ substantially across race (although there are a few exceptions); and the magnitude of the black coefficients is generally somewhat smaller than the white coefficients. Beliefs about tolerance and freedom are fairly closely connected. There is a moderately strong relationship between political tolerance and perceptions of repression, with those who are more tolerant perceiving less political repression. These people apparently believe not only that they are free to act as they wish but that others should be free as well. Conversely, those who would deny liberty to their political opponents do not necessarily claim it for themselves. Those who are more tolerant are also less likely to engage in self-censorship. Whether tolerance flows from some sort of norm of reciprocity and fairness (“Because I am able to express my views, others should be allowed to express theirs”) or individuals are projecting their own tolerance onto others cannot be determined. Tolerance of others is associated with the belief that there are few significant costs to be paid for one’s own political self-expression.

It would be tempting to argue that perceptions of government constraints inhibit self-expression; and, indeed, there are significant correlations between these variables for both blacks and whites. Yet I am a bit reluctant to interpret the causal pathway. Those who self-censor may rationalize their behavior through beliefs about repression rather than limiting themselves out of fear of governmental retaliation. At the moment, it is prudent to conclude no more than that most Americans—black and white—hold reasonably consistent views about freedom and tolerance.20 Tolerance matters because it is connected to a set of beliefs about the legitimacy and appropriateness of self-expression.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONSTRAINTS ON FREEDOM

Does cultural intolerance inhibit freedom? While the analysis presented is consistent with that hypothesis, it does little to elucidate the causal pathways. For that, it is necessary to turn to somewhat different data about the interpersonal networks of the respondents.

Networks

The most direct test of the hypothesis that lack of freedom flows from cultural intolerance would re-
require that interpersonal networks be mapped and interviewed (e.g., Knoke and Kuklinski 1982). It would then be possible to correlate attributes of the network with perceptions of the individual. This sort of research design is extremely costly and difficult to execute, and because many sanctions for nonconformist behavior are no doubt situationally determined, it would still only provide limited evidence of central tendencies. An alternative research design is therefore necessary.

Following the methodology of earlier research (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991; Leighley 1990; MacKuen and Brown 1987), I will test the cultural hypothesis using respondent reports about their immediate set of peers. The respondents were asked to name three individuals with whom they “discuss important matters.” They were then asked to specify the party identifications of each of the people, as well as the frequencies with which they talk about political matters. Using these variables, an indirect test of contextual constraints on freedom can be conducted.

One of the most important attributes of the micro environments of individuals is diversity. Social scientists have long argued that exposure to political diversity contributes to political tolerance (e.g., Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978). As one is exposed to a greater range of political ideas, one can become aware that alternative viewpoints are possible and legitimate and that one’s own view may not be absolutely correct (see Duch and Gibson 1992). Political homogeneity generates and reinforces a closed-mindedness that is not conducive to political tolerance. As Blau noted: “The attenuation of profound social bonds that firmly integrate individuals in their communities is often deplored. But strong in-group bonds restrain individual freedom and mobility, and they sustain rigidity and bigotry. Diverse intergroup relations, though not intimate, broaden horizons and promote tolerance, and they are the basis of macro-social integration” (1974, 623). Those with more diverse peers are expected to perceive a greater level of political freedom because group diversity nurtures political tolerance.

Using the respondents’ reports on their networks, some indication can be got of the political diversity of these peer groups by comparing the party identifications of the respondents with their reports of their friends’ party identifications. An overall index of exposure to partisan diversity can be created by simply counting the number of members of the peer group that has perceived affiliations differing from the respondent’s party attachment. The index ranges from zero (no friends with different party affiliations) to three (all three friends are of a party different from the respondent’s).

Only a small majority (60%) of the respondents can identify the party affiliations of at least two of the three people in their networks. Of those who know the party of at least one of their friends, most report fairly homogeneous peer groups: 50% of the sample identifies no members of the immediate peer group with different party affiliations, while only 8% has three friends with differing party affiliations. This finding of relative network homogeneity is common in the research literature (e.g., Marsden 1987).

This measure of homogeneity can be further weighted by the frequency of political discussion; that is, each respondent was asked to indicate the frequency with which he or she discussed politics with each of the three peers. Thus an overall index score can measure the frequency of discussion of politics with people of differing partisan persuasions. This is a more sensitive measure of exposure to political diversity. I hypothesize that greater exposure to political diversity is associated with greater political tolerance and with a greater sense of political freedom. Table 3 reports the analysis.

The direct relationship of network partisan heterogeneity and perceptions of freedom is tiny. The
correlations for blacks and whites are quite weak. Individuals who have more heterogeneous groups of peers perceive little more freedom available than those with homogeneous peer groups. In light of the variability in political content and the frequency of discussion, this finding is perhaps not surprising.

When the diversity measure is weighted by the frequency of political conversations, the relationships are stronger and, in most cases, statistically significant. When political discussion is common within the peer group and the peer group is composed of members with differing party identifications, blacks become significantly less likely to engage in behavioral self-censorship or to perceive governmental constraints on their freedom. Under similar conditions, whites perceive fewer governmental constraints, are less reluctant to talk about politics, and engage in less behavioral self-censorship. Peer group diversity thus contributes to greater perceived freedom. Were a more direct measure of peer group tolerance available, these relationships would likely be stronger. Nonetheless, I take these data as supportive of the basic hypothesis that exposure to diversity legitimizes differences and thereby contributes to political freedom.

This analysis concerns peer groups that are made up of a variety of types of individuals, each treated as having equal importance for the respondent. Peer groups are certainly of some importance for learning about the limits of political freedom. However, it is likely that people also learn lessons about freedom from their experiences within an even more micro environment, the family. In particular, I hypothesize that the political intolerance of a spouse has something to do with how one perceives political freedom. The available data allow at least an indirect test of this proposition.

