



# Ideological symmetries and asymmetries in political intolerance and prejudice toward political activist groups



Jarret T. Crawford

Psychology Department, The College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Rd., Ewing, NJ 08628, USA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- I identify ideological symmetry in intergroup outcomes, but asymmetry in processes.
- Symbolic threat predicts prejudice, but not political intolerance.
- Threat-based antecedents of political intolerance depend on the target's ideology.
- Equivalent levels of political intolerance and prejudice emerge on the left and right.
- Results are consistent across multiple studies and methodological approaches.

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## ABSTRACT

Three studies examined ideological symmetries and asymmetries in political intolerance and prejudice toward political activist groups. Using both student and non-student samples, and two alternative methodologies for studying political intolerance, the results of these studies converge on three important and novel conclusions. First, consistent with the ideological conflict hypothesis, both liberals and conservatives were politically intolerant and prejudiced toward ideologically dissimilar groups, to similar degrees. Second, whereas political intolerance and prejudice are related intergroup phenomena, they have different threat-based antecedents. Specifically, whereas symbolic threat significantly predicted prejudice, it did not predict political intolerance of the same groups. Finally, the threat-based antecedents of political intolerance depended on the political objectives of the group itself. Across studies, only safety threat predicted intolerance of left-wing groups. In Studies 1 and 2, only realistic threat predicted intolerance of right-wing groups; however, Study 3 revealed that those effects are attributable to beliefs that right-wing groups are a threat to people's rights. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed, including their relevance to political intolerance and prejudice reduction interventions.

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## Introduction

There has been recent controversy regarding the role of political ideology in political intolerance judgments. Whereas some perspectives argue that conservatives are more politically intolerant than liberals (i.e., *ideological asymmetry* in political intolerance judgments), others suggest that liberals and conservatives are equally politically intolerant of their disliked groups (i.e., *ideological symmetry*). On the one hand, Lindner and Nosek (2009) recently found evidence of ideological asymmetry: specifically, conservatism predicted political intolerance of anti-American (and presumably left-wing) speech, but liberalism did not predict political intolerance of anti-Arab (and presumably right-wing) speech. However, Crawford and Pilanski (2013) noted several limitations to Lindner and Nosek's (2009) approach, such as examining

a) only a single comparison of targets (anti-Arab vs. anti-American) who did not clearly possess directly contrasting political objectives, b) only one mode of political expression (i.e., free speech rights), and c) intolerance of individuals but not groups, which is the typical unit of analysis in political tolerance research (e.g., Gibson & Gouws, 2003; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995).

In their study, Crawford and Pilanski (2013) assessed the protection of both free speech rights as well as rights to assembly of multiple left-wing and right-wing groups and individuals with directly contrasting political objectives (e.g., pro-life vs. pro-choice activists). Across seven comparisons, Crawford and Pilanski (2013) found clear evidence of ideological symmetry in political intolerance judgments: conservatism predicted intolerance of left-wing targets, whereas liberalism predicted intolerance of right-wing targets. Moreover, liberals were more intolerant of right-wing than left-wing targets, whereas conservatives were more intolerant of left-wing than right-wing targets.

E-mail address: [crawford@tcnj.edu](mailto:crawford@tcnj.edu).

Although Crawford and Pilanski's (2013) results are inconsistent with Lindner and Nosek's (2009), as well as some other evidence of ideological asymmetry in the literature (e.g., Davis & Silver, 2004; Sniderman, Tetlock, Glaser, Green, & Hout, 1989), they are consistent with other evidence of ideological symmetry in political intolerance judgments (e.g., Suedfeld, Steel, & Schmidt, 1994), including evidence stemming from one of the most highly influential research programs in the political intolerance literature: Sullivan, Marcus and colleagues' studies of people's intolerance of their least-liked groups (Marcus et al., 1995; Sullivan, Marcus, Feldman, & Piereson, 1981; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). In the least-liked groups (LLG) paradigm, people first indicate the group they dislike the most through either free response or from an experimenter-generated list of possible groups, and then provide intolerance judgments regarding their chosen group. This method has become the standard for examining political intolerance judgments (Gibson, 2006; Gibson & Gouws, 2003), and reveals intolerance among those on both the political right and left (Marcus et al., 1995; Sullivan et al., 1981).

Crawford and Pilanski's (2013) results are also consistent with other recent evidence that liberals and conservatives are equally prejudiced against (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013) and willing to discriminate against (Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013) each other. Summarizing these recent results, Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, and Wetherell (2014) developed the ideological conflict hypothesis (ICH), which argues that people across the political spectrum are prejudiced against and intolerant of ideologically dissimilar others, largely because of the threat these groups pose to one's deeply held worldviews, and the values and beliefs that underlie them.

