



**Bryant University**

HONORS THESIS

# Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance

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## **Contents**

<b>Abstract</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
History of Attitude Polarization Research .....	5
Psychological Underpinnings of Ideology .....	7
Intolerance .....	9
<b>Research Goals and Hypotheses</b> .....	12
Objective Intolerance ( <i>“How intolerant are you of them?”</i> ) .....	13
Perceived Intolerance ( <i>“How intolerant do you think they are?”</i> ) .....	13
Additional Variables .....	14
<b>Methodology</b> .....	16
Participants .....	16
Measures.....	16
Procedure.....	20
<b>Results</b> .....	20
Political Ideology .....	20
Objective Intolerance .....	21
Perceived Intolerance .....	21
Additional Variables .....	22
Manipulation Check .....	24
<b>Discussion</b> .....	24
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	27
<b>References</b> .....	28
<b>Table</b> .....	32
<b>Figures</b> .....	33
<b>Appendices</b> .....	35

**ABSTRACT**

Scholarly research linking conservatism to intolerance is widespread (McAdams et al, 2008; Jost et al, 2003): however, relatively little attention is paid to the impact of intolerance on the liberal side. Nevertheless, mounting empirical research and popular journalism suggests that intolerance works both ways, but that liberals are not aware of their own intolerance. Building on survey methodology used by Crawford and Pilanski (2014), the present study uses a scale of ideological consistency, intolerance judgments across a range of issues, and perceived intolerance, to explore both the intolerance levels and perceived intolerance levels of liberals and conservatives, as well as additional variables associated with intolerance. Most notably, the study demonstrates preliminary findings suggesting that even though liberals are objectively no more tolerant than conservatives, they perceive themselves to be so. In an era of intensifying ideological divide and hostility, these findings may be used to inspire further research into an apparent intolerance perception gap among liberals as a contributing factor in political polarization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The United States is currently in a new political era characterized by growing political divide and hostility. In 1994, the Pew Research Center (2017) embarked on a large, ongoing national study tracking the political polarization of the United States electorate. In 2017, they reported a marked decrease in ideological overlap between the Democratic and Republican parties and a rise in animosity across party lines: 45% of republicans and 44% of democrats now hold “*very unfavorable*” views of the opposing party, up from 16% and 17% just two decades ago. Partisans are also reported to associate more and more exclusively with members of their own party and self-segregate due to an increased desire to live in different types of communities, suggesting that contact between partisans is becoming increasingly limited (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Mainstream media messages and popular stereotypes confirm general findings in personality psychology that the liberal worldview emphasizes empathy and openness (McAdams et al, 2008) while conservatives are characterized by a resistance to change and justification of inequality (Jost et al, 2003). Such ideas therefore make it easy to assume that polarization is driven primarily by the rigidity and intolerance of political conservatives. However, more recent empirical research (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Brandt et al., 2014; Wetherell et al., 2013) and popular journalists (Kristof, 2016; Kristof, 2017; Hutson, 2017; King, 2017), have found that political intolerance works on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Nicholas Kristof (2017), who has written several New York Times articles about liberal intolerance and the alienation of liberals from the political right, asked Trump voters in Oklahoma why they voted the way they did. They cited that a major reason was to mock Democrats who “*deride them as ignorant*

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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bumpkins” (Kristof, 2017). Kristof argues that liberals are halting their own progressive agenda by being hostile towards the very people they need to get on board with their policies (2017).

The present study aims to examine and compare the intolerance of liberals and conservatives as part of a continuing line of research in political polarization. Underlying this is a goal to spotlight liberal intolerance, highlight a lack of awareness among liberals about their own intolerance, and speculate on the importance of this perception gap in political polarization.

History of Attitude Polarization Research

A wealth of research has studied the psychology of attitude polarization since the late 1960s and 1970s, and reveals that people naturally tend to diverge in their attitudes. Moscovici & Zavalloni (1969) found that membership of a group could act as a polarizer. Participants were given a questionnaire about their opinions on topical issues, and then were asked to discuss the same issues in groups of five until they came to a consensus. Afterwards, they indicated individually whether they would accept or reject the group consensus. The researchers found that the consensus mean was more distant from neutral than the pre-consensus mean, indicating that group opinions became more extreme. Furthermore, their results suggested that participants privately endorsed the consensus even if it required changing their personal position to become more extreme.

Intergroup comparison has also been found to shift attitudes to be more polarized. Reid (1983) presented social work students with a two-part questionnaire with the same set of eight attitude statements about social work issues. All participants decided on their own opinion about each statement, but half also decided what the majority of other social workers would think about the statements (ingroup) and the other half decided what the majority of commerce students

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

(outgroup) would think. The order of decisions was also changed: half decided about the opinions of the ingroup/outgroup before their own opinion, and the other half decided on their own opinion first. The results showed a tendency for subjects to adopt more extreme positions after considering the opinions of rival outgroup members.

Even people presented with the same objective facts have been found to become more polarized in their attitudes. In their classic study on biased assimilation, Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979) found that proponents and opponents of capital punishment became even more polarized in their attitudes after reading the same two studies: one that made positive conclusions and another that made negative conclusions about the deterrent effects of the death penalty. For example, proponents of the death penalty saw the pro-deterrence study as more convincing than the anti-deterrence study, and vice versa. Instead of taking on board all information equally to come a more neutral position, participants chose the arguments that confirmed their preexisting biases to strengthen their attitude.

