OVERCOMING INTOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Analyzing South Africa’s political culture during the initial years of the country’s experiment with democracy, *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa* provides the first comprehensive study of intolerance ever conducted outside the developed world (and the first outside the United States in nearly twenty years). In a field so heavily dominated by research on stable democracies, this book is a refreshing reminder that political tolerance is crucial to successful democratic politics in every corner of the globe. The research of Gibson and Gouws creates a new agenda for the study of political tolerance by going far beyond simply reconsidering the questions normally investigated by scholars in the West. Instead, the overwhelming focus of this research is on change: how the tolerance and intolerance of South Africans respond to both short-term and long-term political, economic, and social forces. Thus, the emphasis of this book is not merely on what is in South Africa, but what might be as well.

Employing a variety of innovative research techniques – including using actual experiments incorporated within a representative survey of more than three thousand South Africans – *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa* certainly reports some pessimistic findings. Most important, tolerance and intolerance may not be cut from the same cloth. Intolerance is a “strong” attitude, keenly felt, resistant of change, directive of actual political behavior, whereas tolerance is anemic and more susceptible to change, in part because tolerance holds an uneasy and often unsupported position within the broader constellation of democratic attitudes and values. But the research also points to means by which South African intolerance can be constrained and perhaps neutralized. Gibson and Gouws discover that those who are intolerant can sometimes be convinced – by arguments and deliberations, by the intervention of institutions, and so forth – to put their intolerance aside and let a democratic outcome emerge from political disputes. Intolerance is strongly driven by perceptions of intergroup threat, which are in turn connected to certain aspects of social identities. Anything that reduces threat perceptions and group identities will therefore undermine intolerance. *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa* is not just groundbreaking social science; it is a thoughtful and nuanced prescription for how South Africa can become more tolerant and thereby consolidate its democratic transition.

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Cambridge Studies in Political Psychology and Public Opinion

Editors

James H. Kuklinski, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Dennis Chong, Northwestern University

This series has been established in recognition of the growing sophistication in the resurgence of interest in political psychology and the study of public opinion. Its focus will range from the kinds of mental processes that people employ when they think about democratic processes and make political choices to the nature and consequences of macro-level public opinion.

We expect that some of the works will draw on developments in cognitive and social psychology and relevant areas of philosophy. Appropriate subjects would include the use of heuristics, the roles of core values and moral principles in political reasoning, the effects of expertise and sophistication, the roles of affect and emotion, and the nature of cognition and information processing. The emphasis will be on systematic and rigorous empirical analysis and a wide range of methodologies will be appropriate: traditional surveys, experimental surveys, laboratory experiments, focus groups, in-depth interviews, as well as others. We intend that these empirically oriented studies will also consider normative implications for democratic politics generally.

Politics, not psychology, will be the primary focus, and it is expected that most works will deal with mass publics and democratic politics, although work on nondemocratic publics will not be excluded. Other works will examine traditional topics in public opinion research, as well as contribute to the growing literature on aggregate opinion and its role in democratic societies.

*Books in the series are listed on the page following the Index.*
We dedicate this book to Nelson Mandela
and all South Africans who have died as a result of
political intolerance.
OVERCOMING
INTOLERANCE IN
SOUTH AFRICA

Experiments in Democratic Persuasion

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Washington University
in St. Louis
United States

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University of Stellenbosch
South Africa
Contents

List of Tables and Figures  page x
Preface  xiii

Part I Introduction

1  Political Tolerance in the New South Africa  3
   POLITICAL TOLERANCE: AN INTRODUCTION  6
   OBJECTIVES OF OUR RESEARCH  9
   SUMMARY  12
   THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK  12

2  The South African Context  15
   SOUTH AFRICA’S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION  16
   THE IMPORTANCE OF TOLERANCE AS AN ANTIDOTE TO
   CONFLICT IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY  24
   IMPEDIMENTS TO TOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA  26
   CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS RESEARCH  34
   A NOTE ON RACE IN SOUTH AFRICA  35

Part II South African Intolerance as It Is

3  The Nature of Political Intolerance in South Africa  41
   TOLERATING SOUTH AFRICANS?  42
   THE MEANING OF INTOLERANCE: CONCEPTUAL
   DISCUSSION  44
   MEASURING POLITICAL INTOLERANCE  49
   PERCEIVED THREATS FROM TARGET GROUPS  62
   CONNECTING THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND INTOLERANCE
   DISCUSSION  70

