

Trust as a Mediator: Understanding the Relationship Between Community Context and Political Tolerance in Contemporary America

Abstract

Political tolerance, the willingness to extend civil liberties to ideologically opposed groups, is fundamental to democratic stability, yet Americans increasingly sort into politically and demographically homogenous communities. While existing research demonstrated that community characteristics predict political attitudes, the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship remain underspecified. This research examines whether generalized social trust mediates the relationship between community context (urbanicity and diversity) and political tolerance using the General Social Survey (GSS) dataset.

Drawing on the contact theory and social capital frameworks, I hypothesize that community characteristics shape residents' generalized trust in others, which in turn influences their willingness to extend democratic rights to disliked groups. Using mediation analysis with bootstrap confidence intervals, I decompose the total effect of community characteristics on political tolerance into direct and indirect (trust-mediated) pathways. This approach allows for estimation of the proportion of the community-tolerance relationships explained by social trust, while controlling for relevant demographic and political covariants.

Findings contribute to understanding how social context shapes democratic attitudes and have implications for theories of polarization, social capital, and intergroup relations. By identifying trust as a potential mechanism, this research suggests that interventions aimed at building generalized social trust, rather than simply increasing demographic diversity or urban density, may be more effective pathways to promoting political tolerance. The study also demonstrated the value of mediation analysis for unpacking complex social phenomena and moving beyond correlational descriptions to explanatory mechanisms.

Key words: political tolerance, social trust, community characteristics, mediation analysis, General Social Survey