

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Determinants of Attitudes Toward Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

Existing research on public opinion towards Indigenous peoples tends to focus on the extent to which citizens hold racist and anti-Indigenous attitudes. In contrast, few empirical studies have examined the extent to which citizens support reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Drawing on data from the 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES), we construct a novel Indigenous reconciliation scale to measure non-Indigenous support for policies that seek to address the historical and ongoing legacies of residential schools. We then compare this scale to existing measures of Indigenous resentment before investigating the effects of several individual-level determinants related to attitudes, elite cues, and policy preferences on support for Indigenous reconciliation policies. Our findings shed light on the ongoing efforts in settler countries in North and South America and Australasia to decolonize their settler institutions and to create new and renewed relationships with Indigenous communities in those countries.

Keywords: Indigenous politics; public opinion; race and ethnic politics; reconciliation; transitional justice

Indigenous reconciliation has become a powerful basis for change across settler societies (Alcantara 2013; Van Cott 2007; Wilkins and Stark 2010). Although Indigenous mobilization is crucial to the emergence of state-led reconciliation processes and policies (Alcantara 2010; Scholtz 2006), so too is public support from those members of society who are not Indigenous, especially in countries where non-Indigenous peoples are the dominant majority (Bergmann 2024; Burstein 2003; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). The failed 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum is a striking example of how a lack of public support can hinder reconciliation efforts (McAllister and Biddle 2024).

In this paper, we investigate the determinants of public support for Indigenous reconciliation policies in Canada. Although there exists a small but growing comparative literature on prejudicial attitudes toward Indigenous peoples, few

studies have focused on public support for Indigenous reconciliation policies (Beauvais 2022, 2021; Williamson, 2024).¹ To address this lacuna, we theorize and explore the effects of three sets of factors that could influence the extent to which citizens are likely to support state policies toward Indigenous reconciliation: prejudicial attitudes towards Indigenous persons and minorities; partisan and religious identities; and policy preferences regarding support for minorities and equal rights. Empirically, we draw upon data from the 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES) (Stephenson *et al.* 2022) to explore the determinants of public support for policies aimed at addressing the legacies of the residential school system in Canada. This state-supported program involved taking Indigenous children from their homes and sending them to live at church-run boarding schools to receive a Western education. At these schools, many children suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and trauma, and sometimes death, leading some to suggest this is evidence of state-sponsored genocide (TRC 2015). The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2016 (TRC 2015), the report of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry in 2016, and the more recent discovery of potential mass graves of Indigenous children who attended residential schools (Gulliver 2021) have all raised the saliency of Indigenous issues considerably, making the Canadian case ideal for exploring the determinants of support for Indigenous-focused reconciliation policies. These issues have also become salient in other countries. For example, in New Zealand, public demonstrations and marches occurred in response to promises made by the 2023 coalition government formed to rescind preferential treatment policies for Māori communities. In Australia, there was a rancorous debate during the 2023 Australian referendum over a proposal to enshrine Indigenous political representation in the Australian constitution (McAllister and Biddle 2024).

In this article, we develop and test a measure of reconciliation attitudes in Canada. We then document that policies relating to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples are generally supported by respondents in Canada, but there is also meaningful variation depending on attitudes towards groups, partisan and religious identities, and policy preferences. While negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples obviously structure policy support, our findings suggest that attitudes about reconciliation are not simply—or only—a proxy for group attitudes. Instead, we show that partisan and religious identities and policy attitudes underpin how people respond specifically to reconciliation policies, above and beyond prejudicial attitudinal effects. These findings point to the complexity of reconciliation efforts and the need for more research to better understand the determinants of public support for reconciliation within the group-based legacies of discrimination and the socio-political context in which reconciliation policies are proposed.

Defining Reconciliation

The concept of reconciliation is frequently applied in contexts where the state has a long and ongoing history of large-scale human rights violations toward selected social groups (El-Masri *et al.* 2020: 3; Walker 2018). Reconciliation emerges, either as an ongoing process or as an end state, when governments adopt policies and processes that try to rectify these violations. The goal is to repair relationships

between the state and its citizens by removing the structural causes of discrimination and inequality within the country, restoring dignity to marginalized groups, and empowering them to become full and equal citizens (Seils 2017: 1; Murphy 2017). The result is a perpetual state of “non-alienation”, in which the state and society actively protect all “members against social relationships and structures in which inequalities in power, status differences, institutional mechanisms, social practices or cultural artifacts” lead to “the explicit or systematic disrespect of the affected person’s (or group’s) status as socially free and equal” (Schuppert 2015: 451). To achieve non-alienation in the social world, reconciliation processes operate at multiple levels, including the individual (e.g. victims coming to terms with the trauma they experienced), the interpersonal (e.g. victims and perpetrators working together to repair relationships), the socio-political (e.g. reconciliation between groups), and the institutional (e.g. the restoration of trust between the state and its citizens) (Seils 2017: 4–6).

Canadian efforts at Indigenous reconciliation reflect many of these sentiments and have evolved over time. Early efforts at reconciliation were assimilative and colonial in nature and focused on non-alienation (e.g. Indigenous peoples are no different than any other social group) (Flanagan 2008). Over time, Canadian policies shifted to recognizing Indigenous peoples as “Citizens plus” (e.g. Indigenous peoples are Canadian citizens with special rights) (Cairns 2001) and then as nations deserving of greater control and autonomy over their lives (RCAP 1996). Indeed, current federal reconciliation policies talk about the need to work “in partnership with Indigenous Peoples to address past harms, support strong and healthy communities, and advance self-determination and prosperity” (Government of Canada 2023). From the perspective of the Crown, however, reconciliation can only occur under the presumption of Canada’s unquestioned and unchallenged sovereignty over all lands and peoples within its borders. There is no room for co-sovereignty with Indigenous constitutional orders (Ladner 2018). Global Affairs Canada, for instance, defines reconciliation as working with Indigenous communities to foster “strong, healthy and sustainable Indigenous nations *within a strong Canada*” (emphasis added), meaning reconciliation can only occur within the constitutional framework of Canada (Canada 2022; McCrossan and Ladner 2016).