The principle of biased processing also applies to political attitude formation. Taber and Lodge (2006) found that prior beliefs play a major role in shaping a person's stance in policy arguments. Motivated reasoning theory suggests that to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, people with strong conviction in their prior political attitudes are more motivated to discount information that is inconsistent with prior beliefs (disconfirmation bias), and to seek out sources of information that confirm existing attitudes (confirmation bias) (Taber & Lodge, 2006). For example, Democrats and Republicans differ in their responses to scientific expertise when considering opinions on public policy (Blank & Shaw, 2015). Marquartt-Pyatt et al. (2014) found that the strongest predictor of US public opinion on climate change was political ideology,

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

even when people were presented with objective evidence of changes in climatic conditions. That is, liberals and conservatives chose to accept or reject the evidence in order to remain aligned with the accepted stance of their ideology.

Psychological Underpinnings of Ideology

Other research looking at political polarization has found that there are fundamental differences between political ideologies that contribute to why citizens struggle to get along. Studying ideology is inherently intricate and complex, and it is acknowledged that “flattening” political thinking to a single binary liberal/conservative continuum may undermine its abundant variety (Pew Research Center, 2014). People may identify with different ideologies based on economic, social, racial, and religious issues (Zschirnt, 2011), and a significant portion of the electorate can also be classified as “libertarian,” “disaffected,” or “post-modern” (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Nevertheless, most political studies dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century have focused on defining ideology in terms of the left-right distinction, which has proven to be the most useful means of classifying political attitudes, and remains an extremely powerful predictor of voting behavior (Jost, 2006). In recent years, the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have come to represent symbolic, overarching sources of political meaning in the US (Zschirnt, 2011), and Pew Research (2017) has found that the correlation between self-identified liberalism/conservatism and views with a traditional left/right association across a diverse range of issues has grown considerably over time. Furthermore, no matter the topical issues of the day, liberals and conservatives diverge in their core attitudes towards social and economic equality and social change (Jost, 2006). Self-identified conservatives are consistently more likely than

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

liberals to favor policies that promote traditional cultural values and oppose groups aiming to change the status quo, while those who identify as liberal are more likely than conservatives to value social and economic equality (Jost et al., 2003).

In addition, self-identified political ideology has been associated with different personality traits. Metanalytic data shows that when correlating self-identified political ideology with Costa and McRae's (1985) "Big Five" personality traits, conservatives are consistently found to be higher in conscientiousness and lower in openness and neuroticism, while liberals tend to be higher in openness and neuroticism and lower in conscientiousness (Kunzendorf, 2015; Jost, 2006). Additional personality differences include increased mortality salience, dogmatism, need for structure, and perceived social and economic threat in conservatives (Jost et al., 2003), and increased empathy and nurturing qualities in liberals (McAdams et al., 2008).

Deep rooted differences between self-identified liberals and conservatives have also been observed in their perceptions of morality. According to moral foundations theory, human beings innately respond with varying degrees of intensity to five key dimensions of morality: harm, fairness, in-group, authority, and purity (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; McAdams et al., 2008). Liberals have been found to strongly value the avoidance of harm and seeking fairness – the first two moral foundations – while conservatives emphasize moral intuitions regarding respect for social hierarchy, allegiance to in-groups (patriotism), and purity when evaluating their own attitudes towards political issues (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; McAdams et al., 2008).

Using moral foundations theory, Ditto & Koleva (2011) claim that a lack of moral empathy and understanding of differing moral foundations is at the heart of political polarization. They argue that we assume people who do not share our point of view have malicious intentions



**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

because we cannot understand that we all have different moral intuitions. In addition, Feinberg & Willer (2015) claim the reason we cannot relate to the other side is because we appeal to each other using the wrong moral dimensions – political advocates make arguments grounded in their own moral values rather than persuading the other side with arguments that they will find morally appealing. Their study found that reframing political issues to emphasize either the liberal values of harm and fairness or the conservative values of in-group, authority, and purity, shifted political positions on those issues.

Intolerance

Political tolerance is commonly defined in social science research as the “willingness to grant the full rights of citizenship uniformly and without exception” (Mondak & Sanders, 2005; Gibson & Bingham, 1982), that is, accepting the rights of everyone to express their opinions no matter how much one might disagree. It follows that a person becomes intolerant the moment they deny another such a right, though Gibson (1982) argues that this intolerance can be analyzed in terms of its scope and magnitude. People vary in their willingness to tolerate different types of activity (freedom to speak, assemble, demonstrate, publish...), as well as the level of violence occurring as a result of freedom of expression. For example, a person may tolerate a person who makes a pro 9/11 speech, as long as it remains just speech and does not turn to violent, terrorist behavior (Gibson, 1982).

Intolerance research has shown that many of the psychological traits that have associated with conservativeness, including mortality salience, perceived threat, closed-mindedness, conscientiousness, and dogmatism, have also been correlated with high levels of political intolerance (Jost et al., 2003; Oskarsson & Widmalm, 2016). Given also the liberal values of

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

openness, empathy, and tolerance (Jost et al., 2003), it is unsurprising that many studies have sought to empirically prove that liberals are more tolerant than conservatives. Terror management theory has typically been used as an explanation for conservative hostility: increasing mortality salience (reminding participants about their own mortality) has been found to increase the intolerance of conservatives towards liberals but reduce the intolerance of liberals towards conservatives (Greenberg et al., 1992). The reasoning is that liberals are not affected by mortality salience because they value open-mindedness and tolerance, which mediates the effect. Lindner & Nosek (2009) also support the view that conservatives are more intolerant than liberals: their study found that conservatives were more intolerant of anti-American speech while liberals were not intolerant of anti-Arab speech.

