

## Aisthesis 12.1 Supplement



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# Political Tolerance and Ideology: Ideology as a Determinant of Political Tolerance

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## **Abstract**

This study examines whether or not political ideology is a strong determinant of political tolerance, as has been found in previous studies. Participants of this study (N = 258) were asked to complete a survey asking questions that would indicate their level of tolerance. Respondents identified their least-liked group in the beginning of the survey and answered questions about procedural rights in the context of that group. The results showed that respondents in this study had generally low levels of tolerance. When compared across political ideology, there is a small difference in the tolerance levels between those who identified themselves as conservatives, independents/moderates, and liberals. Ultimately, political ideology is found to be an insignificant determinant in level of political tolerance.

**Keywords:** tolerance, ideology, politics

## **Literature Review**

Since this mid-20th century, tolerance has been a pressing matter in the research field of public opinion and political psychology. The first major study delving into this topic was conducted by Stouffer (1954) in order to measure tolerance levels in terms of support for civil liberties. This survey asked respondents if they supported extending certain civil liberties to communists, socialists, and atheists. Stouffer (1954) found older

generations and those who are less educated to be less tolerant of these groups. This study did not address political ideology. Furthermore, the majority of respondents were in favor of revoking civil liberties from communists, with 89% saying a communist should be fired from their job as a college teacher and 77% saying a communist should lose their citizenship altogether. In a historical context, these findings could make sense as the 1950s experienced the rise of McCarthyism where paranoia about internal communist threats plagued the country. This study was then replicated in 1973 through the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center. Many of Stouffer's (1954) questions were included in the survey and the results showed a substantial increase in broad tolerance in the American public from 1954 to 1973 (Cutler and Kaufman, 1975; Davis, 1975; Erskine and Siegel, 1975; Nunn et al., 1978; McClosky and Brill, 1983:434-438). This phenomenon became known as the Stouffer Shift. Although Stouffer's (1954) contribution to tolerance is still valued as a starting point in academics today, this study has been challenged on methodological grounds.

Sullivan et al. (1979) have questioned these earlier studies of political tolerance – specifically citing Stouffer (1954) and the 1973 General Social Survey. Sullivan et al. (1979) argue previous empirical studies into the topic were methodologically flawed because Stouffer (1954) targeted only the left-wing groups of communists, socialists, and atheists in order to determine political tolerance as a whole. This study fails to paint a broad picture of tolerance in the United States and rather, merely points to tolerance of the American public as a whole toward the communist ideology. Political ideology, as previously stated, was considered as a demographic by Stouffer (1954). Sullivan et al. (1979) define tolerance as “a willingness to ‘put up with’ those things that one rejects.” This definition led the study to take a content-controlled approach in measuring political tolerance where respondents were asked to identify the group in which they liked the least. This survey offered each respondent the same list of groups to choose from while also making it clear that they were not limited to choosing only those

on the list. This list included many left-wing and right-wing groups. Participants were then asked a range of agree/disagree questions where their least-liked group was inserted into a procedural rights scenario. For example:

(1) *Members of the \_\_\_\_\_ should be banned from being president of the United States.*

The results of this study by Sullivan and colleagues showed that tolerance of left-wing targets such as communists had increased, but tolerance toward other groups had decreased. Simply, less individuals were identifying left-wing targets as their least-liked group. These two movements neutralized any change in political tolerance in the United States and levels had not drastically changed in the 25 years prior to this study. This contradicts the theory of the Stouffer Shift. Expounding upon their 1979 study, Sullivan et al. conducted another study in 1981 to determine the sources of political tolerance rather than simply the level. This study moves from a bivariate analysis that was previously used to a multivariate analysis which allowed for a more detailed look at causes of tolerance. The results of this study show that there are many major determinants for tolerance level including social, psychological, and political factors. The political determinants, including ideology, political threat, and support for general norms of democracy are the most important for the study described here as this study is looking at the ideological factor as a determinant – not social and psychological factors.

More recently, there has been disagreement surrounding whether conservatism and liberalism are systematically different and can equally predict tolerance or intolerance. Some psychologists and social scientists argue that conservatism predicts intolerance in individuals whereas others, such as Crawford and Pilanski (2009) predict that both are equal predictors. Rather, both liberals and conservatives are intolerant of those that they disagree with and how threatening these opponents were perceived to be. Although the study at hand discusses whether political ideology in general is a determinant – rather than determining which ideology is more

likely to be intolerant – it is still important to note the disagreement in the research on tolerance and political ideology has not ended with Sullivan et al. (1979) and Stouffer (1954).

