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Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion.

By James L. Gibson and Amanda Gouws. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xiii, 262. \$55.00 cloth.)

From time to time there are works that change how we ought to think about important problems. James L. Gibson and Amanda Gouws' *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa* is such a work.

Conditions encouraging the entrenchment of democratic politics are their theoretical concern, commitment to political tolerance their empirical focus. Their concern and focus only partly overlap. Whether South Africa can preserve and deepen its democratic politics will depend on factors other than the beliefs and values of its citizens, as Gibson and Gouws take care to underline. Still, it is a reasonable bet that the outcome there hinges to a degree that matters on the commitment of citizens to democratic values, political tolerance chief among them.

To this point, the two milestones in research on political tolerance have been the studies of Stouffer and McClosky and those of Sullivan, Marcus, and his colleagues. Differences about measurement aside, Stouffer-McClosky and Sullivan-Marcus share a common conception of the research—and political—problem. Recognizing that the specific judgments that a person makes vary with time and place, their aim is to pin down citizens' central tendency, their settled view on issues of toleration, as it were. As do Gibson and Gouws. They chart levels of political tolerance in South Africa, using the Sullivan-Marcus least-liked, content-controlled method. They measure what should be measured, examine the interrelations of measures that should be examined, from this measurement perspective. No surprises here, descriptive details specific to South Africa aside, though the absence of surprises says two things, one about this book, one about the field of research to which this book belongs. Gibson and Gouws do what everyone should do but hardly anyone ever does: they devote themselves to seeing if their results buttress previous work. I can't recall reading a sentence in their book that began, "Conventional wisdom says that . . . , **but** . . ." As for the field of research, point-by-point comparisons with previous studies make the case that research on political tolerance is genuinely cumulative.

All of this concerns political tolerance viewed as a—more or less—settled view. But rather than this being the heart of Gibson and Gouws' story, it is only the beginning of it. The actual choices that citizens make about tolerance are conditional, not only on their general views on tolerance, but also on the play of forces at work when they confront a choice. General predispositions and situational influences is a general story, but one with particular relevance for the politics of tolerance. To what extent will citizens who believe in tolerance hold their ground in the face of pressure, social and otherwise, to retreat? To what extent can citizens who are not sympathetic to tolerance as a general proposition be persuaded to support it on a particular occasion?

These two questions do not stand on quite the same ground. It is interesting to learn how many outside the faith can be induced to hum the right tune on a particular occasion when those around them preach tolerance. But face-to-face with a real threat to civil liberties, the problem tends to be defection, not genuflection. What we most need to know is how many will defect from the democratic creed when it is most important—and most difficult—for them to stay true.

This is the question that Gibson and Gouws distinctively illuminate. Their strategy is to see how readily citizens can be talked out of the initial position they take on issues of political tolerance. So they turn to experimental and quasi-experimental manipulations. Their “sober second thought” experiment is a novel hybrid, joining counterargument and random variation of sources of counterarguments, while their “acquiescence” experiment tests out appeals to local authorities and the Supreme Court. And always the procedure is formally symmetrical, with attempts to talk people out of an initial position in favor of tolerance matched by attempts to talk others out of an initial position in favor of intolerance.

But the asymmetry of the results is the story. It turns out that it is easier to talk people out of a tolerant position than out of an intolerant one, and by a fair margin. By any standard, this is a major finding. The established story about the politics of tolerance has been organized around one major plot line, the difficulty in securing the commitment of ordinary citizens to the value of political tolerance when it is put to an actual test in a specific controversy. Now it appears there is a double difficulty: getting them to favor tolerance as their initial position, and getting them to stand behind their initial position in the face of counterpressure. Anticipations of this result can be found in previous research, including Gibson’s own. But Gibson and Gouws put a spotlight on asymmetries of pliability. In a way that sets their work apart, they grapple with the problem, introducing innovative procedures, assessing the issue of asymmetry first from one angle then from another, underscoring the centrality of the problem by the robustness of their findings against different procedures. This is an original and fundamental contribution. It opens up a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the politics of tolerance once you accept the proposition that it is easier to dislodge those whose first reaction is to support the rights of controversial groups than to dislodge those whose first reaction is to reject them.

On the explanatory side, however, the results strike me as more equivocal. Without making a fetish of *r*-square, the impact of explanatory variables often is modest. Moreover, their impact is group conditional, stronger for white South Africans, worrisomely weaker for black South Africans. On the one hand, this difference in explanatory power underlines just how different South African blacks and whites are; on the other, it points to a need to identify the factors that distinctively shape black South Africans’ attitudes. Finally, for the record, I sniff a scent of circularity in the Sullivan-Marcus procedure. On the left-hand side, target groups are selected because they are disliked; on the right-hand side, the most important variable is perceived threat posed by the target group, defined operationally as degree of negative affect toward the group—i.e., how much the group is disliked.

Still, major leaps forward usually look awkward from some angle. And Gibson and Gouws, *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa*, is a major leap forward.

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