Competing Norms of Free Expression and Political Tolerance

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FIFTY YEARS AFTER ICONIC STUDENT PROTESTS IN BERKELEY FORCED THE UNIVERSITY of California to end restrictions on campus political activism, free speech controversies are again roiling American universities. In a remarkable role reversal, however, the student protesters now demand that universities censor and cancel events featuring speakers who espouse controversial views about politics, race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Administrators who refuse to curb their institutions' commitment to free expression face disruptive and potentially violent demonstrations by students who often seek not just to air opposition to offensive speech but to suppress it entirely.

Observers across the political spectrum lament what they regard as a failure of the educational system to promote understanding and appreciation of the importance of free speech in a democratic society. A recent Brookings Institution report (Villasenor 2017) based on a poll of college students concludes that "many students have an overly narrow view of freedom of expression … and a majority of students appear to want an environment that shields them from views they might find offensive," a state of affairs that it attributes to "insufficient attention given to the First Amendment" before and during college. Other polls reach similar conclusions.[1] An annual UCLA survey of American college freshmen conducted since the 1960s finds

a steady rise, from slightly over 20 percent in 1973 to 43 percent in 2016, in agreement with the idea that colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers from campus. The same survey shows support for banning racist and sexist speech is even higher, and has increased in the aggregate since 1991 from 61 percent to 71 percent. A recent survey of students, faculty, and administrators at 23 colleges and universities to gauge perceptions of the campus climate reflects observation of more restrictive norms of free speech. Only 36 percent of students and 17 percent of faculty felt it was safe to hold unpopular opinions on their own campuses (Dey et al. 2010). Such findings correspond to assessments of institutional rules and codes on college campuses that restrict freedom of expression. The organization FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) classifies institutions according to the degree to which they have policies that restrict free speech. The vast majority of colleges and universities currently have speech policies that restrict significant categories of speech or that infringe on speech in more limited ways, while fewer than 5 percent of institutions are without any restrictive speech policies.[2]

More hostile critics deride the modern university campus as fostering intolerance and hypersensitivity, and indoctrinating students with stifling norms of "political correctness" that encourage them to believe they are entitled to special protections from the challenges of open debate in a democratic society. The current conflict over political correctness reflects broader concerns that efforts to root out prejudice and discrimination have been accompanied by growing intolerance of disagreeable ideas and opinions more generally. In the 2016 presidential election and in his first term in office, Donald Trump has attempted to capitalize on the conservative backlash to these developments by repeatedly claiming excessive political correctness as a dangerous impediment to national security and prosperity.[3]

For all the attention these controversies have received in the mass media, we know little about their broader resonance and implications for attitudes toward free speech in the general public. Intense

elite debates often fail to penetrate the consciousness of a politically inattentive citizenry. In Stouffer's (1955) classic study of the general public's willingness to tolerate communists, conducted in the midst of the 1950s Army-McCarthy hearings, fewer than 1 percent of respondents in his national survey spontaneously mentioned domestic communism as one of the most important issues facing the country at that time.

There is good reason, however, to believe that the contested speech norms at work in the current controversies have diffused far beyond the ivory tower, even if few Americans are attuned to the campus conflicts. Those who attended college after the mid-1980s were exposed to the values of multiculturalism and to institutional speech codes that allowed for punishment of those who made remarks offensive to women and minorities (Chong 2006). Corporations and organizations enforce norms of tolerance in the workplace and punish workers who make intolerant or insensitive remarks both on the job and in their private lives. The federal government has also intervened in regulating speech in the workplace, where racially or sexually insensitive speech can be considered a form of harassment that creates a hostile environment for employees (Volokh 1997; de Boer 2017).

Controversies over the notion of political correctness have entered the popular culture and left their imprint on public opinion. Familiarity with the phrase "political correctness" has been widespread since the 1990s, when the term first seeped into public consciousness following media stories, mostly critical in tone, of restrictions to free speech on college campuses. In 1993, 76 percent of Americans reported that they had heard of the phrase. A large majority in 1993 also expressed the judgment that speech norms had changed over time, causing them to be more cautious than in the past out of concern that their opinions might offend other people. More recent polling suggests that most Americans view political correctness as a problem for the country, with over 70 percent saying in 2016 that political correctness makes it hard for people to say what they believe. There is also evidence that disagreements about hate speech and political

correctness have taken on a distinctly partisan and ideological tenor, with Democrats significantly more likely to endorse limitations on offensive speech and Republicans advocating for free and blunt expression of unpopular ideas.

These developments call for a thorough examination of how public opinion toward free speech has changed in response to elite debates about permissible restrictions on speech. Using 40 years of longitudinal data from the General Social Survey (GSS), we test whether public support for censoring racist expression has increased even as tolerance for other forms of unpopular speech continues to rise. If there has been a decline in tolerance for racist speech, we hypothesize that it would be most evident among younger cohorts, college graduates, and self-identified liberals because these groups are most likely to have encountered and accepted the premise that hate speech is unworthy of free speech protections. As a result, higher education and certain liberal values may no longer promote tolerance of racist speech to the degree they have in the past.

FROM CLEAR TO CONTESTED NORM

Past research has defined "clear norms" as values, beliefs, and practices that are backed by strong consensus among political elites in the government, media, the academy, and other central social institutions. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to vote, and other democratic principles are examples of clear norms. Because these norms are transmitted through political socialization and political discourse, participation and engagement in political affairs lead reliably to both greater exposure to the norms and an increased likelihood of accepting them (McClosky and Zaller 1984).

The stature of free speech as a clear norm in American society is highlighted in cross-national surveys that show Americans are more supportive of free speech than are the respondents of any other country. Citizens in other nations are significantly more inclined to identify exclusions to free speech, to favor restrictions on speech tar-

geting racial and ethnic minorities, and to balance the value of equality against the right to free expression.[4]

Of course, public support for free speech has never been absolute. People are guided in their opinions in specific cases not only by their beliefs about the applicable norms, but also by their attitudes toward the groups involved, the context of the speech, the weight they give to other values, and other individual and contextual factors (Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001); that is, political tolerance is shaped by the norm of free speech and by other competing considerations that may reinforce or conflict with the right to free speech. Consequently, abstract support for the right to free speech is almost invariably higher than support for free speech exercised by specific controversial speakers and groups (Prothro and Grigg 1960; McClosky and Brill 1983). In a 2016 Pew national survey, 95 percent of Americans said that people should be able to make statements that criticize the government's policies. However, this proportion dropped to 77 percent for statements that are offensive to one's religion. Only two-thirds of the public tolerated statements that offend minority groups. One-half tolerated sexually explicit statements. And only 44 percent said people can make statements calling for violent protest.