### Intolerance in the Family

For most married couples in the United States, spouses represent an important reference group. When asked to name three other people with whom important matters are discussed, nearly 76% of the married people in this national sample named their spouses. Fully 39% listed a spouse as the most important person. Moreover, there is considerable political content to the discussions that husbands and wives have. Nearly 25% of the sample report that they frequently talk to a spouse about politics, while only 14% claim that they talk quite rarely to a spouse about politics. It is reasonable to ask, therefore, to what extent the intolerance of a spouse contributes to perceptions that freedom is best not exercised.

The optimal research design requires that spouses be interviewed and be interviewed independently of their mates. Such a design is feasible (see Brickell, Huckfeldt, and Sprague 1988; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1989, 1991); but it is quite costly and difficult to implement. An alternative is to allow respondents to serve as informants on their spouses. Such a strategy probably cannot produce reliable direct information about spousal tolerance but can certainly be used to gather data about levels of education, religious affiliation, and so on. Perhaps the data that can be reliably collected can be used to estimate the data that cannot be reliably collected.

The respondents in the 1987 survey were queried about a variety of attributes of their spouses. Fortunately, many of the demographic characteristics that can be faithfully reported in the survey are useful predictors of intolerance and can be used to estimate the intolerance of each respondent’s spouse. Several steps (each involving important assumptions) must be taken in order to estimate spousal intolerance.

The intolerance of the spring 1987 respondents was regressed on several demographic attributes of the subjects (see Table 4). The regressions were conducted separately for the various combinations of race (blacks and whites) and gender. The sample was separated by gender in order to allow estimation of spousal intolerance. The separation by race was useful because such significant differences in intolerance (as well as the predictors of intolerance) exist by racial
groups. The data reported in Table 4 are unstandardized coefficients, allowing comparison across the samples; and they are derived from only the portion of the sample that reported being currently married.

It should first be noted that the demographic model explains a considerable amount of the variance in tolerance among whites but a much reduced amount among blacks. The tolerance of whites is fairly well predicted by their demographic attributes, while the tolerance of blacks is not. Moreover, there are large differences in the intercepts that vary by race (as well as by gender). The large amount of unexplained variance among blacks should make us cautious in using these equations to estimate spousal intolerance.

Among whites there are some important differences across gender in the predictors of tolerance. Religious fundamentalism contributes somewhat to intolerance among men but has a much reduced effect among women. On the other hand, greater family income enhances the tolerance of women but has little effect on men. The largest difference observed is in the intercept. When education, income, and occupational prestige are at their lowest and when church attendance and religious fundamentalism are at their highest, women are considerably more intolerant than men (and this seems to be true across races). The tolerance levels of men are also slightly more predictable than those of women.

It is not my purpose to present a fully specified model of gender and racial differences on the basis of the data in Table 4. The indicators available are not suitable to that task. Instead, I aim to use these characteristics to generate an estimated spousal tolerance score. Because the tolerance of blacks is so unpredict-

able by this equation, I will exclude them from further consideration. Using the coefficients reported in the table and each respondent's reports of the characteristics of a spouse on these five variables (and assuming that all marriages are heterosexual and not interracial) estimated scores can be derived for the married portion of the sample. The scores are estimated from the equation that is appropriate for the gender and race of the spouse, and the values for the independent variables are the attributes of the spouse (as provided by the respondent). These estimates provide some indication of the level of intolerance of the spouse.

As expected, the correlation of the tolerance of white couples is relatively high ($r = .43$). Tolerant women tend to marry tolerant men and vice versa. Relative to other characteristics of couples, this is not a strong correlation, however. For instance, levels of education of husbands and wives are correlated at .63, and frequencies of church attendance are related at .72. Though this no doubt reflects in part the estimation of spousal intolerance, rather than the direct measurement of it, there is some degree of heterogeneity within families in levels of intolerance.

It is not possible to sort out the direction of causality in these data. We cannot determine whether the intolerance of husbands is caused by their wife's intolerance, or vice versa. We can, however, test the hypothesis that spousal intolerance is associated with a sense of lack of freedom. Where one's spouse is more intolerant, I expect to see greater self-censorship and a greater sense of constraints on personal political freedom. Because there are important gender differences, the relationships must be considered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Equations for Estimating Spousal Tolerance (Married Respondents Only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>BLACKS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>MEN</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREDICTORS OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td>-.539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.252)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational prestige</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious fundamentalism</td>
<td>.229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.865)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.242)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.772)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum pairwise N</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Entries shown in parentheses are standard errors. The minimum pairwise Ns shown are the unweighted numbers of cases.*
TABLE 5

The Impact of Spousal Tolerance on Political Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLITICAL DISCUSSION WITH FAMILY</th>
<th>SPOUSE'S TOLERANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male respondents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage talking about politics &quot;often&quot; with family</td>
<td>19.1 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage reluctant to talk about politics with family</td>
<td>15.2 (66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female respondents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage talking about politics &quot;often&quot; with family</td>
<td>21.1 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage reluctant to talk about politics with family</td>
<td>20.5 (39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parentheses are the total numbers of cases upon which the percentages are based (white married respondents only).

separately for men and for women. (As before, the analysis is confined to whites.)

Table 5 reports the relationship between spousal intolerance and the frequency and nature of familial political discussions among whites. Two indicators are reported: the percentage of respondents reporting that they "frequently" hold political discussions with their families and the percentage who claim that they sometimes feel reluctant to express their political views to their families. I hypothesize that spousal intolerance contributes to unwillingness to discuss politics openly.

