Backlash and Culture Wars: A Political Economy Model*

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Abstract

This paper develops a political-economy model of cultural conflict and electoral competition. Conservatives and progressives choose their level of tolerance toward the opposing cultural group in response to two sources of threat: the probability of interacting with a cultural outgroup and the risk of unfavorable cultural policy. Political parties compete on both economic and cultural dimensions. The model shows that a shift toward more progressive values can, beyond a threshold, trigger endogenous backlash and increased societal intolerance. This backlash shifts political competition from economic to cultural issues, further reinforcing cultural conflict. This two-way interaction can generate multiple equilibria and self-fulfilling "culture wars."

JEL Codes: P16, D72.

Keywords: Political Competition, Voting, Intolerance, Social Interactions, Culture vs. Economics, Cultural Backlash, Multiple Equilibria

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, societies around the world have gradually moved away from traditional norms —particularly in areas such as sexuality, family life, and religion (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Alesina, Tabellini, and Trebbi 2017). This cultural shift (see Figure 1[1]) –which Inglehart 1977 referred to as the "Silent Revolution"– has been linked to structural factors such as rising educational attainment, globalization, and greater exposure to diversity.

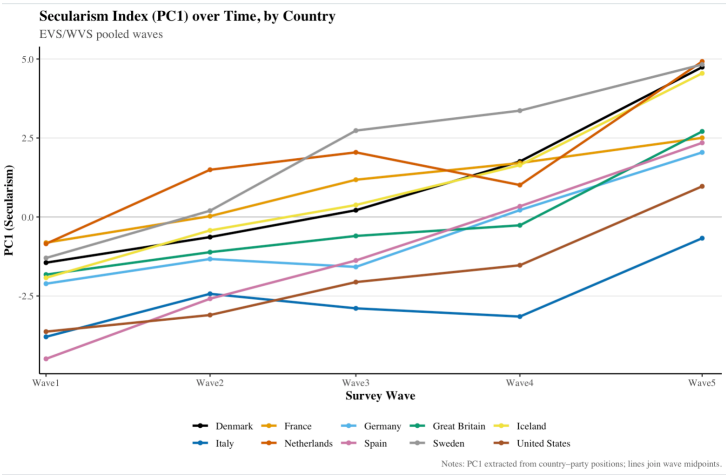


Figure 1: The Rise of Progressive Values (source EVS, WVS)

This revolution has not always unfolded quietly. Although, on average, individuals have less traditional values, cultural clashes have intensified. Moreover, the silent revolution has coincided with the emergence of a "sociocultural" axis of political conflict (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022, Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini 2021).[2] Surprisingly, the increasing number of progressive voters has not consistently benefited left-wing parties, the traditional proponents of progressive policies.[3] Instead, the increased salience of cultural issues appears to have benefited right-wing parties campaigning on conservative platforms.

This paper develops a model to analyze these co-occurring patterns. While the Silent Revolution—an exogenous rise in the share of progressives—is taken as given (due, for example, to generational replacement), the intensity or salience of cultural preferences among progressives and conservatives is endogenous. I examine two implications. First, I show how this structural change has led to partisan realignment, identifying the tipping

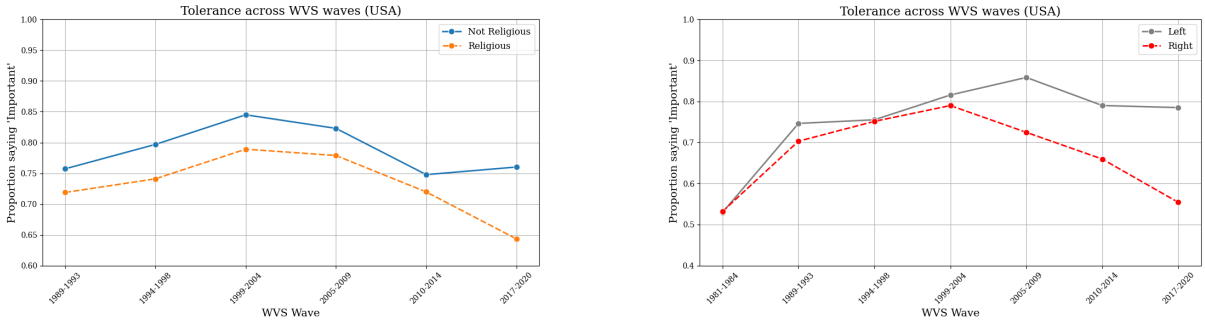
[1]This figure represents the first principal component (PC1) of beliefs about family, sexuality, and religion from the first wave (1981–1984) of the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) to the most recent one (2017–2022).

[2]Similarly, Ayman and Carmines 1997 find that American politics is becoming more defined by religious traditionalism. Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin, and Wacziarg 2024 find that by the mid-1990s, U.S. social divisions had shifted to cultural and religious lines.

[3]On the declining support for social democratic parties, see Benedetto, Hix, and Mastrorocco 2020.

point at which political competition shifts from economic to cultural issues. Second, I examine how—and at what threshold—this value shift and the rising salience of culture in politics have triggered "culture wars," i.e., greater intolerance in social interactions and more intense preferences over cultural policies.[4] This echoes well-known arguments (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019) that the growth of progressive values provoked a cultural backlash and "fuelled the need for self-defense and self-reassurance" (Ignazi 1992).[5]

To model cultural clashes, I assume that conservatives and progressives choose ex ante, before social interactions, whether to be tolerant or intolerant toward the opposing group. Intolerance involves a fixed cost but confers strategic advantages once interactions take place by protecting one's way of life against an intolerant outgroup. In the model, intolerance amplifies preferences over cultural laws: in more intolerant societies, favorable laws are more valuable because they help mitigate outgroup threats (e.g., through courts).



(a) By Religiosity

(b) By Political Orientation

Figure 2: Importance of Tolerance and Respect for others across groups (WVS).

An intolerance equilibrium appears to characterize the U.S. at present. For example, on the eve of the 2024 election, more than two-thirds of voters believed their way of life would be threatened if the opposing party won, and these perceived threats are often centered on cultural issues.[6][7] Affective polarization is also peaking (Iyengar et al. 2019; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024).[8] Consistent with these attitudes is the level of intolerance in social relations: as illustrated in Figure 2,

[4]Hunter (1991) defines culture wars as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding." See also Hartman (2019) and Mouw and Sobel (2001).

[5]See also Foa and Mounk 2016 and Frank 2004. Margalit 2012 emphasize the fear of the social and cultural consequences of globalization.

[6]Source: `https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/trump-voters-2024` (YouGov / University of Cambridge Survey Results, October 2024), asking questions such as: "American values and beliefs are being undermined and cherished traditions are under threat" (89% of Trump voters and 45% of Harris voters agree) and "My way of life would be under threat if my presidential candidate doesn't win" (74% of Trump voters and 68% of Harris voters agree). See also PRRI, American Values Survey 2023: `https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-AVS-Presentation.pdf`.

[7]E.g., Algan et al. 2025 finds that abortion is the issue most strongly associated with anger and fear among both Republicans and Democrats, and that negative emotions have increased in recent years.

[8]Americans' trust in one another has also been steadily declining over the last decades (e.g., World Values Survey (WVS).

in the U.S. there has been a sharp decline in the importance placed on tolerance and respect for others over the last three decades (source WVS).[9] The figure reports trends separately for religious and non-religious groups, as well as for right- and left-leaning individuals. The fact that tolerance by groups generally moves together hints at the possibility of complementarities, where a decrease in tolerance by one group induces the other to decrease as well.

The model has a social layer explaining cultural intolerance and a political layer determining economic and cultural policies. While economic preferences are standard, cultural preferences are endogenous. As discussed above, intolerance strengthens cultural preferences and affects political outcomes. At the same time, intolerance itself is endogenous: the decision to be intolerant depends on group sizes, which determine the likelihood of outgroup interactions, and expectations about public policies. In equilibrium (Figure 3), policies and intolerance are jointly determined as a fixed point.[10]

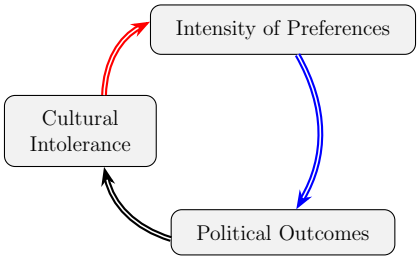


Figure 3: Interaction Between Intolerance and Politics

Individuals make two decisions: how tolerant to be in their social interactions and whom to vote for. More specifically, the sequence of events is as follows. First, progressives and conservatives choose whether to be tolerant or intolerant toward the opposing group. Outgroup intolerance amplifies the threat to one's way of life, while one's own intolerance mitigates it, and the threat is further reduced when cultural laws favor the in-group. Second, an election occurs between policy-motivated Left- and Right-wing candidates. The Left represents poorer, progressive voters, while the Right represents richer, conservative voters. Each party proposes a platform that bundle a binary cultural policy (progressive or conservative) with an economic policy (high or low taxes). Individuals vote based on their income and cultural preferences, with social intolerance determining how strongly each group supports one cultural policy over the other. Finally, social in-

[9]Figure 2 reports the share of respondents who indicated that "Tolerance and respect for other people" is important. The question asked was: "Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? (please choose up to five)" Other qualities include: Unselfishness, Independence, Hard Work, Religious Faith, Good Manners, etc

[10]This is similar to the politico-economic equilibrium of Krusell, Quadrini, and Ríos-Rull 1997 (see also Persson and Tabellini 2000, Ch. 11, and Alesina and Rodrik 1994), but with a socioeconomic equilibrium in which social intolerance, rather than capital, is the aggregate state variable. See the literature review for further discussion.

teractions take place: conservatives and progressives are randomly matched and those who meet an outgroup member suffer an externality, the size of which depends on the intolerance choices made in the first stage and the legislation enacted in the electoral stage.