Over time, tolerance for particular types of speech changes with public perceptions of what is dangerous, immoral, or offensive, and, by implication, what is permissible to tolerate without risking the foundations of the political system. The growth in tolerance of communists, socialists, atheists, and other left targets since the 1950s was made possible in part by reduced fears and in some cases growing acceptance of groups that were formerly unpopular. Tolerance for more menacing speech remains low, however. Only 43 percent of Americans in the 2016 GSS said that Muslim clerics should be allowed to "preach hatred of America" in their communities, a figure that is only modestly higher than the percentage of the public that supported the same freedom for communist speech in Stouffer's study more than 60 years ago.

Nevertheless, free speech has been considered a clear norm in American society for two reasons. As with other clear norms pertaining to democratic principles, there is almost universal support for the general principle of free expression (McClosky and Brill 1983). And while there are public divisions over the right to free speech in particular cases, the consensus favoring freedom of expression grows among those segments of the population who are most attuned to elite discourse and who are therefore most aware of the applicability of the norm in a variety of distinct scenarios (McClosky 1964).

In post-WWII America, a number of social changes have occurred that potentially undermine tolerance for racist speech. Social attitudes about race, religion, women, sexual orientation, censorship, sex, and morality have become significantly more liberal. Racism is now universally denounced in official circles, and racial equality is a dominant social norm in American society, even if there is not universal conformity to this standard. An increasingly cosmopolitan American society now values diversity per se as an intrinsic and instrumental good (Schuck 2003).

Crucially, the abstract norm of free expression that upholds political tolerance of unpopular groups is being challenged in debates that question its applicability to racist speech and other forms of "hate speech." Legal scholars have advanced novel arguments about hate speech as libelous speech that violates equal protection under the law and therefore is unprotected by the First Amendment (Delgado 1982; MacKinnon 1993; Matsuda et al. 1993). Such competing considerations have made political tolerance of racist opinions increasingly difficult to uphold, even—or especially—for the kinds of highly educated and politically engaged citizens whose opposition to censorship is least likely to waver regardless of their disagreement with a particular type of speech.

These social changes may mean that free speech, at least as it applies to racism and other forms of group prejudice and derogatory expressions, has become a "contested norm" that no longer enjoys an elite consensus. Contested norms are reflected in elite division on

issues, with such division resulting in competing positions and conflicting elite cues sent to the public regarding the proper position to adopt. The divided opinion between—as well as within—partisan and ideological camps that we see in recent polling on attitudes toward political correctness may signal that the scope of the free speech norm is increasingly contested.

HYPOTHESES

If tolerance for racist speech specifically has become a contested norm, we should discern a widening gap between tolerance for racist speech and tolerance for other kinds of controversial expression that are not considered hate speech. There is prima facie evidence that growing antipathy toward racial prejudice has slowed the rise in tolerance of racism but not of other types of speech. The best barometer of changing levels of tolerance toward unpopular ideas since the early 1970s is the NORC General Social Survey, which has asked the same battery of questions repeatedly to gauge the American public's willingness to tolerate communists, atheists, homosexuals, advocates of military rule ("militarists"), and racists. From 1972 to 2006, tolerance increased steadily overall, with the average rate of gain being 0.5 percent annually, but tolerance of racism resisted this trend and remained level over time (Davis 2008). Since 2006, tolerance of racists has declined slightly while tolerance of the other groups has continued to increase (Smith and Son 2013).

We should also observe that declines in tolerance for racist speech are largest among people who were more exposed and receptive to reinterpretations of the scope of the speech norm. This premise leads us to expect significant decreases in tolerance among three groups. First, younger generations should be less tolerant of racist speech than their predecessors, because age is a proxy for the norms and values to which one has been exposed. Younger cohorts will have been socialized in a more liberal social and political climate that is less tolerant of prejudice and hate speech.

Second, the decline in tolerance of racist speech should be especially pronounced among college graduates compared to those without a college degree. The epicenter of debates over hate speech and political correctness remains the college campus, even though disputes over language, race, and free speech have been injected into partisan politics and are now part of a broader conversation in American society. Education has traditionally been the strongest predictor of political tolerance in general, but possession of a college degree also indicates that one has had greater exposure to rationales for censoring hate speech. If there were now less support in elite circles for the right of racists to express their views, college graduates would be more attuned to these shifting norms (Chong 2006). Therefore, we expect the effect of education on tolerance will have diminished over time, but primarily with respect to tolerance of racist expression and not other types of speech.

Third, we also anticipate that the largest changes in tolerance of racist speech will be manifest among self-identified liberals, whose values place them in sharp conflict with racism, and who therefore will be most predisposed to accept norms against hate speech. Historically, liberals have been more tolerant than conservatives of free speech for groups on the left and right of the political spectrum owing to their greater support for democratic norms. For most of the twentieth century, debates over the civil liberties of unpopular political and social groups pitted the value of liberty and the marketplace of ideas against the specter of sedition, public disorder, and the decay of traditional moral values. What has changed over time is that contemporary debates over hate speech have been reframed to give greater consideration to the harms caused by bigotry and prejudice. Liberals are therefore more cross-pressured today than they were in the past between the values of free speech and equality. For this reason, we expect tolerance of racist speech will have declined more precipitously over time among liberals than among conservatives, even as liberals remain more tolerant of other unpopular types of expression.

Finally, we hypothesize that the applicability of the value of racial equality to tolerance of racist expression has changed over time in accord with the reframing of racist speech as hate speech. Our premise is that changes in the public's tolerance of racist speech have come about specifically because many citizens no longer consider racist speech to constitute free speech but instead regard such expression as an affront to racial equality. Given this reframing of hate speech, we should find that attitudes toward racial equality have become more strongly correlated over time with tolerance for racist speech.