Intolerance limits political discussions, but the findings vary significantly by gender. Among men, the intolerance of wives significantly affects not only the frequency of political discussion but the openness of discussion, as well. Where wives are more tolerant, political discussions are more common, and husbands are more likely to express their true political views. Thus, these data support the hypothesis. However, the intolerance of women's husbands has virtually no effect on the frequency of political discussions and only a slight effect on the openness of conversations. The gender differences are fairly stark: 43% of the men married to tolerant wives often talk about politics with their families, while only 22% of women married to tolerant husbands discuss politics often. Whether under conditions of low spousal tolerance or high spousal tolerance, women are more likely to censor their political views than are men and thus are less likely to realize the benefits of increased tolerance within marriages. Thus (perhaps ironically), the tolerance of wives has a bigger impact on family political discussions than does the tolerance of husbands.

The frequency and content of political discussions is no doubt influenced in part by levels of interest and competence in politics. If gender differences exist, then they might account for the differences shown in Table 5. Instead of pursuing these differences, it might be more useful to turn to the general beliefs respondents hold about personal political freedom and consider the correlations between spousal intolerance and general perceptions of freedom for men and women.

White men who are married to less tolerant women tend to perceive greater governmental repression ($r = -.37, p < .01$). The same is true of women who are married to less tolerant men ($r = -.35, p < .01$). To the extent that these views are derived from familial experience, men and women react similarly. Moreover, there is an independent impact of spousal tolerance on perceptions of government repression; that is, when these perceptions are regressed on the respondent's own intolerance and a spouse's intolerance, the latter variable has a significant and nontrivial effect on perceptions. The increment in R-squared is a highly significant .03; and beta is $-.19$ (s.e. = .04).

However, there are hints of some differences between men and women in terms of self-censorship of political talk (if not action). Spousal intolerance has some effect on the willingness of men to express their political views ($r = -.16, p < .01$) but a more substantial effect on the general willingness of women to express their views ($r = -.28, p < .01$). On the other hand, when it comes to expressing their political views behaviorally (which usually takes place outside the home, anyway), neither men nor women are much affected by their spouse's intolerance (men, $r = -.14, p < .05$; women, $r = -.11, p > .05$). In terms of general self-censorship, we see an effect on willingness to express opinions that is opposite of that already observed. The views of
women are affected by their husband’s intolerance, but the views of men are little affected by the intolerance of their wives.

Thus, we have something of a paradox. Men with less tolerant wives tend to have fewer and less open political discussions at home, but their overall levels of perceived freedom are little affected. On the other hand, women with less tolerant husbands are neither more nor less willing to express themselves at home but generally perceive less freedom. It appears from these data that the experiences at home of married white men are not generalized to politics at large, while the experiences of women at home are generalized. If the South Bend, Indiana findings of Brickell, Huckfeldt, and Sprague (1988) are generalizable, this may be due to the tendency of men to discount and devalue political discussions with their wives. (See also Weiner 1978, which also reports a greater effect of husbands on wives’ partisan affiliations than vice versa.) This conclusion, though highly speculative, is worthy of further investigation.

Apparently, people do learn something of the limits of freedom from their experiences in their families. Perhaps, however, this is in part a function of larger political environment in which individuals and families exist. Hence, I will turn my attention to a different sort of contextual analysis.

Community Intolerance and Perceptions of Freedom

Contextual analyses also profit from moving beyond individual networks to the macro environment of the individual (e.g., MacKuen and Brown 1987). It is useful to consider whether intolerance in the larger social and political community within which the respondent resides affects levels of perceived freedom. To explore the impact of community intolerance we first have to consider some important measurement and aggregation issues.

The traditional approach to measuring political tolerance derives from Stouffer’s (1955) pathbreaking study and involves asking respondents whether groups assumed to be unpopular should be allowed to engage in certain activities. The General Social Survey frequently includes 15 measures of this sort. The measures are structured around five groups and three activities. The group stimuli are (1) “somebody who is against all churches and religion,” (2) “a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior,” (3) “a man who admits he is a Communist,” (4) “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run country,” and (5) “a man who admits he is a homosexual.” The activities are (1) making a speech in the community, (2) teaching in a college or university, and (3) such a person’s book being in the public library. The responses are collected through a dichotomous response set. Though these items have been criticized (e.g., Sullivan, Pireson, and Marcus 1982) and are certainly limited in important ways, they have been used repeatedly by scholars interested in political tolerance (e.g., McCutcheon 1985; Bobo and Licari 1989; and Sniderman et al. 1989). I have recently shown that the Stouffer measures are remarkably similar to the Sullivan, Pireson, and Marcus “least-liked” approach (Gibson n.d.[a]). Especially since the traditional left-wing targets of intolerance were expanded (in 1976) to include militarists and racists, the items are less susceptible to the critique of Sullivan, Pireson, and Marcus. A scale based on the overall responses to the items can be of some utility as a measure of community intolerance. The tolerance index is the mean of the responses to these 15 items. The mean index score is .56, with a standard deviation of .33; and the index is extremely reliable (Cronbach’s alpha = .92). Generally, these data show remarkable temporal stability.

In order to test the contextual hypothesis, a measure of the intolerance of the local community must be derived. There are two possible geographical units that could serve to define the local community: the primary sampling unit and the block (enumeration district). In the 1980s, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) consistently used the same 84 primary sampling units. These are fairly large geographical units, consisting of counties, standard metropolitan statistical areas, independent cities, and (in New England) parts of counties. The blocks are much smaller than primary sampling units. The 1980 sampling frame included 562 of these units. The advantages and disadvantages of using the block as the measure of community opinion are obvious: the block has immediacy for the respondent, but the block mean is based on few cases. The primary sampling unit means are based on many more cases, but the primary sampling unit may not impinge much on the individual respondent. In the analysis that follows, I will aggregate by both units, bearing in mind the limitations of each.