4  Social Identities, Threat Perceptions, and Political
   Intolerance  72
# Contents

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY 73
IDENTITIES, SUBCULTURAL PLURALISM, AND DEMOCRACY 74
EMPIRICAL DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY 77
HYPOTHESES CONCERNING THE INTERCONNECTIONS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY SUBDIMENSIONS 83
HYPOTHESES CONNECTING IDENTITIES WITH ANTIPATHY, THREAT, AND INTOLERANCE 86
MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS 90
DISCUSSION 93

5 Making Tolerance Judgments: The Effect of Context, Local and National 95
THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN CIVIL LIBERTIES DISPUTES 97
USING VIGNETTES TO STUDY CONTEXT 99
MODELING CONTEXT 100
DISCUSSION 115

Part III South African Tolerance as It Might Be

6 The Persuasibility of Tolerance and Intolerance 119
THE MUTABILITY OF PUBLIC OPINION 119
THE “POSSIBILITIES” FOR POLITICAL TOLERANCE: THE “SOBER SECOND THOUGHT” EXPERIMENT 127
CONCLUSIONS 149
APPENDIX: THE MEASUREMENT OF SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES 151

7 The Law and Legal Institutions as Agents of Persuasion 154
 COURTS, LAW, AND COMPLIANCE 155
THE ACQUIESCENCE EXPERIMENT 158
DISCUSSION: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS AS PROTECTORS OF CIVIL LIBERTIES 172

8 Becoming Tolerant? Short-Term Changes in South African Political Culture 176
UNDERSTANDING THE ETIOLOGY OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE 177
THEORIES OF SHORT-TERM ATTITUDE CHANGE 179
MEASURING POLITICAL INTOLERANCE 182
THE ORIGINS OF INTOLERANCE 186
BASIC PANEL RESULTS 188
CHANGING POLITICAL TOLERANCE 189
A DYNAMIC MODEL OF TOLERANCE 198
CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION 209
Contents

9 Conclusions: Experimenting with Tolerance in the New South Africa 212

EXPERIMENTS IN CREATING TOLERANT SOUTH AFRICANS 212

THE EXPERIMENT WITH DEMOCRATIC TOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA 220

Appendix A Research Design and Methodology 223

THE SURVEY FIRM 223

SAMPLING AND FIELDWORK 224

THE QUESTIONNAIRE 229

THE QUALITY OF THE RESPONSES 231

CONCLUSIONS 235

References 237

Index 253
## Tables and Figures

### Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>The Relationship between Tolerance and Antipathy</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The Distribution of Affect toward Political Groups in South Africa, 1996</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The Distribution of Disliked Groups</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>The Distribution of Disliked Groups by Race</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Levels of South African Political Intolerance</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Political Tolerance in Great Britain, the United States, Russia, and South Africa</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Predicted Levels of Tolerance, Based on Group Affect</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>The Perceived Threat of Highly Disliked Groups</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>The Relationship between Threat Perceptions and Political Tolerance</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The Distribution of Primary Positive Social Identities</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>The Distribution of Primary Negative Social Identities</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Perceived Benefits of Group Membership</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Attitudes toward Groups and Social Identity</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Intercorrelations of Social Identity Measures</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Intercorrelations of Social Identity and Political Intolerance</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Multivariate Analysis of the Interconnections of Social Identity and Political Intolerance</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>The Structure of the Vignette's Experimental Manipulations</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Should Political Enemies Be Allowed to Demonstrate?</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Perceptions of Group Threat</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>The Direct Effect of the Experimental Manipulations on Tolerance and Threat Perceptions</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Tables and Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>The Effects of Experimental and Perceptual Variables on Political Tolerance</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>The Effects of Persuasive Communications on Political Tolerance</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>The Effects of Persuasive Communications on Political Intolerance</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>The Macro-Level Effects of Persuasive Communications</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Determinants of Persuasibility</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>The Effect of Message Source on Persuasibility</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Multivariate Analysis of Persuasibility – Persuasion to Tolerance</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Multivariate Analysis of Persuasibility – Persuasion to Intolerance</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Initial Behavioral Reactions in a Civil Liberties Dispute</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Behavioral Reactions after Local Authorities Intervene in a Civil Liberties Dispute</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Behavioral Reactions after the Constitutional Court Intervenes in a Civil Liberties Dispute</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Change in Behavioral Propensities as a Result of Institutional Intervention</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Behavioral Reactions to an Adverse Institutional Decision</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Summary of Effects of Institutional Intervention</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Political Tolerance before and after Constitutional Court Intervention</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>The Nature of the Groups Used to Measure South African Intolerance</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Political Tolerance, 1996–7 (Constant Group)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Change in Political Tolerance, 1996–7</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Perceived Threat, Highly Disliked Group (Constant Group), 1996–7</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Change in Perceptions of Threat, 1996–7</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>The Impact of Economic Evaluations on Perceptions of Group Threat and Political Tolerance</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>The Impact of Economic Evaluations on Threat Perceptions</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>The Impact of Political Evaluations on Perceptions of Group Threat and Political Tolerance</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>The Impact of Crime Evaluations on Perceptions of Group Threat and Political Tolerance</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>Summary Results of Comprehensive Model of Change in Tolerance, 1996–7, Structural Equation Modeling</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>The Effects of Exogenous Variables on Change in Tolerance, 1996–7</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables and Figures