Our expectation that people have come to trade off the values of equality and freedom on political tolerance issues would revise Gross and Kinder's (1998) conclusion, based on data from the 1990 GSS, that attitudes toward equality are only weakly related to tolerance of racist speech. They attributed this finding to the absence of a connection between racist speech and egalitarian norms in contemporary elite discourse. Subsequent studies have indeed demonstrated that communications that prime the value of equality can reduce tolerance for offensive speech such as epithets and slurs (Cowan et al. 2002) and that exposing initially tolerant citizens to arguments against racist speech can cause individuals who value racial equality to change their minds and favor censorship (Peffley et al. 2001). These results suggest that the reframing of hate speech as an issue of equality in the 25 years since the Gross and Kinder study would have caused the relationship between support for racial equality and tolerance of racial speech to have grown increasingly negative over time.

DATA AND MEASURES

To test these expectations, we draw on repeated cross-sections of the General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey of the American public that is the best available index of change over time in public attitudes toward the free speech rights of various controversial political and social groups. Since 1976, the GSS has regularly asked a battery of questions about the free expression rights for "admitted

homosexuals," atheists who are "against churches and religions," communists, militarists who advocate suspending elections and letting the army rule, and racists who profess that blacks are "genetically inferior." Respondents are asked whether a book whose author advocates each of these positions should be removed from a public library, whether a college professor holding these views should be allowed to teach, and whether someone holding these views should be allowed to give a speech in their communities.[5]

Following earlier research using these items (e.g., Davis 2008; Gross and Kinder 1998), we create indexes of tolerance for each type of speech by averaging responses to these three questions, coding and rescaling all items so that higher values on the scale indicate greater tolerance. The scale tops out at 1.0 for respondents who would allow circulation of the book, retain the college professor, and permit the public speech; and has a minimum of 0.0 for those who choose the intolerant response for all three items. Descriptive statistics for all 15 items as well as bivariate correlations between them, pooling across all years of available data, are provided in the online appendix.[5]

Pooling across all years of available data, tolerance is highest for homosexuals (0.73), followed by atheists (0.66) and communists (0.63), with the two right-wing targets trailing at 0.59 for militarists and 0.57 for racists. For each type of speech, there is more support for firing the teacher than for removing the book or prohibiting the public address. Inter-item correlations range from 0.25 to 0.66 and are highest for items pertaining to the same type of speech and the same mode of expression. Thus there is evidence that these items are all engaging a common underlying tolerance dimension or predisposition, and that individuals are not responding solely on the basis of whether they are sympathetic to the particular content of the speech (cf. Davis 2008; Sniderman et al. 1989).

In addition to standard demographic variables included in the GSS, as well as seven-point partisan and liberal-conservative ideological identification scales, we make use of two sets of attitudinal

indexes to measure support for racial equality and general liberalism. These indexes are available in most but not all years in which the tolerance items were asked. The measure of racial equality is the mean of four items asking respondents whether they believed the source of racial inequality could be attributed to each of four factors: innate biological differences in ability between blacks and whites; differences in motivation or willpower; educational differences; and discrimination. Egalitarian or liberal responses pointed to educational opportunities and discrimination as causes of inequality and rejected innate differences and motivational differences as possible explanations. The mean of this scale in the pooled sample is 0.56 and has been stable through most of the period of analysis.[6]

The general liberalism scale was constructed to resemble Davis (2008) as closely as possible, but with two modifications: the items pertaining to race were removed, and items were eliminated if they were unavailable for many of the years analyzed.[7] Items included in our modified general liberalism scale are as follows: regularity of church attendance; belief about whether the Bible is truth or fiction; religious fundamentalism; strength of religious affiliation; whether the government should take steps to equalize wealth; support for national spending on cities, health care, education, the environment, and the military; attitudes about the morality of homosexuality, premarital sex, and sex outside of marriage; and confidence in the army as an institution. All items were rescaled to run from zero to one, with higher values reflecting stronger liberalism. Less religiosity, skepticism toward both the military and increased military spending, support for national expenditures other than the military, and nontraditional sexual mores were coded as more liberal. The scale has a mean of 0.54 in the pooled sample and is never higher than 0.57 or lower than 0.51 for any given year (since 1986, prior to which the scale is not available), with no apparent trend.

Figure 1. Aggregate Trends in Tolerance
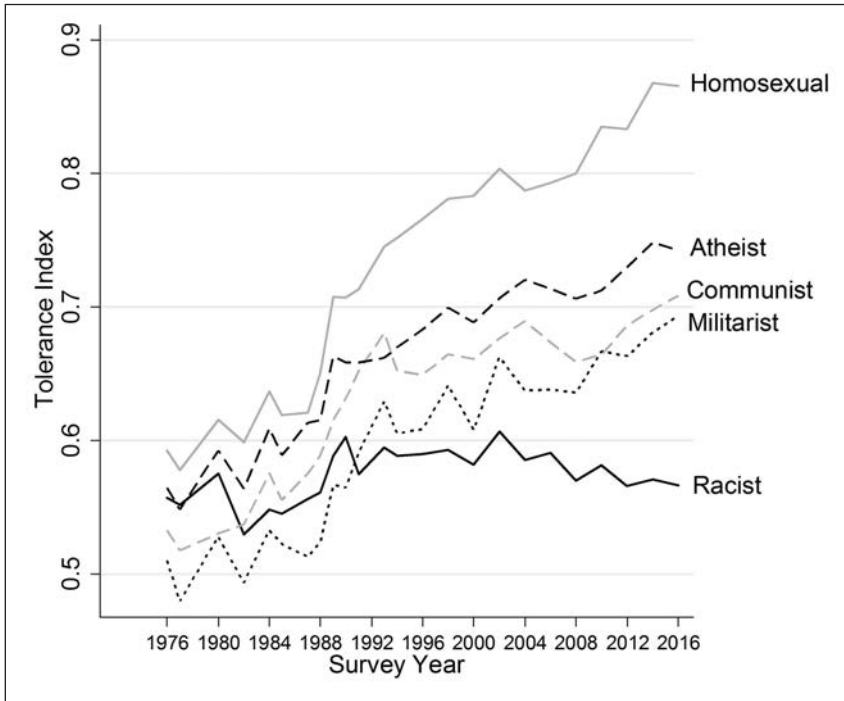
FINDINGS

Have Americans been persuaded that general free speech rights do not extend to hate speech? Figure 1 suggests a growing tendency for people to differentiate between racist speech and other types of content. It plots the average level of political tolerance for each of the five groups regularly asked in the GSS. There have been massive gains in tolerance for atheists, communists, homosexuals, and even militarists since the mid-1970s. These gains are ongoing even though the pace of increase slowed after a sharp uptick in the late 1980s. Some of these gains reflect changes in public attitudes toward the particular groups that the GSS has asked about—especially homosexuals, but also communists and atheists, who are still widely disliked although no longer feared as they were during the Cold War. But gains in toler-

ance for militarists point to a rise in generalized tolerance fostered by rising levels of education and the continuing embrace of liberal values that counteract the public's inclination to censor ideas that remain extremely unpopular (Davis 2008).