In contrast to these conceptions of reconciliation, many Indigenous scholars and their allies argue that reconciliation must go beyond non-alienation towards an ongoing process in which Indigenous peoples, settlers, and the state work together to create sustainable and positive relationships with each other, grounded in Indigenous traditions and constitutional orders (Borrows 2010; Borrows and Tully 2018). According to Tsartlip Elder May Sam, “reconciliation for her people is a relationship of mutual respect and sharing with Mother Earth and all our kin – human and more than human—that we have responsibilities to acknowledge and enact in every breath and step we take” (Borrows and Tully 2018: 13). This means that settlers and the settler state should return land back to Indigenous peoples and empower and give them the space to restore and strengthen their political, economic, and social systems (Alfred 2023; Coulthard 2014). It also means transforming the Canadian state so that Indigenous constitutional orders are recognized as equal to the Canadian one, not only in the courtroom, but also in its

political, economic, and social arenas (Borrows 2010). Further, it means rejecting any sort of “convergence of nations” approach to instead embrace activities that transform our collective consciousness about Indigenous peoples and the historical and ongoing harms that the settler state and settlers have and continue to perpetuate towards them.

In short, the concept of reconciliation inhabits a continuum. At the one end is non-alienation or assimilation, in which Indigenous peoples are treated no differently than any other group, and so they do not have any special programs or rights that are attached to their nationhood or claims to land (Flanagan 2008). At the other end is Indigenous resurgence, in which Indigenous communities are independent entities with their own constitutional orders and economic and social systems, derived not from the state but rather from their own rights to self-determination (Couthard 2014). In between these extremes are reconciliation models such as “Citizens Plus”, in which Indigenous people are first and foremost citizens but with additional rights that recognize their Indigeneity (Cairns 2001), and nation-to-nation (RCAP 1996), in which Indigenous communities are province-like entities with significant autonomy that other social groups do not enjoy, but which still exist within the constitutional order of the settler state. In all cases, except for non-alienation, meaningful reconciliation requires the state to recognize the traumatic experiences it inflicted on Indigenous peoples before engaging in processes and policies that lead to the recognition and protection of Indigenous identity (TRC 2015). As Ladner (2018: 249) notes, settlers/citizens need to come “to terms with those great myths that deny the past, and in so doing continue to deny Indigenous humanity and rights, both in the past and present” and Canada must “confront its mythologized exceptionalism ... [which] constructs Canada as the good colonizer, a peaceful nation that did not engage in Indian wars but has instead always dealt justly with Canada’s Indigenous peoples” (see also Frank *et al.* 1983; Macklem 2001).

Attitudes Towards Reconciliation

Despite the growing salience of Indigenous reconciliation, we know relatively little about settlers’ attitudes toward Indigenous peoples. What we do know is that Indigenous peoples frequently endure many instances of prejudice, pernicious stereotypes, and discriminatory behavior across settler societies (Enviroics 2010; Findling *et al.* 2019; González *et al.* 2022). Much of the literature on attitudes towards out-groups stems from the United States, rooted in work by Kinder and Sears (1981) on symbolic racism, among others (see also, Henry and Sears 2002). In the United States, most studies have focused on categorizing and describing these instances and expressing Native American feelings about them in a broad range of political and social spaces (Findling *et al.* 2019; Robertson 2015; Williams 2007). In contrast, only a handful of studies (Foxworth and Boulding 2022) have focused on public attitudes towards Native Americans, and when they do, the focus is usually on public opinion in relation to the mascots of college and professional sports teams (Williams 2007). Jimenez *et al.* (2023), for instance, found that prejudicial attitudes towards Native Americans increased substantially after Cleveland’s major league baseball team decided to retire its Native American mascot, Chief Wahoo.

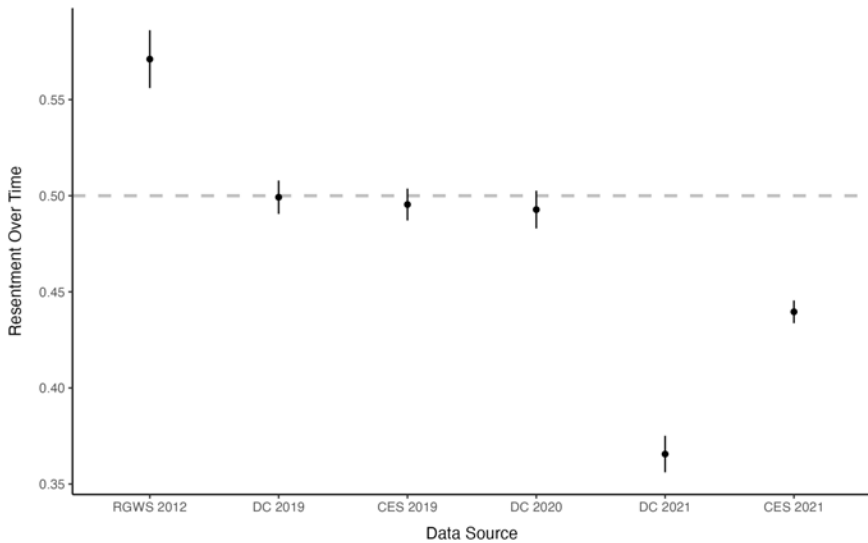


Figure 1. Indigenous resentment over time.

In Australia and Canada, it is only relatively recently that scholars have turned to empirically documenting the existence of anti-Indigenous sentiment. In Australia, Shirodkar (2019) found that Australians broadly held negative unconscious views about Indigenous peoples in their country but that these opinions are becoming more positive over time (Levy and McAllister 2022). Similarly in Canada, recent papers by Beauvais (2021, 2022) and Harell et al. (2014, 2016) found evidence of strong resentment toward Indigenous peoples, but this resentment may be decreasing over time. Figure 1 depicts these trends by presenting a short scale of Indigenous resentment over the course of six surveys, one in 2012 (Harell et al. 2012) and five conducted between 2019 and 2021 (Harell et al. 2020, 2021, 2022; Stephenson 2020, 2023).² It shows that feelings of resentment seem to have decreased over time, with a large dip in late May/early June 2021 (e.g. 2021 Democracy Checkup (DC) data were collected between May 20–June 7) and a significant increase in the fall of 2021 when the 2021 Canadian Election Study data were collected. The dip in 2021 coincided with the discovery of multiple mass graves at the sites of former residential schools (Gulliver 2021), suggesting that making the consequences of residential schools salient may have helped to decrease resentment towards Indigenous peoples (see also Williamson, 2024).

