

# Trends in the Association between a College Education and Political Tolerance, 1976–2016

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## Abstract

In this data visualization, we use data from the General Social Survey to explore long-running trends in the association between a college education and political tolerance toward five groups. For tolerance toward militarists, anti-religionists, communists, and gay men, we show that the tolerance gap between college-educated and non-college educated individuals has narrowed, and this is largely attributable to increased tolerance among the non-college educated. We also find that the tolerance gap toward racists has narrowed; however, this is the result of decreased tolerance among college graduates.

## Keywords

college, political tolerance, attitudes, education

Past studies have found that a college education is associated with greater levels of political tolerance (Bobo and Licari 1989; Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Kingston et al. 2003). However, recent protests related to controversial speakers on college campuses have led to a popular contention that a college education actually suppresses political tolerance. These discussions led us to explore long-running trends in the association between education and political tolerance.

Since the 1970s, the General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2018) has consistently included 15 items related to political tolerance. Specifically, these items consider political tolerance toward five groups: (1) militarists who advocate doing away with elections and letting the military run the country, (2) anti-religionists who are against all churches and religion, (3) communists, (4) gay men, and (5) racists who believe that blacks are genetically inferior. For each group, respondents were asked whether they support or oppose that group having the right to three types of expression: making a public speech, teaching at a college or university, and having a book in a public library. Each of the 15 variables (5 groups × 3 types of expression) is dichotomous, where 1 = supports freedom of expression for this group and 0 = opposes freedom of expression for this group. Using these measures as our outcome variables, we estimated 15 separate logistic regression models and present the results in Figure 1. In each

model, we included an interaction between whether the respondent was a college graduate (1 = had at least a bachelor's degree, 0 = had no more than a high school diploma) and survey year, allowing us to explore trends in the association between college and political tolerance. We included controls for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region of residence at age 16. While the unadjusted trends are substantively similar to the adjusted trends, we elected to include these covariates in order to present more conservative estimates of the association between college and political tolerance. We used survey weights for all analyses.