However, despite the majority of literature highlighting conservative discrimination and liberal tolerance, more recent research supports an ideological-conflict hypothesis (Brandt et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2014), finding that intolerance works both ways. Crawford and Pilanski (2014) criticized Lindner and Nosek for comparing liberal and conservative tolerance of different, incomparable, and highly specific issues, and responded with a study that showed political intolerance came from both sides. Participants were provided with intolerance judgments of left and right-wing behavior across a range of social issues, and were asked to rate the extent to which they believed those behaviors should be allowed. Participants who believed that political behaviors should not be allowed received a higher intolerance score. In this study, conservatism predicted intolerance of the left wing and liberalism predicted intolerance of the right wing, an effect that was mediated by a perceived sense on both sides that the opposing target posed a threat to the country as a whole. A study by Wetherell, Brandt, and Reyna (2013) also showed that both liberals and conservatives supported more discrimination towards the

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

opposing group. Confirming the ideological discrimination hypothesis, they found that intolerance in conservatives was driven by the perception that liberals violated conservative values, and intolerance in liberals was driven by the perception that conservatives violated liberal values.

One example of this specific form of liberal intolerance is in academic bias. Inbar & Lammers (2012) found that within a large sample of social and personality psychologists, only 6% described themselves as conservative, and many conservatives feared the negative consequences of revealing their political beliefs to colleagues. This fear was reasonable: incredibly, many psychologists said they would discriminate against openly conservative colleagues on a range of decisions including paper reviews to hiring. The more liberal the participant, the more discrimination they admitted to. Clearly, something was telling them that their intolerance was justifiable.

Review of the literature reveals considerable research about political attitude polarization and the reasons for hostility towards the political other. Furthermore, deep rooted psychological differences between liberals and conservatives have been widely studied and used to justify the claim that liberals are tolerant and conservatives are intolerant. Until recently, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of intolerance on the liberal side. This is perhaps a reflection of the liberal bias in academia – particularly in psychological fields (Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

Nevertheless, the literature provides evidence to suggest that polarization is in human nature. We become more polarized in our attitudes when we enter into groups, we employ confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias strategies in order to maintain an existing worldview,

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

and use different moral intuitions to justify our positions. Intergroup hostility mounts when we feel threatened and dislike towards outgroups, and as identification with the ingroup rises (Miller & Conover, 2015). Moreover, both groups have been found to strongly defend their moral convictions, and support intolerance of groups who violate those deeply held moral values. Clearly, motivated reasoning exists on both sides of the political spectrum, and political polarization can work both ways.

Finally, the shortage of academic studies on liberal intolerance may be suggestive of a lack of awareness among liberals that they can also display intolerant behavior. While there are currently no scholarly articles on the matter, popular journalists have begun to observe an apparent liberal perception gap: that “liberals are not as tolerant as they think” (Hutson, 2017; King, 2017). Hutson (2017) suggests that the media focus on conservative intolerance and the fact that open-mindedness and tolerance form an integral part of liberal identity, mean that liberals do not recognize their own intolerance. In order to remedy the fact that intolerance on the liberal side has been under-explored in academic research, it is important to examine political intolerance on both sides, as well as the misperception of liberals as fully tolerant.

**RESEARCH GOALS AND HYPOTHESES**

The present study has three primary goals. First, we sought to confirm recent findings that liberals and conservatives are both objectively intolerant of each other, building on literature supporting the ideological-conflict hypothesis. Second, we wanted to explore how intolerant liberals and conservatives are perceived to be, in an attempt to measure the apparent liberal “perception gap” regarding liberal intolerance: that liberals think they are completely tolerant but they are not. To our knowledge, this would be the first empirical study exploring intolerance

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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perceptions. Finally, we wanted to explore additional variables that might contribute to both objective and perceived political intolerance.

Objective Intolerance (“How intolerant are you of them?”)

Since research highlighting liberal intolerance is still relatively new, we wanted to replicate findings made by Crawford and Pilanski (2014), Brandt et al. (2014), and Wetherell, et al. (2013), showing that overall, liberals were objectively no more tolerant than conservatives, and that liberals could be just as intolerant of the opposing ideology as conservatives. In order to do this, the study aimed to answer the following questions: 1) How tolerant are liberals and conservatives overall? 2) Do tolerance levels in liberals and conservatives differ depending on the political target? 3) Are liberals really more tolerant than conservatives?

Replicating the results of these studies would involve confirming the following hypothesis:

*H1: Both liberal and conservative participants will be more tolerant of their own political ideology, but more intolerant of the opposing ideology.*

Perceived Intolerance (“How intolerant do you think they are?”)

The present study also aimed to demonstrate the apparent perception gap in liberals surrounding liberal intolerance. In order to explore perceived intolerance in liberals and conservatives, we posed the following empirical questions: 1) How intolerant do people think liberals and conservatives are? 2) Do liberals perceive liberals to be more tolerant than they really are? 3) How does this compare with conservatives?

## **Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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There is little previous empirical research to draw on regarding perceived intolerance, but given popular findings and anecdotal evidence, we predict that motivated reasoning would cause groups to perceive outgroups as more intolerant than the ingroup, and liberals to perceive themselves as more tolerant than conservatives. We therefore made the following hypotheses:

*H2: Liberals will be perceived overall as more tolerant than conservatives.*

*H3: Liberal participants will perceive themselves as more tolerant than conservatives.*

Motivated reasoning theory suggests that conservatives should also be motivated to perceive liberals as more intolerant than conservatives. However, this motivation might be undermined by the documentation of conservative intolerance and the fact that tolerance does not form an integral part of conservative identity as it does for liberals. Therefore, we do not make a definitive prediction about the perceived intolerance of conservatives.