After solving for the equilibrium for a given progressive share, I compare equilibria across different shares to study how the rise of progressives affects outcomes. I begin by describing the effects on party platforms. At the start of the Silent Revolution, there were not enough cultural progressives for culture to become a salient electoral issue; competition was always on the economic dimension. As progressives grew in number, it became optimal for the left candidate—who holds progressive preferences—to propose progressive policies, even if doing so reduced the left's electoral advantage relative to elections centered on economic issues. The model identifies the threshold at which competition shifts to the cultural dimension. At the same time, the Silent Revolution affects social outcomes. As society becomes less uniformly conservative, interactions with the opposing group become more likely; under random matching, this likelihood is highest when conservatives and progressives are equal in size. At this midpoint, complementarities may lead both groups to adopt intolerance as a defensive response, increasing the demand for laws that prevent the outgroup from threatening the in-group's way of life.

In the model, the threat from unfavorable cultural laws and from interactions with the outgroup can reinforce each other. A key result is that intolerance peaks at the midpoint of the Silent Revolution, when conservatives and progressives are of similar size and the Left and Right propose opposing cultural policies. High uncertainty—about prevailing policies and about whom individuals will interact with—generates a "culture war" spiral, characterized by high intolerance and political conflict centered on cultural issues. By contrast, tolerance arises in largely homogeneous societies. The majority faces little threat, as most interactions occur within the group and its size ensures favorable cultural laws. Majority tolerance in turn encourages tolerance among the minority. As a result, culture is less salient, and the two parties diverge on economic policy but converge on the cultural law preferred by the larger group (either conservative or progressive).

Two major insights can be derived from the model. First, societal intolerance increases the stakes of elections for everyone, but especially for minorities, who—under random matching—are more likely to interact with members of the outgroup and thus gain more from the protection of favorable cultural laws. This helps explain the political influence of progressive movements when progressives were a minority and of today's alt-right when conservatives are, or perceive themselves to be, in the minority. Second, societal intolerance rises more when a cultural law is expected to be unfavorable to the majority of the population. This occurs because more individuals are incentivized to become

intolerant as self-defense, which—through complementarity—induces others to do the same. This finding suggests that "anti-majoritarian" policy changes can increase cultural intolerance. In my model, such policy changes may arise because parties are assumed to be policy-motivated (Wittman 1983) rather than vote-share maximizing. In practice, anti-majoritarian policies may also arise from factors external to electoral politics, such as EU institutions or court rulings. Examples from the United States include Roe v. Wade (1973), when a majority of Americans opposed abortion, and its reversal in 2022, when a majority favored abortion rights.[11]

Together, these two mechanisms may give rise to multiple thresholds at which culture becomes salient, each sustained by self-fulfilling expectations. To see this, suppose mutual intolerance is expected. As the minority cultural group's preferences intensify relatively more, cultural policy is more likely to reflect their preferences. The prospect of an anti-majoritarian law then triggers a backlash, making culture salient earlier, when conservatives still hold a large majority. Suppose instead that mutual tolerance is expected. In a tolerant society, cultural conflict becomes less salient, and political competition centers on economic issues. Parties then converge on the majoritarian conservative policy, sustaining expectations of a tolerance equilibrium and delaying divergence on cultural issues.[12]

Finally, this paper sheds light on a puzzle: how can intense conflict emerge in democracies with strong institutions, such as the United States—a hostility more commonly expected in weak states? The model shows that strong institutions and better enforcement narrow the conditions under which intolerance arises, as individuals can rely on the law rather than intolerance to defend itself. However, they also amplify political conflict when intolerance does occur: under stronger institutions, favorable laws offer greater protection, raising the electoral stakes.

1.1. Review of the Literature

This paper relates to the literature on multidimensional model of policy competition (economics vs culture). For example, Roemer 1998 shows that higher religious salience may explain "why the poor do not expropriate the rich, " and Krasa and Polborn 2014 studies how cultural preferences and candidates' cultural positions influence equilibrium economic positions.[13] Recently, Buisseret and Weelden 2025 propose a model linking

[11] A large literature, mostly among legal scholars, studies backlash following *Roe v. Wade* (1973); see Ziegler 2020; Greenhouse and Siegel 2011.

[12] Multiplicity arises from the interaction between politics and intolerance—this is more novel than standard sources of multiplicity driven by complementarities, where individuals choose intolerance because they expect it from others.

[13] See also Besley and Persson 2021 and Levy 2004).

campaign finance, inequality, and cultural conflict. Beyond several modeling differences, the novel feature of this paper is that the intensity of cultural preferences is endogenous: preferences over cultural policies are a function of an aggregate state variable —intolerance in social relations. The equilibrium in this paper is similar to the "politico-economic equilibrium" in Krusell, Quadrini, and Ríos-Rull 1997, where the competitive equilibrium determines capital given expected policies, and policies are subsequently chosen given capital. Similarly here, given expected policies, private decisions determine societal intolerance, and subsequently, policies are chosen for a given level of societal intolerance. The dynamics, however, are simpler than Krusell, Quadrini, and Ríos-Rull 1997 because intolerance—unlike capital, which is accumulated over time—is chosen afresh each period, so the fixed point can be solved period by period.

The paper is also related to Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini 2021, where group identity drives stereotyping and polarizes preferences. This model differs in several ways. Focusing on a binary policy, in my model, higher electoral stakes arise from increased costs of electoral loss, not from polarization of preferences.[14] Moreover, this paper does not build on a social psychology framework but instead solves for a Nash equilibrium in the tolerance game. The political process also differs. While Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini 2021 relies on probabilistic voting, I adopt the Wittman framework with policy-motivated parties, which has very different implications (for instance, it can generate anti-majoritarian policy changes that may trigger backlash). Finally, in Bonomi, Gennaioli, and Tabellini 2021, individuals' group identity depends on primitives (e.g., cultural and economic heterogeneity). In contrast, here group identity is fixed along the cultural dimension, while preference intensity depends on endogenous policies (capturing backlash), which can generate multiple equilibria.

To my knowledge, culture wars have not been formally modeled. However, related work on conflict (e.g., Esteban and Ray 2008; Ray and Esteban 2017) has shown that conflict intensity peaks when opposing groups are similar in size—consistent with this paper's finding that intolerance is highest in the middle of the silent revolution. This paper does not model culture wars as in standard models of conflict, where individuals expend resources to influence policy using a "technology of war" (M. Jackson and Morelli 2007). Instead, cultural conflict arises in social interactions, with policy determined in a political game.

A few papers analyze tolerance. Genicot 2022 studies social networks where tolerance expands social connections through compromise; in contrast, I model a strategic setting

[14]Consistent with this, Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024 show that the rise in affective polarization is primarily driven by increasing negativity toward the opposing political group. While affective polarization has risen, evidence of widespread preference extremization is more limited, with some arguing that polarization is a myth (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005).

where one group, by imposing its way of life, creates a negative externality on the other. In Bisin and Verdier 2001, cultural intolerance is defined as a parent's dislike of a child with a different cultural trait. In this paper, there is no cultural transmission across generations, and conservatives do not become progressive through interaction, and vice versa. By studying how politics affects social relations, this paper relates to the literature studying the interaction between culture and institutions (among others, Tabellini 2008, Besley and Persson 2023, Shayo 2009—see Bisin and Verdier 2023, Section 5.2, for a review). Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin (2020) find that Trump's victory increased individuals' willingness to express xenophobic views. While their mechanism is different (they emphasize social learning), this paper similarly shows that political outcomes spill over into social interactions.

Finally, this paper relates to the recent empirical literature on political realignment. Danieli et al. 2022 show that the rise of conservative populist parties reflects voters' shifting priorities from economics to culture and document a rightward shift among older voters, consistent with the cultural backlash theory. This paper endogenizes cultural salience and provides a backlash mechanism that explains why voters' priorities shift. Longuet-Marx 2025 identifies stronger party polarization on cultural—rather than economic—issues as the main driver of partisan realignment. In line with his work, I show that while the underlying cause of political realignment is a cultural trend (the Silent Revolution), its "proximate" cause is the shift in party platforms.

2. Model Overview

The economy is populated by a continuum of individuals, each characterized by an income level $x \in \mathbb{R}_+$ and a cultural value $\phi \in \mathbb{R}$. Cultural values summarize positions on issues such as religiosity, abortion, race, and immigration. Individuals are either *progressive* ($\phi > 0$) or *conservative* ($\phi < 0$); a fraction $n \in (0, 1)$ are conservative and the remaining $1 - n$ are progressive. Within each group, cultural values are homogeneous. An individual's cultural type is exogenous, but the intensity (or salience) of each group's cultural values is endogenous and depends on the level of social intolerance, as described below (see Section 2.2). For tractability, income x is independently distributed of cultural values and is drawn from a uniform distribution on the interval $[0, 2]$.

There are two competing political parties, Left (L) and Right (R), whose leaders are policy-motivated citizens characterized by an income level and cultural values, either progressive or conservative. Each party proposes a two-dimensional policy platform (δ, t), consisting of economic and cultural policies, and voters cast their votes by comparing their utilities under the two platforms. To simplify the analysis, policies are binary. The economic policy is a linear tax rate $t \in \{t^L, t^H\}$, with $t^L < t^H$. The cultural policy is

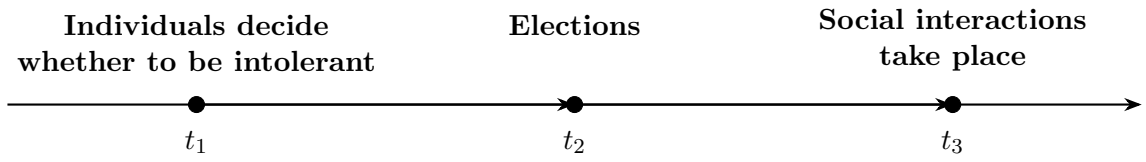


Figure 4: Timing within a period

$\delta \in \{0, 1\}$, where $\delta = 1$ denotes the progressive policy (preferred by progressive voters) and $\delta = 0$ denotes the conservative policy (preferred by conservative voters).