Tolerance for racist speech, by contrast, has been stagnant over this period and declined slightly over the past decade (cf. Smith and Son 2013). The result is a widening gap between tolerance for racist speech and other forms of speech. As of 2016, tolerance for racist speech was 10 points lower than tolerance for militarists. By comparison, as recently as 1988, tolerance for these two types of speech had been roughly equivalent. Whatever broad liberalizing social forces have promoted rises in the public's generalized tolerance appear to be encountering a particularly strong challenge when it comes to racist expression. New prohibitions against hate speech seem to be putting downward pressure on a rising tide of tolerance, offsetting rather than overwhelming the broader liberalizing forces of education and changing attitudes that continue to promote tolerance.

Age

If the divergence between trends in general tolerance and tolerance for racist speech reflects the diffusion of anti-hate-speech norms, the adoption of such norms should be greatest among segments of the population that have received the greatest exposure to them and that are most inclined to accept them. Therefore, we hypothesize that the absolute magnitude of declining support for racist expression should be larger among younger cohorts who have been socialized in a more racially liberal period than were their predecessors.

Prior research (e.g., Davis 2008) has found that cohort replacement explains much of the aggregate change in tolerance over time. Our analysis affirms the significant role played by the changing composition of the population, as each new generation comes of age and older individuals die off. An ordinary least squares regression of the tolerance for racists index on GSS survey year and respondents' birth year for individuals born since 1948 yields an insignificant coefficient

Figure 2. Trends in Tolerance across Cohorts
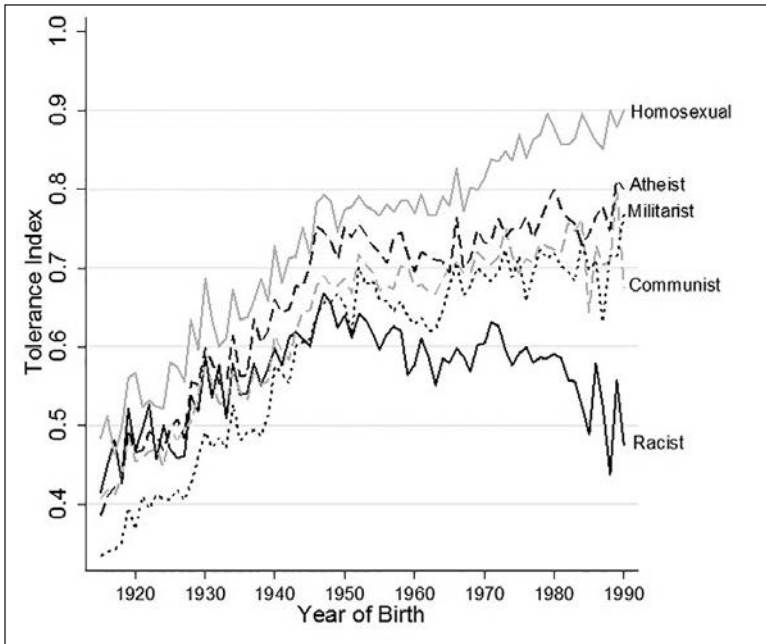
of 0.000 (p = 0.74) for survey year and a significant coefficient of -0.002 (p < 0.001) for birth year. Starting with the baby boomers, each annual cohort therefore is approximately 0.2 of a point *less* tolerant toward racists than its predecessor, but within-cohort change over time is minimal. By contrast, the cohort effects are positive for every other type of speech, meaning that each cohort is *more* tolerant than the last.

Figure 2 illustrates how these trends have separated attitudes toward racist speech from tolerance of other controversial ideas. There were sharp rises in tolerance for all five types of speech until roughly the start of the baby boom. Thereafter, tolerance continued to increase sharply for homosexuals and at a slower pace for atheists, militarists, and communists. This is consistent with Davis' (2008) expectation that gains in tolerance would slow as rises in general liberalism decelerated during the early baby boom, but nonetheless continue upward as access to higher education reached a far great-

Figure 3. Trends in Tolerance by Education
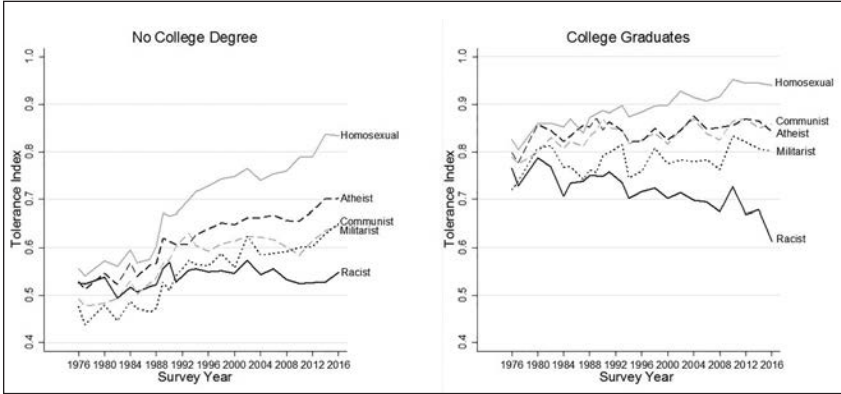
er share of the population. But tolerance for racist speech declined sharply from its peak in the late-1940s cohorts and is approaching lower absolute levels unseen in several generations.

Education

Figure 3 provides clear support for our expectation that college graduates are drawing an increasingly sharp distinction between racist ideas and other forms of controversial expression. Among those without a college degree, tolerance for racist speech has been flat, while it has risen rapidly for the other types of speech. By comparison, college graduates have been far more tolerant across the board since the start of the time series. But while their support for free speech for groups other than racists continues to *rise* appreciably, tolerance for racist speech has *declined* substantially. College graduates are now about 15 points less tolerant of racist speech than they were in 1980.

