Are Minorities (In)Tolerant Like Everyone Else?: Evidence from a Survey of American Muslims

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Abstract

Do the considerations motivating political tolerance vary between majority and minority populations? This study takes on this timely, though largely neglected question by offering empirical evidence from an original survey of American Muslims—a socially salient community for which comparatively little quantitative data exists. My analysis highlights 1) the enhanced role of perceived threat to personal safety in motivating targeted intolerance within marginalized groups, and 2) the prevailing effect of education and acculturation in augmenting overall tolerance levels. These findings thus undermine charges of American Muslims’ innate resistance to integration while also suggesting an asymmetric distribution in the burdens of democratic citizenship in America.
1 Introduction

Political theorists have long viewed intolerance as deleterious to democracy. From John Locke’s call to abandon the imposition of religious conformity to J.S. Mill’s advocacy for a “marketplace of ideas,” the liberal foundations of tolerance in the public sphere are well established. Yet, despite being a cornerstone of liberal democracy, political tolerance remains a particularly difficult norm to inculcate. It is perhaps due to the gulf between its significance and its incidence that, for nearly sixty years, scholars have sought to better understand the dynamics of tolerance.

Despite the breadth of literature on this topic, however, some gaps remain. Thus far, for example, the vast majority of studies stemming from Samuel Stouffer’s (Stouffer 1955) seminal work, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*, have altogether neglected the role of minority status—and the particular experiences and worldviews that accompany it—in conditioning tolerance levels. There are important differences between majority and minority citizens across various domains of public opinion (see, e.g., Kinder and Winter 2001; Kinder and Kam 2009; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010) and there is no reason to think that intolerance should constitute an exception to this tendency. Yet, studies on the determinants of tolerance almost exclusively limit their inferences to the broader population (most often relying on General Social Survey data), or otherwise to random samples meant to approximate majoritarian attributes (e.g., religious affiliation (Eisenstein 2006)).

This gap in the literature is all the more conspicuous at a time when minority groups, long the targets of intolerance, are themselves being charged with fomenting intolerant attitudes toward others. A recent FBI report, for instance, warned of the threat posed by “Black Identity Extremists” (Winter and Weinberger 2017), an assessment championed by a number of conservative commentators and politicians in regards to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Arrowood 2015; Phillips 2017). Similarly, although the Southern Poverty Law Center has asserted that BLM is not a hate group according to their categorization (Cohen 2016), “Black Separatists” nonetheless comprise the largest proportion of active hate groups
in the organization’s database (Potok 2017).

Beyond the allegations leveled against voluntary organizations, whole communities are also thought to harbor (or even actively promote) intolerance. This trend is perhaps most evident in the rhetoric towards American Muslims. Speaking directly to this phenomenon, a Pew poll not long ago found that only 33% of US respondents would characterize Muslims as “tolerant” (Pew Research Center 2011). This sentiment is not unique to the mass public, but is increasingly found among politicians (SAALT 2014; Schleifer 2016). Indeed, anti-Muslim rhetoric in political speech has spiked periodically during electoral cycles of late (Lajevardi 2016), indicating the potency and normalcy of these provocations. Taken together, these trends can have concrete policy implications, as evident in the meteoric rise of anti-Sharia legislation across the country (hatewatch_antisharia_2017).

The time is therefore ripe to ask: Are minorities (in)tolerant like everyone else? This question can either be thought of as inquiring about the degree of (in)tolerance or, alternatively, its determinants. Given the data I draw upon, my analysis will largely be limited to the latter. More specifically, I argue that, contrary to prior findings gleaned from studies of the general public, perceived threats to personal safety should significantly predict political intolerance among minorities. Analyzing original survey data from a national sample of Muslims in America, I find strong support for this hypothesis across various model specifications. Thus, in addition to the typically inhibiting effect of threats to one’s way of life, minority citizens must clear an additional psychological hurdle to express forbearance toward their ideological enemies.

Conversely, I also test whether two of the more robust predictors of tolerant attitudes in studies of the general public, education and acculturation, hold similar sway among minority groups. I find that education has a modest, positive effect on tolerance among the full sample, with a more pronounced effect among those respondents born in the United States. Along these same lines, years in residence significantly predict tolerance among foreign-born respondents. Taken together, these results run counter to the narrative that Muslims are
not integrating into American society or that they seek to fundamentally change it rather than adopt societal norms (Carroll and Jacobson 2015; Stump 2016).

