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Political Tolerance in the New South Africa

In April 1994, South Africans of every race streamed to the polls to register their choices in the first all-race election ever conducted in the country. The voting in South Africa’s first democratic election was the culmination of a long and brutal struggle by the majority of South Africans to share in their own governance. The opening of the political process to all the citizens of the country marked the end of authoritarian rule in South Africa by the white minority.

The implementation of institutions of majority rule should not be understood as the culmination of the country’s transition to democracy. Instead, the election marked the beginning of a process of democratization. Democracy requires far more than political institutions through which the majority can express its preferences. At a minimum, democracy also requires institutionalized protections for the opportunity of political minorities to compete for political power, to attempt to become political majorities. Moreover, successful democracy most likely requires a host of supportive nongovernmental institutions, often referred to as a “civil society.” Without strong institutions capable of checking the power of the state, democracies often slip back into authoritarianism (or “illiberal democracy”); without strong institutions to recruit and nurture citizen participation and to develop a sense of competence at self-government, citizens in democracy often abdicate their crucial roles. Parliaments and presidents are important for democracy, but so too are strong courts, businesses, interest groups, and perhaps even a middle class.

Even beyond institutions, flourishing democracies profit from (if not require) a particular set of cultural values. Democracies experience difficulty in encouraging widespread political competition if citizens are too deferential to authority, for instance. Certainly, the willingness of citizens to put up with their political opponents, to allow — indeed, to encourage — unfettered political competition among all who seek
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Political power through peaceful means is essential if democracy is to prevail. Without widespread cultural beliefs and values that are compatible with the institutions and processes of democracy, it is difficult for self-government to take deep and effective root in a polity. As the distinguished American jurist Learned Hand (1952, 190) observed:

I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes. . . . Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.

These are all challenges for South African democratization. Institutions of majority rule have already been established, and a new constitution enshrines the right to compete for political power. But have nongovernmental institutions sufficiently changed their role from before the transition to serve as vital checks on the new South African leaders? Are the South Africans themselves ready for self-government? If ready, are they, or can they become, competent at self-government? Most basic, to what degree does the political culture of South Africa—the beliefs, values, and attitudes toward politics held by ordinary people—impede or promote the development of democratic institutions and processes and the consolidation of democratic reform? At present, the answers to these crucial questions are unknown.

Frankly, we begin this inquiry into South African political culture with a considerable degree of pessimism about the prospects that the country will successfully consolidate its democratic transition. South Africa has many characteristics typically associated with the failure of democratization. Democracies do not typically profit from widespread illiteracy among the mass public. Democracies require a certain amount of wealth in society, and at least some minimal degree of equality in the distribution of that wealth. Democracies often fail when confronted with rigid, historical cleavages in society, and racial and ethnic cleavages are some of the most difficult to put aside and overcome. The prognosis for successful democratization in South Africa generated from existing theoretical and empirical models is guarded at best, and, more realistically, is poor. If South Africa succeeds in establishing a thoroughly democratic political system, it will do so against all odds, and its success will be virtually unprecedented in the history of the development of democratic government throughout the world.

Moreover, there is little reason to suspect that the ordinary people of South Africa are particularly well versed in the requirements of democratic self-government in an integrated institutional democracy. Great proportions of South Africans have never had any direct experience with self-government (even if many South Africans are quite experienced at
protest). Few democracies in the world have suffered from more political violence than South Africa, and the violence has not been confined to the violence of the state against its citizens. Hatred and distrust are in no short supply in South Africa. Some segments of the South African population seem too passive to be effective at self-government; other segments seem too aggressive to tolerate and compromise. The lawless activities of the regime under apartheid (now widely reported through the truth and reconciliation process) have done much to undermine respect for the rule of law. Communalism is often at odds with the liberal individualism that facilitates so many democratic institutions and processes. Most South Africans are poorly educated and desperately poor. The average South African has few attributes that political scientists associate with effective democratic citizenship.

We recognize that contemporary South African political culture most likely has few of the characteristics that contribute to successful democratization (and an important part of our objective here is to document this assertion). But our analysis of democratization in South Africa is as much about what can be as it is about what is. Thus, this research considers the possibilities for change in the beliefs, values, and attitudes of ordinary South Africans. We are certainly interested in thoroughly describing South African political culture, and in analyzing the etiology of political beliefs and values, and a considerable portion of this book is devoted to those tasks. But we also pay a great deal of attention to strategies for changing the political views of ordinary South Africans, exploring several theories of persuasion, and testing a variety of hypotheses about short-term attitude change. In the final analysis, this book is as much about the future of the South African political culture as it is about the state of contemporary South African culture.