In terms of the substance and nature of these negative attitudes, they are often grounded in colonialism and a lack of knowledge and understanding of the current realities of Indigenous peoples. For example, Fryberg and Eason (2017) suggest that contemporary prejudice toward Native Americans is often grounded in “commissions” of romanticized stereotypes and “omissions” that render Native people largely absent from contemporary media coverage and settlers’ own awareness and contact (see also Davis-Delano et al. 2021). In terms of contemporary attitudes grounded in the on-going experience and consequences of colonialism,

Foxworth and Boulding (2022) document how resentment toward Indigenous peoples is often framed in terms of Native Americans having special rights that are unfair or unequal, such as the right to build and manage casinos on their territories. In Canada, Beauvais (2021, 2022) argues that Indigenous resentment differs from other forms of prejudice as it is often grounded in conflicts over Indigenous lands, language rights, and jurisdictional autonomy, all of which are rooted in historical and ongoing processes of colonization. In New Zealand, negative attitudes toward the Māori are similarly grounded in ideologies of “colonization, land alienation, and political inequality” because these are “*undeniable* features of post-colonial societies that must be addressed (and mitigated) by ideologies developed by the ruling class” (Sibley and Osborne 2016, 117; see also Satherley and Sibley 2018).

In sum, negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples are often grounded in perceived conflicts that emerge out of colonization as well as intergroup conflict more generally. Yet, we know surprisingly little about how settlers feel specifically about addressing the legacies of these processes through reconciliation initiatives. The one exception we are aware of is Campo *et al.* (2004), which found that while race predicted American attitudes towards certain kinds of reparations for slavery (e.g. compensation and community-based programs for Black individuals), race failed to predict support for reparations for other racial groups, including Japanese Americans, Holocaust survivors, and Native Americans. Other studies have looked at the relationship between public support for Indigenous reconciliation and attitudes about nature and levels of critical historical knowledge, finding that they are correlated, but these studies rely on university student samples ranging in size (approximately 20, 200, and 1200; Neufeld *et al.* 2022; Starzyk *et al.* 2021; Woolford *et al.* 2022), which means their generalizability is likely limited. The relatively small number of studies on this topic is surprising given that in many settler contexts, such as in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, Indigenous issues have become salient to different degrees, especially as Indigenous communities have become more successful at politically mobilizing, organizing, and negotiating institutional and policy changes that strengthen their communities (Miller 2018; Hobbs 2020; Wilkins and Stark 2010).

While the literature on public opinion towards Indigenous reconciliation is scarce, the same is not true for research on reconciliation attitudes towards other marginalized, non-Indigenous populations. Some studies have developed rich descriptions of how citizens conceive of reconciliation (El-Masri *et al.* 2020). Rettberg and Ugarriza (2016), for instance, found that Colombians prefer reconciliation to be targeted towards improving social relations more generally rather than targeting particular groups for redress. Colombians want the state to provide perpetrators with the opportunity to accept responsibility and blame, rather than subject them to punitive punishments. Finally, Colombians seem “to care more about their well-being and their relations with others in their immediate context than for abstract processes of rebuilding historical memory at a central level. In fact, only a few respondents explicitly explained reconciliation as a process of dealing with the past or the future” (Rettberg and Ugarriza 2016: 531–32).

Other studies have focused on assessing the determinants of support for the general idea of reconciliation. James Gibson’s (2004) research on South Africa has found that those who acknowledge and accept the truth about their country’s

ignoble past are more likely to hold more positive attitudes towards reconciliation. Aguilar and colleagues (2011: 1398) examined whether a broader range of individual factors (e.g. age, interest in politics, education, religiosity, and ideology), socialization experiences (whether family identity was linked to the previous regime, politics discussed at home, ideology of father, and whether the family or individual was a victim), and contextual factors (whether a region was strongly repressed due to their linguistic or cultural identity) influence attitudes toward creating truth commissions, prosecuting perpetrators, and removing all symbols tied to the Franco regime. They found that “ideology and religiosity are decisive determinants of support”; specifically, highly religious conservatives were less likely to support transitional justice (TJ) efforts (Aguilar et al. 2011: 1418–19). Age and education only had modest effects, with older respondents (and especially those in rural settings) less supportive of TJ policies. In terms of socialization experiences and contextual factors, they found that family ties to the previous regime and whether you lived in a culturally/linguistically distinct region reduced public support for TJ measures (Aguilar et al. 2011: 1419; see also Bobowick et al. 2017).

Another stream of research on reconciliation has focused on developing models that predict support for different kinds of reconciliation initiatives, including political apologies, symbolic (e.g. museums and monuments) and financial reparations, and public policies that purport to eliminate all forms of discrimination or which mandate the preferential treatment of marginalized groups. In most studies, the dominant social group is more likely to support symbolic gestures and policies that promote non-alienation and less likely to support distributive and preferential reconciliation measures (Campo et al. 2004; Torpey and Burkett 2010). Reichelmann and Hunt (2022), for instance, find that variation in white American attitudes towards reparations for slavery in 2016 depended mainly on the type of reparation being considered, with respondents more likely to support symbolic efforts (e.g. memorials) and policies of non-alienation in the workplace, and less likely to support financial reparations and preferential treatment policies for Black Americans. Other studies suggest that these effects are likely driven by in-group pride and perceptions of deservingness for the marginalized, aggrieved group (Reichelmann et al. 2022). Similarly, Bobowick et al. (2017) found that support for institutional apologies in three South American countries depends on the extent to which victims and non-victims perceive the structural conditions in their country to be favourable to collective hope and security. In short, the effects of different kinds of reconciliation policies may be overcome by individual and contextual factors (Aguilar et al. 2011; Bobowick et al. 2017; Reichelmann et al. 2022).