The net result of these changes is that a college education no longer significantly promotes tolerance for racist speech. By 2016, holding a college degree boosted tolerance for racist speech by a small and statistically insignificant five points, less than a quarter of the effect of college in 1980. In contrast, as of 2016, a college education continued to be strongly and significantly associated with toler-

**Figure 4.** Trends in Tolerance by Ideological Self-identification
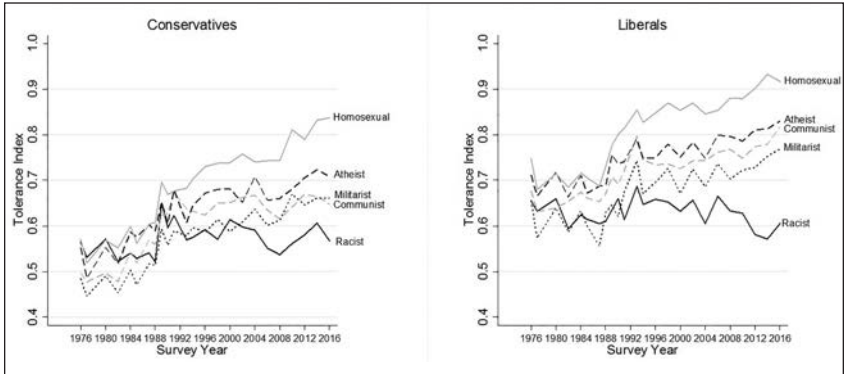
ance of all the other types of speech queried in the GSS. It elevated
tolerance for communists by 20 points, militarists and atheists by 15,
and homosexuals by 11 points. Although a college education has long
been one of the most reliable predictors of support for civil liberties,
its influence now varies markedly with the content of the controver-
sial speech at issue.

Political Ideology
There is also strong evidence for ideological differences in receptiv-
ity to anti-hate speech messages. As shown in figure 4, self-identi-
fied conservatives show small rises in tolerance of racist speech of
about five points over the period—considerably smaller than their
increased tolerance toward the other types of speech. In contrast,
liberals' tolerance for racist speech has declined in absolute terms
by about five points. Comparing the panels of figure 4, one sees that
whereas liberals remain considerably more tolerant than conserva-
tives of communists, atheists, homosexuals, and militarists, liberals
and conservatives are for the first time approximately equal in their
tolerance of racists.

These trends underscore the degree to which the diffusion of
norms against hate speech has altered the longstanding relationship
between ideology and political tolerance. Throughout the history of

Figure 5. Trends in Tolerance by Ideological Self-identification and Education
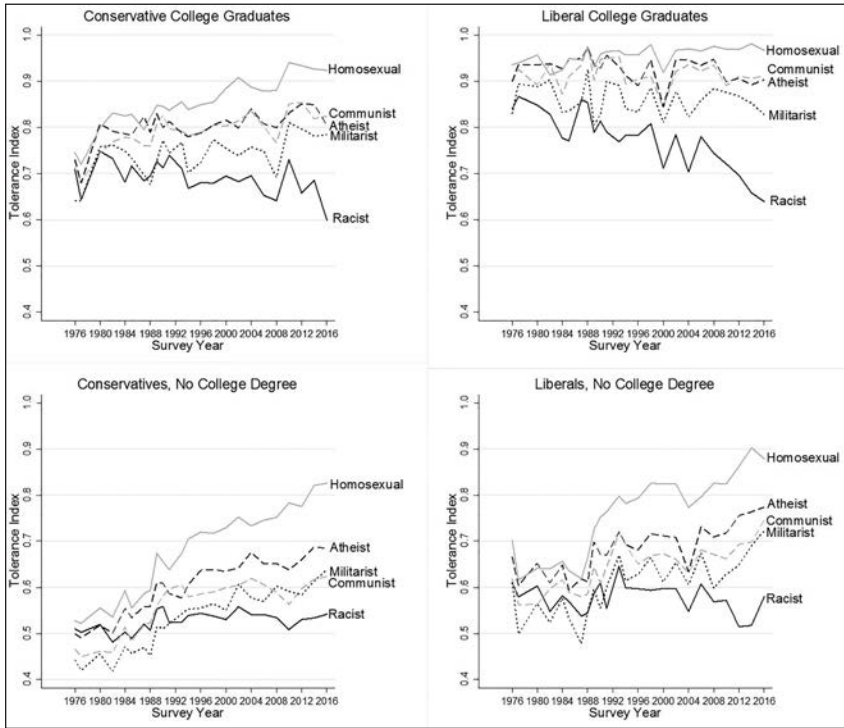
the GSS, liberals have typically been considerably more tolerant than conservatives regardless of the content of the speech. This difference remains, but in the realm of racist speech, where censorship is justified by an appeal to egalitarian values, the gap separating liberals from conservatives has narrowed dramatically.

Figure 5 shows that the combined effects of education and ideology have produced a dramatic decline in tolerance of racism among well-educated liberals, reflecting the degree to which this group has turned against the expression of hate speech. Since the mid-1970s, tolerance for racist speech increased about 0.05 on the 0 to 1.0 tolerance index among conservatives without a college degree, with most of the increase occurring prior to 1990. Among liberals without a college degree, the trend line has also been predominantly flat,

with index scores fluctuating mainly between 0.55 and 0.60. College-educated conservatives and liberals are more tolerant of racism than their non-college-educated counterparts. For most of the time series, college-educated conservatives bump around the 0.70 index score, sometimes above this baseline and sometimes below. In 2016, the tolerance level for this group dips to 0.60, but we will have to wait to see if this decline is an aberration or will be sustained. What is not in doubt in figure 5 is the steep, long-term decline in tolerance of racism among college-educated liberals. Until the late 1980s, tolerance index scores for racist speech among college-educated liberals hovered around 0.80–0.85, but since then the tolerance level in this group has plummeted more than 20 points to 0.64. To place both the magnitude and direction of this attitude change in perspective, tolerance of every other controversial group regularly tested in the GSS since the 1970s has increased among both liberals and conservatives, regardless of educational level. These trends confirm that college-educated liberals—a group that has ordinarily been stalwart in support of free speech—have been highly receptive to intellectual challenges to the legitimacy of hate speech as a form of free speech.