To what degree is the intolerance of the community reflected in the intolerance of the individual respondent? We can address this problem by correlating the measure of individual intolerance with the mean tolerance score for the primary sampling unit and block. Note that the tolerance score for the individual is operationalized differently from the tolerance score for the community and that the magnitude of cross-level correlations is invariably quite small. Furthermore, the tolerance scores of the individual respondents are not used in constructing the aggregate scores for the primary sampling units and blocks in which they live. Nonetheless, the correlation between individual tolerance and average tolerance within the block is .33 for whites and .19 for blacks. For average tolerance within the primary sampling unit, the correlation is .22 for whites and .12 for blacks. That people are more like their immediate neighborhood than the larger community is not surprising. However, the more interesting question is whether the tolerance of the community is associated with perceptions of freedom by individual residents. The data relevant to this hypothesis are shown in Table 6.
The correlations reported in Table 6 are quite supportive of the hypothesis. Among both blacks and whites, those living in more tolerant communities are considerably more likely to perceive political freedom. For instance, intolerance in the community is significantly associated with perceptions of greater repression and with less willingness to express one’s political views. Less tolerant communities seem to be successful at limiting freedom. These coefficients are all the more impressive when it is noted that they are cross-level correlations, so that all within-community variance in levels of perceived freedom must be treated as error variance.

It is impossible to sort out the causal pathways linking community intolerance with self-censorship. It is possible, for instance, that the community creates a set of norms that legitimize intolerance, that communal intolerance gets reflected in individual intolerance, and that citizens would deny themselves freedom just as they would deny their enemies freedom. Other processes are equally plausible. The only statistical test that is helpful in trying to unravel the process is to determine whether community intolerance has an impact on perceptions of freedom controlling for the intolerance of the individual. Data relevant to this hypothesis are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 reveals that community intolerance does have some effect on perceptions of freedom beyond the individual’s own intolerance. For instance, for blacks, the beta coefficient relating community (block) tolerance to perceptions of governmental constraints on freedom is a highly significant \(-.18\). For whites, the coefficient is \(-.14\) (which is also significant at less than \(.01\)). These effects are not large either, and they are generally stronger for the block-level data than for the primary sampling unit data. But since the statistical tests are so strongly biased against the hypothesis, I take this as important support for the proposition that intolerance in the community limits available freedom.

Thus, there is fairly persuasive evidence that those who perceive constraints on their freedom live in communities characterized by higher levels of political intolerance. I cannot be certain that perceptions of

---

**TABLE 6**

Community Tolerance and Perceptions of Freedom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCEPTION OF FREEDOM</th>
<th>AVERAGE COMMUNITY TOLERANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRIMARY SAMPLING UNIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of government constraints</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to discuss political views</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral self-censorship</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of government constraints</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to discuss political views</td>
<td>-.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral self-censorship</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients. 
\(p \leq .05\). 
\("p \leq .01.\)
lack of freedom are caused by local cultural values encouraging conformity. To unravel the complex causality involved here is far beyond the limits of the data and research design. Nonetheless, where there is greater intolerance in a community, one is more likely to find citizens who perceive significant costs to the exercise of political liberty.

The analysis presented here supports several conclusions. First, it appears that the perceptions ordinary citizens hold of political freedom can, in fact, be rigorously measured. Second, there is a surprisingly low level of perceived political freedom in the United States. Third, large and very important racial differences exist in how much freedom is perceived, with African-Americans asserting that there are many more constraints on their freedom than do whites.

More important are the findings connecting perceptions of freedom and intolerance. Not only are those who are intolerant more likely to perceive constraints on their own freedom, but I have also adduced evidence that intolerance in the external environment contributes to a lack of perceived freedom. More homogeneous (and presumably less tolerant) peer groups, less tolerant spouses, and less tolerant local communities all seem to limit how much freedom ordinary Americans perceive. One reason why perceived freedom is so low seems to be that intolerance is so pervasive within American political culture.

There are many important limitations to this research; and as a consequence of the limits of this research design, care must be taken in ascribing too much certitude to the conclusions. Nonetheless, there is a strong suggestion of a close connection between how people think about their own freedom and what freedom they would grant to their political enemies, as well as some more inferential evidence of a linkage between cultural intolerance and perceived limits on political freedom.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Does political tolerance matter? The cumulative weight of evidence from this analysis suggests that tolerance does matter. Though I have taken some risks in these analyses—w ith the consequence that no single bit of evidence is irrefutable—the data point repeatedly toward a connection between intolerance and lack of freedom. I have traced this relationship at the level of the individual, the family, and the community. Intolerance in American political culture appears to set at least broad constraints on political liberty. Those who study political tolerance can therefore take succor in these findings. It appears that we have not devoted our research efforts to analyzing attitudes of little or no political consequence.

At the same time, however, my analysis points to an entirely new frame of reference for tolerance research. No longer should we focus exclusively on the individual survey respondent as the most inter-

esting unit of analysis. Why people differ in their levels of intolerance—and with what consequences—cannot be well understood by conceptualizing the individual in social isolation. John Donne’s “No man is an island, intire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine” is an important and quite relevant prescription for social scientific research on the implications of political intolerance.

In Noelle-Neumann’s “spiral of silence” people are encouraged “either to proclaim their views or to swallow them and keep quiet until, in a spiraling process, the one view dominated the public scene and the other disappeared from public awareness as its adherents became mute” (1984, 5). Perhaps more relevant to the case of the United States, Tocqueville observed many years ago, “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America” (1948, vol. 1, p. 263). Survey evidence from the contemporary United States seems to support this view, and this is a problem of considerable consequence for democracies. Indeed, the loss of respect for dissent and nonconformity in nominally democratic regimes is perhaps one of the greatest threats to political freedom (see Duch and Gibson 1992). Without a culture that legitimizes political opposition, those outside the centrist mainstream have few political opportunities. Ultimately, the political system loses its democratic vitality. If this is a consequence of mass political intolerance, then, certainly, intolerance matters.