Predicting Attitudes toward Indigenous Reconciliation

The comparative literature above suggests that support for reconciliation is likely influenced by the types of reconciliation policies under consideration (Reichelmann and Hunt 2022; Torpey and Burkett 2010), but also by a range of individual, socialization, and contextual factors that can outweigh considerations specific to the policies being proposed (Aguilar et al. 2011; Banting et al. 2022; Bobowick et al. 2017; Reichelmann et al. 2022). It is also important to consider existing research about attitudes towards Indigenous communities in settler contexts where

colonialism and dispossession were crucial to state formation. In one systematic review of 20 articles examining public opinion towards Indigenous peoples in Australia, the authors found that age had mixed effects, but men and individuals with lower levels of education were generally more negative towards Indigenous peoples (Falls and Anderson 2022). They also found that those who demonstrated a “social-dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism” were also more likely to hold negative attitudes towards Indigenous peoples (see also Heaven and Quintin 2003), as did those who belonged to the Anglican Church (Falls and Anderson 2022). In the Canadian context, several studies have found that negative evaluations of Indigenous peoples correlate with an increased desire to be socially distanced from Indigenous peoples, increased opposition to Indigenous-focused government spending (Beauvais 2021), increased opposition to welfare for Indigenous beneficiaries (Harell *et al.* 2014, 2016), and increased support for the building of new pipeline infrastructure (Beauvais 2022).

Taking all the existing research together, as well as general expectations related to policy attitudes, there seem to be three key categories of factors to consider. First, since reconciliation policies are explicitly designed to recognize wrongs committed by non-Indigenous persons against Indigenous peoples, general attitudes towards Indigenous peoples are likely to be relevant. Someone who has negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples is unlikely to be supportive of policies designed for that group’s benefit.

Beyond attitudes about the groups identified by a policy, there are more general considerations known to shape policy opinions that might structure baseline inclinations toward new policies. Research on public opinion makes it clear that group identities are important when people are developing their own opinions about new or complex issues, as groups can provide individuals with cues about what a consistent stance would be (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Since we are interested in reconciliation policies, which are both relatively newer additions to Canadian political debate as well as complicated in terms of understanding rights, responsibilities, and obligations, partisan and religious identities could be important for understanding policy stances. With respect to partisanship, those who identify with a political party often develop opinions in line with the stances of their preferred party. Especially for individuals who are ambivalent or who have not considered the issue of reconciliation policies, heuristics like party cues can be extremely useful (Bullock 2011). In Canada, conservative and ideologically right-wing parties have been generally less supportive of policies that recognize the distinctive rights and claims of Indigenous communities relative to the Liberal, New Democratic, and Green parties at the ideological center and left. Indeed, reflecting these trends, Indigenous voters have been found to disproportionately support the two main federal parties on the left, the Liberals and the NDP, relative to the main federal party on the right, the Conservatives (Harell and Panagos 2013; Dabin *et al.* 2019: 48). While partisan and ideological differences partly capture how parties “sort” the population along values, when confronted with specific policy proposals, we expect that Canadians may be particularly likely to take cues from elites from relevant social and political groups. We expect, therefore, those on the left of the political spectrum and those who support parties on the left will be more likely to

support Indigenous reconciliation policies relative to those who support right-wing parties or are themselves positioned on the right.

In terms of religion, although residential schools were created by the federal government, they were run and administered by the Catholic church and other Christian denominations (TRC 2015; Miller 2017; see also Aguilar et al. 2011: 1418–19). Blame for the atrocities that were committed has been leveled in part at Christian churches. For their part, the churches have typically responded with penitence but with limited financial support for reparations (Austen 2022; Grant and Cardoso 2021). Therefore, we expect Christian respondents, whose own religions are implicated, to be less likely to support reconciliation policies. Finally, given the very public verbal support for reconciliation provided by the government of Canada, including by then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau after the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015,³ we think that it might be seen as the “Canadian” thing to do to support such policies. Therefore, those who value their identity as Canadians may take the government’s cue and support reconciliation policies.

Finally, related policy preferences are likely to shape one’s opinions on efforts toward reconciliation as well. Since reconciliation involves government actions for a minoritized group, it is likely that general attitudes towards government spending and activity, especially targeted policies for minority groups, will be relevant. It is not uncommon for individuals to develop opinions on new issues that are consistent with their existing policy preferences, especially if they are based on underlying values or orientations. For example, those who have a strong sense of justice or believe in support for minorities in general might likewise support Indigenous reconciliation efforts. Based mainly on Falls and Anderson (2022), we therefore expect that attitudes about inequality in other domains may inform preferences over reconciliation policies. Similarly, we expect that support for government spending to support minorities is a relevant consideration as it captures a general willingness to proactively support minority-targeted policies and inclusion more generally.

In the next section below, we empirically explore the impact of a range of individual-level determinants that various literatures suggest should be important for influencing public opinion, with a specific focus on how group prejudice, partisan and religious identities, and other policy attitudes may shape public support for reconciliation in Canada.

Data and Methods

Our analysis relies on the 2021 Canadian Election Study (Stephenson et al. 2023), a survey of the general population conducted online with panelists from the Leger Opinion panel. The sample was drawn to be balanced on gender and age with region and language quotas. Canadian citizens and permanent residents aged 18 and over were eligible. The survey had two waves—one in the weeks leading up to the election, and one immediately after. 20,968 people answered the campaign period wave and 15,069 answered the post-election wave. The 2021 CES is ideally suited for this study because it contains the necessary sociodemographic, political, and attitudinal questions, including a battery of questions to gauge Indigenous resentment as well as another to gauge support for reconciliation, which we use to

Table 1. Reconciliation scale items

Item	Statement wording
Accelerate progress	Accelerate progress on the calls to action from the truth and reconciliation commission
Federal funding	Federal government funding to identify unmarked graves at all former residential schools
Ceasing court actions	All governments ceasing court actions against residential school survivors and first nations children
Renaming buildings	Renaming buildings and institutions that are named for people who built or ran parts of the residential school system

build Indigenous resentment and reconciliation scales. Developing single measures from multiple items enables us to capture underlying attitudes and, for Indigenous resentment at least, is consistent with the approach of classic (Henry and Sears 2002) and recent scholarship on this and other related topics (Beauvais 2022; 2021).