In addition to voting, individuals decide how tolerant to be in their social interactions. Each individual simultaneously chooses whether to act tolerantly toward the cultural outgroup, according to a binary strategy $I_i \in \{0, 1\}$, where $I_i = 0$ denotes tolerance and $I_i = 1$ denotes intolerance. Intolerance strategies are symmetric within cultural groups. Consequently, let $I_P, I_C \in \{0, 1\}$ denote the choices of progressives and conservatives, respectively. The resulting distribution of intolerance is $\mathcal{I} = (I_P, I_C) \in \{0, 1\}^2$. Throughout this section, $\mathcal{I}$ is taken as given – the conditions under which intolerance arises are studied in Section 3.

Each period consists of three subperiods, as illustrated in Figure 4. First, individuals choose whether to be intolerant, and these choices determine the distribution of intolerance in society. In the second subperiod, policies are determined by elections. In the final subperiod, social interactions occur. Because there are no dynamic links, the equilibrium is solved period by period. The rest of this section first discusses the social layer and then discusses political competition and voters' preferences.

2.1. Social Interactions

Individuals in the two cultural groups — *conservatives* and *progressives* — are randomly matched. Interaction payoffs and matching probabilities do not depend on income.

At this stage, individuals take no actions and payoffs are determined by earlier choices — namely, the distribution of social intolerance and the electoral outcome. If the two individuals share the same cultural preferences, or if both are tolerant, social interactions generate a baseline payoff of zero. Conversely, meeting an intolerant outgroup member can generate a negative externality of up to -1. There are two ways to mitigate this negative externality. First, if the individual herself is intolerant, the externality is reduced from -1 to $-\kappa$, where $\kappa < 1$. The intuition is that intolerance represents a form of closedness, while tolerance (openness) may make individuals more vulnerable to others' intolerance. Second, if the cultural policy that wins the election is favorable to the individual's in-group, the negative externality is reduced to $-\lambda$, where $\lambda < 1$. This

captures the idea that favorable laws and their enforcement—e.g., through court decisions—can help the in-group mitigate the externality; the more effective the enforcement, the smaller the externality. If both defense mechanisms operate, the externality becomes $-\kappa\lambda$. If neither defense mechanism operates (i.e., the individual is tolerant and the law is unfavorable), the negative externality equals -1.

By mitigating outgroup externalities, cultural policies affect social-interaction payoffs, and voters take these consequences into account at the voting stage. Let $\Phi_i(\delta;\mathcal{I})$ denote individual i's expected payoff from social interaction as a function of the policy δ. The expectation is conditional on $\mathcal{I}$, since the distribution of intolerance in the society is predetermined at the voting stage. The utility difference between implementing the progressive and the conservative cultural policies for an individual in group $i \in \{P, C\}$ is given by

$$\Delta\Phi_i(\mathcal{I}) \equiv \Phi_i(1;\mathcal{I}) - \Phi_i(0;\mathcal{I}).$$

For conservatives,

$$\Delta\Phi_C(\mathcal{I}) = \begin{cases} -\kappa(1-\lambda)\, nI_P, & \text{if } I_C = 1, \\ -(1-\lambda)\, nI_P, & \text{if } I_C = 0. \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

Because for conservatives, social interaction payoffs are higher under a conservative policy than under a progressive one, $\Delta\Phi_C(\mathcal{I}) \leq 0$, with strict inequality when progressives are intolerant. Under random matching, note that a higher share of progressives (higher n) increases the likelihood of interacting with them and raises the expected loss under a progressive policy. Moreover, when intolerance is an effective defense against others' intolerance (low κ), the utility difference between implementing one policy rather than the other is small, as voters rely less on the law for protection. By contrast, when cultural policy provides effective protection against others' intolerance (low λ), having the law on one's side becomes more important. As shown in (1), conservatives therefore incur a larger loss when the opposing policy is implemented.

For progressives,

$$\Delta\Phi_P(\mathcal{I}) = \begin{cases} \kappa(1-\lambda)(1-n)\, I_C, & \text{if } I_P = 1, \\ (1-\lambda)(1-n)\, I_C, & \text{if } I_P = 0. \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

Because progressives are better off under a progressive policy than under a conservative one, $\Delta\Phi_P(\mathcal{I}) \geq 0$. Moreover, note that the relative gain from a progressive policy is now proportional to $1-n$, the size of the outgroup faced by progressives.

Equations (1) and (2) measure the electoral stakes for the two cultural groups, showing

that the smaller group has higher stakes. When $n < \frac{1}{2}$, progressives constitute a minority and therefore face outgroup interactions with higher probability. The value of a favorable policy is then higher for the progressive minority than for the conservative majority. Conversely, when $n > \frac{1}{2}$, conservatives constitute the minority and have higher stakes.

2.2. Preferences over Policies

Conditional on the distribution of intolerance, a voter with income x and cultural identity $i \in \{P, C\}$ has utility over taxes and cultural policy given by

$$U_{x,i}(t, \delta; \mathcal{I}) = (1 - t)x + v(t) + \delta\, \phi_i \tag{3}$$

The first two terms capture preferences over taxes $t \in \{t^H, t^L\}$: $(1 - t)x$ represents after-tax income, while the second term $v(t)$ is an increasing and concave function, capturing the utility derived from the public good financed by taxation.[15]

The final term reflects preferences over the cultural policy $\delta \in \{0, 1\}$. The slope parameter ϕ_i, which measures the utility difference between a progressive policy ($\delta = 1$) and a conservative policy ($\delta = 0$), consists of an exogenous component capturing intrinsic cultural preferences and an endogenous component reflecting socially driven preferences:

$$\phi_i \equiv \phi_i^0 + \Delta\Phi_i(\mathcal{I}). \tag{4}$$

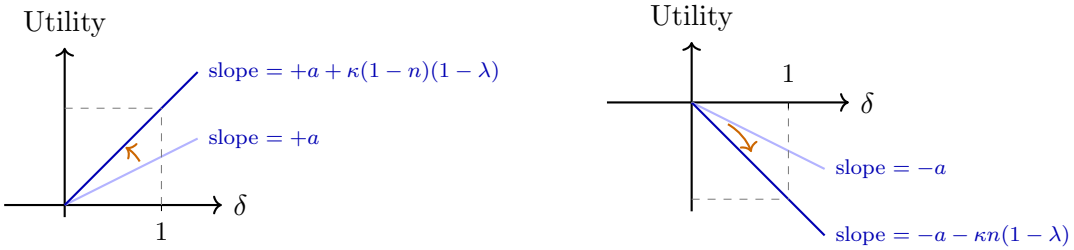
Regarding the exogenous component, assume $\phi_C^0 = -a$ and $\phi_P^0 = a$, with $a > 0$. For ideological reasons—independent of social interactions—progressives (conservatives) strictly prefer the progressive (conservative) policy. The parameter a measures intrinsic disagreement along the cultural dimension. A higher a increases polarization in cultural preferences across the two groups, and does so *symmetrically*.

The endogenous component $\Delta\Phi_i(\mathcal{I})$ captures the utility difference induced by social interactions. As shown in (1) and (2), when society is tolerant, interaction payoffs are not affected by the law, and therefore $\Delta\Phi_i(\mathcal{I}) = 0$ for all i. When society is intolerant, the law provides some protection, implying that $\Delta\Phi_C(\mathcal{I}) < 0$ and $\Delta\Phi_P(\mathcal{I}) > 0$. Consequently, intolerance amplifies disagreement over cultural policy beyond its intrinsic component and, by (1)–(2), does so *asymmetrically*, polarizing the minority more than the majority. The political implications of greater intolerance will therefore differ from those of an increase in the exogenous component a.

Figure 5 illustrates the last term in (3) to show how cultural preferences are amplified when society moves from mutual tolerance to mutual intolerance. Note that the degree

[15] Since total income is normalized to one, the tax rate t coincides with the level of the public good.

of amplification also depends on whether law enforcement is effective. If it is not ($\lambda = 1$), having one law or another is completely inconsequential, and therefore electoral stakes are not increased.



(a) Progressives (b) Conservatives

Figure 5: Amplification of cultural preferences under intolerance

2.3. Political Competition

In the second subperiod, after intolerance is predetermined, the two political parties, Left and Right, simultaneously propose policy platforms consisting of a tax rate and a cultural policy. Let $\mathbf{q}_L = (t_L, \delta_L)$ and $\mathbf{q}_R = (t_R, \delta_R)$ denote the platforms of parties $j = L, R$, specifying the tax rate and cultural policy. Let $\pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)$ denote the probability that party L wins the election, and $1 - \pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)$ the probability that party R wins.

The political game is modeled in the spirit of Wittman 1983. Candidates are policy-motivated and derive utility from the implementation of tax and cultural policies. Let U^L and U^R denote the utilities of the party leaders, which we discuss in Section 4. Second, elections are uncertain: for simplicity, assume that a platform wins the election with probability equal to the share of voters who support it (see Roemer 2001, Section. 2.3, for a similar specification, and Callander and Carbajal 2022). The probability that L wins the election is given by the measure of individuals who prefer $\mathbf{q}_L$ over $\mathbf{q}_R$.

$$\pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R) = \mathbb{P}\Big(U_{x,i}(t_L, \delta_L) \geq U_{x,i}(t_R, \delta_R)\Big) \tag{5}$$

If the two platforms coincide, the probability equals 1/2. This uncertainty possibly reflects candidates' uncertainty about the median voter's position or aggregate shocks that may influence the election. Introducing aggregate uncertainty about the electoral result reduces a party's incentive to move closer to the opponent's policy, thereby explaining platform divergence and making the equilibrium outcome dependent on party preferences. It should be stressed that, while the specific form of electoral uncertainty matter quantitatively, it is not essential to the results.

