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Political tolerance and the golden rule: Reciprocity increases acceptance of normative protest actions of disliked groups

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Abstract

The golden rule is a widespread moral guide for preventing conflict across cultures and religions, and reciprocity is foundational to political tolerance. This raises the question of whether the golden rule has an impact on one's willingness to tolerate political protest actions of disliked ideological groups. In the current research, we examined whether making salient golden rule reciprocity impacts on political tolerance of one's least-liked groups. Data from two experiments ($N = 950$) revealed that participants who watched a 3-min video highlighting the golden rule showed significantly more tolerance of normative protest actions of their least-liked group relative to watching a control video. By contrast, the golden rule video had no significant impact on tolerance of non-normative protest actions of one's least-liked group. Additionally, the golden rule video had no impact on one's attitudes or willingness to engage in contact with the least-liked group indicating that increased political tolerance of normative protest actions was not due to changing attitudes towards the least-liked group. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that reminders of the principle of reciprocity and the golden rule can increase political tolerance with benefits for liberal democracy. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

Across nearly all cultures and religions, there is some form of the 'golden rule'—that you should treat others as you yourself like to be treated (Wattles, 1996). It is something children are told from an early age and a central guide for preventing social conflicts and inequalities in society. This well-known moral code influences people's moral reasoning about a range of social and political issues (Fehr & Gintis, 2007) and reminders of the golden rule can reduce prejudice (Vilaythong, Lindner, & Nosek, 2010). A key aspect of the 'golden rule' is the ethic of reciprocity.[1] Human beings have a general tendency to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960), and reciprocity is the basis of human cooperation (Nowak & Sigmund, 2000). Expectations of reciprocity increase outgroup trust and reduce discrimination (Tusicisny, 2017), while reciprocity-based policies bolster welfare support for disadvantaged groups (Findor et al., 2023), and political dissidents utilize the principle of reciprocity in choosing (non)violent means in response to (non)violent repression (Dornschneider-Elkink & Henderson, 2023).

The golden rule with its reciprocity ethic is not only easy to understand and learn, and relevant across settings and cultures, but also a foundational concept of political tolerance in democratic societies: "Tolerance towards a group presupposes that the group accepts the reciprocal rights of others" (Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2011, p. 583). Politically, the norm of reciprocity implies that people feel compelled to accept the civil rights of groups who themselves respect these rights for others but feel justified to reject violent and non-democratic groups and behaviours (Kuklinski, Riggle, Ottati, Schwarz, & Wyer, 1991; Sniderman, Tetlock, Glaser, Green, & Hout, 1989). Norms of reciprocity do not imply that one should like one's ideological adversaries but rather prescribe that normative political actions of these adversaries should be tolerated. While the reciprocity logic implies tolerating equal civil rights and liberties for disliked groups that express completely different political opinions, it does not imply tolerance of all actions. Violations of the rights and liberties of others, for example, with violence and other non-normative protest actions go against the reciprocity logic and therefore are not to be tolerated.

In the current experimental research, we focus on the impact of being reminded of the 'golden rule' on persuading people to become more politically tolerant by comparing the effect of a moral message about the general social importance of golden rule reciprocity with a control condition. Specifically, we tested the proposition that the golden rule will increase tolerance of normative protest actions, but not of non-normative actions of one's least-liked group. We focused on tolerance of normative and non-normative protest actions of disliked ideological groups that are not extremist, undemocratic or transgressive (e.g., Neo-Nazis, Islamic fundamentalists) because these groups are rejected by most people (Lee, 2014; Petersen et al., 2011). Doing so allows us to test whether the golden rule with its behavioural norm of reciprocity does indeed increase tolerance of normative protest actions without affecting people's dislike of their least-liked group. Evidence for the impact of a general reciprocity appeal on tolerance is relatively strong when it applies to normative, but not to non-normative, protest actions, and if it is not driven by a reduced dislike of one's least-liked group (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022; Petersen et al., 2011).

1 | RECIPROCITY AND POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Political tolerance implies an assessment of whether those that one dislikes or with whom one disagrees should be allowed to take actions to advocate their beliefs and interests. This assessment depends, among other things, on the perceived commitment to democratic norms and values of the disliked group. The 'paradox of democracy and tolerance' and the notion of 'militant democracy' (e.g., Accetti & Zuckerman, 2017; Capoccia, 2013; Popper, 1945) relate to the possibility that a democratic order can overthrow itself when it does not restrict the liberties of those who

turn against the behavioural reciprocity principle. Groups that play by the rules of liberal democracy should be tolerated, but those that do not and deny others' basic and equal rights cannot be tolerated. Reciprocity is central to the idea of tolerance because being tolerant towards forces that fail to reciprocate undermines the benefits of civil liberties and equality and therefore cannot be tolerated (Popper, 1945; Walzer, 1997).