A.1 South African Population Attributes 225
A.2 Perceived Attributes of the Respondents, as Reported by the Interviewers 232
A.3 Attitudes toward a Fictitious Group – Mishlenti 234
A.4 Opinionation toward a Fictitious Group and Level of Education 234

FIGURES

4.1 Hypothesized Pathways from Social Identity to Political Intolerance 76
8.1 The Conventional, Crosssectional Model of the Origins of Political Tolerance 178
8.2 The Origins of South African Intolerance, 1996–7 (Maximum Likelihood Estimates) 187
8.3 Tolerance and Threat, 1996–7 (Constant Group) 188
8.4 Hypothesized Model of the Dynamics of Political Tolerance 199
8.5 Summary of Change in Political Tolerance among Each Racial Group 207
Preface

Regimes attempting to overthrow authoritarianism and replace it with democracy face a host of daunting problems. Citizens may have little experience with or regard for democratic values and practices; elites may be waiting in the wings, ready to steal the state’s assets, reimpose dictatorial rule, or both; and the struggle itself may have contributed to a cultural infrastructure very much at odds with peaceful and democratic political competition. It is not surprising that consolidating democratic change is perhaps more difficult than initiating such change.

The problem of political intolerance is one of the most vexing issues for regimes in transition. How does one come to tolerate those who have been responsible for the worst oppression? How is reconciliation possible between those who were masters and slaves under the previous regime? Democracy requires that people with vastly different ideologies “put up with” one another – how do people learn to tolerate ideas they have been taught to regard as evil and criminal? The transition from armed struggle to democracy is never an easy one.

The problem of intolerance plagues all transitional regimes. But nowhere is this democratic deficit more urgent and more real than in South Africa. Apartheid was perhaps one of the world’s most strident and insistent ideologies of intolerance. Although apartheid was defeated in South Africa, its legacy persists in many important ways. In the New South Africa, Boers must cooperate with blacks, the African National Congress (ANC) must coexist with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and whites must somehow come to terms with their minority status and newly found political impotence. These circumstances provide strong challenges to tolerance – indeed, the challenges are among the most intense found anywhere in the world.

This book is about political intolerance in South Africa. We started this project with the assumption that intolerance was widespread in South Africa (and our findings have not undermined that basic intuition). But
Preface

we came to this research from the objective of studying both what is in South Africa and also what might be. That is, we sought to take advantage of a number of advances in political psychology and the theory and methods of survey research to assess whether means can be found to induce South Africans to put aside their intolerance and accept their political opponents. Thus, the most important aspects of this book have to do with the dynamics of intolerance, the ways in which people can be converted or changed to accept more democratic positions and practices.

In focusing on change, we (like everyone else in the world) have been inspired by the New South Africa’s first democratically elected president – Nelson Mandela. Mandela is an icon of tolerance; his dream of a multiracial, democratic, and tolerant South Africa inspired us throughout our work. Mandela reminds us that tolerance is not the same thing as lack of conviction, that one can believe strongly in the rightiness of one’s cause, and the wrongness of one’s enemies, while at the same time rejecting demands for repression and intolerance. Tolerance requires forbearance, it requires controlling one’s natural desire to strike out at one’s enemies. Mandela’s strength of conviction – both in his view of what constitutes a just society and his willingness to debate openly those holding a contrary view – is a role model that all South Africans must emulate if democracy is to succeed. It is for this reason that we dedicate the book to the former president.