A (Wittman) political equilibrium is a Nash equilibrium in the game played by the

two parties, where parties simultaneously select the platform. The expected payoff of the two parties are

$$\mathcal{U}_L(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R) = \pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)\, U^L(t_L, \delta_L) + \big(1 - \pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)\big) U^L(t_R, \delta_R),$$

$$\mathcal{U}_R(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R) = \pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)\, U^R(t_L, \delta_L) + \big(1 - \pi(\mathbf{q}_L, \mathbf{q}_R)\big) U^R(t_R, \delta_R).$$

2.4. Equilibrium

Let q and p denote the expected probabilities of the low-tax policy t^L and the cultural policy outcome $\delta = 0$, respectively. The equilibrium intolerance levels for both cultural groups are given by

$$\begin{pmatrix} I_C \\ I_P \end{pmatrix} = \mathcal{A}(p; n), \tag{6}$$

where $\mathcal{A}$ denotes the solution of the tolerance game (see Section 3). In writing (6), we make explicit the role of n. Note that when determining intolerance, cultural policies (p) are taken as given: because there is a continuum of individuals, each individual does not internalize the subsequent effect of her own intolerance choice on policy outcomes through aggregate social intolerance.

Let $\mathcal{F}$ denote the solution of the political game. The distribution over policy outcomes resulting from the Wittman model of political competition is given by

$$\begin{pmatrix} q \\ p \end{pmatrix} = \mathcal{F}\left(\begin{pmatrix} I_C \\ I_P \end{pmatrix}; n \right). \tag{7}$$

In a rational-expectations equilibrium, the expected policy in (6) must be consistent with the actual political outcome. An equilibrium is a vector (I_C^*, I_P^*, p^*, q^*) such that intolerance and policies satisfy (6) and (7). That is, equilibrium requires solving for a fixed point:

$$\begin{pmatrix} q^* \\ p^* \end{pmatrix} = \mathcal{F}\big(\mathcal{A}(p^*; n); n\big). \tag{8}$$

Intolerance is chosen in each period, and the model does not feature dynamic linkages. After solving for the equilibrium for a given progressive share n, I compare equilibria across different shares to study how the rise of progressives affects outcomes.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 3 analyzes the endogenous emergence of intolerance. Section 4 examines the political game under tolerance and

intolerance. Section 5 analyzes the full equilibrium where politics and intolerance are mutually consistent.

3. Cultural Intolerance

Cultural choices (e.g., how people marry, which religion they practice, fertility decisions, etc.) are constrained not only by state laws but also by social pressures. The goal of this section is to study the conditions under which these pressures emerge. The focus of this paper is on intolerance. Tolerance can be thought of as openness to others—the willingness to allow others to live their lives as they choose. Intolerance, by contrast, is closedness to others and may also involve "negative interference," that is, threatening others' ways of life.

Intolerance arises endogenously as the equilibrium outcome of a strategic interaction game. At the beginning of each period, individuals belonging to two groups – progressives (mass n), and conservatives (mass $1-n$) – simultaneously choose a binary tolerance strategy $I_i \in \{0,1\}$, where $I_i = 0$ denotes tolerance toward the outgroup and $I_i = 1$ denotes intolerance. This choice is made behind a double veil of ignorance: before the realization of the cultural law and taking as given the probability of interacting with the outgroup. Let p denote the probability that $\delta = 0$ (a conservative policy) is implemented and $1-p$ the probability that $\delta = 1$ (a progressive policy) is implemented.

Intolerance involves a fixed cost equal to c.[16] Individuals decide whether to be intolerant by comparing the fixed cost of intolerance with its potential benefits once social interactions take place. As discussed in Section 2.1, the benefit of intolerance is to mitigate the threat to one's way of life posed by an intolerant outgroup. In Section **??**, I extend the model to allow for an additional, non-defensive benefit: intolerant individuals also derive utility from imposing their way of life on others.

To study individuals' incentives to become intolerant, define the expected social-interaction payoff $\tilde{\Phi}_i(I_i)$ as a function of individual i's intolerance choice. The expectation is formed in the first subperiod, given outgroup intolerance I_{-i} and the expected probability p that the progressive policy prevails.[17] To simplify notation, the dependence on p and I_{-i} is omitted in $\tilde{\Phi}_i(I_i)$.

Based on the social-interaction payoffs described in Section 2.1, a conservative individ-

[16] Either because individuals are inherently tolerant (Rousseau 1762) or because intolerance limits opportunities for exchange. Without such costs, since intolerance provides only benefits in the model, it would be difficult to explain why tolerance emerges in societies.

[17] Notice the difference from $\Phi_i(\delta;\mathcal{I})$, defined in Section 2.1. There, to determine the utility difference between implementing one policy rather than the other, I computed the expected payoff from social interaction as a function of the cultural law δ, evaluated *after* social intolerance—including i's own choice—has been determined. In contrast, here $\tilde{\Phi}_i(I_i)$ is evaluated before intolerance choices are made.

ual obtains the following expected social payoffs, depending on whether the conservative C chooses to be intolerant or tolerant:

$$\tilde{\Phi}_C(I_C) = \begin{cases} -nI_P\kappa\Big(p\lambda + (1-p)\Big), & \text{if } I_C = 1, \\ -nI_P\Big(p\lambda + (1-p)\Big), & \text{if } I_C = 0. \end{cases} \tag{9}$$

When outgroup members are tolerant ($I_P = 0$), social interactions generate no negative externality for the conservatives. When progressives are intolerant, the expected externality on conservatives is negative and increasing with the size of the progressive group n. With probability p, the law is expected to be conservative, and outgroup externality is reduced by a factor $\lambda < 1$. With probability $1 - p$, the law is expected to be progressive, and the externality is not reduced by the law. As discussed above, regardless of the law, being intolerant themselves reduces the externality by a factor $\kappa < 1$.

Along similar lines, for a progressive individuals social interactions generate the following payoffs:

$$\tilde{\Phi}_P(I_P) = \begin{cases} -(1-n)I_C\kappa\Big(p + (1-p)\lambda\Big), & \text{if } I_P = 1, \\ -(1-n)I_C\Big(p + (1-p)\lambda\Big), & \text{if } I_P = 0. \end{cases} \tag{10}$$

Let us define the net payoff from being intolerant rather than tolerant for a conservative individual:

$$\Delta\tilde{\Phi}_C = \tilde{\Phi}_C(1) - \tilde{\Phi}_C(0) = n\big(\lambda p + (1-p)\big)(1-\kappa)I_P. \tag{11}$$

Similarly, for a progressive individual:

$$\Delta\tilde{\Phi}_P = \tilde{\Phi}_P(1) - \tilde{\Phi}_P(0) = (1-n)\big(\lambda(1-p) + p\big)(1-\kappa)I_C. \tag{12}$$

The expressions (12) and (12) identify the determinants of intolerance. First, when legal protection is stronger (that is, when λ decreases) and cultural laws favor the in-group, the benefit of being intolerant decreases. Thus, legal protection "crowds out" intolerance. Second, intolerance decisions exhibit strategic complementarity across groups: higher intolerance in the outgroup increases the incentive for members of the in-group to become intolerant. Finally, individuals are more likely to choose intolerance when they are more likely to interact with members of the outgroup.

An individual $i \in \{P, C\}$ is intolerant if $\Delta\tilde{\Phi}_i$ exceeds the fixed cost c. I solve for the Nash equilibrium in which intolerance is a best response to outgroup intolerance.

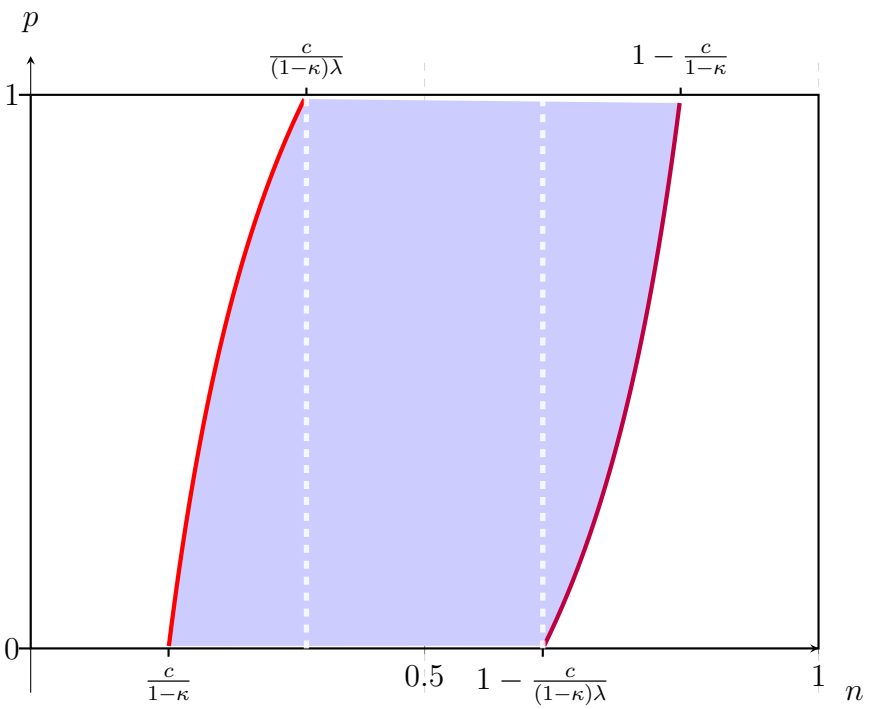


Figure 6: Intolerance Region (Shaded Area)

Proposition 1. *Let n denote the progressive population share. For all $n \in [0,1]$, there exists an equilibrium with mutual tolerance. In addition, for intermediate values of n, a mutual-intolerance equilibrium also exists, which arises when $n \in I(p)$ with*

$$I(p) = \left[\frac{c}{(1-\kappa)\left(p\lambda + 1 - p\right)},\ 1 - \frac{c}{(1-\kappa)\left(p + (1-p)\lambda\right)} \right]. \tag{13}$$

where p denotes the expected probability that a conservative law is adopted.