**APPENDIX: RESEARCH DESIGN**

The analysis I have reported is based on a national survey conducted in 1987. The survey was an extension of the 1987 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a nearly annual survey conducted by the NORC with funding from the National Science Foundation. The sample for the GSS is a full multistage probability sample of English-speaking adults living in the continental United States. The 1987 GSS was conducted in the spring, with a response rate of approximately 75%.

In June and July, the respondents in the 1987 GSS were resurveyed. Of the 1,466 subjects in the spring GSS, 1,106 were eligible to be interviewed. (The NORC reserved approximately 350 respondents for possible use in future panel studies. Those subjects were not eligible to be reinterviewed.) This subsample was selected randomly, within gender strata. Because the 1987 GSS cross-section had a relatively large differential nonresponse rate by gender, there is some gender imbalance in the pool of subjects eligible for the second-wave interview. Consequently, stratified random sampling was thought desirable. For the reinterviews, males and females were selected with equal probability. Approximately 87% of these subjects were reinterviewed. Most of these were in-person interviews although, because some subjects had moved since the earlier interview, some small
percentage of the reinterviews were conducted by telephone.

The 1987 GSS also included a special oversample of 353 black respondents (i.e., beyond the 191 blacks in the main GSS sample). This sample was also a full probability sample. This means that extraordinary efforts had to be mounted in order to draw this supplementary sample. Roughly five thousand households nationwide were sampled and contacted in order to locate the black subjects. The response rate for the black respondents was 79%. All of these subjects were eligible for the reinterview, and reinterviews were successfully completed with nearly 90% of the original subjects. It should be noted that the black oversample also overrepresents females. Because the universe of the black oversample was selected for inclusion in the reinterview project, no sampling techniques could ameliorate this problem. Thus, interviews were completed with a total of 1,267 respondents. Since the sample is stratified by race, most analyses are conducted on weighted data.

Special thanks are due Tom Smith and Jim Davis, coprincipal investigators on the GSS, and the GSS Board of Overseers for their assistance on this project. Dick Rubin of the NORC was instrumental in bringing the reinterview survey to a successful conclusion.

Notes

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1990 annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association. The analysis is based on research funded by the National Science Foundation (SES 86-06642). I am deeply indebted to Felice Levine of the foundation for support for the project. A number of colleagues have contributed significantly to the development of the research, including Jonathan Casper, James Davis, Jennifer Hochschuld, Stanley Presser, Lee Sigelman, Paul M. Sniderman, John L. Sullivan, and Thomas Tyler. I am also indebted to the NORC (especially Dick Rubin) for its excellent execution of the survey. Bernadette McKinney, Steven Shambarger, and Marilyn Yale provided helpful research assistance. As always, James F. Wenzel has been my invaluable assistant throughout. This article also makes use of General Social Survey data, made available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Betin Bilir, John Burke, James F. Farr, Franklin Gilliam, Don Green, George Marcus, Laura J. Scalda, Robert Erikson, and Michael Krassa have made useful comments on an earlier version of this article and on other portions of this research.

1. Highlights in a fairly voluminous literature on political intolerance include Barnum and Sullivan 1989; Bobo and Licari 1989; Lawrence 1976; McClosky 1964; McClosky and Brill 1983; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978; Prothro and Grigg 1960; Sniderman 1975; Stouffer 1955; Sullivan, Pireason, and Marcus 1982; Sullivan et al. 1985. I would also mention my own work: Gibson 1989b; Gibson and Bingham 1985; and Gibson and Duch 1991a.

2. The elitist theory of democracy is actually an amalgam of the work of a variety of theorists, including Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Key 1961; Kornhauser 1959; and Lipset 1960. The most useful analysis of the similarities and differences among the theories can be found in Bachrach 1967. For a popularized summary of the theory see Dye and Zeigler 1987 (see also Dye 1976). My more recent analysis of some of the propositions of elitist theory can be found in Gibson 1988, 1989a; Gibson and Bingham 1984; and Gibson and Duch 1991b.

3. On the other hand, the literature linking opinion and policy in other substantive areas is voluminous. For recent examples, see Erikson, McIver, and Wright 1987; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1989.

4. However, I have suggested that a climate of tolerant mass opinion during the 1970s may have contributed to acceptance of dissent as a legitimate form of political action (Gibson 1989a). Dissent, in turn, was an important stimulus for repressive policy. Thus, mass opinion indirectly affected policy, but the direction of the relationship is ironic. Where opinion was more tolerant, there was more political repression. Moreover, even if opinion does not produce a specific expectation for public policy, it may set broad constraints on the ability of elites to implement their own preferences.

5. Sprague defines contextual effect as “variation in political behavior that depends, systematically, on properties of the environment within which that behavior is embedded” (1982, 99). MacKuen writes “The quality of political life produced by individual choices made in a collective context differs fundamentally from one that might be expected from a simple aggregation of individual preferences” (1990, 61; emphasis original).

6. There is a large and important literature on pressures toward political conformity, beginning in the 1960s, including Cox 1974; Fields and Schuman 1976; Finifter 1974; Krass 1980; MacKuen and Klandt 1988; MacKuen and Klandt 1992; MacKuen et al. 1992; Putnam 1966; Segal and Meyer 1974; Weatherford 1982; and the many works of Hucksfield and Sprague. For a review of the social psychological literature on conformity see Moscovici 1985.

7. In a brilliant formal analysis of the contextual constraints on political discussion, MacKuen (1990) has addressed many of the processes considered here. The overall implication of his analysis is that “public, if not private, conformity is likely to occur even when many individuals are perfectly willing to encounter contrary views” (p. 85). The linchpin of his analysis is an individual propensity for political interaction he terms expressivity. Were one to pursue an empirical analysis of expressivity, it would surely look something like the perceptions of political freedom that I analyze here. Note also that MacKuen agrees about the sensitivity of political discussion to social environments (pp. 94–95, n. 5).