Norms of reciprocity can influence people's political judgement and behaviour. For example, in the context of South Africa, it was found that both the black majority and the white minority are politically less tolerant towards groups that are considered unwilling to follow the rules of democracy and are considered dangerous to society (Gibson, 2006a). In the context of the United States, political tolerance is higher for least-liked groups that are expected to be more strongly committed to reciprocity (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022). Furthermore, in research among the Danish population, Petersen et al. (2011) found that people are politically tolerant towards groups that they dislike but are considered to be committed to non-violence and accept the democratic rules and procedures (e.g., Muslims, far-right, far-left). In contrast, Danish people were intolerant towards groups that were considered violent and non-democratic (e.g., Neo-Nazis, Islamic fundamentalists) (see also Sniderman, Petersen, Slothuus, & Stubager, 2014). Additionally, a large-scale survey experiment in Germany demonstrated that extremist political groups with violent intentions are not tolerated, regardless of the ideological position of the group and people's own ideological affinity (Trüdinger & Ziller, 2023). Similarly, in a large-scale study in the context of the United States, people were found to be less politically tolerant towards groups that were perceived to be undemocratic (Gibson, Claassen, & Barceló, 2020), and to have become more tolerant over the last two decades towards controversial groups but not towards Islamic extremists and racists that use hate speech (Bloch, 2020). Thus, people tend to politically tolerate disliked ideological groups, but this is not without boundaries because these groups have to accept the reciprocal democratic rights of others.

2 | THE CURRENT RESEARCH

In examining the importance of the golden rule with its norm of reciprocity for people's political tolerance the current research goes beyond the existing empirical work in three ways. First, most prior research has not captured reciprocity per se but rather took a more inferential approach rooted in group perceptions (e.g., reputation of the ideological group) or measured related constructs such as trust (but see Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022). For example, research has investigated political tolerance across specific ideological target groups that are considered to less or more strongly respect the democratic rights of others. Groups that are more strongly seen as playing by the democratic reciprocity rule are tolerated more, indicating that people take the group's reputation into account. Furthermore, the existing research focuses on inferences of reciprocity that are explicitly tied to political groups and the context of democratic politics. In contrast, we used a general message on the moral importance of the golden rule in everyday life for examining whether this has a positive effect on tolerance of normative, but not non-normative, protest actions. This allows us to establish whether a general golden rule message affects people's political tolerance, which has theoretical and applied implications. Additionally, it reduces the risk of experimental demand characteristics in which a message on the importance of reciprocity for the democratic system leads participants to change their political tolerance response based on what they think the research is about.

Second, prior research on the role of reciprocity for political tolerance is predominantly concerned with immediate political judgements and not with persuasion appeals. However, being reminded of the societal importance of golden rule reciprocity might persuade people to tolerate normative protest actions more. Petersen et al. (2011) found that people can be more easily persuaded by specific counterarguments (e.g., referring to the constitution and to real democracy) to change their view and accord civil liberties to least-liked groups that use normative political means and to deny these liberties to extremist groups. In addition to the work on persuasive appeals of counterarguments for political tolerance (e.g., Adelman, Verkuyten, & Yogeeswaran, 2021; Gibson, 2006b; Nelson & Garst, 2005), we focused on the persuasive impact of a moral message of the golden rule with its key element of reciprocity.