Thousands have died in South Africa as a direct result of political intolerance, and we also dedicate this book to them. The apartheid system was responsible not only for denying political rights and liberties to the vast majority of its citizens, but also for instigating and promoting intolerance within the black communities in South Africa. Apartheid left a horrible legacy for the country, one not easily overcome. No ideas are more in conflict with the ideology of apartheid than that all people are equal before the eyes of the state, that all have the right to political expression, and that the marketplace of ideas is the only legitimate means of identifying more and less useful political philosophies. Many died due to apartheid’s intolerance, and we seek to honor those victims in our dedication of this book.

This book is about the possibility for a more tolerant South Africa. Unfortunately, the results of our various efforts to manipulate and change South African intolerance are not particularly pleasing. Though we contribute important empirical findings for theories of political psychology, in the end, our techniques are better at inducing intolerance than tolerance. This has been an extremely discouraging aspect of this project.

It seems that tolerance and intolerance are not cut from the same cloth. Indeed, this is perhaps our most important finding. Intolerance is
Preface

a “strong” attitude – it is salient to people, is resistant to change, and it has strong implications for action. Tolerance is a “weak” attitude, as seen in the numerous ways in which it can be undermined and neutralized. We did not expect these findings, and we regret them.

Still, our commitments to scientific research on the nature of political cultures and individual political psychology have not wavered. Knowledge is always preferable to ignorance. We only hope that those who read the reports of our various experiments will be motivated to solve the problem at which we failed – how to create more political tolerance.

Many institutions and people have contributed to this research. Most important – the sine qua non – is the National Science Foundation. Without the generous support of the Law and Social Science Program of the (U.S.) National Science Foundation (SBR 9424287 and SBR 9710214), this research would not have been possible. We are especially indebted to C. Neal Tate, Susan White, and Patricia White for their enthusiastic support of this research. We also acknowledge support from the Limited-Grant-in-Aid program at the University of Houston.

It is always challenging to try to explain to South Africans why an agency of the United States government would be willing to spend considerable sums of money on an investigation of the attitudes and values of ordinary people in South Africa. The motivation of NSF is our motivation – the belief that the indispensable basis of a better world is knowledge. Few agencies are motivated by such noble purposes. The contribution of the United States to social science is unparalleled in the world; other governments should come to accept some of the responsibility for advancing efforts to understand important social and political phenomena throughout the world, as the Americans have.

Two people have made particularly important contributions to the intellectual foundations of our work: George Marcus and Paul Sniderman. Marcus – with his colleagues John Sullivan and Jim Pireson – essentially created the modern study of political tolerance in their pathbreaking book published in 1982. But more than this, George has been an insightful and generous critic of our work on tolerance, over a twenty-year period. Honest, informed, and tough criticism is the most valuable gift one colleague can give another. George will surely not be entirely pleased to see that we have not always followed his advice. But certainly there is no one whose counsel is more valuable to us, and we are deeply indebted to him for his many contributions to our research program.

Paul Sniderman has long been a dear friend and true inspiration to all of those (including us) who seek to understand something about why people think and act as they do. Few people we know have more useful insights and intuitions than Paul, and few are as generous in sharing their views with others. Paul Sniderman is the consummate scholar. Paul too
Preface

will not be entirely happy with our stubbornness in resisting some of his recommendations on this manuscript, but our appreciation for his work and counsel – and friendship – is unbounded.

Several colleagues read all or parts of this book and have made most helpful comments. We are especially indebted to Jeremy Seekings, Mr. Justice Albie Sachs, Mr. Justice Richard Goldstone, Jan Leighley, Jim Kuklinski, Greg Caldeira, Valerie Hoekstra, and Andrew Martin. We are grateful for the invaluable research assistance Marika Litras, Vanessa Baird, Kris Guffey, Ingrid Anderson, Marthane Swart, and Grisalda Steward provided on this project. Gibson is also most grateful for the friendship of Chris Willemse, who is responsible for a substantial portion of Gibson’s understanding of South African history and politics.

As we note in Appendix A, the fieldwork for this project was conducted by Decision Surveys International (DSI), located in Johannesburg. DSI did an exemplary job on the survey, for which we are grateful. Two individuals, however, contributed beyond the call of duty to both the operational and logistical portions of the work: Carrol Moore and Danny Manuel. Without the thoughtfulness, diligence, and competence (and, we might add, patience) of these two individuals, we are certain the survey would not have been concluded so successfully.

This project soon became a labor of love (at least for Gibson) as the beauty of South Africa and its people became so gloriously apparent (even if South Africa is at once among the most beautiful and ugliest countries in the world). Coming to understand the country and its people has been a true delight.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


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