8. Wildavsky (1987) has argued a similar position. Rejecting the proposition that citizen preferences are exogenous variables for political analysis, he suggests that choices reflect variations in relationships to the political culture, that is, they emerge from social interaction. Individual choices are choices of culture, they are determined by representations toward the shared values that legitimate different patterns of social practices: “Put plainly, people decide for or against existing authority” (p. 5).

9. This technique, often dubbed the “least-liked” approach, was developed by Sullivan, Pireason, and Marcus (1979, 1982).

10. For a more complete explication of the measurement and distribution of opinion see Gibson 1987b, 1989b. The objective of the measures was to insure that all respondents were asked whether they would tolerate political activities by a) the two groups they disliked the most and b) Communists and members of the Ku Klux Klan. These objectives produced a somewhat complicated question format. All respondents were asked whether they would tolerate their two most disliked groups. Those who named Communists and Klansmen as their two most disliked groups (in either order) were then asked whether they would tolerate their third and fourth most disliked groups. Respondents naming neither the Klan nor Communists as among the two most disliked groups were asked about these two groups, rather than their third and fourth most disliked groups. The rest of the respondents were asked questions designed to insure that they evaluated Communists and Klansmen at some point in the question sequence. The precise group stimulus depended upon the
configuration of groups named as first through fourth most disliked.

11. I recognize that a distinction is typically made between negative and positive conceptions of freedom (see Berlin 1958). The negative view of freedom argues that to free people is to remove restraints on their activities, whereas the positive view of freedom emphasizes the realization of moral and intellectual functions by guaranteeing broad areas of autonomous activity within which the individual can make free choices. The positive view of freedom emphasizes rational self-determination. Freedom is thus assessed not in terms of whether conditions for free choice prevail but, rather, by the objective rationality of the choice. Decisions that are seemingly unrestrained but irrational are not free choices. The distinction between negative and positive freedom has been subjected to a variety of attacks and has been much debated (e.g., MacCallum 1967). For my purposes, it is more important to distinguish between subjective (perceived) and objective freedom than positive and negative freedom. Preston’s (1982) conceptualization allows me to do just that. There is a certain asymmetry to my argument. Perceived restraints on choices—perceptions that certain political activities will generate adverse repercussions—certainly are evidence of the lack of freedom, even if I am on less certain ground when I claim that the absence of perceived restraints is equivalent to freedom. Nonetheless, if the absence of perceived constraints is grounded in reality, this is an important component of positive freedom. Clearly, those people whose freedom for their political activity are not free. In this sense, my conceptualization of freedom is closer to the negative view than to the positive view.

12. For a more extended discussion of this approach to freedom, see Gibson n.d.(b).

13. There are, of course, alternative conceptualizations of democracy and of democratic freedom, and I certainly do not claim this as the only legitimate approach. The emphasis I place on democracy as procedure (without much regard for substantive public policy) must be born in mind throughout the analysis.

14. This view of personal political freedom is focused on the individual citizen. It looks directly toward the attributes and beliefs of individuals, as well as their interactions with their immediate environments, to gain an understanding of freedom. In adopting this approach, I do not deny the utility of alternatives (e.g., focusing on the attributes of cultures or polities). But my basic premises are that what people believe about their own freedom is important; that what they perceive about the opportunities for political expression and the costs associated with such expression has much to do with their exercise of freedom; and that it is useful to regard the degree of freedom available and the patterns of allocation of freedom within a polity as ultimately reducible to a study of the beliefs of individual citizens. I do not gainsay the utility of considering other sorts of freedom; and I shall later try to identify some linkages between the individuals and the larger social and political environment within which they function. But the approach here must be recognized from the beginning as a particular, and not necessarily inclusive, approach to the problem of perceived personal political freedom.

15. The most useful conceptualizations of freedom are embedded in larger theories of politics. The theory I employ is most generally liberal–democratic, with specific reference to Dahl’s theory of polyarchy. This perspective emphasizes obstacles that individual citizens might perceive to free political expression. This is not a freedom of unconstrained licentiousness. Instead, it is a freedom to engage in political activity that is essential to the effective functioning of polyarchies. It is quite possible for others to conceive of freedom differently, emphasizing, for instance, the potential (whether perceived or not) of individuals to develop nascent capacities for expression.

As much as I might wish to avoid the issue, I also have to acknowledge the distinction between objective and subjective freedom. My approach is to study subjective freedom—the freedom that is perceived by individuals. A different sort of freedom (e.g., the degree of freedom acknowledged by law) might be measured more objectively (and as an attribute of polities, not of individuals). Within my conceptualization of the problem, there is no necessary relationship between objective and subjective freedom. People may perceive themselves as free even in conditions in which objective freedom (‘false consciousness’ is not addressed in this research.) Alternatively, people may not perceive the freedom that is truly available to them. When I refer to freedom I refer to the freedom that exists in the minds and hearts of citizens, not to the freedom that exists in the law books or even in the broader culture.

16. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1989, 1201) have quite carefully distinguished between contexts and networks. For their purposes, it makes a great deal of sense to do so. I am a bit sloppier with the use of the term context, but I do use network as the respondent’s peer group.

17. I recognize that irrespective of the freedom allowed by the larger political system or local networks, individuals may be unwilling to express themselves politically for completely psychological reasons. For instance, lack of self-confidence may lead people to be unwilling to risk the opprobrium of others (Bay 1970 terms this psychological freedom). Though the effect of psychological attributes might be interactive (in the sense that personality attributes structure perceptions of, and reactions to, external environmental stimuli), the effect may exist completely apart from the objective attributes of the environment. That aspect of psychological freedom is not addressed in this research. Instead, the psychological attributes of individuals are treated as independent variables, as predictors of social and political freedom (see Gibson n.d.[b]). Thus, rather than asserting that psychologically based risk-aversion is a sign of unfreedom, I prefer to test the hypothesis that those who perceive less freedom are more risk-averse and psychologically insecure. These hypotheses are addressed in Gibson n.d.(b).