Racial Equality and Tolerance of Racist Speech
Our final test examines whether attitudes toward racial equality are exerting increasing downward pressure on tolerance of racist speech. Our expectation is that younger generations are more likely to believe that racist speech conflicts with racial equality and therefore will give more weight to their racial attitudes in judging whether racists are entitled to free speech. This would be consistent with our premise that the debate over hate speech has heightened tension between the values of freedom and equality. We noted earlier that this hypothesis updates earlier research that found little evidence that liberal racial attitudes undercut tolerance of racist expression (Gross and Kinder 1998).

To examine the changing influence of attitudes toward racial equality, we regressed the tolerance for racist expression index in each five-year moving cohort window from the period ending 1930

Figure 6. Relationship between Support for Racial Equality and Tolerance for Racist Speech
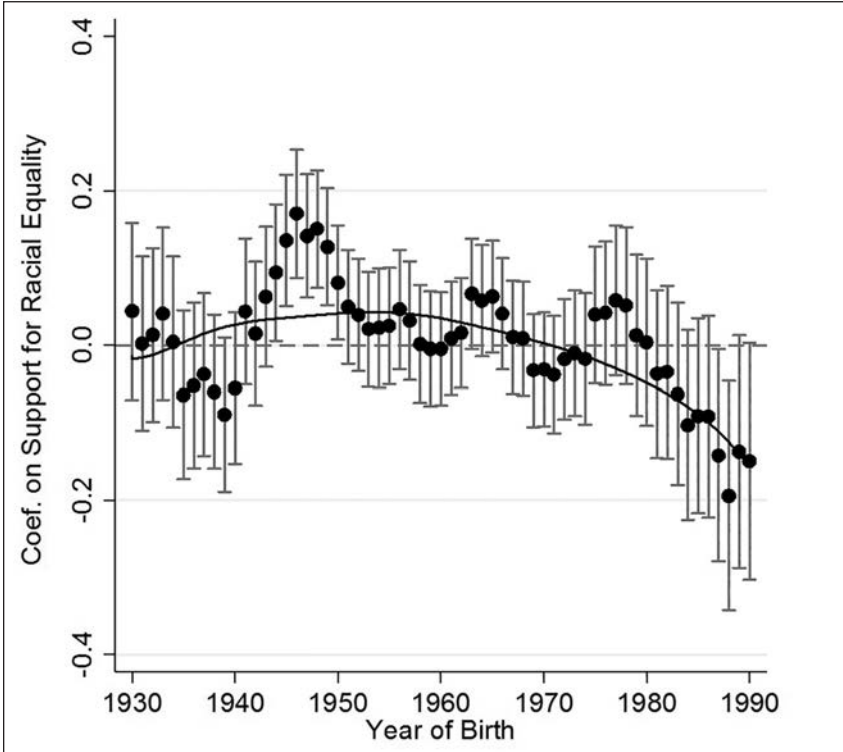
to the period ending 1990 (i.e., for those born 1925–1930, 1926–1931, and so on until those born 1985–1990) on our measures of racial equality, general liberalism, education (a dummy variable identifying those with a college degree), and controls for survey year, race (black, white, and other, as additional categories were not available prior to 2000), sex, region, liberal-conservative self-identification, and party identification. Both figures 6 & 7 display regression coefficients drawn from these models across the cohorts in the pooled GSS sample. Results are similar when we confine the analysis to GSS years since 2000 (available from the authors).

The patterns in figure 6 clearly support our prediction. Beginning with cohorts born around 1960, we observe that the degree to

Figure 7. Relationship between General Liberalism and Tolerance for Racist Speech
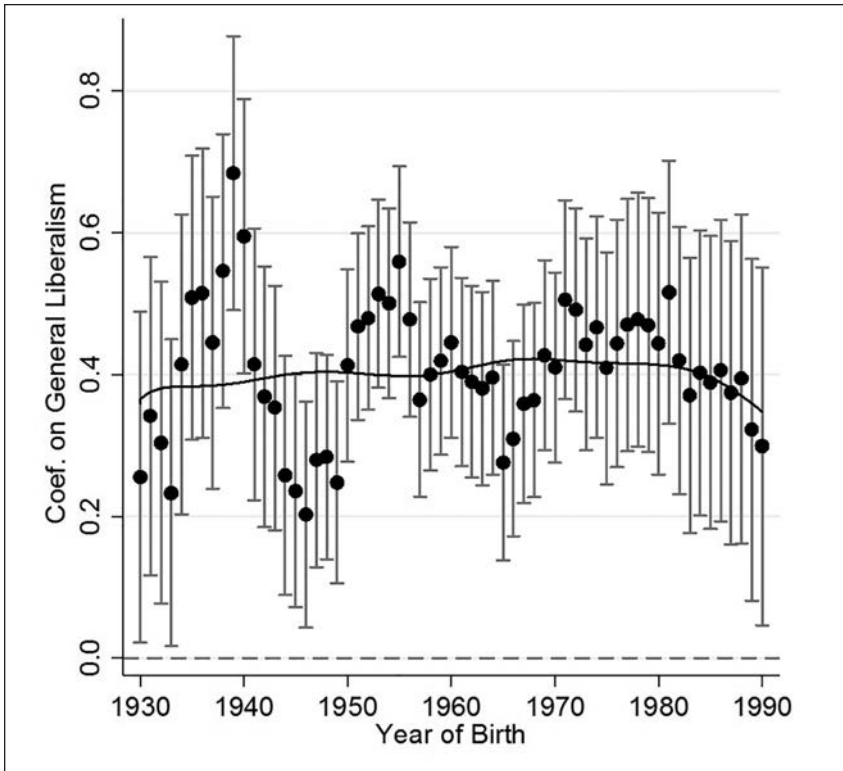
which attitudes toward racial equality diminish tolerance for racist speech has grown significantly over time. Over and above the effect of general liberalism (which, recall, excluded race-related items that earlier research included in the liberalism index), strong racial egalitarians born before this period were generally no less and sometimes more tolerant of racist speech than were those who held more conservative attitudes about racial equality. But in recent cohorts, those who score highest on the racial equality index are 15 to 20 points less tolerant of racist speech than those who score lowest, all else equal.