Third, the existing research demonstrates that tolerance varies considerably across target groups, with people being less tolerant towards groups that are perceived as not respecting the civil rights of others or even threatening the democratic order. However, different target groups do not only capture different reciprocity expectations but also, for example, different degrees of dislike, power, and sociotropic threat (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022; Gibson et al., 2020). Another way to investigate the importance of reciprocity for political tolerance is to focus on a range of behaviours of the *same* disliked ideological group. A group can use different strategies for expressing their views and trying to persuade others and tolerance judgements can differ depending on the type of activity groups are engaged in. Research has found that the use of normative protest actions (public demonstration, handing out flyers) and non-violence increases people's willingness to support and join a movement (Orazani et al., 2021). However, the use of non-normative protest actions (e.g., blocking roads, occupying public buildings, hate speech) is generally perceived negatively and as something that should not be tolerated (Bloch, 2020; Chong & Levy, 2018; Doré et al., 2023). These actions tend to be considered unreasonable, threatening, and also immoral (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020; Simpson, Willer, & Feinberg, 2018) due to the emotional harm and infringement on the rights and freedoms of others. Non-normative protest can be considered morally problematic which reduces support among strong group supporters and opponents alike (Feinberg et al., 2020; Verkuyten et al., 2023a), and even when used against a widely reviled group (Simpson et al., 2018). Thus, it can be tested whether making the golden rule with its norm of reciprocity salient has a positive impact on tolerance of normative protest actions, but not on non-normative actions, of the same least-liked group.

We used the well-known least-liked group technique for examining political tolerance by first asking people to indicate which ideological group they like the least and subsequently, whether they are willing to grant people of that group the full rights of citizenship, such as giving public speeches and holding demonstrations (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1979). Although the content-controlled least-liked group technique has its limitations, it allows for the examination of political tolerance of ideological groups that people themselves object to (Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002). Furthermore, it makes it possible to assess whether the expected positive impact of a golden rule message with its behavioural reciprocity appeal on tolerance of normative protest actions is not driven by reduced dislike of the least-liked group. Experimental research has shown that specific interventions can affect support for democratic values and anti-democratic attitudes independently of outgroup dislike (Halperin, Pliskin, Saguy, Liberman, & Gross, 2014; Voelkel et al., 2023). Empirical support for a positive impact of the golden rule on tolerance is stronger when the expressed tolerance does not reflect a more positive evaluation of the least-liked group. It would demonstrate that the behavioural golden rule message has an effect on political tolerance of normative actions independently of group affect and thus does not work through reduced outgroup prejudice, but rather through higher acceptance of equal democratic rights of ideological opponents.

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

A total of 450 participants were recruited from Cloud Research (previously called TurkPrime; Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock, 2017) and completed the study. However, 23 participants were excluded from the analyses after offering nonsensical responses on the open-ended items asking participants to describe what the video they just watched was about. Of the remaining 427 participants, 218 were men, 206 women, and three participants identified as non-binary or another gender. Most participants were White/European ($n = 330$), 38 were Black or African American, 15 were Hispanic or Latino/a, 28 were Asian American or Pacific Islander, 11 were multiracial, one was Native American, one was Middle Eastern, and three indicated 'other'. All participants were 18 years or older ($M = 39.76$;

SD = 11.19). In response to the statement 'I identify as politically conservative', 97 responded with 5 = strongly agree, 62 said 4 = agree, 61 responded with 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 68 responded with 2 = disagree, and 139 responded with 5 = strongly disagree.

3.1.2 | Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to watch a video describing the golden rule, or a control video about candle-making. The golden rule condition involved a 3-min custom animated video that tells viewers about the golden rule and how it has been a central moral guide in everyday life and for preventing social conflicts in most cultures and religions (see Supplementary Materials). Following the video, participants were asked two questions: (a) to think back at a time in their life when they felt someone did not reciprocate something good they had done for them and then describe how they felt during this experience; and (b) what they would tell this person to help them understand the golden rule and reciprocity for creating a tolerant society. These two questions we asked to make the message personally relevant so that participants are more likely to engage with it, which is not self-evident in online studies (e.g., Shamon & Berning, 2020). By contrast, participants in the control condition watched a short two-minute video on candle-making (see Supplementary Materials).[2] Participants in both conditions were finally asked to describe in their own words what the video they watched was about. The randomization was successful because there were no significant differences (p_s > 0.12) between the two experimental groups in gender, age, ethnicity and political orientation.

3.1.3 | Measures

Participants were asked to select from a list of groups their least-liked group. These groups were deliberately chosen to be disliked groups, but not violent groups which are typically seen as intolerable. Based on the work of Gibson et al. (2020) and Orazani and Leidner (2019), participants chose from a list of groups including the following: Atheists, Democrats, Animal rights activists, Republicans, Muslims, Pro-life activists, Women's rights activists, Alt-right activists, LGBTQ+ activists, Christian fundamentalists, Gun control activists, Gun rights activists. Table S1 in the supplementary materials provides the exact percentages for which groups were selected by participants.