If our hypotheses hold true, and we are able to show that liberals are objectively no more tolerant than conservatives but perceive themselves to be that way, this study will demonstrate the “perception gap” that has been alluded to in popular media.

#### Additional Variables

In this study, we also wanted to look at additional variables that might contribute to political intolerance. Crawford and Pilanski (2014) found that perceived threat from the political other was a major cause of intolerance from both liberals and conservatives, and that political ideology predicted dislike (low warmth) towards the political other, which contributed to intolerance. We therefore made the following hypotheses:

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

*H4: Higher levels of perceived threat will be associated with objective intolerance in both liberals and conservatives.*

*H5: Lower feelings of warmth will be associated with objective intolerance in both liberals and conservatives.*

In studies linking personality and intolerance, the Big 5 personality traits of Openness to Experience and Agreeableness have been positively correlated with political tolerance, while Conscientiousness is negatively associated with tolerance (Oskarsson & Widmalm, 2016). We hypothesized that:

*H6: Conscientiousness will be associated with higher intolerance levels, and Openness and Agreeableness will be associated with lower intolerance levels.*

Furthermore, Pew Research (2014) reported that partisan hostility is considerably higher among those who are more politically engaged compared to those who are less politically active. We measured political engagement by looking at whether participants were registered to vote, and whether they voted in their last election (local or national). This was the final hypothesis made about objective intolerance:

*H7: Being registered to vote and voting in the last election will both be associated with objective intolerance in both liberals and conservatives.*

Finally, we wanted to look at the same set of variables that has been associated with objective intolerance levels in the literature - perceived threat, warmth, personality traits of openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, party affiliation, and political engagement – and see how they related to perceived intolerance. Prior studies have not analyzed the relationship between

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

these variables and perceived intolerance, and therefore no directional hypotheses were made for the present study.

**METHODOLOGY**

Participants

A total of 125 college students at Bryant University in Rhode Island took an online Qualtrics survey involving a series of measures. Twenty-six students began the survey but did not complete, so their results were not included in analysis. Some students were recruited from Psychology and Communication classes, and were offered extra credit through the Bryant University Sona system. Seventy per cent of participants identified as female and 90% as White. The average age was 20.43 ( $SD = 1.40$ ).

Measures

*Self-identified political ideology*

Participants identified their political identity using the conservatism/liberalism measure commonly used in political survey research (McAdams et al. 2008; Jost et al., 2003), which involved a single item political self-rating on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = middle of the road, 4 = conservative, and 5 = very conservative).

*Ideological Consistency*

Participants also identified their political ideology using a more objective measure of ideological consistency, which was used by Pew Research (2014; 2017) to establish the strength of liberal/conservative affiliation. Participants were asked to choose between a traditionally liberal or conservative view on a range of social and economic issues (Appendix A). In the



**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

original measure, liberal responses were given a score of "-1" and conservative scores "+1," and the degree of ideological consistency was measured by calculating a cumulative score on a scale of -10 to +10.

For this study, original items were largely kept the same to preserve the validity of the measure, but four additional items were appended to reflect more current politically divisive issues such as terrorism, gun control, healthcare, and abortion. Ideological consistency was therefore measured on a scale of -14 to +14, with -14 representing the most consistently liberal participants and +14 representing the most consistently conservative participants (Appendix A).

*Objective Intolerance ("How tolerant are you?")*

Participants' objective levels of tolerance were measured using questions based on the Intolerance Judgment test developed by Crawford and Pilanski (2014). Participants were provided with intolerance judgments for either a left or right-wing target across a range of issues. For instance, participants assessing right-wing targets were asked to determine the extent to which they agreed with a statement such as: "I think that members of a state Right to Life organization should be allowed to distribute pro-life pamphlets and buttons on local college campuses." Similarly, participants assessing left-wing targets were given statements such as: "I believe that a group that supports affirmative action should not be allowed to organize in order to influence government policy on affirmative action in higher education" (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014). Items were scored on a scale of 1-6 (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating increased political intolerance. Items claiming that a target should be allowed to engage in a particular act were reverse coded.

## **Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

The majority of the items from the original scale were kept the same to preserve its validity. However, even though the scale was developed relatively recently, the rapid shift in political current events since 2014 meant that three items were modified to be more politically relevant while maintaining the political theme of the item. Specifically, an item referring to George W. Bush was updated to Donald Trump, and another item referring to Obama's proposed healthcare reform was updated to the repealing of the Affordable Care Act. Furthermore, two items were added to the original Intolerance Judgement Scale, in reference to gun laws and civil rights movements such as Black Lives Matter/Blue Lives Matter (Appendix B).

#### *Perceived Intolerance ("How tolerant are they?")*

Participants were asked to rate people who identify as either liberal or conservative in terms of their political tolerance on a scale of 1-7 (1 = very intolerant; 7 = very tolerant). Political tolerance was clearly defined as: "the willingness to grant full rights of citizenship uniformly and without exception" to avoid misinterpretation. In order to remain consistent with other measures in the study that recorded higher scores for higher intolerance, all perceived intolerance scores were reverse coded (1 = very tolerant; 7 = very intolerant).

#### *Warmth & Threat*

Following Crawford & Pilanski (2014), participants indicated their level of warmth towards both liberals and conservatives on a 1-100 thermometer scale (1 = extremely cold; 100 = extremely warm), as well as their general perception of the threat liberals and conservatives pose to the nation on a 1-7 scale (1 = not at all threatening to our country; 7 = very threatening to our country).