18. Those who “don’t know” whether the government would allow them to engage in the activity might legitimately be included with those believing that they would not be allowed to do so. Since the don’t know are quite few, I have simply excluded them from the calculations of the percentages.

19. Note that these figures exclude those who would not engage in the activity under any circumstances, regardless of the popularity or unpopularity of the view. For most of the actions, this number is inconsequential. However, 44 subjects say they would not put a bumper sticker on their car under any circumstances, and 29 would not wear a political button under any circumstances.

20. The first component of freedom is the perception that the government would allow political activity. The first unrotated factor from factor analysis had an eigenvalue of 3.4 and accounted for 66% of the variance in the items. The second factor that emerged from the analysis had an eigenvalue of .72 (explaining just 14% of the variance) and was therefore ignored. As indicated by the factor loadings reported in the table, the items contribute roughly equally to the scale, with the exception of the low-variance item about nationwide strikes. This index is quite reliable (alpha = .88) and can serve as a measure of perceived external governmental censorship of political behavior. As expected, racial differences on this index were extremely significant, with blacks perceiving substantially more political repression.

The index of perceived social censorship of political expression was derived by factor-analyzing the items shown in the second portion of the table. The first unrotated factor had an eigenvalue of 2.3 and explained 46% of the variance in the items. The second factor, which was not used, had an eigenvalue of .93 (accounting for 19% of the variance). This index is quite reliable, with an alpha of .70, and only the item about the government not allowing people to talk freely was significantly related to the factor. On this index, blacks are significantly more fearful of political expression than are whites. An index of behavioral self-censorship was also constructed. The reliability of this index is also quite high (alpha = .86), and all of the items contribute roughly equally to the scale. The first unrotated factor had an
eigenvalue of 3.6 and explained 59% of the variance in the items. The second factor, which was not used, had an eigenvalue of .84 (accounting for 14% of the variance). The differences in the loadings across individual items are not of any substantive significance, and the differences on this index are not significant. A fairly detailed analysis of the validity and reliability of these scales is available on request.

20. An alternative explanation for these findings is that the correlation between perceptions of freedom and tolerance is spurious, reflecting a common psychological origin. Consequently, it is useful to control for some additional variables before concluding this test of the hypothesis involves calculating psychological attributes closely linked to political tolerance are closed-mindedness, or dogmatism (e.g., Gibson 1987a; Gibson and Tediin 1988; Sullivan, Piersen, and Marcus 1982), low self-esteem (Sniderman 1975), and anomie (Herson and Holstetter 1975; McClosky and Schara 1965; Quinley and Glock 1979; Zalkind, Gaugler, and Schwartz 1975). Each of the measures of tolerance and freedom is fairly strongly related to some personality attributes and to self-censorship. Those who are more self-censoring are more intolerant, more likely to perceive government repression, and more likely to engage in self-censorship. This is true for both blacks and whites. Self-esteem has only a weak direct effect on tolerance, but it is related to perceptions of government repression and willingness to express oneself in political conversations. This is probably because of the way in which those who are self-esteem interact with others. Those who are high in anomie tend to be more intolerant and perceive more repression and are slightly more likely to engage in self-censorship.

The important question is whether perceptions of freedom and political tolerance are related even after controlling for their common origins in the personality traits of individuals. One way of considering this test of the hypothesis involves calculating semipartial correlation coefficients for tolerance as a predictor of perceived freedom and for perceived freedom as a predictor of tolerance (in both cases controlling for the personality traits).

Among whites, this test leads to the conclusion that tolerance and perceptions of freedom are still connected, even when personality attributes controlled. Perceptions of freedom are related to tolerance, and tolerance is related to perceptions of getting governmental self-censorship, not to reluctance to discuss politics. Among blacks, the relationships are similar but generally weaker. Thus, even with a quite demanding test, there is evidence that tolerance and freedom are connected at the individual level. This is compatible with the hypothesis that intolerance may serve as an important constraint on freedom.

21. For an excellent example of this sort of research design see the series of papers by Huckfeldt and Sprague (e.g., 1988, 1989, 1991).

22. For the approach to discussion networks used in the GSS, see Burt 1984 and Marsden 1987.

23. Networks differ, of course, in a variety of aspects, including size, density, homogeneity, dispersion, span, reachability, and anachrony (and, of course, individual ties within the network can be characterized in a number of ways). By design, some of these attributes do not vary within this data set (e.g., size). From a theoretical point of view, peer group diversity is the most interesting attribute for political tolerance and freedom.

24. It is unclear whether respondents can accurately report the party identifications of their friends. For my purposes, this is not of great concern because it is the respondents’ perceptions of their friends’ affiliations that is crucial, not the true affiliations. Moreover, if there is bias in the reports, it is probably bias that reduces the measure of political diversity of the peer group and so works against the hypothesis under consideration.

25. This concept of network diversity is derived from Burt’s (1983) definition of network range. This is simply the degree of diversity within the network (see Marsden 1987). The obverse of a broad range is a dense network. As Marsden asserts, density “also measures the potential strength of normative pressures toward conformity by indicating the capacity of alters to collectively influence the respondent” (p. 124).

26. Some measures of network diversity consider only the diversity of the network work members without regard to the characteristics of the respondents (e.g., see Mantel 1978). Since I am specifically concerned with partisan diversity and its impact on freedom and conformity, it is important for my purposes that each dyad be scored for diversity or similarity.