Developing an Indigenous Reconciliation Scale

Before moving to evaluate the correlates of attitudes about reconciliation, we construct a scale using the four Likert-type questions from the 2021 CES. The questions capture attitudes on government actions and policies towards Indigenous peoples, particularly within the context of those impacted by residential schools. These questions span the topics of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: accelerating progress on the calls to action, federal funding for unmarked graves, court actions directed at residential school survivors, and the renaming of buildings for those individuals associated with the residential schools.⁴ At the same time, these questions do not capture the full range of possible reconciliation policies or outcomes. Questions relating to more expansive forms of self-government, land restitution, and constitutional change, for instance, might produce a wider range of public opinion. Nonetheless, the CES questions that are available do capture a reasonable range of reconciliation policies, from symbolic (e.g. accelerate progress; rename buildings) to more substantive (e.g. federal funding and ceasing court actions) that vary in terms of the kind of costs imposed on the Crown and the public more generally. The specific wording of the four questions is displayed in Table 1.⁵ Respondents were presented with four response options—strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, somewhat support, and strongly support—to rate their level of agreement with the statements. For each of the four questions, opposition to the statement indicated less support for reconciliation and support for the statement meant greater support for reconciliation. Because support for reconciliation can be understood as a latent, continuous concept, a summated rating model provides a valuable framework for capturing the construct. The summated rating model allows us to transform multiple ordinal indicators into a single-level measure of support for reconciliation policies. To create the scale, we calculated the mean score across the four items ($\alpha=.73$).⁶ Figure 2 displays the distribution of reconciliation scale

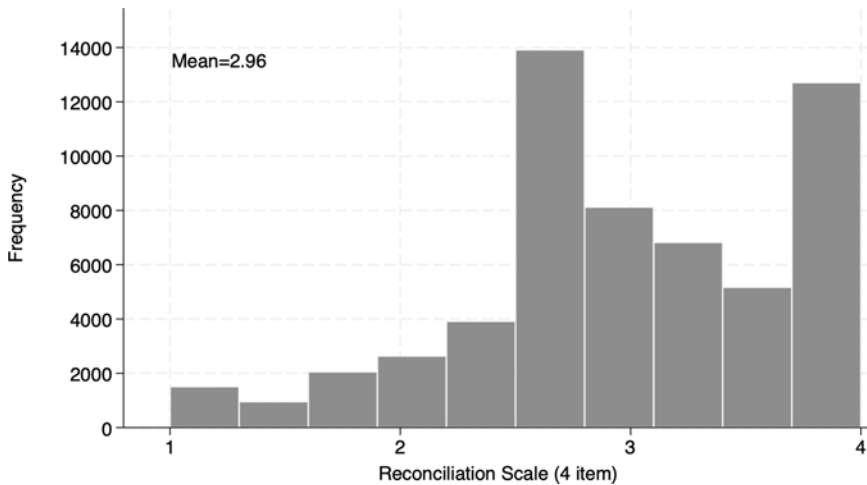


Figure 2. Indigenous reconciliation scale.

scores for 2021 CES respondents, showing that, on average, respondents were more supportive than unsupportive of reconciliation.⁷

As this scale has not been used in previous academic work (to the best of our knowledge), validating the scale is important, which means assessing the construct's dimensionality, monotone homogeneity, reliability, and criterion validity. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and based upon the results of a scree plot analysis and loadings, the variables load on a single dimension (see Appendix Figure A1). All items are retained in the index as the factor loadings are all above the accepted .3 threshold (see Appendix Table A1).⁸ The scale's Cronbach's alpha, which provides an estimate of the true reliability of the reconciliation scale, is .73.⁹ We also looked at the Cronbach's alpha for each item in relation to the rest scores, which exclude that specific item; the scores range from .61 to .78, indicating that each item is a reliable indicator of the concept (Appendix Table A2).¹⁰

Finally, we examined criterion validity using an Indigenous resentment scale created from three indicators in the 2021 CES Study data (as shown in Figure 1).¹¹ Theoretically, if our reconciliation measure truly captures attitudes in favour of policies that would lead to more reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, it should be negatively correlated with indicators of Indigenous resentment.¹² The wording of the three Likert-scale questions designed to measure resentment are displayed in Table A3 in the Appendix.¹³ Respondents were tasked with selecting one of the following: strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree. For the "Favors" item, agreement with the statement meant greater Indigenous resentment. We reverse-coded "Colonialism" and "Deserve" so that higher levels of the item also indicated greater resentment. As with the reconciliation scale, the resentment scale was created using a summated rating model and we ran the same validation tests on it, which are included in the

appendix (Figure A2, Tables A3-5); the tests suggest that the Indigenous resentment scale is valid and reliable. Our reconciliation scale has a significant negative relationship with the Indigenous resentment scale (correlation is $-.62$, $p < .001$), further supporting the validity of the Indigenous reconciliation scale.

Analyzing Determinants of Support for Reconciliation Policies

Having established the validity of the Indigenous reconciliation scale, we can use it as the dependent variable in regression models to identify the correlates of support for reconciliation policies. We focus on three sets of individual characteristics: group attitudes, partisan and religious identities, and existing policy preferences. We analyse these blocs separately and then in a final combined model. The first bloc, group attitudes, uses the Indigenous resentment scale described in the previous section. The second bloc includes various political and religious identities, in this case, partisanship, ideology, religion, and Canadian identity. To capture political orientation, we created a categorical variable indicating partisans of each major political party in Canada (Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Bloc Quebecois, Green/Other, as well as Non-partisan) and a continuous variable that captures the left-right political orientation of the respondents, measured on a 0-10 scale. For religion, we identified the groups implicated in the residential schools' genocide (Catholics and some Christian religions), as well as other Christian religions.¹⁴ The baseline is those who identify with non-Christian religions or who do not have a religious affiliation (Other). For Canadian identity, we used responses to a question about how important being a Canadian is to the person (1–4 scale). The third bloc is made up of three variables that capture support for equal rights (higher values mean less support), support for spending on immigrants (coded to indicate support for less spending), and a preference for doing less for racial minorities.