To situate the study’s findings, I first review the relevant political tolerance literature. Subsequently, I outline the study’s hypotheses, describe my sample, and detail the model specifications. A discussion of the results follows thereafter. Finally, I conclude by considering the limitations of this study and highlight the implications we can nonetheless draw from the findings.

2 Determinants of Political Tolerance

The modern study of political tolerance arguably began with the Stouffer’s (Stouffer 1955) foundational research in the midst of America’s McCarthy-led Red Scare. Seeking to gauge whether Americans’ attitudes were in line with the country’s widespread political repression, Stouffer found that a wide swath of the general public were more than willing to limit the rights and freedoms of groups whose beliefs challenged their own. Among the dozens of studies that subsequently set out to model the determinants of political tolerance, those elaborating the role of threat perception, minority status, and religiosity inform much of the following analysis.

2.1 Threat Perception

Perhaps the most consistent finding on political tolerance is the negative and powerful influence of threat perception. Indeed, Stouffer (1955) made this connection in his original study. Subsequently, numerous projects of varying scopes, whether comprehensive (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Marcus et al. 1995; Gibson and Gouws 2003) or bounded (Davis and Silver 2004; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004), confirmed this finding. Notably, however, it is a particular type of threat that consistently influences whether or not one is tolerant of a specific group. Specifically, sociotropic threat—that is, a threat to one’s
way of life—is a far more reliable and powerful determinant of intolerance than egocentric threat—that is, a threat to one’s personal safety—with the latter rarely exerting any meaningful impact on tolerance levels. Gibson (2006, 25) explains this seemingly counterintuitive disjuncture by highlighting the foundations of political tolerance as a construct:

Political tolerance is a social, not an individual attitude. . . . Intolerance increases not necessarily when people feel their own security is at risk, but rather when they perceive a threat to the larger system or group (or normative community) of which they are a part of.

While this description of the threat dimension in tolerance judgments may be true of societies on the whole, the same perception may not hold for minorities within these societies. This potential disparity is somewhat speculative at this point, however, given the dearth of studies examining anything other than majoritarian attitudes.

2.2 Minority Status

Indeed, little attention has been paid to the role minority status may play as a determinant of political tolerance. One notable exception is Davis (1995), who conducted the only systematic analysis of the nature of intolerance among African Americans. His findings call into question the perception that, due to cultural and socio-economic disparities, blacks in America are pre-disposed to authoritarian beliefs (Dahl 1956; Lipset 1960). Specifically, Davis concludes that black intolerance is focused on the Ku Klux Klan while registering no discernible difference from typical levels of intolerance exhibited by non-blacks toward “everyday racists” (1995, 12). This suggests that, at least among one racial minority in the U.S., intolerance is not a blanket and involuntary reaction stemming from cultural proclivities, but a conscious decision to secure the group from hatred and violence.

Scant scholarship comparably focuses on other minority groups in America. Several of the existing works were largely occasioned by specific episodes. For example, Gibson and
Bingham (1984) examine American Jews’ tolerance in light of an infamous legal dispute involving neo-Nazis in Skokie, Illinois. Likewise, Gibson (1987) analyzes a case involving the Ku Klux Klan in Houston, Texas to gauge homosexuals’ political tolerance. Similarly, although they do not intensely examine a single incident, Djupe and Calfano (2012, 516) nonetheless open their study of American Muslims by sketching a dispute in which the Miami Dade Transportation Authority removed ads deemed “offensive to Islam” from their buses. Given its relevance to the present analysis, this latter study deserves further discussion.

To date, Djupe and Calfano (2012) have conducted the only academic study of tolerance—and one of the very few in any domain of public opinion—focused on American Muslims. This makes it all the more notable—and normatively troubling—that these authors tell a mostly negative tale. More specifically, after prompting their sample to consider the views of someone who (in the abstract) is against Christianity and Islam, respectively, Djupe and Calfano report a marked dearth of tolerant responses. Only about 30% of their American Muslim respondents chose the civil libertarian option in any of the three anti-Christian scenarios while even fewer were tolerant of the same actions when directed against Islam: 20% would permit an anti-Muslim speech in their community, 9% would allow a person against Islam to teach at a university, and 6% would accept a book critical of Muslims in their local public library. What is more, the authors find that both mosque attendance and scriptural literalism predict greater intolerance. These latter results highlight a final set of relevant determinants.