   In contrast to these sharp patterns, figure 7 reveals that the relationship between general liberalism, *over and above support for ra-*

cial equality, and tolerance for racist speech has remained consistent over time. Liberal values that do not pertain directly to race or racial equality continue to promote tolerance for free speech in general, including for racist speech, and the effects are still enormous, with the most liberal Americans roughly 40 points higher in tolerance for racist speech than the most conservative, even in very recent cohorts. This finding needs to be distinguished from our earlier finding of convergence between self-identified liberals and conservatives in their tolerance of racists. Because those who self-identify as liberals also tend to be strong supporters of racial equality, the ideological gap in tolerance for racist speech, based on self-identification, has shrunk considerably, as documented above.

However, liberals also tend to hold other values regarding individual freedom, openness toward social change, and resistance to religious orthodoxy that have long been associated with support for the right to free expression and other civil liberties (McClosky and Brill 1983). The influence of these values in fostering tolerance has not been diminished by arguments against hate speech that appeal to the value of racial equality. This may explain why we observe little change in the influence of these components of liberalism, measured by the general liberalism index, on tolerance for racist speech. Their impact, over and above attitudes toward racial equality, has remained steadfast over time. By disaggregating the mix of values that prior research (e.g., Davis 2008) has conceptualized as "generalized liberalism," we see that values related to support for racial equality have an increasingly negative effect on tolerance for racist speech while other components of liberalism continue to promote tolerance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Massive gains in educational attainment and the diffusion of liberal values in American society have promoted large-scale increases in the public's support for the free speech rights of groups outside the mainstream. Increasingly, however, arguments that justify censoring hate speech have provided a counterpoint to these trends. Accordingly,

tolerance for racist speech has stagnated in the American public as a whole even as tolerance for other unpopular speech continues to rise. In groups that have received greater exposure to arguments against hate speech, and that are more receptive to them—younger cohorts, the college educated, and ideological liberals—tolerance for racist speech has declined markedly in absolute terms. But even among conservatives and those without a college degree, we observe little growth in tolerance for racist speech, while support for allowing other types of unpopular speech has risen sharply.

We were able to identify what we theorized to be the source of these changes by examining the changing relationship between support for racial equality and tolerance for racist speech. Consistent with our expectation that attitudes toward racial equality would predispose people to accept arguments against tolerating hate speech, we found that in younger cohorts that received greater exposure to such arguments, support for racial equality sharply curtails tolerance for racist speech, whereas in older cohorts support for racial equality is *positively* correlated with tolerance of racist speech.

The current resurgence of debate over political correctness reflects concerns that efforts to eliminate prejudice and discrimination have resulted in mounting intolerance of ideas that are antithetical to liberal norms. The irony is that liberals, historically the strongest defenders of free speech and civil liberties for unpopular groups, are now suspected of being as intolerant as conservatives of ideas they disagree with.

Our results provide further insight into the evolving relationship between ideology and political tolerance. It has been over 60 years since Samuel Stouffer conducted the classic study of tolerance of nonconformity in the United States by exploring the willingness of Americans to extend fundamental democratic rights to communists, atheists, and socialists when the country seemed to face the threat of domestic and international communism. Subsequent studies, including the GSS analyzed here, continued to examine tolerance of communists but expanded the set of unpopular political and social groups

to be more representative of the ideological spectrum, not only to accommodate changes in American society that brought new controversial groups to the fore, but also to provide ideological balance to measures of political tolerance.

In political science, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) were the first to note that survey items centered on communism and atheism might pose an easier test of tolerance for liberals, and hypothesized that inclusion of items about right-wing extremists could reduce the gap in tolerance levels between liberals and conservatives. Their research confirmed that, if asked to identify the group they dislike most, liberals indeed tend to choose extreme-right groups while conservatives are more likely to identify far-left groups such as communists. However, despite their greater antipathy toward extreme-right targets, liberals still proved to be more tolerant than conservatives of right-wing groups. Liberals' greater support for democratic norms moderated their particular antipathies.

More recent studies by social psychologists (Brandt, Reyna, and Chambers 2014), inspired perhaps by the ideological polarization in campus speech controversies, have renewed the claim that liberals and conservatives are equally prone to discriminating against groups they oppose. The only difference between ideological camps, in this view, is that conservatives train their ire on groups that violate conservative norms, such as atheists, feminists, and left-wing political groups, while liberals disdain right-wing groups that oppose liberal values, such as prolife activists, religious fundamentalists, and Tea Party activists. Although the emphasis in this series of studies is on the discriminatory tendencies of both liberals and conservatives, the data continue to show that liberals hold different abstract values than conservatives—e.g., universalism compared to traditionalism—that tend to make liberals more tolerant than conservatives of groups they disagree with.

Based on his analysis of GSS data from 1972 to 2006, Davis doubts the assertion that intolerance is particularistic to the groups that one finds objectionable. He concludes instead that the same

people are more tolerant across the entire spectrum of groups. Responses to all 15 tolerance items (5 groups x 3 acts) are highly correlated, suggesting that tolerance is a general disposition applicable across a range of groups, rather than a specific attitude that varies by group. To make this point, Davis emphasized that individuals who hold racially liberal views are *more likely* to be tolerant of racists than are racially conservative individuals, which contradicts the argument that people who *agree* with a perspective are as a rule more likely to tolerate its expression.

Our analysis here confirms that a general predisposition toward tolerance continues to make liberals more tolerant than conservatives of controversial speech on both the left and the right. But it also shows how rapidly these alignments can change when people's attitudes toward tolerance become more sensitive to their attitudes toward the content of the speech they are judging. The widening disparity between levels of tolerance toward racists and tolerance levels for other groups suggests that attitudes toward the specific ideas being expressed have become a far more significant factor in promoting censorship. As a result, the gap between liberals' and conservatives' tolerance of racists has been all but erased in recent years.

Tolerance toward racists in particular has stalled or declined because of changing attitudes toward equality and prejudice that coincide with the reframing of racist expression as hate speech. This reframing emphasizes competing considerations that support intolerant responses to whether a person who holds racially prejudiced beliefs should be allowed to express those beliefs in a speech or through circulation of a book, or to be employed as a professor at a university. The most recent cohorts of respondents exhibit a strong negative relationship between their support for racial equality and their tolerance of racist speech, in contrast to the positive relationship uncovered by Davis in his analysis of the GSS up to 2006. No similar reweighting of competing values and considerations was manifest on the other tolerance items involving communists, atheists, homosexuals, and militarists, which suggests again that only the terms for evaluating

racist speech have been altered by discussions of free speech and hate speech, and that younger cohorts are more likely than others to have adopted this reframing of the issue.