In today's America, political ideology has become an important part of society's daily life as the trend of polarization between the two major political parties – Democrats and Republicans – has rapidly continued to increase. While the reasons for this influx in polarization are not at issue in this study, how these ideologies have affected political tolerance remains an important question. Tolerance and “political correctness” seem to have been nearing the forefront of conversation since the Obama and Trump administrations. Now in the year 2021, political tolerance at face-value seems to be at an all-time low. The research conducted in this study seeks to determine the tolerance level in the United States across different demographics and conclude whether political ideology is currently a strong determinant in an individual's level of political tolerance. Considering these goals, I hypothesize that in the current political environment, political ideology is a strong determinant for political tolerance.

## **Methodology**

### ***Experimental Design***

This study was composed of 258 demographically diverse individuals in order to determine whether or not political ideology truly is a determinant of tolerance level. Participants were told that participation is anonymous and completely voluntary, and individuals can withdraw from the study at any time. The survey that participants completed was created on Qualtrics and posted on the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform for volunteers to complete. Individuals who completed the survey were compensated with a fifty-cent payment.

This experiment was modelled after Sullivan et al. (1979) and took the content-controlled, or least-liked group, approach. This method asks participants to identify their least-liked group at the beginning of the survey. I provided a list of groups that participants can choose from including: Democrats, Pro-Life Advocates, Republicans, Black



Lives Matter Movement, Proud Boys, Pro-Choice Advocates, and Atheists. It was made clear that participants can also enter a different group that may not be on the given list. Qualtrics then inputted this chosen group into nine questions surrounding tolerance in the form of procedural rights where participants can answer yes, maybe, no, or don't know. Topics of these procedural rights questions included free speech, social interaction, adoption, and political candidacy. Participants were then asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale of political ideology ranging from extreme liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate/independent, slightly conservative, conservative, and extreme conservative. Do not know/don't want to answer was also an available option. These categories were then condensed to the categories liberal, independent/moderate, and conservative in order to show trends more clearly. Following this, participants were asked questions about the economy and demographics.

Once all data was collected, it was downloaded and loaded into the IBM SPSS Statistics software. Each tolerance question was used to create a new scaled variable to determine tolerance level. Answering yes to each tolerance question was considered the tolerant answer and was recoded as 1. Any answers of maybe, no, or don't know were considered the intolerant answer and recoded as 0. Once the variable was created, it placed each individual on a 10-point scale ranging from 0-9 where zero was regarded as the most intolerant and 9 was regarded as the most tolerant. From there, that 10-point scale was condensed to a 3-point scale with the categories labeled low tolerance, mid tolerance, and high tolerance. Those who scored 0-2 were placed in the low tolerance category, 3-6 were placed in the mid tolerance category, and 7-9 were placed in the high tolerance category. This was done in order to show trends more clearly.

### ***Independent and Dependent Variables***

The key independent variable throughout this study is political ideology. As previously mentioned, participants were asked to place themselves on an 8-point scale of political ideology. Each individual

was placed into one of these groups and their answers were analyzed in order to find a correlation between political ideology and the dependent variable in this study: political tolerance.

### Data Analysis & Results

Figure 1 displays tolerance levels by the percent of the total sample on the original 10-point scale. The levels of tolerance with the highest percent of the population sample are 0 (zero) and 8 with an average tolerance level of approximately 4.2 across the total sample. In terms of frequency, individuals who scored 0 (zero) on the tolerance scale – the lowest level of tolerance – was the modal group with a total of 46 individuals. Overall, Figure 1 shows that tolerance levels are relatively low when disregarding political ideology.