2.3 Religiosity

From the earliest studies, scholars have consistently found a link between religious conviction and intolerance. Stouffer’s (1955) original results initially suggested that regular churchgoers were generally less tolerant that those who infrequently attended services or did not attend at all. Subsequent studies have added greater nuance to this relationship by examining additional dimensions of religious life, yet the underlying notion of “more reli-
gious” mapping to “more intolerant” remained overwhelmingly stable (Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; McClosky and Brill-Scheuer 1983).

Despite these steady results, not all scholars are convinced of an invariably negative link between religion and tolerance. Busch (1998) contends that prior findings, given their reliance on a fixed-group tolerance battery and blunt gauges of religiosity, are effectively measurement artifacts rather than genuine representations of underlying attitudes. Eisenstein (2006) similarly opts for content-controlled (or “least-liked”) political tolerance measures (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982) and couples her analysis with better specified religion variables. She concludes, after accounting for oft-neglected psychological variables in her sequential equation model, that neither “doctrinal orthodoxy” nor “religious commitment” has a direct effect on political tolerance. Using an alternative methodological approach, Burge (2013) applies propensity score matching to disentangle the effect of the “three B’s”—behavior, belief, and belonging—and finds that biblical literalism decreases political tolerance, while church attendance exerts a countervailing effect. Thus, while the preponderance of evidence still suggests that religiosity (variably defined) negatively influences tolerance (Gibson 2010), this link does not appear to be as unyielding nor as comprehensive as once believed.

3 Hypotheses

In light of the literature reviewed above and the current political and social atmosphere in America, two central hypotheses guide this study. The first contends that American Muslim intolerance is, in part, a function of the egocentric threat that a target group elicits. Here, I draw on Davis’ (1995, 17) conclusion that “blacks, in order to defend and protect themselves from anxiety and fear that comes from racial hatred, consciously and selectively deny procedural rights to such groups that threaten their existence directly.” His findings thus implicitly underscore the heightened role of threats to personal safety in African-American tolerance judgments. It is likely that this same dynamic operates among American Muslims
given the high rate of hate crimes against this community, which has dramatically increased since the start of the 2016 presidential campaign (Williams 2017), and the rising prominence of hate groups in America (Southern Poverty Law Center Year Hate Trump).

\[ H_1: \text{Political tolerance among minority groups significantly decreases as egocentric threat perception increases.} \]

Turning to the other side of the tolerance ledger, a second set of hypotheses test whether the factors that typically enhance tolerance among the general public function similarly within minority populations. Specifically, I examine whether higher education levels and acculturation to liberal democratic norms positively correlate with increased tolerance.

Although immigrant status has not received much consideration in the tolerance literature specifically, it is an increasingly salient factor in analyses of political attitudes and behavior. At a macro level, prolonged experience with the “rough and tumble” of democratic governance enhances a society’s aggregate expression of democratic norms (Peffley and Rohrschneider 2003). At a micro level, however, the same process cannot be taken for granted. Samuel Huntington, for example, famously lamented the findings of a study on Mexican-origin respondents, noting that “those more incorporated into mainstream society, the native-born Mexican-Americans, are less supportive of core American values than are the foreign-born” (cited in Huntington 2004, 242). As the majority of Muslims in America have continually been either first- or second-generation immigrants\(^1\), there has always been speculation (and skepticism) over whether this community can truly integrate into American society. Therefore, I analyze the observed effect on tolerance levels associated with nativity and, among foreign-born respondents, years in residence.

\[ H_{2a}: \text{Political tolerance significantly increases as education level increases.} \]

\[ H_{2b}: \text{Political tolerance is significantly higher among US-born respondents.} \]

\(^1\) The latest polling numbers find that about 75% of the American Muslims are either immigrants or the children of immigrants (Pew Research Center 2017)
$H_{2c}$: Political tolerance significantly increases among foreign-born respondents
the longer their terms of residence in the US.

4 Data and Methodology

To test the preceding hypotheses, I marshal data from an original online survey of
American Muslims. To populate the sample, Qualtrics solicited the participation of respondents
who had previously indicated that they were Muslim on previous surveys. The invitation
itself was generic and made no mention of the specific topic. The second stage of this double
opt-in process (i.e., the fielding of this survey) took place from August 25, 2017-October 16,
2017, yielding a total of 682 respondents. For both the descriptive and inferential analyses,
the data are weighted to the Pew (2017) proportions for American Muslims’ age, education,
and sex.