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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*Personality*

Participants also responded to items relating to the "openness to experience," "agreeableness," and "conscientiousness" dimensions of the big 5 personality traits from the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Openness to experience and conscientiousness have been found to have the strongest correlations with liberalism and conservatism respectively, and agreeableness has been positively correlated with political tolerance (Oskarsson & Widmalm, 2016). These three personality traits were therefore deemed most relevant to the present study. Participants responded to twelve items for each personality dimension, presented in a randomized order. Several items were reverse coded, and each item was scored on a scale of 0-4, with a higher score representing increased alignment with that trait. Finally, each participant was assigned a cumulative score for each personality dimension.

Due to researcher error, only eleven of the twelve official items for conscientiousness were presented to participants, and therefore the results of this personality trait were excluded from analysis and will no longer be discussed.

*Demographic information*

Participants concluded the survey by providing basic demographic information such as gender, age, and race. Participants also identified their home state, which was recoded to indicate whether it had voted for the Republican or Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election. Finally, participants indicated whether they were registered to vote, whether they voted in their last election, and their party affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other). These last questions assessed political engagement.

## **Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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#### Procedure

Based on Crawford & Pilanski's (2014) between-subjects design, a Qualtrics survey randomly assigned participants to assess either conservative or liberal targets for both the intolerance judgment scale and the perceived intolerance item. For the objective intolerance judgment scale, 55 participants assessed a liberal target and 46 participants assessed a conservative target: 46 liberals and 9 conservatives assessed a liberal target, and 37 liberals and 9 conservatives assessed a conservative target. For the perceived intolerance item, 52 participants determined how intolerant they perceived liberals to be, and 49 participants determined how intolerant they perceived conservatives to be: 45 liberals and 7 conservatives assessed a liberal target, and 38 liberals and 11 conservatives assessed a conservative target. Next, participants were asked for warmth and threat ratings for both liberals and conservatives, followed by personality measures, political engagement and party affiliation questions, and finally, demographics.

## **RESULTS**

#### Political Ideology

Consistent with ideology distributions found in samples by Lindner and Nosek (2009) and Crawford and Pilanski (2014), a higher percentage of participants self-identified as liberal or very liberal (27%) compared to conservative or very conservative (18%). However, over half of this sample (54%) self-identified as middle of the road. Therefore, due to a lack of variability in self-identified political ideology, liberal and conservative participants were defined by ideological consistency, with the cutoff at 0: the mixed ideology point. Defined in this way, 82% of participants were liberal and 18% were classified as conservative.

## **Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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#### Objective Intolerance

It was hypothesized that both liberal and conservative participants would be more intolerant of the opposing ideology and more tolerant of their own political ideology. Implicit in this hypothesis was the idea that liberal and conservative respondents would not differ in their levels of overall intolerance. Intolerance judgment scores were subjected to a univariate analysis of variance with two levels of respondent ideology (liberal, conservative) and two levels of ideological target (liberal, conservative). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

As seen in Figure 1, The main effect of respondent ideology was non-significant,  $F(1, 97) = .14, p = .71$ , indicating that overall, intolerance scores from conservative participants ( $M = 2.98, SD = .93$ ) were not significantly higher than intolerance scores from liberal participants ( $M = 2.86, SD = .89$ ). The interaction effect was also non-significant,  $F(1, 97) = .83, p = .37$ , which did not support the initial hypothesis. However, post hoc independent sample t-tests revealed that while among conservative respondents, the difference in intolerance scores towards liberal and conservative targets was non-significant,  $t(16) = .37, p = .72$ , liberal respondents had significantly higher intolerance scores towards conservative targets ( $M = 3.18, SD = .90$ ) than towards liberal targets ( $M = 2.60, SD = .80$ ),  $t(81) = 3.07, p = .003$  (Figure 1). The first hypothesis was therefore partially supported.

#### Perceived Intolerance

The first hypothesis regarding perceived intolerance was that conservatives would be perceived as more intolerant overall than liberals. A univariate analysis of variance yielded a main effect for the intolerance target,  $F(1, 97) = 2.65, p = .11$ , such that overall perceptions of

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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conservative target intolerance ( $M = 4.37, SD = 1.48$ ) were marginally higher than perceptions of liberal target intolerance ( $M = 3.21, SD = 1.46$ ), and approaching significance (Figure 2).

The univariate analysis of variance discussed for the previous hypothesis also yielded a significant interaction effect between ideological target and respondent ideology in their perceptions of intolerance,  $F(1, 97) = 4.40, p = .039$ , indicating a greater effect in liberal respondents compared to conservative respondents. Liberals were hypothesized to perceive themselves as more tolerant than conservatives: that is, liberal respondents would perceive conservative targets as more intolerant than liberal targets. As seen in Figure 2, Independent sample t tests revealed that liberal respondents perceived conservatives as significantly more intolerant ( $M = 4.53, SD = 1.47$ ) than liberals ( $M = 3.10, SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(81) = 4.87, p < .001$ , confirming this hypothesis. No explicit prediction was made about perceptions of liberal/conservative intolerance among conservative respondents. In fact, conservatives did not differ significantly in their intolerance perceptions of liberal and conservative targets,  $t(16) = .195, p = .11$ ), although the effect approaches significance and the trend suggests that conservatives perceive liberal targets as slightly more intolerant ( $M = 4.00, SD = 2.52$ ) than conservative targets ( $M = 3.82, SD = 1.47$ ) (Figure 2).