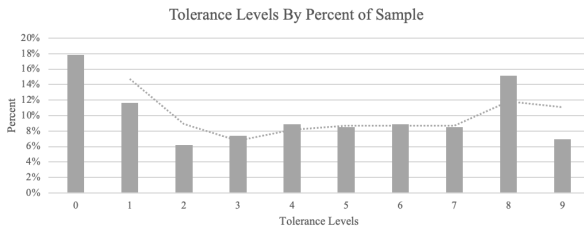


Figure 1

Political ideology is then factored into the analysis as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 shows both numerical and percentage of individuals scoring in each category. Table 2 shows the average tolerance score by the 3-point scale of political ideology. Using the condensed version of ideology (liberal, independent/moderate, conservative) and tolerance levels (low tolerance, mid tolerance, high tolerance) average political tolerance does not differ greatly in totals. Yet, there is significant difference between ideologies in tolerance levels. For example, 41.2% of liberals fall under the low tolerance category in comparison to 26.9% of conservatives. Overall, those in the liberal category trend toward lower tolerance more drastically than the other ideological categories. However,

there is generally little variation between total tolerance scores on the 3-point scale disregarding ideology. As seen in Table 1, the percentage difference between each tolerance level in total is at maximum 5.1% with the largest category being low tolerance and the smallest being high tolerance.

	Liberal	Independent/Moderate	Conservative	Don't Know/Don't Want to Answer	Total
<b>Low Tolerance</b>	(49) 41.2%	(17) 41.5%	(25) 26.9%	(1) 20.0%	<b>(92) 35.7%</b>
<b>Mid Tolerance</b>	(38) 31.9%	(11) 26.8%	(36) 38.7%	(2) 40.0%	<b>(87) 33.7%</b>
<b>High Tolerance</b>	(32) 26.9%	(13) 31.7%	(32) 34.4%	(2) 40.0%	<b>(79) 30.6%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>(119) 100.0%</b>	<b>(41) 100.0%</b>	<b>(93) 100.0%</b>	<b>(5) 100.0%</b>	<b>(258) 100.0%</b>

Table 1

	Liberal	Independent/Moderate	Conservative	Don't Know/Don't Want to Answer
<b>Avg. tolerance Score</b>	3.77	4.24	4.73	4.80

Table 2

Delving into the primary purpose of this study, a regression analysis was conducted in order to determine whether or not political ideology is a strong determinant of tolerance. Other significant demographics were also included to control for other potential explanations. Table 3 shows the regression model with political ideology as the key independent variable and tolerance as the dependent variable. Looking at political ideology alone, a p-value of .065 shows that it is not statistically significant as a determinant for tolerance level when applying the .05 significance level. When you apply the .10 significance level as noted in Table 3, it allows for an argument to be made that there is significance. However, this level is more lenient in acceptance of a hypothesis and allows for an increased chance of a false positive. A significance level of .10 has been denoted in the regression table for observational purposes, but this paper will continue to use the .05 significance level.

The finding that political ideology is not a significant determinant contradicts earlier studies conducted on the topic – most significantly Sullivan et al. (1981). The regression model also controlled for other significant demographics such as annual

household income, education level, and gender. Both annual household income and education level were dramatically insignificant as a determinant when paired with political ideology. However, gender did have a significant effect as a determinant on political tolerance when paired with political ideology. This further supports the argument that political ideology alone is not a significant determinant and contradicts the original hypothesis.

	<b>Political Tolerance</b>
<b>Constant</b>	3.048 [0.910]
<b>Political Ideology</b>	0.176** [0.095]
<b>Annual Household Income</b>	0.296 [0.198]
<b>Education Level</b>	0.017 [0.184]
<b>Gender</b>	-1.015* [0.388]

*Table 3*

R-squared: .051

Note. Tabled are regression coefficients and their standard errors in brackets. DV is tolerance.

\* p < .05

\*\*p<.10

## Discussion

This study has intriguing implications for societal life as it shows that in the year 2021, political ideology is a weakening determinant for political tolerance. Furthermore, conservatives, liberals, and independents/moderates don't differ greatly in their levels of tolerance in regard to their least-liked group. In fact, liberals are surprisingly the least tolerant group in this study. This fact in itself contradicts the common idea of the "tolerant left" – a nickname coined recently on social media platforms. Yet, as shown in Figure 1, tolerance levels throughout the adult population are significantly low in general (disregarding ideology entirely). This is very prevalent in today's society as political parties have grown increasingly polarized over the years with a seeming increase in hostility that can

be seen in the reactions to today's Black Lives Matter movement and events such as the Capitol Riot on January 6, 2021.

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