Political protest actions
Using a 7-point scale where 1 = Never Tolerate and 7 = Always Tolerate, participants indicated the extent to which they thought that their least-liked group should be allowed to engage in the protest actions in their community as a concrete and relevant context. The normative actions used were organizing a rally, carrying signs expressing their views, giving offensive speeches, organizing a peaceful sit-in, and handing out flyers to the public about their cause, and the non-normative actions used were stopping others from speaking in public, sending repetitive emails to adversaries, blocking roads, occupying buildings, and influencing public opinion by spreading biased news.

Previous research indicates that people make an important moral distinction between tolerance of these two types of protest actions (e.g., Verkuyten et al., 2023a). We conducted an exploratory factor analysis to determine whether the selected actions empirically fell into the hypothesized normative and non-normative subsets among the current sample. The EFA revealed that the items broadly fit onto the hypothesized two-factor model, with two exceptions. The hypothesized normative item of giving offensive speeches, and the hypothesized non-normative item of sending repetitive emails to adversaries emerged on separate factors. To confirm this finding, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis comparing a two-factor model of four items each (excluding the normative item of giving offensive speeches and also excluding the non-normative item of sending repetitive emails to adversaries) to another two-factor, four item each model where we instead excluded a different non-normative item which had a

questionable fit (spreading biased news rather than repetitive emails), to a third model where we included all items, to a one-factor model including all items. The analysis revealed that the model excluding offensive speeches and repetitive emails, χ^2 (17) = 128.184, p < .001; CFI = 0.961; RMSEA = 0.124, 90% CIs [0.104, 0.144]; SRMR = 0.081, was superior to the model excluding offensive speeches and spreading biased news, χ^2 (17) = 200.561, p < .001; CFI = 0.933; RMSEA = 0.159, 90% CIs [0.140, 0.179]; SRMR = 0.144, comparison χ^2 = 72.377, p < .001. The first model was similarly greatly superior to a model including all five items within each factor, χ^2 (32) = 415.244, p < .001; CFI = 0.882; RMSEA = 0.167, 90% CIs [0.153, 0.182]; SRMR = 0.166, and to the all-inclusive single factor model, χ^2 (33) = 870.030, p < .001; CFI = 0.742; RMSEA = 0.244, 90% CIs [0.230, 0.258]; SRMR = 0.215. All models included the same two modifications. Therefore, we conducted the analyses using two four-item indices: the normative index including the normative items except 'giving offensive speeches' and the non-normative index including all items except for 'sending repetitive emails to adversaries'. The items relating to normative protest actions formed a single index showing high internal consistency (α = .95) as did the items relating to non-normative actions (α = .86).

We used two measures for assessing participants' attitudes towards their least-liked groups. First, participants were asked to indicate their general feelings towards the least-liked group using the well-known **feeling thermometer** measure going from 0° to indicate very cold or unfavourable views to 100° indicating very warm or favourable feelings towards the least-liked group (M = 17.68, SD = 21.91). Second, using a **social distance scale** participants indicated the extent to which they were willing to engage in the following actions with members of their least-liked group: (a) allow their child to marry them, (b) befriend them, (c) accept them as a co-worker, (d) have them visit your home, (e) attend an event hosted by this group. Participants rated their willingness using a 7-point Likert scale (where 1 = not at all willing, and 7 = extremely willing) and these items showed high internal consistency (α = .91; M = 3.47, SD = 1.72). These items correlated positively with the feeling thermometer measure, r = .49, p < .001. The mean scores of both scales indicate that on average participants had a negative attitude towards their least-liked group. Study data and materials can be found on the OSF page: https://osf.io/crjnh/?view_only=baad961c5564463fbd7c9cf049236cca.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Political tolerance

A 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA first revealed a significant and substantial main effect of type of political action such that participants were significantly and clearly less likely to tolerate non-normative actions (M = 2.80; SD = 1.82) of their least-liked group relative to normative actions (M = 5.06, SD = 1.96), F(1, 424) = 253.626, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.37. Additionally, there was the expected significant interaction between video condition and type of action, F(1, 424) = 6.919, p = .009, η^2_p = 0.02. Decomposing this interaction revealed a significant effect of the golden rule on normative political actions, F(1, 424) = 8.04, p = .005, η^2_p = 0.02. Specifically, participants who watched the golden rule video (M = 5.35, SD = 1.87) were significantly more likely to tolerate normative protest actions of their least-liked group than participants who watched the control video (M = 4.81; SD = 2.00). By contrast, there were no significant differences in intolerance of non-normative actions regardless of whether participants watched the golden rule video (M = 2.69, SD = 1.80) or control video (M = 2.90, SD = 1.84), F(1, 424) = 1.555, p = .21, η^2_p = 0.004.

