

Study examines how uncertainty can affect political tolerance

June 18 2013, by Steve Smith

(Phys.org) —It's a safe bet that in the course of perusing the news on a daily basis, you are confronted with political messages that differ from your own beliefs. But how open are you to those viewpoints? Are you in a frame of mind that allows you to at least consider their validity, or do they just reflexively bounce off your partisan hide?

Ultimately, your level of political tolerance may depend upon how safe, uncertain or threatened you may feel when considering those opposing views, new research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln suggests.

A study authored by Ingrid Haas, assistant professor of [political science](#), examined the situational effects of emotion on political tolerance. It found that though someone may be in a state of [uncertainty](#)—a condition that would typically lead to less tolerance—they show more political open-mindedness if they also perceive themselves to be out of harm's way.

But when people sense a threat on top of that uncertainty, the opposite reaction occurs: Subjects in the study tended to close ranks and become rigidly intolerant to other [political views](#).

"Past research has sometimes assumed that uncertainty and threat are similar, but our work shows that responses to uncertainty can vary as a function of the surrounding context," said Haas, the lead author of the study. "Uncertainty is likely to lead to closed-mindedness when it's paired with threat or perceived as threatening, but may be more likely to

lead to open-mindedness when threat is absent."

In a series of experiments, researchers analyzed the effects on political open-mindedness by asking participants to consider several scenarios designed to elicit uncertainty or threat. They then asked participants a number of questions to determine levels of political tolerance and ideologies.

They found that in this context, threat and uncertainty were distinct and separate experiences that interacted with one another: Usually, participants' tolerance to other viewpoints decreased when they felt uncertain and threatened, but when [threat](#) was absent, their lack of certainty actually increased tolerance of opposing viewpoints and the desire to gather new information.

It didn't matter whether the participants were liberal or conservative, researchers found; [participants'](#) political ideologies had little to no effect on their performances in the new study.

The results lead researchers to believe that while the anxiety caused by uncertainty can in many cases cause people to close their minds to opposing ideas, in some circumstances that uncertainty can ultimately point the way toward better understanding.

And, they said, the results highlight the importance of the surrounding context when considering how uncertainty affects political discourse.

"An increase in closed-mindedness, intolerance or other negative outcomes is not obligatory," the researchers wrote. "Uncertainty may be useful for the political process when it results in increased deliberation and willingness to compromise; however, our work suggests that this may only happen when people are not also feeling threatened."

The findings may also reveal routes to political tolerance even when uncertainty is taken from the equation, the authors suggest.

"In situations where intolerance results from certainty, creating some doubt in the person's mind might reduce intolerance," they wrote.

"Doubt should increase open-mindedness, making people more open to opposing opinions and less likely to minimize the opinions of others."

The study was published online June 12 in the journal *Political Psychology*. In addition to UNL's Haas, it was co-authored by William A. Cunningham of the University of Toronto.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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