We also consider several control variables. We expect those with lower education to be less informed about the historical abuses that occurred at residential schools and therefore less likely to support policies that seek to address those experiences (Aguilar *et al.* 2011: 1419; Falls and Anderson 2022). Research also suggests women are more likely to be empathetic and altruistic than men and so we expect them to be more inclined to support reconciliation policies (Brañas-Garza *et al.* 2018; Löffler and Greitemeyer 2023; Mehravar *et al.* 2023). New research by Albaugh *et al.* (2024) finds that non-binary individuals tend to be more left-leaning than either men or women; in keeping with left-wing preferences for more government intervention and support for minorities, we expect them to be more supportive of reconciliation policies. Finally, we expect Indigenous respondents to be more likely to support Indigenous reconciliation initiatives, given previous studies that found that groups are more likely to support policies that target their group but not others (Campo *et al.* 2004; Williams 2007). In coding racial background, we also create a variable for racialized minorities, as we expect there may be cross-group support for minority-targeted policies like reconciliation (white is the baseline). The coding details of the variables included in the models are summarized in Table 2 of the Appendix.

To assess the influence of each bloc on support for reconciliation policies, we ran sequential OLS models to test the direct impact of the different factors. We run

separate models for each set of predictors (Model 1 group attitudes, Model 2 political and religious identities, and Model 3 policy attitudes) while controlling for a small set of sociodemographic characteristics. We then include a final model with all variables (Model 4).¹⁵ As a reference, we also include a parallel model where resentment is the outcome variable (see Appendix Table A7). In the appendix, we probe further by running models for each scale item individually (Appendix Table A8). Even though the scale is a valid measure of the underlying support for reconciliation policies that informed responses to the individual questions, the variation in the nature of the questions and their loadings led us to be curious as to whether a specific question, analyzed on its own, might have different correlates. This choice builds upon existing research that suggests attitudes towards reconciliation may vary with the type of policy being considered.

Results

The results of the regression analyses are shown in Table 2. Model 1 includes only the Resentment scale along with controls. As expected, those with more negative attitudes toward the group (Indigenous peoples) are much less likely to support specific policies to promote reconciliation. In terms of sociodemographic variables, men and the more educated tend to show lower support, and non-binary people more support for reconciliation policies (though being a man is not significant in the fully controlled model, Model 4). Note that we see no effect for identifying as Indigenous in this first model though this may be due to Indigenous identifiers being far less likely to report high resentment (Appendix Table A7). We note that the Indigenous identity item is significant in models for partisan and religious identities (Model 2) and policy attitudes (Model 3).

Model 2, which investigates partisan and religious identities, reveals that parties, ideology, and religion all have some significant effects on reconciliation attitudes. Support for reconciliation policies is inversely related to right-wing ideology and Conservative partisanship. Liberal and NDP partisans, on the other hand, are more supportive than non-partisans. Catholics and those with other Christian religious affiliations implicated in the residential schools' genocide are also less supportive of reconciliation policies than those without such affiliations. It is notable that these effects largely disappear in the full model (Model 4), with the exception of Conservative partisanship and Catholic religious affiliation. These findings suggest that some partisan, ideological, and policy differences we observe are funneled through resentment and policy attitudes, but not all. In the full model, we also see a significant effect appear for Green and other (mainly People's Party of Canada) identifiers. We take this result to mean that reconciliation attitudes are not only a function of attitudes toward Indigenous peoples more generally; party cues can also structure support for reconciliation above and beyond group attitudes. This suggests that how people understand their party's positioning vis-a-vis reconciliation can have an important impact on the overall level of support for such policies.

In Model 3, we examine the relationship between other policy preferences (equal rights, doing less for minorities, spending on immigrants) and reconciliation attitudes. All three items are negative and significant, and their effect holds (though more weakly) when we control for the other blocs (Model 4). Reconciliation tends to

Table 2. Reconciliation scale regressions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Indigenous resentment	−.371*** (.0071)			−.264*** (.0097)
BQ		−.0282 (.0450)		−.0221 (.0385)
Conservative		−.222*** (.0361)		−.0804** (.0309)
Green/Other		.0300 (.0492)		−.0821* (.0411)
Liberal		.0910* (.0354)		−.0304 (.0321)
NDP		.211*** (.0383)		−.0024 (.0354)
Left-right scale		−.0625*** (.0047)		−.0060 (.0046)
Catholic		−.123*** (.0230)		−.0389* (.0185)
Christian		−.0595 (.0308)		−.0195 (.0259)
Christian-implicated		−.0925* (.0365)		−.0449 (.0283)
Canadian identity		.0157 (.0148)		.0147 (.0127)
Oppose equal rights			−.111*** (.0088)	−.0506*** (.0086)
Less spending on immigrants			−.153*** (.0156)	−.0792*** (.0140)
Do less for racial minorities			−.223*** (.0127)	−.109*** (.0122)
Man	−.0542** (.0165)	−.134*** (.0194)	−.0845*** (.0192)	−.0317 (.0165)
Non-binary and other	.235* (.0941)	.258* (.1100)	.242* (.1000)	.152 (.0915)
Indigenous	.0181 (.0508)	.183** (.0563)	.220*** (.0518)	.0744 (.0476)
Racialized minority	.0395 (.0268)	.0681* (.0274)	.0070 (.0268)	−.0023 (.0269)
None/Other	.0007 (.0364)	.0434 (.0407)	.0392 (.0375)	.0114 (.0352)
University	−.0350* (.0169)	.0258 (.0193)	−.0338 (.0177)	−.0611*** (.0164)
Constant	3.987*** (.0236)	3.308*** (.0611)	3.849*** (.0322)	4.139*** (.0660)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>N</i>	5433	5433	5433	5433
R ²	.395	.167	.323	.449
Adj-R ²	.394	.165	.322	.447

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

be opposed by people who are hostile to other policies directed at minority groups. Again, this is not *simply* a function of anti-Indigenous attitudes, but captures (perhaps better than simple ideology), a policy orientation that opposes government policies that address inequalities or target specific marginalized groups. People oppose reconciliation when they 1) dislike a group, 2) when groups people identify with are opposed to those policies, and 3) when they oppose group-targeted policies more generally.