3.2.2 | Group attitude

A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants' general feelings towards their least-liked group were similarly negative regardless of whether they watched the golden rule video (M = 18.08, SD = 21.07) or control video (M = 17.34, SD = 22.63), F(1, 424) = 0.121, p = .73, η^2_p < 0.001. Similarly, there was no difference in participant's

willingness to engage in contact with their least-liked group regardless of whether they watched the golden rule video ($M = 3.50$, SD $= 1.83$) or control video ($M = 3.44$, SD $= 1.62$), $F(1, 424) = 0.123$, $p = .73$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$.

3.2.3 | Robustness check

To examine the robustness of the findings, we used the general linear model (GLM) univariate procedure, to test the experimental effect while controlling statistically for age, gender, ethnicity, and political orientation (as covariates). The GLM is a flexible generalization of analysis of variance and regression analysis and yields similar results (Rutherford, 2001). This analysis showed a similar significant interaction effect with the golden rule condition (compared to the control) leading only to higher tolerance of normative political actions, $F(1, 419) = 7.34$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = 0.02$. Additionally, there were no significant interaction effects between any of these variables and the effect of the golden rule manipulation ($p_s > 0.11$). Thus, the positive effect of being reminded of the golden rule on tolerance of normative protest actions of the least-liked group was supported regardless of whether we considered the age, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation of the participants, and was similar for older and younger participants, females and males, different ethnicities, and right-wing and left-wing oriented people.

4 | STUDY 2

Considering the increased emphasis on the importance of replication in social scientific research, Study 2 sought to replicate the finding that the golden rule reminder has a positive effect on political tolerance of normative protest actions and not on non-normative actions or the attitude towards the least-liked group. In doing so, the excluded protest action items from Study 1 were replaced and additional items were added. Furthermore, we included a measure assessing the acceptability of violence *against* the least-liked group. Following the reciprocity logic, this allows us to establish whether harassments, threats and forms of violence against least-liked group members are in general considered morally unacceptable and whether a reminder of the golden rule makes these non-normative actions even more unjustifiable. Finally, the methods and predicted results of Study 2 were pre-registered: https://aspredicted.org/KK1_D3H (Verkuyten et al., 2023d).

4.1 | Participants

Using a professional survey company, Lucid, a national sample of 500 US adults was recruited and completed the study. Sampling was completed to relatively match census-level information about gender, age, and region. However, 10 participants provided nonsensical responses when asked to describe what the video they watched was about and were therefore excluded from analyses. Of the remaining 490 participants, 247 identified as women, 242 identified as men, and one identified as non-binary. Additionally, 83 participants were from the Northeast, 184 were from the South, 101 were from the Midwest, and 122 were from the West. In terms of age, 54 participants were between the ages 18–24 years, 82 were between the ages 25–34 years, 81 were between the ages 35–44 years, 84 were between the ages 45–54 years, 84 were between 55–64 years, and 105 were 65 years or older. A majority of participants were White/European descent ($n = 355$), while 66 were Black or African American, 29 were Hispanic or Latino/a, five were Native American, 16 were Asian American, 15 were multiracial, and four indicated 'other' ethnic backgrounds. Similar to Study 1, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'I identify as politically conservative' where 120 participants indicated '1 (strongly agree)', 65 participants indicated '2 (agree)', 115 participants indicated '3 (neither agree nor disagree)', 51 selected '4 (disagree)', and 149 participants chose '5 (strongly disagree) ' ($M = 3.09$, SD $= 1.54$).

4.2 | Manipulation

Similar to Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to watch either the video about the golden rule or a control video about candle-making. The randomization check showed that there were no significant differences (p_s > 0.18) between the two experimental groups in gender, age, region, ethnicity and political orientation.

4.3 | Measures

4.3.1 | Political protest actions

Similar to Study 1, participants were provided with the same list of groups and asked to choose one they liked the least (see Table S2 in Supplementary Materials for exact selections). After watching the video, participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they would tolerate six normative protest actions taken by this group (organize a rally, carry signs expressing their views, deliver speeches expressing their views, organizing a peaceful sit-in, advertise their cause on social media, and hand out flyers to the public about their cause) and six non-normative protest actions taken by this group (stop others from speaking in public, block roads, occupy buildings, influence public opinion by spreading biased news, disrupt events of adversaries, doxing or disclosing personal information about adversaries on social media).