We have noted here that our interest is in the beliefs, values, and attitudes of South Africans, under the general rubric of political culture. In fact, one set of values in particular dominates this research: political tolerance. We contend that political tolerance is a crucial element of democratic political cultures in general, but that in the South African case, political tolerance is perhaps more important than any of the other democratic values. South Africa is one of the most polyglot countries in the world; race is certainly important in South Africa, but so too are language, ethnicity, class, and ideology. South Africa has no hope of ever becoming homogeneous; the South African “pot” will never “melt.” The only viable strategy for survival in South Africa is therefore tolerance toward the political views of others. Although we are not oblivious to the other components of a democratic political culture, our overwhelming emphasis throughout this book is on finding ways to enhance the willingness of South Africans to put up with their political enemies, to
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allow open and widespread political competition, and to coexist in their diversity. If we contribute to that goal at all, we will consider this project to have been a success.

In light of the central importance of political tolerance for this research, it is useful to introduce this analysis from a somewhat more theoretical perspective.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE: AN INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most pressing problem facing regimes attempting a transformation toward democracy is the problem of political intolerance. Tolerance is the endorphin of the democratic body politic; without tolerance, it is impossible to sustain the sort of competition over political ideas that is essential to democratic politics.

Not surprisingly, then, political scientists have devoted considerable effort to understanding what makes people, and regimes, tolerant. The modern study of political tolerance began during a period of intense intolerance and repression in American politics – the era of the McCarthy/Truman Red Scare (Stouffer 1955; see also Carleton 1985). American McCarthyism was characterized by an extreme intolerance of all things left wing, from Communists to “too” liberal movie producers, but it was also characterized by an abiding suspicion of everything different or foreign, and by a pervasive demand for conformity. It is not surprising that Stouffer’s path-breaking research on political intolerance has become one of the landmark studies in modern social science.

In the nearly fifty years since Stouffer’s research, there have been myriad new studies and new approaches to studying political intolerance. Intolerance is not in short supply in contemporary polities, even in the established democracies, and political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists have consequently paid close attention to changes in levels of tolerance and to the factors that make people more tolerant. And what was once a largely U.S. enterprise has recently become crossnational and crosscultural, with important studies of political tolerance and intolerance conducted in Israel, New Zealand, Canada, Europe, Russia and the former Soviet Union, and several other countries, as well as multinational projects. At the most general level, these studies have documented considerable political intolerance even within largely democratic political systems. They have also taught us a great deal about what contributes to the development of a tolerant political outlook. It is fair to describe this body of research as one of the most developed areas of study within the field of public opinion and political psychology.

But despite the proliferation of large-scale studies of political intolerance, many important questions remain unanswered. These include:
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• How does political tolerance gain a foothold in polities with a history of governance by intolerant, authoritarian, or totalitarian regimes? Almost all research on political tolerance has been conducted within countries with considerable experience with democratic governance. Citizens who are tolerant are those who have learned about and accepted liberal democracy – majority rule, with institutionalized respect for minority rights. They are the citizens who most fully embrace the dominant ideology of society. But how do citizens who have never been exposed to the ideology of liberal democracy come to value tolerance? What of citizens in regimes that extol intolerance, either of the “infidels” or of the “enemies of the state” or “of the race” or of “liberation”? And most important, how do citizens of countries beginning the transition to democracy come to embrace tolerance? Tolerance, the most difficult and demanding of all democratic values, is nearly impossible to practice when it requires putting up with those holding the most repugnant political viewpoints, even those who would speak against democracy itself, and in favor of the status quo ante. There is a profound and unfortunate paradox of tolerance and democratization: Tolerance is most necessary during periods of democratic transition, when the institutions of democracy are themselves weak, unstable, and limited in their legitimacy. Yet during this transitional period, tolerance is likely to be in the shortest supply. Increasing the stock of tolerance is one of the most pressing needs of democratizing regimes.