A condition for the existence of mutual intolerance is that the cost of intolerance is sufficiently low:

$$c < \frac{(1-\kappa)\big(\lambda + (\lambda-1)^2 p(1-p)\big)}{\lambda + 1}. \tag{14}$$

Figure 6 illustrates, in the (p, n)-space, the region where an equilibrium with intolerance exists (shaded area), assuming (14) holds. In the shaded area, both mutual tolerance and intolerance are equilibria. In what follows, whenever multiple equilibria arise, I select the intolerance equilibrium. To justify this selection, Section 6 shows that when an interference gain is introduced, the equilibrium is unique and features mutual intolerance for intermediate n.

When there is high cultural homogeneity (n close to 0 or 1), there is no equilibrium with intolerance. The larger group has little incentive to be intolerant, as it is unlikely to be matched with members of the other group. By complementarity, this sustains

tolerance in both groups. Conversely, intolerance arises when cultural heterogeneity is high (n close to $1/2$). When the groups are of similar size, the probability of being matched with an outgroup member is highest, which sustains intolerance as a defensive strategy in both groups regardless of p.

Three additional implications are worth stressing. First, when group-imbalance is moderate (i.e., in the two regions between the red curves and the dashed lines in Figure 6), the emergence of intolerance depends on the expected law, in a way consistent with the backlash arguments. When conservatives form the majority, the expectation of a progressive policy (low p) increases the likelihood of intolerance—the left red threshold shifts further left. Conversely, when progressives are the majority, intolerance is more likely if a conservative law is expected. Thus, political systems that adopt "anti-majoritarian" policies generate backlash and intensify social conflict. This is because an anti-majoritarian law raises intolerance among a larger share of the population and, through strategic complementarities, induces the minority to be intolerant as well.

Second, policy uncertainty increases intolerance. To see this, note from (14) that the cost threshold for intolerance is lowest when $p = 0$ or $p = 1$, and highest when $p = 1/2$. This result suggests that politics can reinforce the backlash dynamic: when n is intermediate, the two cultural groups have similar political influence, and intermediate values of p become more likely, which, by (14), further increases the likelihood of intolerance.

Third, the width of the intolerance region depends on parameters. As expected, a higher cost of intolerance c narrows the intolerance interval. More interestingly, when the law effectively protects citizens (low λ), individuals can rely on the law to protect themselves, and the intolerance region becomes smaller. Does this mean that countries with strong institutions experience less violent conflict? The model suggests the opposite. While intolerance is less likely to arise, when it does, political conflict over culture becomes more intense in states with strong enforcement. With stronger enforcement, having the law on one's side offers greater protection, which raises the electoral stakes.

The next corollary summarizes the three main implications discussed above.

Corollary 1.

1. *Backlash and anti-majoritarian laws: Cultural laws that are unfavorable to the majority (i.e., a progressive law when $n < 1/2$ or a conservative law when $n > 1/2$) lead to greater intolerance.*

2. *Law uncertainty: Greater uncertainty about the cultural law ($p = 1/2$) makes intolerance more likely by raising the cost threshold below which intolerance occurs.*

3. *Strong vs. weak states: Stronger state enforcement (lower λ) reduces the region of*

intolerance $I(p)$; however, when intolerance arises, it increases cultural salience.

4. Political Game

To solve the political game, I assume that the high-tax policy is more popular than the low-tax policy. This assumption is intended to capture a real-world feature—due to inequality, most voters have income below the average. After defining

$$\Delta v \equiv v(t^H) - v(t^L) > 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \Delta t \equiv t^H - t^L > 0$$

Assumption 1. *Assume:*

$$2 > \frac{\Delta v}{\Delta t} > 1.$$

The second inequality implies that the median-income voter ($x = 1$) prefers high taxes, while the first guarantees that voters with sufficiently high income ($x = 2$) strictly prefer low taxes.

In the standard Downsian model (Osborne 2025), parties converge to the Condorcet winner.[18] In this paper, instead, parties are policy-motivated and face electoral uncertainty (Wittman 1983), leading to platform divergence rather than convergence to the Condorcet winner. I assume the following about party preferences.

Assumption 2 (Party Preferences). *Left-party leaders are progressive and poorer than the average voter. Right-party leaders are conservative and have income x_R satisfying*

$$\Delta v < \Delta t x_R.$$

The next sections solve the political competition under tolerance and under intolerance. Intolerance affects voters' preferences—and thus voting behavior—but also party leaders' preferences, since party leaders are themselves citizens.

Given that t and δ can each take only two values, the total number of distinct quadruples describing the platforms of both parties is 16. Some of these combinations are dominated and can be ruled out: as shown in Appendix A, the analysis can be restricted to the following candidate political equilibria: (i) *Full divergence* (denoted D), in which the Left proposes high taxes and a progressive cultural policy, while the Right proposes low taxes and a conservative cultural policy; (ii) *Cultural convergence* (denoted CC),

[18] It is given by t^H and the progressive (conservative) policy when $n > \frac{1}{2}$ ($n < \frac{1}{2}$). See Appendix A.

in which parties propose different tax policies (Left proposes t^L and Right proposes t^R) but converge on culture, either progressive or conservative policy; and (iii) *Tax convergence* (denoted TC), in which both parties propose the same tax policy (t^H) but different cultural policies: the Left proposes a progressive policy and the Right a conservative one.

I characterize the Left party's vote share in the candidate equilibria described above. In the tax-convergence equilibrium, where the Left proposes a progressive policy, it attracts all progressive voters:

$$\pi^{TC} = n. \tag{15}$$

When instead there is convergence on culture, the Left enjoys an electoral advantage by Assumption 1, so that its probability of winning exceeds one half:

$$\pi^{CC} = \frac{\Delta v}{2\Delta t} \in (\frac{1}{2}, 1) \tag{16}$$

Under full divergence, the Left's winning probability is less straightforward and worth computing:

$$\pi^{D} = \Pr\Big(\Delta v - x\Delta t + \phi_i \geq 0\Big). \tag{17}$$

Recalling that $\phi_P = a + (1-n)\kappa(1-\lambda)I_C$ with probability n and $\phi_C = -a - n\kappa(1-\lambda)I_P$ with probability $1-n$, independently of income, by the law of total probability,

$$\pi^{D} = n\, F\left(\frac{\Delta v + \phi_P}{\Delta t}\right) + (1-n)\, F\left(\frac{\Delta v + \phi_C}{\Delta t}\right), \tag{18}$$

where F denotes the cumulative distribution function of x, with $x \sim U[0,2]$. Assuming an interior solution,[19]

$$\pi^{D} = \frac{\Delta v + a(2n-1)}{2\Delta t}. \tag{19}$$

Note that in (19), the endogenous terms related to intolerance cancel out. As a result, the probability depends only on intrinsic policy preferences (the parameter a).[20]

In summary, the previous discussion shows that, conditional on the platforms proposed by the candidates, the probability that a party wins does not depend on whether there is mutual tolerance or mutual intolerance. This feature, which relies on the uniform assumption, greatly simplifies the analysis.

[19]Parameters need to satisfy:

$$\frac{n\kappa(1-\lambda)}{\Delta t} < \frac{\Delta v}{\Delta t} < 2 - \frac{(1-n)\kappa(1-\lambda)}{\Delta t}.$$

[20]The progressive cultural term is linear in $1-n$ but weighted by the share of progressives, n, while the conservative term is linear in n but weighted by the share of conservatives, $1-n$. These two effects exactly offset each other.

Lemma 1. *Conditional on the platforms proposed by the two candidates, and assuming interior solutions in* (18)*, the Left's probability of winning is independent of whether there is mutual tolerance or mutual intolerance.*

Intolerance, however, affects the parties' incentives to propose different platforms.

4.1. Equilibrium under Tolerance

The next proposition characterizes the equilibrium under mutual tolerance.

Proposition 2 (Political equilibrium under mutual tolerance). *Suppose* $I_C = I_P = 0$. *Let* $n \in [0,1]$ *denote the population share of progressives. There are two thresholds,* $\underline{n}$ *and* $\overline{n}$*, with* $0 \leq \underline{n} < \overline{n} \leq 1$.

When $n \leq \underline{n}$*, both parties propose a conservative policy, but they diverge on economic policy (*t^H *for the Left and* t^L *for the Right); the Left wins with probability* (16).

When $n \geq \overline{n}$*, the two parties propose a progressive policy, but they diverge on economic policy (*t^H *for the Left and* t^L *for the Right); the Left wins with probability* (16).

When $\underline{n} < n < \overline{n}$*, the Left proposes high taxes and progressive policies, while the Right proposes conservative policies and either (i) low taxes or (ii) converges to the high-tax platform. In case (i), the Left's winning probability is given by* (19). *In case (ii), it is given by* (15). *The Left's winning probability discontinuously drops at* $\underline{n}$ *and jumps upward at* $\overline{n}$.