Do these results hold across each of the individual items of the scale? Table A8 in the Appendix shows the full model results for each item as well as for the full scale, for ease of comparison. The only variables that are consistently significant across all items, as well as the scale, are Indigenous resentment and supporting less spending on immigrants and minorities. Other variables are consistent in direction and significance across three of the four scale items, such as support for equal rights, doing less for racial minorities, and education. Some additional variables are significant and in different directions across models. Considering all the results, the outlier model is for attitudes about ceasing court action. The correlates for this item differ, which fits with the validation analysis above, as it had lower reliability and factor loadings.¹⁶

Discussion

Given the dearth of literature on public opinion towards Indigenous peoples, our goal in this paper was mainly exploratory. We wanted to conceptualize reconciliation, a political phenomenon that has received limited attention from public opinion scholars, assess public attitudes towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in one settler country where Indigenous issues have become salient, and explore whether several factors identified in previous studies also predict support for Indigenous reconciliation policies. Our results suggest that Indigenous resentment in Canada seems to be decreasing over time (Figure 1) and that Canadians in 2021 were broadly supportive of Indigenous reconciliation (Figure 2). In terms of determinants, the results from our full model in Table 2 suggest that those with more education, those who identify with the Conservative Party and other smaller parties in Canada, and Catholics are less likely to support Indigenous reconciliation policies. Negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples, as well as opposition to group-targeted public policies more generally, also decrease support. These patterns mostly hold across individual items that comprise our scale,

though only Indigenous resentment and spending less on immigrants were significant and in the same direction across all items.

Other differences that emerged, such as greater support among Liberal and NDP partisans, disappeared when we controlled for other variables. Part of the variation we observe in support of reconciliation, then, is grounded in the structuring effect of outgroup attitudes. Yet, as we have shown here, other factors can play into opposition. We have some evidence that partisan and religious identities and broader policy orientations also play an independent role. Garnering support for Indigenous reconciliation requires not only combatting pernicious negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples but also creating an elite consensus over what is required. Convincing those opposed to any group-targeted policy to support reconciliation may be an impossible task.

Overall, these results are mostly consistent with our expectations and the findings from the literature (Dabin *et al.* 2019; Falls and Anderson 2022; Löffler and Greitemeyer 2023), except for education (e.g. more education = less support). Without attitudinal controls (see Table 2, Model 2), the effect of education is insignificant. The coefficient only becomes negative and significant when other variables that are correlated with education and that speak to how individuals evaluate other racial groups relative to their own group's social and economic position within society, are included (Bergmann 2024; Bobo and Tuan 2006). Wodtke (2012: 1), for instance, finds that inter-group attitudes among non-white minorities in the United States depend “on their position in the racial hierarchy”; groups whose members are highly educated and earn a lot of income are more likely to have negative attitudes towards other minority groups below them, especially when those groups push for new policies that promote racial equality for their and other similarly ranked groups.

Although exploratory, this study should help future researchers identify potential mechanisms that link the determinants found to be important in our study to support Indigenous reconciliation policies across settler societies in the Americas and Australasia. It may be, for instance, that men and those who identify with the Conservative Party and the ideological right are more likely to see Indigenous reconciliation proposals as significant threats (Hobbs 2023), given that Canada is steeped in patriarchal traditions that have proven to be highly resistant to change (Collie and Alcantara 2024; Collier and Raney 2018; Voyageur 2011). In contrast, many Indigenous communities were matrilineal societies, built on egalitarian foundations (Fiske and George 2006; Voyageur 2011), which men and those on the right might find threatening, both materially and symbolically. Theories of group conflict, such as integrated group theory and realistic group conflict theory, argue that prejudice and hostility between groups usually manifest out of historical competition over scarce resources (Croucher 2017; González *et al.* 2008; Jackson 1993; Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi 2023). Out of this competition emerges a social hierarchy that empowers some groups (e.g. settlers) and disempowers others (e.g. Indigenous peoples). Conflict and social imbalance are likely to continue so long as the empowered group feels threatened. Threats can be “realistic” in the form of the disempowered group seeking to take jobs and housing away from the empowered group, or they can be symbolic, such as when the cultural identity of the empowered group is challenged by the disempowered group. Threats can be

mediated, however, by efforts or initiatives that weaken the identity and cohesiveness of those who are part of the empowered group, the emergence or presence of multicultural ideologies that create space for accommodation and multinationalism, and finally, sometimes through increased intergroup contact (Croucher 2017; González et al. 2008; Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi 2023). This latter phenomenon is especially important for those individuals in the empowered group who may be uninformed or lack empathy (Walter and Finlay 1999) towards the disempowered group. Many of our results point to the value of going further to consider how perceptions of threat as they relate to sociodemographic and group characteristics, and in particular the position of one's group relative to others within the social and economic hierarchy, may influence attitudes about Indigenous reconciliation policies (Bergmann 2024; Bobo and Tuan 2006).

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the determinants of public support for Indigenous reconciliation policies. Indigenous groups are a unique, disempowered group given their status as the original inhabitants and owners of the land in settler societies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, and due to the varied and unjust circumstances in which they were dispossessed of their lands, through wars, disease, land surrender treaties, and other tactics. Indigenous communities have spent decades organizing and mobilizing to challenge the foundational narratives and myths of these countries, disrupting economic development projects, advocating for constitutional recognition, and seeking influence through the political system. As their efforts gain traction among the public, Indigenous communities may be seen by some as transforming into existential threats to the legitimacy of the state, given their historical and ongoing treatment by settler states (Collie and Alcantara 2024). Therefore, identifying the determinants of public support for Indigenous reconciliation policies is an important matter with implications for social cohesion, democratic legitimacy, and justice in colonial societies.

At the same time, our investigation of public support for reconciliation policies focused on a single country, Canada, and on a particular aspect of colonization, residential schools. While other settler societies such as Australia and the United States did create and administer similar kinds of Indigenous boarding schools, the public discourse around reconciliation in these places has tended to focus on other issues, depending on the time period. Nonetheless, we think that our findings may be applicable to Australia given its political similarities with Canada and its historical record with respect to Indigenous communities, and even the United States, which has a very different history, politics, and culture (Hobbs 2020; Spitzer 2024). Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi (2023), for instance, find that those on the political left in Australia are more likely to have supportive attitudes towards Indigenous peoples, while Kefford et al. (2023) find that Australian populist attitudes correlate strongly with negative views towards Indigenous peoples (see also Hobbs 2023). Similarly in the United States, Foxworth and Boulding (2023) find that partisan shortcuts have a powerful effect on public opinion towards Indigenous peoples, with conservative whites least supportive of these communities. These

findings are broadly consistent with our findings with respect to conservative respondents. Future research should examine whether the individual-level factors found to be important in the Canadian context are transferable to other settler societies and under what conditions.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.30>

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Notes

1 See also Neufeld *et al.* (2022), Starzyk *et al.* (2021), and Woolford *et al.* (2022) although these studies all use university student samples ranging from 20 to 1200.