• Most research on political tolerance is static; it fails to take into account that, while intolerance may be the initial reaction of citizens to a hated political enemy – their “opening bid” – tolerance sometimes emerges out of the rough and tumble of politics. Citizens can under some circumstances be convinced to change their views and accept a tolerant position in political disputes, even when their initial inclinations are intolerant. Research on political tolerance, like nearly all research on public opinion, places far too much (nearly exclusive) weight on the initial reactions of citizens, and far too little weight on the contextual factors that typically become mobilized in actual civil liberties disputes. Some of these factors may be capable of converting intolerance into tolerance, or otherwise altering people’s viewpoints. After all, in many countries in the world, the standard U.S. approach to studying tolerance is neither interesting nor productive since the dependent “variable” is a constant – intolerance is widespread, there is little variance to explain, and the questions of the causes and consequences of intolerance become intractable. If we conceptualize intolerance as an “opening bid,” one that can perhaps be counteracted and changed, then the problem
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of fostering tolerance in intolerant polities becomes an interesting research question.

• One of the corollaries to our complaint about inattention to the dynamics of intolerance is that change, short-term or long-term, in tolerance attitudes is rarely examined. Some research treats tolerance as if it were a permanent attribute of people, perhaps grounded in obdurate personality attributes. Yet tolerance does change and it most likely changes primarily in response to environmental cues about the nature of the threat posed by various different groups. We do not gainsay that some portion of tolerance is rooted in relatively stable personality attributes. But without investigating change, no one can judge just how stable or unstable tolerance really is, and whether political systems are forever imprisoned by their cultural legacies.

• Those who study political tolerance pay little attention to the behaviors that flow from intolerant attitudes. It is by now well established that attitudes are often strongly associated with behavior,¹ so our grumble is not that intolerance is irrelevant because attitudes are so loosely connected to action (as in Weissberg 1998). But the fact remains that citizens seem to have little opportunity to act out their intolerance in the political arena. They may express demands for repressive public policy, but this is rare and occurs only among the most politically active segments of the society. Moreover, intolerance is often a matter of nothing more than acquiescing to repressive policy decisions adopted by elites – that is, doing nothing. Some researchers have attempted to bring behavior into the study of political tolerance, either by studying live political disputes (Gibson and Bingham 1985) or by asking citizens to respond to hypothetical controversies (e.g., Gibson 1989c, Marcus et al. 1995), but precious little research can be found that investigates the behavioral consequences of intolerant attitudes, even in terms of the reactions of citizens to civil liberties policy making by courts and other political institutions.

• Though very important exceptions can be found, tolerance research generally has been too insensitive to the role of context. By “context” we mean two things. First, national or cultural context is typically ignored, as is evident in research on single countries at single points in time. Second, we mean context in terms of the

¹ A meta-analysis of 88 attitude-behavior correlations reported in social scientific papers concluded that the median correlation is .33, a sizable relationship since it is based on survey data. See Kraus (1995, 63).
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specific attributes of civil liberties disputes. The question of whether “Communists should be allowed to march in your community” strikes us as much too sterile, as devoid of the contextual elements that turn simple civil liberties disputes into major political controversies (as when Nazis attempt to demonstrate in a community populated by Holocaust survivors). In the absence of inquiries into the role of context, we simply do not know what contextual factors are important, how important they are, and under what circumstances they are important.

Thus, much has been learned about political tolerance in fifty years of research. Pioneering studies by Stouffer, Sniderman, McClosky, Sullivan, Marcus, and others have taught us a great deal about the nature of political intolerance, where it comes from, and why it is important for democratic politics. Some questions within the tolerance literature are well understood (e.g., the attitudinal etiology of intolerance). The structure of tolerance and intolerance in some countries (e.g., the United States) has been well documented. And some bold and creative crossnational work has contributed much to our understanding of how national contexts affect and are affected by cultural attitudes such as tolerance.

Still, a host of important questions remain unanswered, and most of these questions have to do with the dynamics of change. Thus, our overriding goal in this book is to examine tolerance as it might become in South Africa, rather than tolerance as it exists today.

OBJECTIVES OF OUR RESEARCH

Consequently, we pursue several specific objectives in this research:

• First, we closely examine tolerance and intolerance in South Africa, a country struggling to emerge from decades of undemocratic rule. South Africa’s courageous attempt at democratization provides an extremely fertile context for the study of political tolerance. By most accounts, South Africa has no possibility whatsoever of establishing and sustaining democracy. It lacks the level of wealth necessary (even if not sufficient) for democracy (Lipset 1994; Przeworski et al. 2000); it suffers from enormous economic inequality; in some respects, it hardly even qualifies as an industrialized country; and it is riven by the sort of cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic cleavages that make compromise and tolerance difficult if not impossible. South Africa presents enormous challenges to all theories of democratization and political tolerance. If we can understand how
tolerance can be encouraged in South Africa, we will inevitably expand existing theories of tolerance considerably.