The above proposition provides an account of how the Silent Revolution has led to the rise of progressive policies. When progressives were too few, left-wing leaders—progressive and relatively poorer—pragmatically proposed a conservative policy to increase the likelihood of passing higher taxes. As progressive values become more widespread among voters and n reaches the threshold $\underline{n}$, the Left party takes the risk of proposing progressive policies, even though progressives do not yet constitute a majority and doing so reduces its electoral prospects.[21]. In response, the Right either maintains its traditional stance (low taxes and conservative policies) or, to improve the chances that conservative policies prevail, converges toward the left's economic position. In the former case, some

[21]The model is consistent with the following view: "[In the past,] it wasn't electorally advantageous to campaign on cosmopolitan values. Campaigns centered around [...] economic issues. But over the past 60 years, college graduates have gone from being 4 percent of the electorate to being more like 35 percent. Now, it's actually possible [...] for political parties to openly embrace cosmopolitan values and win elections; [...] and so Democratic elites started campaigning on the things *they'd always wanted to*." [emphasis mine] Interview with David Shor, *Unified Theory of American Politics*, July 2020, *New York Magazine*

poor conservative voters still support the Left. In the latter, realignment along cultural lines is complete: income no longer predicts left-wing voting. How the Silent Revolution unfolds will vary across countries. If n stabilizes at a level between $\underline{n}$ and $\overline{n}$, cultural issues will continue to remain salient. If, instead, n exceeds $\overline{n}$, parties will realign once again along economic lines.

I derive the threshold $\underline{n}$ at which the Left begins to propose a progressive policy:

$$\frac{\Delta v + a(2n-1)}{2\,\Delta t}\,\phi_L \;\geq\; -\frac{a(2n-1)}{2\,\Delta t}\left(\Delta v - x^L \Delta t\right). \tag{20}$$

Starting from an equilibrium in which both the Left and the Right propose conservative policies and differ only on taxes, the Left has an incentive to switch to a progressive policy if the benefit of doing so exceeds the cost. The left-hand side is the probability of winning after the deviation (equation (19)), multiplied by ϕ_L, the Left's utility of a progressive law. The right-hand side is the reduction in the probability of winning caused by the deviation—that is, the probability in (19) minus the probability in (15)—multiplied by the Left's utility gain of implementing high rather than low taxes.

Knowing that under tolerance, $\phi_L = a$, solving (20) under equality gives the threshold at which the progressive policy begins to be proposed by the Left:

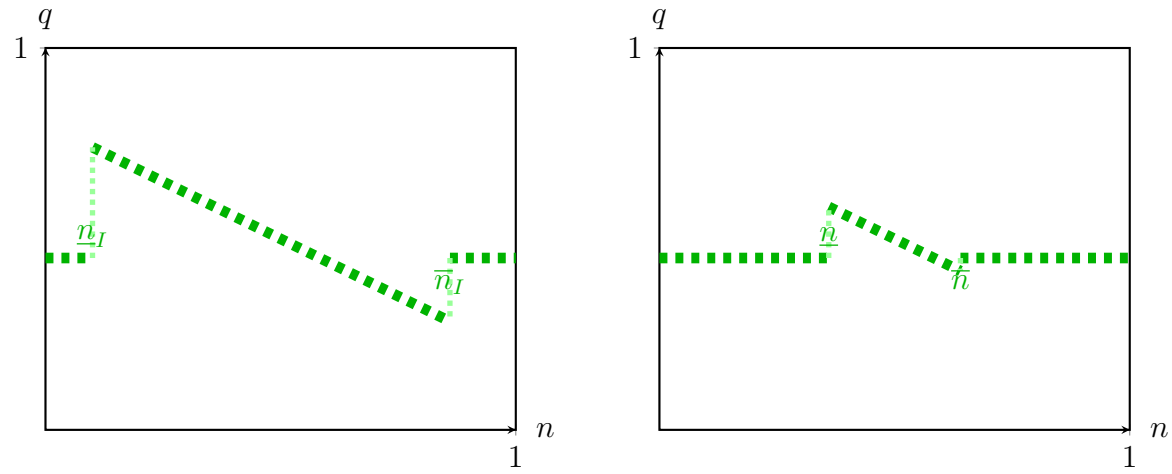
$$\underline{n} = \frac{1}{2}\left(1 - \frac{\Delta v}{\Delta v - x^L \Delta t + a}\right) < \frac{1}{2} \tag{21}$$

An equivalent condition to (20) allows to characterize the threshold at which the conservative policy ceases to be proposed by the Right:

$$\bar{n} = \frac{1}{2}\left(1 + \frac{2\Delta t - \Delta v}{a + x^R \Delta t - \Delta v}\right) > \frac{1}{2} \tag{22}$$

Next, I study how these thresholds vary with changes in parameters. In some cases, the comparative statics are straightforward. For example, it is intuitive that if the Left is represented by richer candidates, it will propose a progressive policy earlier, when progressives are still few, because it is less costly for the Left to reduce the probability that high taxes are implemented.[22] Other comparative statics are more ambiguous. For example, consider variations in the value of the public good, Δv—such as shocks that increase the demand for public spending (e.g., increased defense needs). An increase in Δv has ambiguous effects: it consolidates the Left's electoral advantage (raising the expected benefit of a deviation in (20)), but—since the Left cares more about implementing high

[22]Similarly, if the Left is represented by candidates who are much more progressive than the average progressive in the population, $\underline{n}$ decreases.



(a) Intolerance (b) Tolerance

Figure 7: Low Tax probability: intolerance vs. tolerance.

taxes—it also increases the cost of an electoral loss (the right-hand side of (20)).

Corollary 2 (Value of the Public Good). *An increase in Δv decreases $\underline{n}$ if and only if $\phi_L - x^L \Delta t > 0$, and increases $\overline{n}$ if and only if $\phi_R + (2 - x^R \Delta t) > 0$.*

Next, I consider an increase in ideological polarization along the cultural dimension, driven by the exogenous component a.

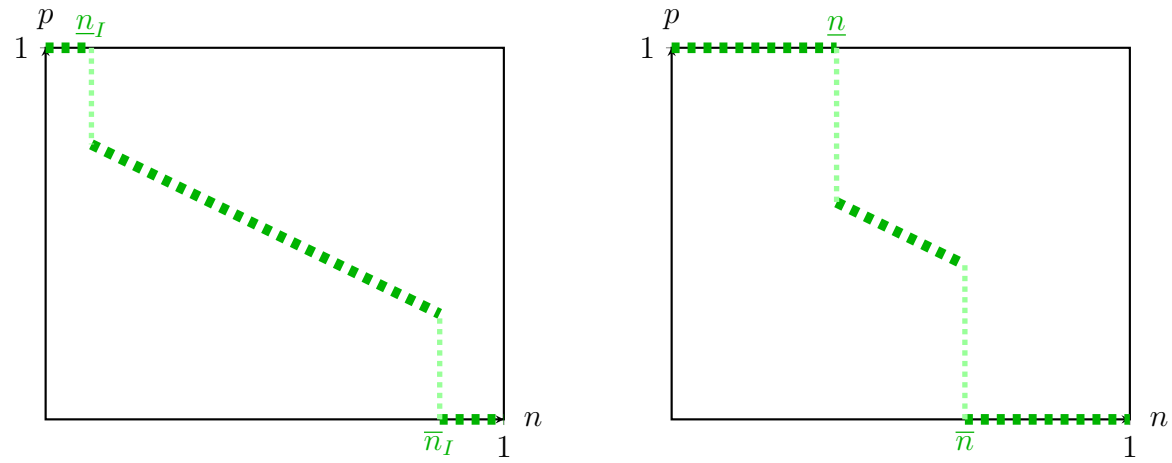
Corollary 3 (Cultural Polarization). *An increase in ideological cultural disagreement (higher a) leads to greater cultural convergence between the two parties: it raises $\underline{n}$ and lowers $\overline{n}$.*

This somewhat surprising result arises because when a rises, the salience of cultural preferences increases symmetrically for both groups and, consequently, this raises the political weight of the group with more voters. Because more voters are more strongly opposed to minority cultural policies, it becomes less advantageous to deviate from the majority position.

4.2. Equilibrium under Intolerance

This section considers the case of mutual intolerance ($I_C = I_P = 1$).[23] The equilibrium is similar to that of mutual tolerance, also in light of Lemma 1. The main difference is that, because party leaders are themselves citizens, intolerance strengthens their cultural

[23] Asymmetric intolerance is not an equilibrium in the model presented in Section 3, which is why we do not consider that case here.



(a) Intolerance (b) Tolerance

Figure 8: Conservative law probability: intolerance vs. tolerance.

preferences, affecting party proposal, and changing the relevant thresholds (now denoted $\underline{n}_I$ and $\bar{n}_I$) at which parties diverge on culture.

Proposition 3 (Political equilibrium under mutual intolerance). *Suppose $I_C = I_P = 1$. The equilibrium has a structure similar to that in Proposition 2; however, the interval of cultural divergence is larger: $\underline{n}_I < \underline{n}$ and $\overline{n}_I > \overline{n}$.*

For example, to determine $\underline{n}_I$, using (4) and substituting ϕ_L into (20), we obtain:

$$\frac{\Delta v + a(2n-1)}{2\,\Delta t}\left[a + (1-n)\kappa(1-\lambda)\right] \;\geq\; -\frac{a(2n-1)}{2\,\Delta t}\left(\Delta v - x^L \Delta t\right). \tag{23}$$

Intolerance increases the Left's gain from proposing a progressive policy—the left-hand side of (23)—thereby lowering $\underline{n}_I$. Similarly, intolerance reduces the Right's willingness to propose progressive policies, even when progressives are a large majority; consequently, $\overline{n}_I$ increases. As a result of these threshold shifts, parties are more likely to propose anti-majoritarian policies. The reason is that, on the one hand, intolerance strengthens the cultural preferences of Left- and Right-party elites, increasing their incentive to deviate from majoritarian cultural policies and push theor preferred cultural policy. On the other hand, as shown in Lemma 1, intolerance does not change the mass of voters preferring one policy over the other.