Additional Variables

Correlational analysis was used to explore additional variables and their relationship with intolerance. Relationships between these variables and objective intolerance scores are discussed in relation to our directional hypotheses, and their relationships with perceived intolerance scores are explored. First, it was hypothesized that lower feelings of warmth would be associated with higher levels of objective intolerance. Table 1 shows a significant negative correlation between

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

---

warmth towards liberals and intolerance towards liberals, confirming the hypothesis, and a significant negative correlation between warmth towards conservatives and intolerance towards liberals. Additionally, the table shows that warmth towards liberals was significantly negatively correlated with perceived intolerance of liberal targets, and warmth towards conservatives was negatively associated with perceived intolerance of conservative targets.

It was also hypothesized that higher perceptions of threat would be associated with higher levels of intolerance. Indeed, Table 1 shows a significant positive correlation between perceived threat from liberals and intolerance towards liberals. However, there was no significant correlation between perceived threat from conservatives and intolerance towards conservatives. In terms of perceived intolerance, there was a significant negative correlation between perceived threat from liberals and perceived intolerance of conservatives.

It was hypothesized that the Big Five personality traits of openness to experience and agreeableness would both be associated with lower levels of intolerance. Table 1 shows a significant negative correlation between openness to experience and objective intolerance towards liberals, supporting the hypothesis, however the correlation between openness and objective intolerance towards conservatives was not significant. Agreeableness was not significantly associated with intolerance towards either liberals or conservatives, contrary to expectation. Additionally, both openness and agreeableness were significantly negatively related to the perceived intolerance of liberal targets.

Finally, we hypothesized that increased political engagement, namely being registered to vote and voting in the last election, would be associated with increased intolerance. There were

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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no significant correlations between either variables and objective or perceived intolerance, so this hypothesis was not supported.

Manipulation Check

We also used these correlations as a manipulation check. As expected, warmth towards liberals and threat towards conservatives were both significantly associated with liberalism, and warmth towards conservatives and threat towards liberals were both significantly associated with conservatism. Openness to experience and agreeableness were also associated with liberalism.

**DISCUSSION**

This study adopted Crawford and Pilanski's (2014) approach of manipulating the stated positions of political targets, and aimed to replicate their findings that both liberalism and conservatism predicted intolerance towards the opposing target. Our results showed that while liberal participants were significantly more intolerant towards conservative targets than liberal targets, conservative respondents did not differ significantly in their intolerance towards liberal and conservative targets. The inability to fully confirm the results found by Crawford and Pilanski may be due to the very small sample of conservative respondents.

Of course, this study was limited by its relatively small sample size of college students at a small, business centered university in the northeast of the US. The sample was also predominantly white and female, with a strong liberal skew as defined by ideological consistency, and the results therefore cannot be generalizable to the entire US population. However, we began to find signs of the hypothesized perception gap in liberals about their own intolerance. That is, even though conservatives were objectively no more intolerant than liberals,



**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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liberals perceived conservatives as more intolerant than liberals. There was also no such significant difference among conservatives. While the lack of significance among conservatives may again be explained by the small sample of conservatives, the significance of the interaction effect suggests that liberals are truly less aware of their own intolerance.

The argument is compelling that liberals are unaware of their own intolerance because their liberal identity is so wrapped up in the idea of tolerance, but in this study, attempts were made to understand some of the other variables contributing to these intolerance effects. Warmth towards a particular ideology was found to be negatively associated with perceptions of that ideology's intolerance, and the personality traits of openness and agreeableness were both negatively related to perceptions of liberal intolerance. These findings, while interesting, are probably due to the fact that the variables are so significantly correlated with ideology, and therefore do not reveal much beyond the already established ideological findings.

Although we were not able to explore morality in the present study, it might offer some insight into why liberals may justify their intolerant behavior, or not even see it as intolerant. Morality research has found a theory of moral licensing – the idea that doing something morally favorable gives “moral credentials,” and increases the likelihood of doing something morally unfavorable (Effron et al., 2009). This may be interesting to consider when thinking about why liberals do not perceive themselves as intolerant. Could it be that the liberal emphasis on fairness and avoidance of harm (which are widely seen to be morally good) gives them moral credentials that they feel licenses them to act “immorally” towards conservatives? Alternatively, liberals might perceive their intolerance of conservative intolerance (which they see as immoral), as a moral position in itself, and instead see a failure to reject this intolerance as the more immoral

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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act. Applications of morality to the study of liberal intolerance may certainly be an interesting area of future study.

Future studies should also continue to explore this perception gap by attempting to replicate the findings with self-identified liberals and conservatives, and by offering a more direct comparison of objective and perceived intolerance. Each participant should respond to the same political target on both the objective and perceived intolerance measures, and these two variables should be measured on equivalent scales to allow more direct comparisons to be made. Such findings would also be interesting to measure in relation to political polarization as a whole. It would seem logical that, as opposed to disagreement, intolerance towards the other would create more hostility, denying people the right to speak, mocking and dismissing people as having unworthy opinions, and ultimately fueling polarizing attitudes. If liberals are not aware of the impact of their own intolerance, they may inadvertently be increasing political polarization. This would be interesting to investigate in the future.

An additional interesting finding from this research showed that, though they were strongly correlated,  $r(99) = .63, p = .000$ , political self-identification and objective responses to left-right issues did not directly match. Many participants identified as middle of the road, when their ideological consistency score suggested that they were well into the liberal range. This could be that many liberals did not want to identify as such, or maybe that those who identified as middle of the road did not want to be classified on the liberal/conservative continuum. Furthermore, almost half of this sample did not vote in the last election, which may suggest a sense of political apathy in this age group. In any case, attitudes towards political labelling and

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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voting behavior would be worth looking into in a future study, especially in these unique political times.