Our focus on the distinctiveness of racist speech should not obscure the potentially far-reaching consequences of changing norms of political tolerance. In our analysis, racist speech is a proxy for a possibly broad category of content that can be placed under the general heading of "hate speech." Future research should explore whether other types of offensive speech directed at or concerning women, homosexuals, and religious minorities evoke intolerant reactions comparable to the intolerance shown toward racist speech. If there has also been a similar attenuation in the effects of education and ideology on tolerance of these other types of offensive speech, it would be strong evidence for the diffusion of a norm prohibiting hate speech generally, rather than a taboo on racist speech in particular.

A disquieting possibility is that increasing support for censoring epithets, insults, and other hate speech has bolstered support for censoring unpopular intellectual and political viewpoints generally, thereby circumscribing public debate about controversial political issues such as race relations, criminal justice, immigration, and affirmative action that divide the public and political elites. The boundaries in general discourse between acceptable and unacceptable speech have become less clear to the public, as evidenced by opinion polls cited earlier in which people say they are more careful about what they say today out of concern they may offend others. Recent GSS surveys of racial attitudes "reveal evidence of a heightened disengagement with racial topics: whites in greater numbers opt not to give a specific answer to some racial questions, instead saying they have 'no interest' in the issue" (Krysan and Moberg 2016, 2). The high rate of nonresponse suggests that many respondents are apprehensive about expressing a view on racial issues in today's sensitive political climate. To put this in perspective, consider that the prevalence of noncommittal answers in current surveys contrasts sharply with the willingness of respondents to express their attitudes on racial matters in

national surveys conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, as reflected in the small percentage of nonresponses (Hyman and Sheatsley 1956, 1964).[8]

The perceived expansion of the types of speech now considered to be taboo has produced a backlash against so-called political correctness, with conservatives now championing free speech at least rhetorically, and occasionally exhibiting greater tolerance than liberals toward various types of controversial speech. As conservatives have felt their zone of expression contracting, especially in the sensitive areas of race and gender, they have embraced more strongly the principle of free speech to defend their right to take unpopular positions. At the same time, their championing of the norm of free speech has had the added instrumental benefit of placing liberals on the defensive. The strategy has been effective, especially in the context of recent conflicts on university campuses, where administration officials have been skewered for cancelling invitations to conservative speakers.

It is possible that the instrumental value of supporting free speech is motivating a partisan and ideological realignment on tolerance issues. Republicans are already far more likely to say that political correctness is a greater concern than prejudice, while Democrats are more likely to feel that attention to prejudice is being obscured by accusations of political correctness. A 2017 Economist/YouGov national poll reveals that Republicans and conservatives are somewhat more likely than Democrats and liberals to say that colleges should *not* be able to restrict the expression of political views that are upsetting and offensive to certain groups.[9] There are even larger partisan and ideological differences in attitudes toward the use of slurs and offensive language on campus, with Democrats and liberals being significantly more willing than Republicans and conservatives to curb offensive language and actions. What these data capture overall is that the norms regarding speech are changing faster than are attitudes about race and gender in some segments of the population. Liberals and Democrats are more comfortable with the direction in which the

norms of speech have changed, while conservatives and Republicans feel the changes in the rules of expression have been excessive.

If the particulars of future changes in public support for free speech are necessarily speculative, continuing change of some kind is more certain. Prior research optimistically reported rising levels of political tolerance in the American public toward types of speech that had struck majorities of Americans as impermissible only a generation earlier. The results presented here illustrate there is nothing inevitable or irreversible about these trends. Nor does it take an existential threat to the nation's security, such as fear of communism in the 1950s, to usher in sharp reversals in political tolerance. Change can be effected through conventional political channels that influence our understanding of the scope and meaning of free speech. Opinion leaders are capable of reframing debates about tolerance in ways that incline large segments of the public to become less tolerant of certain types of speech. The expansion and amplification of the norm of equality will continue to pose a challenge to Americans' traditionally strong embrace of free expression.

NOTES

1. A 2016 Gallup Poll of college students indicates considerable differentiation between tolerance for "political views that are upsetting or offensive to certain groups" and the language of racial provocateurs; 72 percent said colleges should not restrict the former while 69 percent said that they *should* be able to restrict the use of "slurs and other language on campus that is intentionally offensive to certain groups," and 63 percent believed universities should be able to restrict "wearing costumes that stereotype certain racial and ethnic groups." The report is available at https://www.knightfoundation.org/media/uploads/publication_pdfs/FreeSpeech_campus.pdf.
2. See https://www.thefire.org/first-amendment-library/special-collections/fire-guides/fires-guide-to-free-speech-on-campus-3/fires-guide-to-free-speech-on-campus-full-text-2/.

3. See, e.g., https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/ wp/2017/05/16/trump-ran-against-political-correctness-now-his-team- is-begging-for-politeness/?utm_term=.63d548fd4850 and http://www. businessinsider.com/ap-the-latest-trump-says-no-time-for-political- correctness-2015-8.

4. See, e.g., http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/12/amer icans-more-tolerant-of-offensive-speech-than-others-in-the-world/ ft_16-10-15_freedom-of-expression/.

5. The appendix can be accessed at https://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/posc/ faculty_display.cfm?Person_ID=1057914.

6. The exceptions are the first year of availability, 1977, in which the mean was 0.51, and 2016, in which the mean jumped from 0.56 in 2012 to 0.61. For all other years, the mean of this scale has been between 0.54 and 0.58.

7. Davis included two of the items from the racial liberalism scale—the will and discrimination questions—as well as questions about inter- marriage between whites and blacks and whether blacks should not "push" where they are not wanted. These items were unavailable after 2002 and thus unsuitable for our analysis anyway. We also had to discard an item gauging opposition to communism, which has not been asked since 1994.

8. In their 1956 report, Hyman and Sheatsley (1956, 37) observed that respondents "were not at all reluctant to talk about the subject [of racial segregation] to interviewers, and they consistently showed a livelier interest in this topic than in almost any other public question."

9. https://today.yougov.com/news/2017/10/02/americans-support-free- speech-college-campusmost-t/

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