2 The scales are composed of three questions that measure public perceptions of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The questions ask whether respondents believe that Aboriginal peoples should overcome prejudice without special favors, if they think Aboriginal peoples have been treated unfairly, and whether they believe generations of colonialism and discrimination have created conditions making it difficult for Aboriginals to rise out of the lower class. Responses to the second and third questions are reverse coded so that those who strongly disagree with the statements score higher on the scale. The questions were included in all surveys, except for the Democracy Check-up (DC) in 2021, where the question concerning favors was not asked. Only individuals who responded to both questions in the survey were included in the sample for that year. We acknowledge, of course, that the trends in Figure 1 could be the result of other factors, such as changes in social norms and social desirability.

3 <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2015/12/15/statement-prime-minister-release-final-report-truth-and-reconciliation>

4 These questions are based upon ones fielded by Abacus Data for the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (https://crrf-fcrr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Residential_Schools_June_2021_National_Report_EN_TC.pdf). When fielded in June 2021 by Abacus, each item was supported (strongly or otherwise) by a majority of respondents. The item that received the least support (52%) was about ceasing court actions. The item with the most support was about federal government funding (79%).

5 “Accelerate progress” refers to demands that the Crown and Canadian society writ large fully implement the 94 recommendations provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body created to research the existence, operation, and effects of the residential school system in Canada. “Federal funding” refers to demands that the federal government provide funding to Indigenous communities so they can search for unmarked graves of children who attended residential schools but never came home. “Ceasing court actions” refers to demands that the federal government abandon adversarial approaches such as litigation in favour of working with Indigenous communities to solve issues related to child welfare and residential school compensation. “Renaming buildings” refers to the practice of removing the names of policymakers associated with the creation of residential schools from buildings, which in recent years has included the Langevin Block in Ottawa and Ryerson University in Toronto.

6 The Indigenous reconciliation questions were asked of 5,760 respondents in the campaign period survey of the CES. However, there is significant non-substantive response to each question (use of the “don’t know/prefer not to answer” option), ranging from 10–28%. The amount of missingness varies across the four items that comprise the reconciliation scale. We therefore use multiple imputation to impute missing values and appropriately characterize our uncertainty. In so doing, we increased our sample size from $N=3,503$ (using listwise deletion for the scale items) to $N=5,433$. Using the *mi* package in Stata, we created ten imputed datasets. We then constructed the scale within each multiply-imputed dataset and estimated each of our regression models, using Rubin’s rules (Rubin 1987) to pool estimates. The results reported in this paper

reflect these pooled estimates. All variables used in the models are in the multiple imputation model, but no other variables were included in the imputation model. There are 17 variables in the data being imputed with 5,433 observations for a total of 92,361 cells. Of those, 15,262 (17%) are missing. In the appendix, Table A10 presents the results obtained without multiple imputation, and it is worth noting that these results are similar, providing additional support for the robustness of our findings.

7 The summary statistics for each item are as follows. For “Accelerate Progress,” the mean is 3.17 and the standard error is 0.012. For “Federal Funding,” the mean is 3.12 and the standard error is 0.012. For “Ceasing Court Actions,” the mean is 2.89 and the standard error is 0.015, while for “Renaming Buildings,” the mean is 2.68 and the standard error is 0.015.

8 Two of the three factor loadings are “high” (over 0.70) (Hair et al. 2010).

9 As a rule of thumb, a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.70 or above is considered good (Bland and Altman 1997; Tavakol and Dennick 2011; Taber 2018). We calculated Cronbach’s alpha for the scale constructed from each multiply-imputed dataset. Of the 10 multiply imputed datasets—and 10 resultant scales—the lowest alpha value was 0.72.

10 It is likely that “Ceasing Court Actions” is considered less reliable than the other three items in the scale. However, we believe that this is an important indicator of support for reconciliation and high enough to include in our scale. Moreover, the reliability of the scale only increases marginally with this item removed.

11 Unfortunately, our scale does not measure respondent beliefs about Indigenous peoples’ behavior. Such questions are not available in our dataset and so we acknowledge that our scale likely possesses less validity than the one developed by Beauvais (2021).

12 While we do not test whether these constructs are on opposite sides of a continuum, we do expect a negative relationship.

13 The summary statistics for each item are as follows. For “Favors,” the mean is 2.89 and the standard error is .021. For “Deserve,” the mean is 2.61 and the standard error is .020. For “Colonialism,” the mean is 2.49 and the standard error is .020.

14 The religions implicated in the residential school’s genocide include Catholic, Anglican/Church of England, Presbyterian, and the United Church of Canada. Non-implicated Christian religions include Baptist, Greek Orthodox/Ukrainian Orthodox/Russian Orthodox/Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Lutheran, Mormon/Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, Pentecostal/Fundamentalist/Born Again/Evangelical, Protestant, Christian Reformed, Salvation Army and Mennonite. Other religions include None/don’t have one/Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist/Buddhism, Hindu, Jewish/Judaism/Jewish Orthodox, Muslim/Islam, Sikh/Sikhism and Other.

15 To assess multicollinearity, we analysed the variance inflation factors for these models. No value is greater than 3.0, well below standard cut-offs of 5–10 which indicate issues of multicollinearity.

16 We also consider the extent to which we see these trends across two sub-samples: one filtered to include only respondents who reside in Quebec and one that only includes respondents in the Rest of Canada (ROC). Table A9 in the Appendix shows the results for the full model in Quebec and the ROC where the direction of effects are mostly consistent, though not always significant. In the ROC sample, being a Green/Other party support and being Catholic are no longer significant, while having an implicated Christian affiliation is. In Quebec, Conservative support is not significant, nor is education or being Catholic. These results suggest that there may be unique considerations that structure attitudes towards reconciliation in Quebec, but that attitudinally the same factors are relevant. A fuller investigation into differences across the country would be a valuable avenue for future research.

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