**CONCLUSION**

Until very recently, the focus of political intolerance research has been on conservative intolerance. However, mounting evidence suggests that intolerance comes from both sides, fueled by motivated reasoning (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Brandt et al, 2014). The lack of attention to liberal intolerance is suggestive of a lack of awareness or realization of the importance of intolerance on the liberal side. This study made some initial steps towards demonstrating that even though liberals are objectively no more tolerant than conservatives, they perceive themselves to be so. Though there are further steps to take in understanding the reasons behind this perception gap, this study sought to demonstrate that it is an important phenomenon in research about political polarization, and may one day contribute to healing the political divide.

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***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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## Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance

Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi

### TABLE

**Table 1.** Correlation Analysis for Each Additional Variable

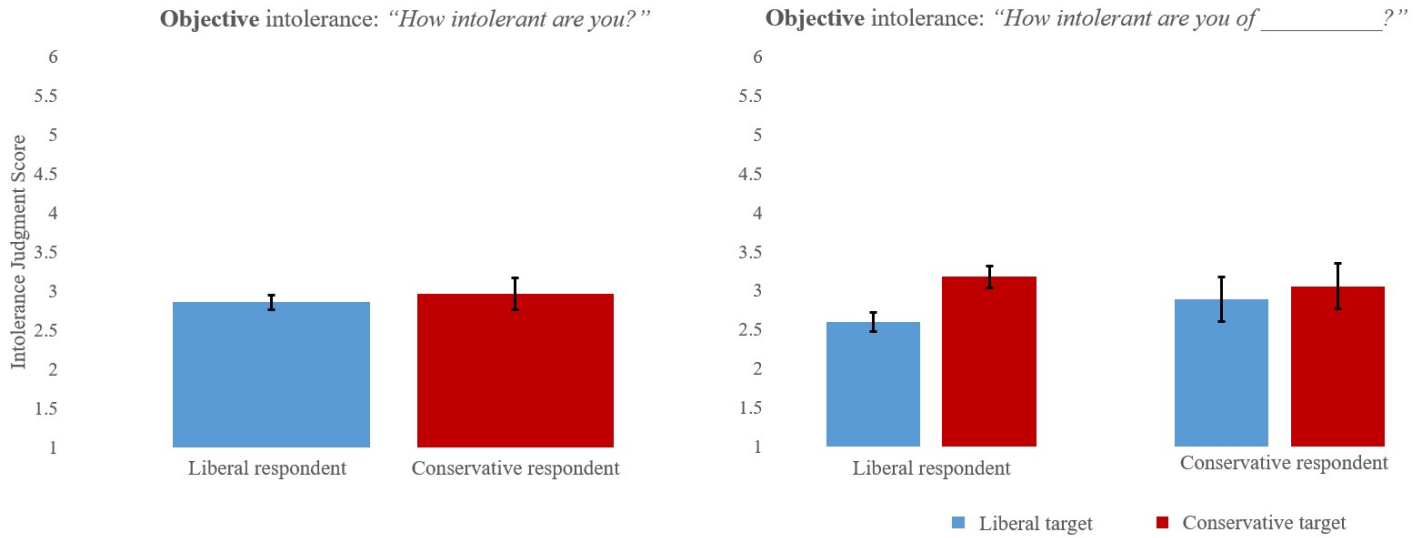
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Wlib	-													
2. Wcons	.13	-												
3. Tlib	-.65**	.16	-											
4. Tcons	.16	-.47**	.06	-										
5. Ideology	-.48**	.31**	.49**	-.38**	-									
6. Open	.42**	.01	-.25*	.20 <sup>†</sup>	-.25*	-								
7. Agree	.26**	.06	-.31**	-.11	-.14 <sup>†</sup>	.30**	-							
8. Reg?	-.08	.02	-.09	-.17 <sup>†</sup>	.12	-.02	-.20*	-						
9. Voted?	-.07	-.09	-.01	.04	.11	.11	-.16	.36**	-					
10. Party	-.29**	.09	.14 <sup>†</sup>	-.23*	.23*	.02	-.22*	.17	.41**	-				
11. PerLib	-.52**	.07	.26	-.25	.53**	-.36**	-.33*	.27	.21	.37**	-			
12. PerCons	.27	-.35*	-.42**	.25	-.42**	.21	.25	-.20	-.10	-.31*	-	-		
13. ObjLib	-.60**	-.34**	.28*	-.13	.26	-.43**	-.08	.13	-.08	.13	.69**	-.22	-	
14. ObjCons	.04	-.07	.01	-.04	-.10	-.24	-.05	.09	.11	.12	-.07	.18	-	-
<i>M</i>	64.18	56.74	3.46	3.79	-5.44	29.17	34.59	30.58	1.16	1.46	2.17	3.21	2.64	3.18
<i>SD</i>	24.37	22.96	1.34	1.39	5.24	7.13	6.88	6.22	.37	.50	1.02	1.45	.83	.87
<i>N</i>	104	104	104	103	101	100	100	100	99	99	98	53	57	48

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; <sup>†</sup> $p < .1$

With ideology, positive correlation refers to conservatism; negative correlation refers to liberalism