Figure 8 shows the probability that a conservative law is implemented (denoted by p) as a function of the progressive share n under intolerance (left panel) and tolerance (right panel). The diagonal line represents the probability that the Right wins, $1 - \pi^D$, where π^D is defined in (19). We assume that parameters are such that the Right proposes low taxes for all values of n.

Figure 7 shows the probability that a low tax is implemented (denoted by q) as a function of the progressive share n under intolerance (left panel) and tolerance (right panel). The diagonal line again represents $1 - \pi^D$, where π^D is defined in (19). When the Left and Right converge on cultural policy, the probability of low taxes is below $1/2$ because the Left enjoys an electoral advantage (Assumption 1). Note that intolerance reduces the likelihood that high taxes are implemented when $n < 1/2$, and increases it when $n > 1/2$, because the Left and the Right, respectively, are less pragmatic and therefore propose the anti-majoritarian cultural policy they prefer.

5. Politico Socio-economic Equilibrium

In equilibrium, social and political outcomes must be consistent: the expected policy underlying intolerance must coincide with the actual political equilibrium. Figure 10 plots, in (p, n) space, the intolerance region (Figure 6) together with the political equilibrium (Figure 8), allowing us to verify whether intolerance and policy choices are mutually consistent.

It is instructive to identify which combinations cannot arise in the full equilibrium. In Figure 9, parameters are such that the thresholds under tolerance, $\underline{n}$ and $\bar{n}$, lie close to $1/2$. However, tolerance is not an equilibrium outcome for values of n around $1/2$. Similarly, the thresholds under intolerance, $\underline{n}_I$ and $\bar{n}_I$ (Proposition 3), lie close to 0 and 1, respectively. However, parties cannot diverge on cultural policies for $n \in (\underline{n}_I, \bar{n}_I)$, because for n close to 0 or 1 the equilibrium features tolerance rather than intolerance.

In the specific configuration shown in Figure 9, it is immediate to characterize the full politico–socio-economic equilibrium: there is full divergence when $n \in (\underline{n}^*, \bar{n}^*)$, where $\underline{n}^*$ is the solution of the system

$$n = \frac{c}{(1-\kappa)\big(1 + p(\lambda - 1)\big)} \quad \text{and} \quad p = 1 - \frac{\Delta v + a(2n-1)}{2\Delta t}.$$

and $\bar{n}^*$ is the solution of the system

$$n = \frac{c}{(1-\kappa)\big(\lambda + p(\lambda - 1)\big)} \quad \text{and} \quad p = 1 - \frac{\Delta v + a(2n-1)}{2\Delta t}.$$

More generally, the equilibrium depends on the relative positions of $(\underline{n}_I, \bar{n}_I)$ and $(\underline{n}, \bar{n})$, which depend on the underlying parameters. If $\underline{n} < \underline{n}^*$, the threshold is unique, and the Left party waits until $\underline{n}^*$ before proposing a policy. Similarly, if $\underline{n}_I > \frac{c}{(1-\kappa)\lambda}$, the equilibrium is unique, and the Left proposes a progressive policy as soon as n exceeds $\underline{n}_I$. A symmetric argument determines the conditions under which the Right stops proposing

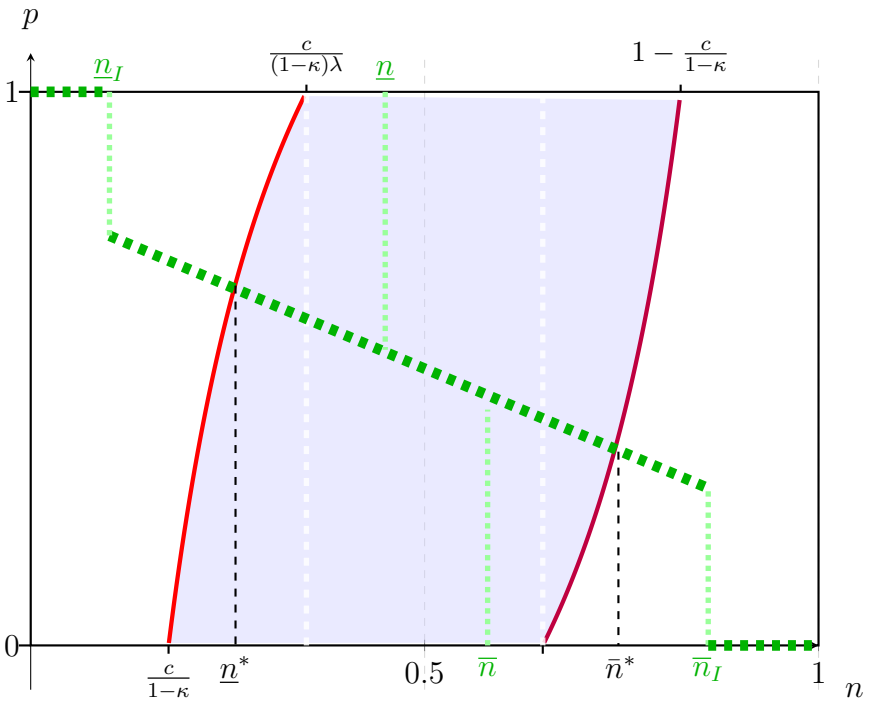


Figure 9: Cultural Law divergence when $n \in [\underline{n}^*, \bar{n}^*]$

a conservative policy.

5.1. Multiple Equilibria

In the politico–socio-economic equilibrium, the thresholds at which parties diverge on culture are not always unique. When n belongs to the blue intervals in Figure 10, i.e., $n \in [\underline{n}_I, B]$ and $n \in [A, \overline{n}_I]$, multiple equilibria arise. To see this, note that if intolerance is expected, the Left proposes a progressive policy for $n \geq \underline{n}_I$, and the associated winning probability lies in the shaded region, thereby confirming intolerance. If tolerance is instead expected, the Left may continue to propose a conservative policy when $n < B$, and the associated winning probability lies outside the shaded region, thereby confirming tolerance.

6. An Extension: Interference Gain

In the previous sections, the benefit of intolerance was defensive, to reduce the externality on one's own way of living from an intolerant outgroup. However, one can also suppose that intolerance provides individuals with an *interference gain*: the ability to impose their preferred way of living on others, beyond what cultural law can achieve. This interference gain is especially high if the outgroup is tolerant. By adding this additional benefit, one introduces strategic substitutabilities: when the interference gain is sufficiently large,

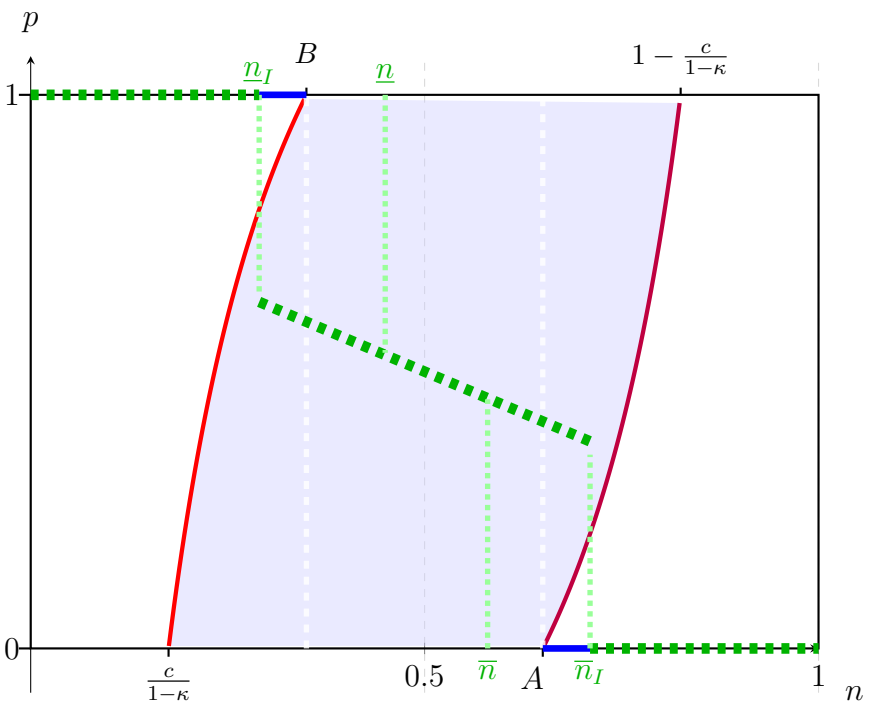


Figure 10: Multiple Equilibria (blue intervals)

when the others are tolerant, it is more advantageous to be intolerant.

C's social payoffs are

$$\tilde{\Phi}_C(I_P) = \begin{cases} -c - n\Big[I_P\kappa\big(p\lambda + 1 - p\big) + \underbrace{\gamma p\big(1-(1-\kappa)I_P\big)}_{\text{interference gain}}\Big], & \text{if } I_C = 1, \\ -nI_P\big(p\lambda + 1 - p\big), & \text{if } I_C = 0. \end{cases} \tag{24}$$

Payoffs are as before, with the only difference that there is an additional term that represents the interference gain from being intolerant. This interference gain is maximized when the outgroup is tolerant and the law favors the in-group (an event occurring with probability p); in this case, the interference gain is γ. If the outgroup is intolerant and the law still favors the conservatives, the interference gain is reduced to $\kappa\gamma$. To keep the analysis tractable, I assume that if the law is expected not to be favorable, the interference gain does not arise.