While there is a good deal of theory and empirical evidence to support the ICH, some of its arguments likely require further refinement. First and foremost, the ICH does not make a conceptual distinction between political intolerance and prejudice, despite both theoretical and empirical reasons for suspecting that they are related but distinct intergroup outcomes. Prejudice (or "social intolerance," as it has been sometimes labeled in the political tolerance literature; e.g., Gibson, 2006) refers to negative evaluations of or feelings toward particular social groups and their individual members (Allport, 1954; Mackie & Smith, 2002; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). Prejudice is typically distinguished from beliefs about groups and their individual members (i.e., stereotypes) and behavioral expressions of negative feelings and beliefs (i.e., discrimination). On the other hand, political intolerance refers to the willingness to deny certain social groups democratically-guaranteed rights, such as the freedom to assemble, to speak publicly regarding their beliefs, to run for public office, or to organize in order to influence policy (see Sullivan & Transue, 1999 for a review).

Perhaps at the heart of the conceptual distinction between political intolerance and prejudice is the fact that political intolerance reflects antipathy at a level beyond simple prejudice. As multiple scholars have noted, it is one thing to dislike a group, but a step beyond that to willingly allow that groups' rights and freedoms to be restricted (Gibson, 2006; Skitka et al., 2013; van der Noll, Poppe, & Verkuyten, 2010). It is therefore possible to be politically tolerant of groups toward whom we feel great hostility and prejudice. For example, adherence to democratic principles and values can often override intolerance judgments against even one's least-liked group (Marcus et al., 1995; Skitka et al., 2013; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). This conceptual distinction between political intolerance and prejudice is further borne out in research utilizing the LLG paradigm, which carries the built-in assumption that people are prejudiced against their selected *least-liked* group. The fact that non-trivial proportions of respondents express political tolerance toward even their least-liked group indicates that political intolerance and prejudice do not necessarily go hand-in-hand (Gibson, 2006; Marcus et al., 1995; see also van der Noll et al., 2010 for evidence of this distinction outside of the LLG paradigm).

Additional research provides empirical support for this conceptual distinction. For example, Skitka et al. (2013) recently found in a U.S. sample that moral conviction predicted prejudice against targets who held opposing positions on deeply moral issues, but was unrelated to political intolerance toward these same targets. This was not the case, however, in a Chinese sample, in which moral conviction predicted both political intolerance and prejudice toward dissimilar targets. These results suggest that different psychological processes are associated with political intolerance and prejudice, at least in countries with relatively strong democratic norms like the U. S. Finally, Gibson (2006) noted that in contrast to scholars who have conceptually conflated political intolerance and prejudice (e.g., Stenner, 2005, p. 325), he has observed only small or even non-significant correlations between political intolerance and prejudice toward Whites in South Africa and toward Jews in Russia. Gibson (2006, p. 26) subsequently argued that understanding the apparent disjunction between political intolerance and prejudice is "one of the most important tasks of future [political tolerance] research."

Thus, whereas some previous scholarship has implicitly (Brandt et al., 2014) or explicitly (Stenner, 2005) equated the two, there are both conceptual and empirical reasons to expect political intolerance and prejudice to be distinct intergroup phenomena. If so, they should have different antecedents, as Skitka et al.'s (2013) findings suggest. Further, given that different values and motives underlie liberalism and conservatism (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010), it is plausible that different antecedents would underlie liberals' and conservatives' political intolerance and prejudice toward right-wing and left-wing political activist groups, respectively. Given that perceived threat is a powerful antecedent of both political intolerance (Feldman, 2003; Gibson, 2006; Marcus et al., 1995) and prejudice (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Duckitt, 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2000), the present studies examined different types of threat as predictors of political intolerance and prejudice against left-wing and right-wing activist groups.

Whereas Crawford and Pilanski (2013) found that perceived threat mediated the relationship between political ideology and political intolerance, their threat item ("How threatening is this group to our country as a whole?") did not clearly identify the *type* of threat being assessed. Both the political science (e.g., Gibson, 2006; Marcus et al., 1995) and social psychology (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2008) literatures point toward intergroup (or "sociotropic") threats as more predictive of political intolerance and prejudice than interpersonal (or "egocentric") threats. Further, multiple theoretical perspectives such as the sociofunctional threat-based approach (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) and integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) recognize the multi-dimensionality of intergroup threat, and posit that the effects of different types of threat depend on the intergroup context. The present investigation focused primarily on *symbolic threat*, which stems from intergroup conflict over values and beliefs (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), *realistic threat*, which stems from real or perceived group competition over limited societal resources (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), and *safety threat*, which stems from perceived physical danger to the group (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005).

Following Gibson's (2006, p. 26) recommendation to assess both political intolerance and prejudice toward the same target groups in order to compare these intergroup phenomena, the present studies examined political intolerance and prejudice toward both left-wing (e.g., pro-choice) and right-wing (e.g., pro-life) political activist groups. Using political activist groups as targets provides a more controlled test of the distinction between political intolerance and prejudice (and the processes that underlie them) than using non-political social groups (e.g., African-Americans; Muslims; atheists). Specifically, a non-political social group's political identity is far more apparent in political intolerance judgments than in prejudice judgments toward them; however, an activist group's political identity is apparent regardless of

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