4.1 Dependent Variable

Contrary to the fixed-group approach, which gauges one’s willingness to limit the civil
liberties of a static (if salient) set of associations, I employs a content-controlled measure of
political tolerance (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). The survey first asks respondents
to indicate their least-liked groups and subsequently populates the tolerance battery with
their choices. This procedure thereby ensures that the so-called ’objection precondition’ is
met. That is, if one is positively inclined toward a particular group—let alone if they are a
member of that organization—it makes little sense to label this individual as tolerant of that
group’s actions. Thus, what is being measured, in a sense, is the degree to which individuals
are prepared to “put up with” those ideas and people that not only differ from, but strongly
oppose their own values and worldview.

Political tolerance in the sample is gauged through four questions. Specifically, respon-
dents were asked the extent to which they would support 1) banning their chosen group
from running for office; 2) putting their chosen group under government surveillance; 3) allowing their chosen group to hold a rally in their city [REVERSE CODED]; and 4) banning a member from their chosen group from speaking at a local college. Each of the questions presented respondents with a 7-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The answers to these four questions formed the additive tolerance scale ($\alpha=.72$). For an added layer of comparison, I randomly assigned respondents to consider tolerance toward either their first or second highly disliked group.

### 4.2 Key Independent Variables and Controls

The core explanatory variable for the first hypothesis is also tied to the respondents’ assigned group. *Egocentric Threat* is tapped through two questions: 1) [ASSIGNED GROUP] pose a threat to my own and/or my family’s personal safety; and 2) If [ASSIGNED GROUP] had their way, they would reduce my own and/or my family’s personal freedom. *Sociotropic Threat* similarly scales two indicators: 1) [ASSIGNED GROUP] are a threat to our society’s way of life; and 2) [ASSIGNED GROUP] are dangerous to the lives of normal people in this country.

Three variables are used to test the second set of hypotheses. Both *College Graduate* and *Born in the US* are dichotomous variables, indicating whether respondents earned a college degree or were native born, respectively. For the sample’s foreign-born, *Years in the US* measures the length of their residence in America (grouped into four categories with the following ranges in years: 0-5, 6-15, 16-30, 30+).

Alongside these key variables of interest, the full model of political tolerance includes three sets of controls. First, two multi-item indicators capture the psychological dispositions that tend to depress tolerance levels. *Dogmatism* indicates the extent to which respondents hold a closed-minded view of the world, tending to categorize social stimuli as either one way or another with little nuance. Along these same lines, *Order vs. Freedom* taps the inclination to limit liberty when granting freedom can detrimentally impact social order.
Prior studies have found that both these cognitive states negatively correlate with political tolerance (Rokeach 1973 Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982 Marcus et al. 1995 Eisenstein 2006).

Second, the questionnaire features a religiosity battery gauging Mosque Attendance, Importance of Religion (in respondents’ lives), and Frequency of Prayer, drawing on the standard dimensions of behavior, belief, and belonging (with adjustments made to fit the phrasing within an Islamic frame). A measurement of Quran Literalism similarly accords with the usual factors tested in tolerance studies, but goes beyond the typical dichotomy. Respondents are asked to choose which of the following comes closest to their belief: 1) The Quran is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word; 2) The Quran is the actual word of God, but has some content that is merely symbolic; or 3) The Quran is an ancient book of history and moral guidance authored by men.

A final set of demographic controls–namely, Age, sex (Female), and Race/Ethnicity–complete the full model specification. The question wording for all independent variables is located in the Appendix.

5 Results and Discussion

For ease of interpretation, all variables (including political tolerance) in the analysis are rescaled from 0-1. In effect, this means that the coefficients correspond to the mean point difference on the tolerance scale between the highest and lowest values on any given variable, holding all other variables constant.

Beginning with a descriptive breakdown of the data, Figure 1 presents the mean level of political tolerance in the sample by assignment and chosen group. As we would expect, tolerance is significantly lower among those who were asked about their least-liked group compared to those asked about another group they highly dislike. Similarly evident is the divergence that exists between the subjects of intolerance; White supremacists are signifi-
Figure 1: Political Tolerance, By Assignment and Chosen Group

cantly less likely to elicit a tolerant response when compared to all other groups. Figure 2 points to a likely explanation for this trend. Comparing levels of threat perception across groups and assignments, a similar pattern emerges with respondents fearing for their safety far more when White supremacists are invoked. This finding, too, is fairly intuitive given that the first year of the Donald Trump presidency not only featured a resurgence of White supremacist public presence, but also a marked rise in violence associated with these groups (Greenblatt 2018).