P's social payoffs are

$$\tilde{\Phi}_P(I_P) = \begin{cases} -c - (1-n)\Big[I_C\kappa\big((1-p)\lambda + p\big) + \underbrace{\gamma(1-p)\big(1-(1-\kappa)I_P\big)}_{\text{interference gain}}\Big], & \text{if } I_P = 1, \\ -(1-n)I_C\big((1-p)\lambda + p\big), & \text{if } I_P = 0. \end{cases} \tag{25}$$

Allowing for an interference gain reduces the region in which mutual tolerance con-

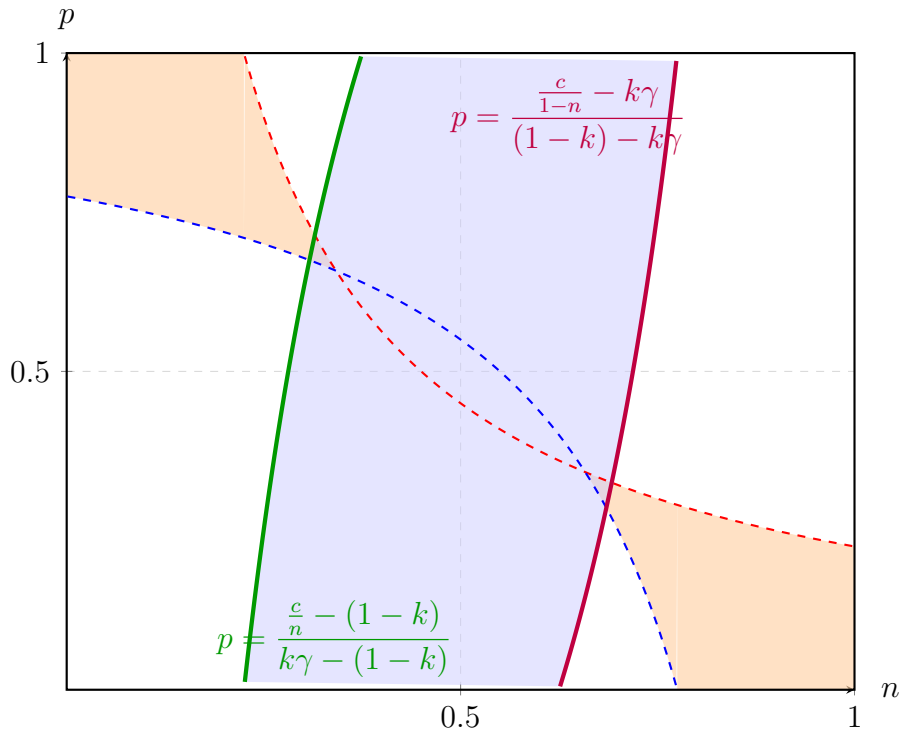


Figure 11: Mutual Intolerance with Interference Gain

stitutes an equilibrium (the orange diamond-shaped area in Figure 11). In some regions of the parameter space, mutual intolerance is the unique equilibrium (see the purple area in Figure 11), and there are also regions in which intolerance is asymmetric. Apart from these differences, the results are qualitatively similar to those presented above. The main difference is that the additional gain further amplifies electoral stakes under social intolerance: favorable laws both mitigate outgroup threat and allow groups to impose their way of life on others.

7. Discussion

This section first discusses the role of economic factors and the binary policy assumption. It then presents evidence on anti-majoritarian policy changes and discusses evidence suggesting that such changes may have generated backlash.

Economic vs. Cultural Factors. Related work—especially in the economics literature on populism—emphasizes economic factors such as recessions, austerity, and globalization,[24] while this paper focuses instead on cultural threats.

Note, however, that while economic threats have no direct effect on intolerance—for

[24]See Guriev and Papaioannou 2022 for a review of this literature. The distinction between economic and cultural threats is not always clear. For example, Margalit 2012 argues that the threat posed by globalization is a "package," including both economic and cultural components.

example, tax policies do not enter the intolerance decision in (6)—economic factors matter indirectly in the model. Changes in economic parameters (for example, a recession that raises the value of the public good) affect the likelihood that cultural laws are implemented, which in turn influences cultural intolerance (see Corollary 2).

In addition, economic factors could complement the mechanism studied here. For example, minorities may be perceived as more numerous than they actually are (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva 2023), and these misperceptions may be amplified during adverse economic shocks.[25]

Ideological vs. Affective Polarization. Because the model assumes a binary policy space, cultural conflict intensifies not because policies become more extreme, but because people view the opposing cultural policy more negatively. This is consistent with evidence that affective polarization—i.e., "how much [voters] prefer their own party to its opponent" (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020, p. 13)—has increased, largely driven by growing hostility toward the opposing party (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024). It is also consistent with evidence that, for example in the U.S., voters' preferences have not necessarily become more dispersed (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005) and that on many issues most voters are actually moderate. In the model, higher affective polarization can arise even without higher ideological polarization (see Figure 5).

Anti-majoritarian Laws and Backlash One implication of my model of electoral competition is that anti-majoritarian policies can arise in equilibrium. As an example, Figure 12 shows episodes of improvement in LGBT rights across different countries (data come from Velasco 2025). The y-axis reports the share of the population that is uncomfortable with having a gay neighbor in the years just before the reform (WVS survey). The figure shows that improvements in rights can occur at different levels of public support, even when a majority of the population is opposed. In some cases, such laws are determined outside electoral politics, for example through judicial decisions. A feature of my model is that anti majoritarian policy changes lead to backlash. This is supprted, for example, by Klarman 2013 who argues that a court "venturing too far in advance of public opinion" might backfire, and "that is the most important cause of backlash." Similarly, Sunstein 1991, p. 766 argues that *Roe* helped radicalize American gender politics and spill over into other cultural conflicts: "[T]he decision may well have created the Moral Majority, helped defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, and undermined the women's movement by spurring opposition."[26] Velasco 2025 discusses backlash against

[25]The role of threat in fostering prejudice is emphasized in Gelfand et al. 2011 and J. C. Jackson et al. 2019.

[26]The "Moral Majority" was a conservative organization founded in the late 1970s to support conservative candidates.

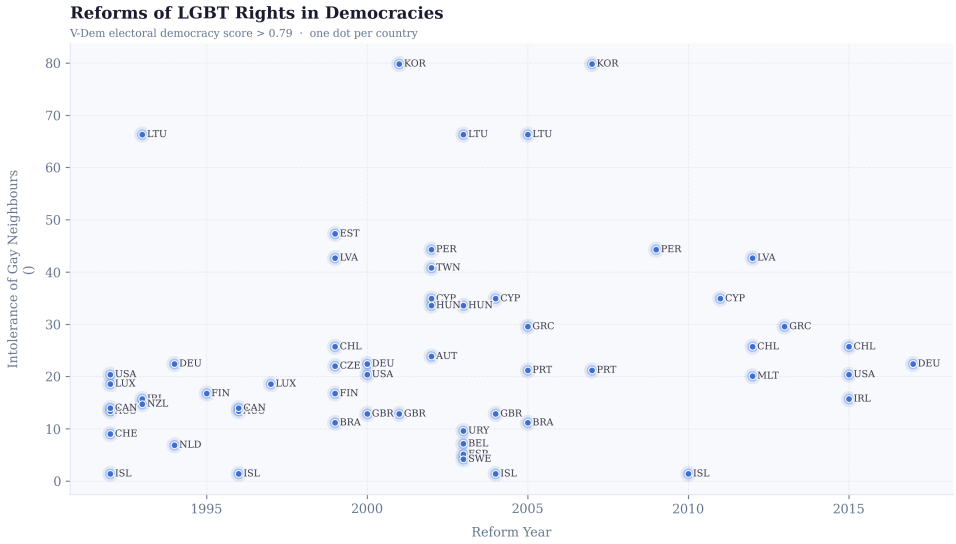


Figure 12: LGBT Reforms

LGBT reforms across countries.[27] For example, Estonia was the first former Soviet state to pass a Cohabitation Law in 2014, and some commentators have described this change in the law as "the starter pistol for the culture wars in Estonia."[28]

Backlash and Threshold Effects. A feature of the model is that cultural outcomes and hostility exhibit threshold effects. These types of threshold effects have been found in both the empirical and theoretical literature. With two opposing groups, intergroup antagonism becomes more salient and conflicts become more intense (Esteban and Ray 2008). Bazzi et al. 2019 empirically show that polarization—defined as the presence of two opposing groups of similar size—has adverse effects on social capital and national cohesion. Card, Mas, and Rothstein 2008 provides empirical evidence of threshold effects: when the minority share in a neighborhood exceeds a critical tipping point, white residents leave.

8. Conclusion

In the U.S., ahead of the November 2024 presidential election, more than two-thirds of voters believed their way of life was under threat if their preferred candidate lost. In many cases, these perceived threats are driven by cultural concerns. How did we reach such extreme levels of hostility, and what explains the growing salience of cultural issues relative to economic ones?

[27] Descriptive evidence in Hickey et al. 2025 shows a spike in hate speech in May 2022, which coincides with the leak of a U.S. Supreme Court 's draft majority opinion signaling the potential overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. See also Herrera Rodríguez 2024.

[28] Tõnis Saarts, "The Roots of Today's Culture Wars," *ERR News*, `https://news.err.ee/1609865568/tonis-saarts-the-roots-of-today-s-culture-wars`

To answer these questions, this paper develops a model with two nested layers: a social layer and a political one. In the model, both cultural intolerance and party platforms—economic and cultural policies—are endogenous. I analyze how political and social outcomes interact as societies gradually shift toward progressive values—the so-called silent revolution—and show that, once the share of progressives exceeds a threshold, an intolerance equilibrium can emerge. I also show that the threshold at which culture becomes salient need not be unique and that expectations matter: a culture-war spiral may emerge in which expected intolerance increases the salience of cultural relative to economic ones for everybody, but relatively more so among the minority group. This increases the chances that minority cultural policies are adopted, which in turn reinforces intolerance and confirms the initial expectations.

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