27. This measure is based on six-point frequency-of-discussion variables for each of the three peers. Discussion was a peer of a different identification was assigned a score of 0; discussion with a peer of the same identification was scored by .33; and discussion with a peer of unknown identification is scored by .67. The overall index of diversity is simply the sum of the discussion diversity measures (i.e., the measure for each peer). This measure ranges from a minimum of 1 to a high of 18 (mean = 6.8; standard deviation = 3.4). Racial differences are statistically significant, with whites reporting slightly greater peer group diversity than blacks.

28. It should be noted, however, that there are weak but nonzero relationships between the ability to report the party identifications of the peer group and levels of perceived freedom. Those who are more knowledgeable about their friends tend to perceive greater political freedom.

29. Marsden has shown that the degree of diversity varies according to age (range is greatest among the young and middle-aged), education (more education is associated with greater diversity), race (whites have more diverse networks), and urban residence. In order to guard against the possibility that the findings reported in Table 3 are spurious, I estimated each equation, separately by age controlling for the respondent’s age, education, and size of place of residence. The resulting regression coefficients are slightly smaller than those shown in Table 3, but the impact of heterogeneity—politicization on whites’ perception of governmental constraints is still highly significant, as is the coefficient for heterogeneity—politicization on blacks’ behavioral self-censorship.

30. The most systematic assessment of the reliability of spouse reports is Niemi 1974. Niemi concludes that spouse reports on the sorts of attributes considered here are extremely accurate (see also Weiner 1978). In a somewhat different context, Williams and Thomson have concluded, “Systematic errors in proxy reports are not a major problem. . . . Had we relied only on self and proxy reports collected from wives, our pattern of results would have been about the same as those obtained by using data collected from both spouses, but our estimates would have been attenuated by random measurement error” (1985, 120). Brickell, Huckfeldt, and Sprague (1988) have also shown that spouses are extremely accurate in reporting their mate’s political preferences.

31. This technique closely parallels one employed by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1991). Based on their South Bend, Indiana, sample, they estimated a Reagan vote probability for each person with whom the primary respondent reported discussing political. The equation was estimated from data on the primary respondent, regressing (logistic regression) vote choice on seven demographic attributes (e.g., union membership, education, income, age). The resulting equation was then used to estimate a discussant probability, based on the scores of the discussant on the seven demographic attributes. Except for the fact that the discussant attributes were gathered through direct interview, the identification of this technique is identical to the one I have employed here. For the specific details of the technique they use, see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1991, p. 132, n. 2.

32. The dependent variable is an index based on the responses to 15 tolerance items in the spring survey. The tolerance items involve three activities and the spring responses were used instead of the summer responses because (1) there are more respondents in the spring due to the ineligibility and nonresponse of some respondents in the second-wave interviews and (2) the measures of tolerance are temporally separate from the measures of perceptions of
freedom. The effect of the latter consideration is to reduce the size of the observed correlations.

33. Note that family income is a variable shared by the respondent and the spouse.

34. This technique is not unlike that developed by Charles Franklin (1989) for estimating missing data across data sets.

35. Note that the independent and dependent variables do not "fit" perfectly. The independent variable characterizes the tolerance of the respondent's spouse, while the dependent variable refers to familial discussions in general. This mismatch can only serve to weaken the observed relationships and thus works against the hypothesis.

36. Note that Huckfeldt and Sprague discovered an especially strong effect of the spouse's vote probability on the main respondent's vote (1991, 133). The effect of nonrelative discussions is quite a bit smaller and does not achieve statistical significance in their model.

37. Men and women differ little in their self-described levels of interest in politics. Gender is not a good predictor of interest (tau-beta = -1.11, although about 10% more men than women claim high levels of political interest. Nor are there gender-based differences in levels of political knowledge.


39. The critique of these measures is that there is no assurance that the respondents dislike the groups and that without antipathy, tolerance is not relevant. Though it is presumed that most Americans do not care for communists, homosexuals, etc., no independent measure of affect toward these groups has been available. Without some assurance that these groups present a negative stimulus to most respondents, the conceptual requirement that one cannot tolerate that which one does not dislike cannot be met. Affect toward these and a variety of other groups was measured in my 1987 survey using a scale ranging from 1 (like very much) to 11 (dislike very much). The results were reported in Gibson 1989b. These data reveal that while there is no unanimity that these groups are highly disliked, there is a tremendous amount of agreement on the matter; and for great majorities of the respondents, the groups are a valid tolerance stimulus.

40. Each item was scored as 0 (intolerant), 1 (tolerant) and 5 (uncertain).

41. Some additional blocks are associated with the black oversamples that NORC has employed during the 1980s. These bring the total number of blocks to 612.

42. For the primary sampling units represented in the 1987 survey (i.e., excluding the special black primary sampling units that were not used in 1987), the averaged, weighted numbers of respondents per unit is 92, with a standard deviation of 32 and with a minimum of 55, and a maximum of 269, respondents. The average number of respondents per block is 13, with a standard deviation of 4.8, and a range of weighted Ns from 1 to 40. There are a total of 261 blocks represented in the data file for 1987. Note that this analysis is based only on the data from the surveys using the common 1980s sampling frame.

43. At the level of the individual, the correlation between the two tolerance measures is .63 for whites and .38 for blacks. Note that the Stouffer-based measure was derived from questions asked in the spring 1987 survey, while the generalized tolerance measure was constructed from summer 1987 questions.

44. Jennings (1987) has shown just how powerful the effect of dissent can be. Those who engaged in protest during the Vietnam War era are even today more likely to support civil liberties than those who did not protest, despite the fact that protestors and nonprotestors differed little in their attitudes prior to the college experience. Both groups became more supportive of civil liberties as a result of their college experience, but the experience of having participated in a demonstration or sit-in had a distinctive and lasting effect. To the extent that willingness to engage in protest behavior diminishes, support for the broad exercise of civil liberties will decline. See also Jennings and Niemi 1981, chap. 11.

References


James L. Gibson is Distinguished University Professor of Political Science, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3474.