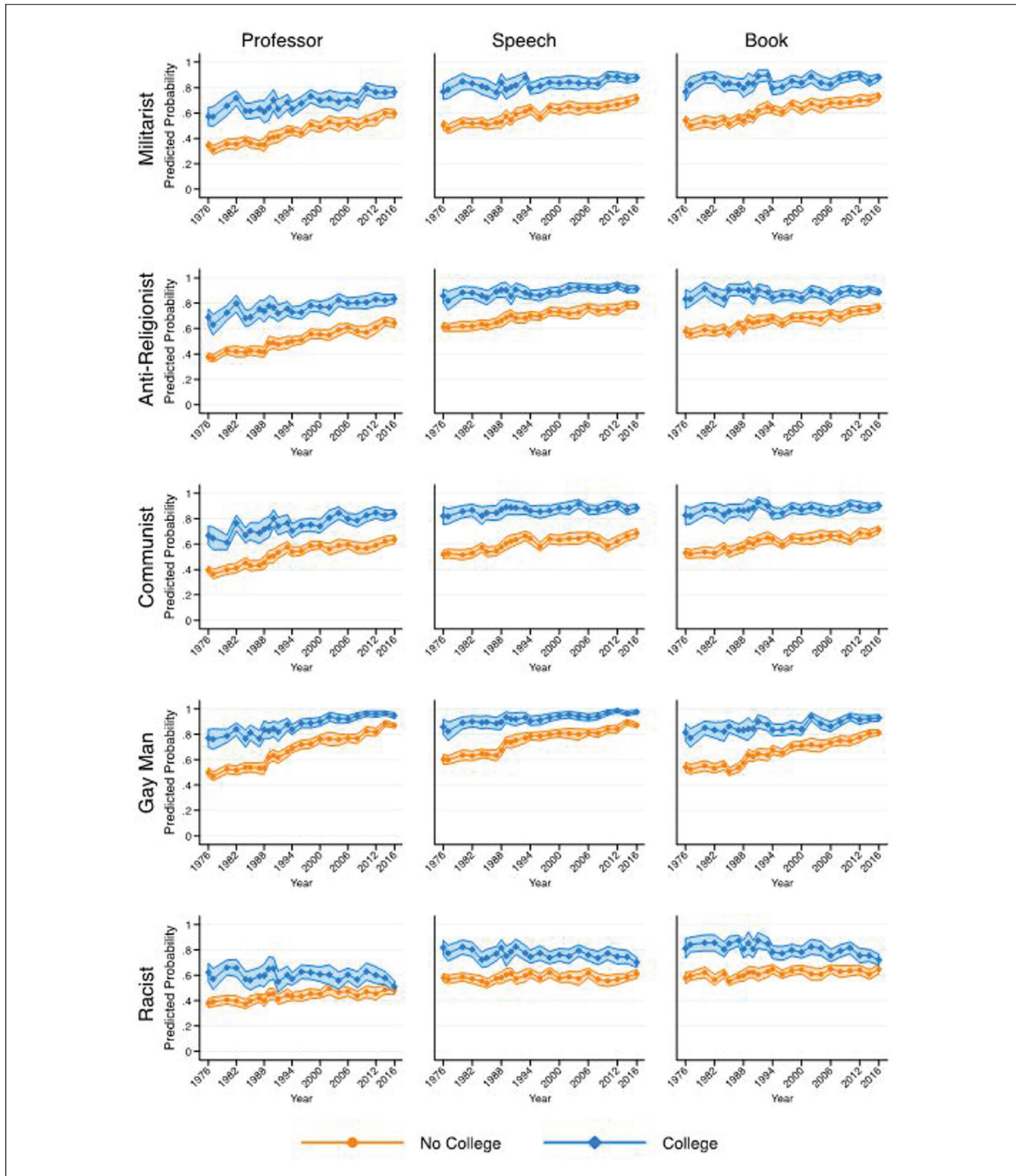
Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities derived from the 15 logistic regression models. The figure reveals two notable findings. First, for tolerance toward militarists, anti-religionists, communists, and gay men, the tolerance gap between the college educated and non-college educated has narrowed. This is largely attributable to increased tolerance among the non-college educated. While tolerance toward these groups has increased among college graduates, tolerance was already high in the 1970s among college graduates, and the increases

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**Figure 1.** This figure displays trends in tolerance for three types of expression (i.e., “Professor”—teaching at a college or university, “Speech”—making a public speech, and “Book”—having a book in a public library) for five groups (i.e., militarists who advocate doing away with elections and letting the military run the country, anti-religionists who are against all churches and religion, communists, gay men, and racists who believe that blacks are genetically inferior). Estimates were derived from weighted logistic regression models that included an interaction between college and survey year as well as controls for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region of residence at age 16. The shaded areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Data are from the General Social Survey. N = 26,734.

were larger among the non-college educated. The increases in tolerance toward gay men are particularly striking. For example, in 1976, the predicted probability that a non-college educated person would support a gay man teaching at a college or university was .5; by 2016, the predicted probability had increased to .87.

The second key finding relates to tolerance toward racists. In particular, the tolerance gap toward racists between college educated and non-college educated individuals also narrowed; however, the narrowing gap is largely due to *decreased* tolerance among college graduates. For example, in 1976, the predicted probability that a college-educated person would support a racist teaching at a college or university was .62. In 2016, the predicted probability was .51.

Figure 1 shows that college graduates are not becoming less tolerant overall, and while tolerance among the non-college educated has increased, college graduates still report higher levels of political tolerance on average. However, college graduates have become less tolerant of racists. We suspect this is because racists express particularly hateful speech and that the threats posed by racists are perceived as concrete and credible. Still, while college graduates have become less tolerant of racists over time, college graduates are not less tolerant toward racists than non-college graduates.

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## Author Biographies

**Colin Campbell** is an assistant professor of sociology at East Carolina University. His primary research focuses on poverty, inequality, and social support networks.

**Jerry Johnson, Jr.** recently completed an MA in sociology from East Carolina University. His thesis explored the spillover of college effects on racial attitudes in white married couples with differing levels of education. He is currently completing a certificate in statistics and is interested in race and ethnic relations, political tolerance, and quantitative methods.