Following from the findings of Study 1, the political action items were further adapted, with the excluded items from Study 1 replaced and additional items added to the hypothesized normative and non-normative factors. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis for the hypothesized two-factor, six-item each model (with three modifications added based on modification indices), and we found that the hypothesized two-factor model fit the data satisfactorily, χ^2 (50) = 201.057, p < .001; CFI = 0.967; RMSEA = 0.079, 90% CIs [0.067, 0.090]; SRMR = 0.064. This fit was substantially superior to an alternative one-factor model, χ^2 (51) = 1711.706, p < .001; CFI = 0.632; RMSEA = 0.258, 90% CIs [0.247, 0.268]; SRMR = 0.255, comparison χ^2 = 1,510.649, p < .001. Therefore, we retained the six-item normative action index (α = .95) and the six-item non-normative action index (α = .89) for analyses.

4.3.2 | Justification of political violence

Participants completed a measure of four items asking about the acceptability of forms of violence towards their least-liked group using a measure adapted from previous research (Voelkel et al., 2023). Specifically, participants responded on a 100-point slider scale to the following 4-items: (a) when, if ever, is it OK to send threatening and intimidating messages to [least-liked group] leaders?; (b) when, if ever, is it OK for someone in the public to harass [least-liked group] on the internet, in a way that makes the target feel frightened?; (c) how much do you feel it is justified for people to use violence towards [least-liked group]?; and (d) how much do you feel it is justified to use violence if [least-liked group] gain significant political power and influence in society? These items were anchored from 0 to 100 going from 'Not at All Justified' to 'Extremely Justified' or 'Never' to 'Always'. These items showed high internal consistency (α = .95).

Using the same *feeling thermometer* as Study 1, participants indicated their feelings towards the least-liked group they identified before (0 = very cold or unfavourable; 100 = very warm or favourable). Participants also indicated the extent to which they were willing to engage in the same types of contact as Study 1 with members of their least-liked group using a 7-point scale (five items; α = .88). Both measures were positively associated, r = .45, p < .001, and the mean scores of both scales did again indicate that on average participants had negative attitudes towards their least-liked group (M = 32.36, SD = 28.57; M = 3.93, SD = 1.68, respectively). Study data and materials can be found on OSF page: https://osf.io/crjnh/?view_only=baad961c5564463fbd7c9cf049236cca

4.4 | Results

4.4.1 | Political tolerance

A 2×2 mixed ANOVA examining the effects of the video manipulation on tolerance of normative versus non-normative actions by their least-liked group revealed significantly and substantially more tolerance of normative ($M = 4.85$; $SD = 1.76$) than non-normative actions ($M = 2.35$; $SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 488) = 690.466$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.59$. As expected, there was again also a significant interaction between the video manipulation and tolerance of normative versus non-normative actions, $F(1, 488) = 12.645$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$. Decomposing this interaction revealed a significant effect of the golden rule on tolerance of normative protest actions by one's least-liked group, $F(1, 488) = 8.21$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2_p = 0.02$. Specifically, participants who watched the golden rule video ($M = 5.10$; $SD = 1.79$) were significantly more likely to tolerate normative protest actions of their least-liked group relative to those who watched the control video ($M = 4.64$; $SD = 1.70$). By contrast, participants who watched the golden rule video ($M = 2.22$; $SD = 1.39$) were no more likely to tolerate non-normative protest actions of their least-liked group than those who watched the control video ($M = 2.45$; $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 488) = 3.07$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2_p = 0.006$.

On the 100-point slider scale, participants clearly did not find violent actions against their least-liked group justifiable and acceptable, but rather 'not at all' or 'never' justified ($M = 15.58$; $SD = 25.02$). However, there were mean differences in the extent to which participants in both conditions responded to these items. As the data was not normally distributed, a Mann–Whitney U test revealed that participants who watched the golden rule video ($M = 11.72$; $SD = 22.36$) were even less likely to support or justify support for political violence against their least-liked group relative to participants who watched the control video ($M = 17.92$; $SD = 26.05$), $Z = -2.54$, $p = .01$.