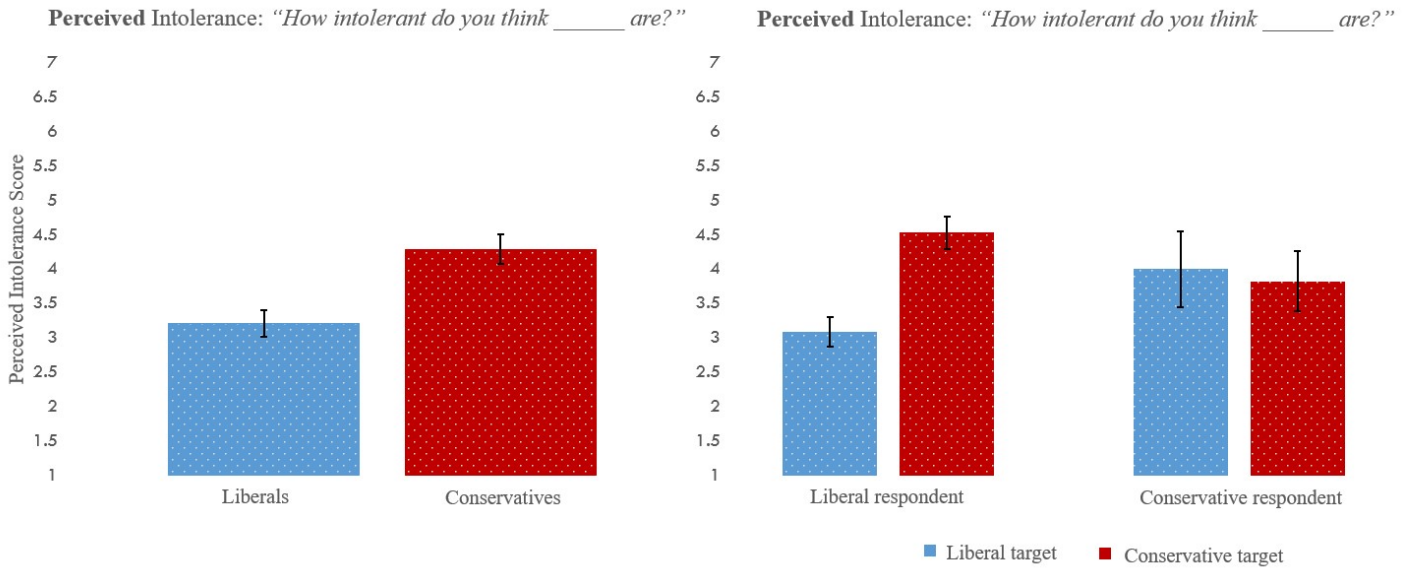
**FIGURES**



**Fig. 1.** Objective Intolerance Mean Comparisons

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi*

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**Fig. 2.** Perceived Intolerance Mean Comparisons

**APPENDICES**

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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**Appendix A. Items in the Ideological Consistency Scale (based on Pew Research Center, 2014)**

<b>Question #</b>	<b>Conservative Position</b>	<b>Liberal Position</b>
1	Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient	Government often does a better job than people give it credit for
2	Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good	Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest
3	Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return	Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently
4	The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy	The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt
5	African Americans who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.	Racial discrimination is the reason why many black people can't get ahead these days
6	Immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care	Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents
7	The best way to ensure peace is through military strength	Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace
8	Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit	Business corporations make too much profit
9	Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy	Stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost
10	LGBT rights should be discouraged by society	LGBT rights should be accepted by society
11	An unborn life is precious and should be protected, and therefore taxpayer dollars should not be used for the government to provide abortions	The decision to have an abortion is a personal choice of a woman regarding her own body and the government should protect this right
12	Healthcare is a privilege and not a right, and the government should play no role in providing healthcare to citizens	Healthcare is a right and not a privilege, and it should be the responsibility of the government to ensure that everybody has access to adequate healthcare.
13	The US can best serve its own interests by prioritizing the needs of American citizens over the needs of the rest of the world	Healthcare is a right and not a privilege, and it should be the responsibility of the government to ensure that everybody has access to adequate healthcare
14	American citizens should have the right to bear arms and the government should not interfere with that right	Stricter gun control laws need to be enforced to prevent mass shootings

**Political Polarization and Intolerance of Intolerance**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Nina Luiggi***

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**Appendix B. Intolerance Judgment Items (based on Crawford and Pilanski, 2014)**

1. I believe that groups who support (*oppose*) LGBT rights should not be allowed to organize in order to pass laws supporting (*opposing*) LGBT rights.
2. I think that members of a state Pro-Choice (*Right to Life*) organization should be allowed to distribute pro-choice (*pro-life*) pamphlets and buttons on local college campuses.
3. I think that an Atheist (*Evangelical Christian*) group should not be allowed to organize in order to remove the phrase “Under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance in American public schools (*allow school prayer in American public schools*).
4. I believe that a group that supports (*opposes*) affirmative action should not be allowed to organize in order to influence government policy on affirmative action in higher education.
5. I believe that a person who supports (*opposes*) the repealing of the Affordable Care Act should not be allowed to disrupt a Congressman’s town hall meeting.
6. I think that a protestor should be allowed to give a speech entitled “Donald Trump (*Barack Obama*), Our Generation’s Hitler”.
7. I think that the Democratic (*Republican*) Party should not be allowed to visit college campuses in order to register potential voters.
8. I think that protestors who disapprove (*approve*) of President Trump’s proposed travel ban from several majority Muslim countries should be allowed to demonstrate outside international airport terminals.
9. I believe that members of the “Coalition to Stop Gun Violence” (*NRA*) should not be allowed to pay for political ads to influence gun control legislation.
10. I believe that groups such as Black Lives Matter (*Blue Lives Matter/All Lives Matter*) should be allowed to organize to use social media to promote their viewpoint without being censored for inappropriate content.