- Second, a portion of this project carefully replicates the research strategies and hypotheses of Western research. We are interested, for instance, in the degree to which threat perceptions contribute to tolerance; in the degree to which intolerance is “pluralistically” distributed; and whether the influential aspects of threat perceptions have to do with general threat to the country – to the South African “way of life” – rather than with the specific and immediate threat people feel from their political opponents (“sociotropic” versus “egocentric” threat perceptions). This portion of our research is not particularly novel, except that we analyze target groups such as the AWB (Afrikaner Weerstands beweging, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement), rather than conventional targets like Communists, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis. The value of this portion of our research is that it tests the generalizability of theories that have arisen in developed democracies and that have not been widely evaluated outside the West and developed democracies.

- Third, we ask whether intolerant attitudes are sensitive to a variety of contextual factors often thought to influence tolerance judgments. For instance, are promises of peaceful behavior influential in getting people to allow demonstrations to take place? As in some earlier research, we are constrained in investigating these hypotheses by the necessity of using hypothetical vignettes describing civil liberties disputes. But the immediacy of such conflicts in actual South African politics imbues our efforts with more realism than is typically found in such studies. In particular, we make use of a relatively new approach to studying public opinion, experimentally manipulated vignettes. These are experiments within the survey, experiments in which we directly manipulate such factors as the degree of threat posed by the political enemy. There are certainly limitations to this methodology, but its considerable advantage is that it yields a much more highly contextualized, concrete, and realistic approach to tolerance conflicts than has characterized previous tolerance studies.

- Fourth, it is unnecessary for us to spend a rand or a minute trying to figure out whether there is much intolerance in South Africa. Some rigorous research exists (e.g., Gouws 1993), but it is research that confirms the widely shared impression that intolerance is one of the most difficult problems facing South African society. If our objective were merely to document the levels of intolerance in South Africa, there would be no suspense to this book, and perhaps little reason for reading even a paragraph further.
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But, as we have said, this book is not only about “what is,” but about “what can be.” It is about persuasion and deliberation – about ways in which citizens can be convinced to abandon their intolerance, to put up with their political enemies. Thus, we attempt to replicate the dynamics of civil liberties disputes within our survey, building debate into the interview. We do not promise spectacular success in this objective – and indeed an important and unfortunate finding of our study is that tolerance is more pliable than intolerance, that persuasion is asymmetrical – but we do report the results of a variety of efforts to persuade the intolerant to become tolerant. It is our hope that some of these strategies provide fruitful and practical means of constraining the widespread intolerance found in South African politics. Whatever the findings, research on the short-term dynamics of tolerance and intolerance provides a useful counterbalance to the largely static and cross-sectional methodology that dominates the field:

- Many theories of political tolerance are deeply pessimistic about the possibility of creating tolerant citizens. This pessimism inevitably gives rise to an attempt to neutralize or ameliorate the “bad tendencies” of democratic citizens through institutional designs. Indeed, South Africa is the location of some of the most interesting efforts on this score in terms of the design of its basic electoral system (e.g., Lijphart 1985; Horowitz 1991). But what sort of institutions can block the intolerant propensities of South African citizens? Here, we devote considerable effort to investigating the impact of law and courts on controlling intolerance. If courts are predisposed to protect individual liberty, and if the judiciary has an unusual supply of institutional legitimacy, then perhaps courts can be successful in getting citizens to acquiesce to tolerant public policy. This is a time-honored hypothesis from Western research, but one that has been little investigated in existing tolerance research.

- Finally, anticipating the findings of widespread South African intolerance, what are the prospects for change in the political culture of South Africa? Culture is far less static than is typically thought, and especially during periods of intense institution building, the political beliefs, values, and attitudes of people can change fairly rapidly. Indeed, many theorists argue that institutional change is a major determinant of cultural change (e.g., Muller and Seligson 1994). Consequently, one of our objectives is to assess the degree to which South African political culture has evolved over the period of the late 1990s, and to test hypotheses about the sources of individual-level change in commitment to democratic institutions and processes and in willingness to tolerate unpopular political minorities.

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