4.4.2 | Group attitude

A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference in participant's thermometer feeling towards their least-liked group, $F(1, 483) = 0.290$, $p = .59$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$, regardless of whether participants watched the golden rule video ($M = 32.61$; $SD = 28.41$) or control video ($M = 31.22$; $SD = 28.24$). Similarly, a one-way ANOVA examining the effects of the golden rule video on social distancing revealed no significant differences in levels of social distancing, $F(1, 483) = 3.10$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2_p = 0.006$, regardless of whether participants watched the golden rule video ($M = 4.05$; $SD = 1.69$) or the control video ($M = 3.78$; $SD = 1.66$).

4.4.3 | Robustness check

To examine the robustness of the findings, we again used the GLM univariate procedure, to test the experimental effect while controlling statistically for age, gender, ethnicity, and political orientation (as covariates). This analysis showed a similar significant interaction effect with the golden rule condition (compared to the control) leading only to higher tolerance of normative political actions, $F(1, 483) = 7.78$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2_p = 0.02$. Additionally, there again were no significant interaction effects between any of these variables and the effect of the golden rule manipulation ($p_s > 0.15$). Thus, the positive effect of being reminded of the golden rule on tolerance of normative protest actions of the least-liked group was supported regardless of whether we considered the age, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation of the participants, and was similar for older and younger participants, females and males, different ethnicities, and right-wing and left-wing oriented people.

5 | DISCUSSION

Political tolerance is indispensable for our increasingly polarized liberal democratic societies, but without limits, it can threaten the foundations of tolerance itself (Popper, 1945; Walzer, 1997). Specifically, tolerance towards a group's actions presupposes that the group respects the reciprocal rights of others. Whereas democratic and normative political actions respect the equal rights of others, undemocratic and violent behaviours tend to deny others their basic rights and therefore should not be tolerated.

People have been found to follow the reciprocity logic in their immediate political tolerance judgements (Findor et al., 2023; Petersen et al., 2011) and in the current research, we focused on the persuasive impact of the golden rule with its central norm of reciprocity on political tolerance. In two studies, we found that a general message on the moral importance of the golden rule in everyday life had a positive effect on tolerance of normative protest actions of one's least-liked ideological group relative to controls. Additionally, there was no effect on non-normative protest actions and also not on attitudes towards the least-liked group. These results were robust in that they were found regardless of whether we considered the age, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation of the participants, and were similar for older and younger participants, among men and women, different ethnicities, and right-wing and left-wing oriented people.

The differential effects on tolerance of normative and non-normative protest actions support the proposition that a moral appeal to the golden rule with its behavioural reciprocity logic has a persuasive effect on political tolerance. An appeal to reciprocity appears to be persuasive in relation to protest actions that do not violate the rights of others, but not to the relatively strong negative evaluation of violence and other non-normative protest actions that go against the reciprocity norm and are considered unjustifiable (Study 2). Furthermore, the moral appeal to the golden rule did not affect participants' negative attitudes towards their least-liked group. Thus, the positive benefits of tolerance of normative protest actions were not driven by a reduced dislike of the least-liked-group, which further supports the persuasive impact of the golden rule with its behavioural norm of reciprocity. Norms of reciprocity prescribe that normative political actions and behaviours of one's ideological adversaries should be tolerated and do not imply that one should like these adversaries (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022; Petersen et al., 2011). Similar, experimental research has demonstrated that interventions can affect support for democratic values and anti-democratic attitudes independently of outgroup dislike (Halperin et al., 2014; Voelkel et al., 2023).

The key finding that a general golden rule message affects people's political tolerance, has theoretical and applied implications. Theoretically, it means that not only people's immediate tolerant judgements are affected by the reciprocity logic, but that a general moral appeal to reciprocity also can have a persuasive impact. Furthermore, while research has shown that many peoples' initial judgement can be changed by counterarguments, especially in the direction towards greater intolerance (Gibson, 2006b; Peffley, Knigge, & Hurwitz, 2001; Verkuyten et al., 2023c), the current findings demonstrate that a reminder of the importance of the golden rule in everyday life can increase tolerance of normative protest actions of one's least-liked group. The golden rule resonates with most people's values and norms and their general tendency to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960; Nowak & Sigmund, 2000), making the persuasive effect of a general reminder of its importance in everyday life for tolerance of normative political actions understandable (Nelson & Garst, 2005). At the same time, an appeal to the golden rule clearly sets limits to political tolerance in the case of non-normative actions that violate the equal rights of others (Trüdinger & Ziller, 2023).