Turning to the OLS regression analysis, the relationship between threats to personal safety and intolerance among minority groups is brought into starker relief. Table 1 demonstrates a statistically and substantively significant negative effect for Egocentric Threat across multiple model specifications. To be sure, the magnitude of its impact is somewhat blunted once Sociotropic Threat is taken into account. Nonetheless, a pattern of perceived personal threat weakening tolerance is clearly evident.

The effect of Egocentric Threat is even more pronounced when comparing theoretically relevant groups within the sample. Although all the respondents in this survey are Muslim,
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<th>Full Model</th>
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<td>(w/o Religiosity)</td>
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<td>−0.21***</td>
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<td>−0.08**</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
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N 680 681 680 680

Standard errors in parentheses
† p 0.10, * p 0.05, ** p 0.01, *** p 0.001
not all Muslims experience the discrimination aimed at this community to an equal degree. Indeed, as Figure 3 demonstrates, when comparing those who are more marginalized to those who are more societally privileged, the effect of personal threat on tolerance levels markedly shifts. Whether comparing Whites to non-Whites (row one), men to women (row two), or, among Muslim women, non-hijabis to hijabis (row three), the pattern is identical: the threat of personal harm only decreases tolerance among those who are more vulnerable. This sub-sample analysis, coupled with the findings from the full sample analysis, provide strong support for Hypothesis 1.

Turning to the second hypothesis examining the factors that typically augment tolerance levels, the results are not as clear. Referring back to Table 1, both College Graduate and Born in the US are marginally positive across all the models, although only the former crosses into statistical significance (and even then, only at the p<.10 level). However, when we examine the effect of earning a college degree by nativity, a somewhat different pattern emerges. Figure 4 shows that among foreign-born respondents, graduating from college

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2. The designation “hijabi” corresponds to any female respondent that report wearing a headscarf at least "sometimes" while “non-hijabi” designates those who reported "never" wearing a headscarf.
has no effect on political tolerance, whereas earning a post-secondary degree significantly increases the tolerance of US-born Muslims. This finding indicates that it is not simply the level of educational attainment, but the broader context in which that education is attained that matters for democratic norm adoption.

With regard to nativity, although being born in the United States does not, in itself, push one toward more tolerant attitudes, this finding actually points to a more normatively appealing trend in the data. Specifically, Table 2 demonstrates that, among foreign-born Muslims, \textit{Years in the US} has a strongly positive association with political tolerance. This result thus challenges the notion that Muslims are “by nature” more intolerant and unable to adopt America’s democratic norms.

6 Conclusion

What then, are we to make of American Muslim intolerance? In the main, the data appear to undermine the "are Muslims intolerant?" line of questioning altogether. This em-
Table 2: Determinants of Political Tolerance, Non-Citizens Only (OLS Estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Years in the US</td>
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<td>College Graduate</td>
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<td>Egocentric Threat</td>
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<td>Sociotropic Threat</td>
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<td>Order vs. Freedom</td>
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<td>Religiosity</td>
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<td>Quran Literalism</td>
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<td>Mosque Attendance</td>
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<td>Prayer Frequency</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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N = 273

Standard errors in parentheses
† p 0.10, * p 0.05, ** p 0.01, *** p 0.001
Figure 4: Effect of Earning a College Degree on Political Tolerance, By Nativity

Empirical analysis indicates that it is far more appropriate to instead ask "when are Muslims intolerant?" That is, intolerance among Muslims is not an innate trait, but rather a latent attitude that can activate under the right conditions—which is to say that Muslims psychologically function in the same way as everyone else. Where they—and, I argue, other minority groups in America—differ is in the particular considerations that factor into their tolerance calculations.

Broadly speaking, Muslims are particularly driven to intolerance when faced with the prospect of interacting with groups that pose a distinct threat to their personal safety. This dynamic is fairly intuitive, given the increased prevalence of anti-Muslim rhetoric and behavior since the start of the 2016 presidential campaign (Levin 2017; Johnson and Hauslohner 2017; Crunden 2017). Indeed, the discounting of these external circumstances in lieu of a presumably more fundamental psychological attribute speaks to how uncharitable assessments of minority behavior can be, especially when compared to the usually generous appraisals that more socially privileged groups often receive. Ultimately, the findings presented here underscore the need to jettison blanket, unsubstantiated claims about Muslims (and numer-
ous other minority communities) and instead focus on the social and political context that shapes their attitudes and actions.
References


Crunden, EA. 2017. *Communities Hit by Rising Hate Crimes Say Trump’s Rhetoric Is Having a Devastating Impact,* November.