The practical implication of our findings is that a general message about the golden rule and its reciprocity norm can be useful for stimulating political tolerance. The golden rule is one of the universal moral values across cultures and religions, that is learned from an early age, easy to understand and relevant in many relationships and a range of social settings (Wattles, 1996). Thus, it is likely that such a message will also increase tolerance in social domains in which people have to deal with questions of whether to endure certain beliefs and practices that they object to, such as cultural and religious differences as well as views and behaviours of friends, disagreements at work, or trouble in

their neighbourhood. This is something for future research to examine. Additionally, this research could also examine when and why people follow the implications of the golden rule to a greater or lesser degree (e.g., Tusicisny, 2017; Vilaythong et al., 2010). For example, the golden rule message might resonate more strongly among people for whom the golden rule is more central to their core belief system such as one's religion. Among people who identify strongly with a religion where the golden rule principles are central, watching the video may be especially effective at increasing tolerance of normative actions of disliked groups. Similarly, an appeal on reciprocity might have less impact on political tolerance in situations of increased perceived outgroup threat because the threat is one of the important drivers of intolerance (Gibson, 2006b).

Additionally, future research could examine the effectiveness of stimulating tolerance of different ways in which the persuasive golden rule message and its reciprocity norm are presented. We used a custom animated video followed by questions on personal relevance to ensure that people engaged with the message, which is important in online data collection (Shamon & Berning, 2020). However, future research could examine whether the video itself is sufficient to trigger the effects or whether a reflection on personal experiences is necessary. People might also be asked to reflect on the social and political importance of reciprocity or to consider its relevance in a writing task (e.g., Halperin et al., 2014). Furthermore, it might also be possible to remind people of the reciprocity norm more indirectly or implicitly (Vilaythong et al., 2010) which would rule out the possibility that participants report higher political tolerance because of potential response tendencies such as socially desirable responses. Additionally, future studies could examine the more long-term effects of the current manipulation and similar ones that focus on being reminded of the everyday importance of reciprocity. The manipulation might have a more enduring effect but it might also be the case that a repetitive reminder is necessary since people can have various other reasons for being politically tolerant or intolerant (Gibson, 2006b). The long-term effectiveness might also depend on individual trait-like differences, for example, perspective-taking and openness which make some people more than others receptive to the golden rule message.

Future research could also examine the effectiveness of the golden rule with its norms of reciprocity on political tolerance in relation to the nature of the least-liked ideological group. We focused on people's tolerance of protest actions of mainstream ideological groups that are typically democratic and differ from radical extremist groups (e.g., terrorists, neo-nazis). However, average levels of tolerance can vary across mainstream disliked groups (Gibson et al., 2020) and this might matter for the persuasive appeal of the golden rule reminder. For example, some of these groups might be perceived as being less or rather more frequently involved in democratic actions and decision-making procedures making it less or rather more easy to persuade people to be politically tolerant (e.g., Petersen et al., 2011; Sniderman et al., 2014). Additionally, future research could examine how the notion of reciprocity is used in political discourse to justify intolerance and exclusion of minority outgroups by construing them as being intolerant themselves and therefore as not following the norm of reciprocity that guarantees civil liberties for all (Verkuyten et al., 2023b).

Despite these limitations and venues for future work, the present findings demonstrate that political tolerance of normative protest actions can be increased. An animated reminder of the golden rule with its central norm of reciprocity appears to be effective in making people more tolerant, but not in an unlimited way. People are not persuaded to be more tolerant of non-normative protest actions that go beyond the logic of reciprocity. Tolerance is indispensable for democratic societies but requires clear limits and the norm of reciprocity appears to be an important way to encourage adherence to liberal democratic principles.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/crjnh/?view_only=baad961c5564463fbd7c9cf049236cca.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research and the different studies were ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University. File numbers: 21-0457.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We will use the common and well-known term 'golden rule' although this rule advocates generosity also towards persons who behave egoistically. The Golden Rule differs from what has been called the Silver Rule which focuses on the principle of reciprocal balance (Tullberg, 2012).

[2] No similar additional questions were asked in this control condition because it would be strange to ask participants to reflect on a time when candle-making was personally relevant. Yet, in the control condition, we also presented the participants with a video of equal length, rather than directly asking them to complete the outcome measures.

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