

Brad Epperly

Geoffrey Sigalet

Risking Public Backlash

Canadian universities and demographic-based faculty hiring

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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Canadian universities routinely use demographic criteria to restrict who is eligible for a faculty position. How do these policies shape public attitudes towards the university sector?

Canada's universities are facing growing public and political scrutiny, a trend recently highlighted in hearings before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research. Critics are beginning to question the wisdom of diversity policies in academia, particularly those involving "demographic-based hiring," where characteristics such as sex, race, religion, or sexual orientation are used in selecting or excluding candidates.

While research shows that Canadians broadly support the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, studies reveal that a supermajority consistently opposes hiring practices based on demographic criteria. Despite this clear disconnect, Canadian universities continue to embed such policies in their strategic plans. However, until now, no research has examined how public attitudes shift when people learn about the practical implementation of these policies in Canadian universities.

Our experimental research shows how learning about these hiring practices affects Canadian public opinion, and the results should be especially worrying to advocates of demographic-based hiring. This research has three main findings:

- First, presenting Canadians with a *neutral* statement regarding how demographic-based hiring is used in higher education causes a significant decline in support for such practices; these causal effects are both substantively large and highly statistically significant.
- Second, presenting Canadians with an *advocacy* statement in support of demographic-based hiring fails to increase public support for the practice; the effect is substantively small and statistically significant.
- Third, providing neutral information on demographic-based hiring practices causes a notable, statistically significant decrease in how much Canadians trust the research universities produce.

The primary policy implications are straightforward:

- As Canadians learn more details about how demographic-based hiring practices are used in the university sector, their support declines. This suggests that the already-high levels of opposition to the practice could go higher.
- Information that explicitly advocates for these policies and says they are important does not persuade Canadians that these policies are desirable.
- Our experimental evidence indicates at least one clear downside: demographic-based hiring policies substantially decrease public trust in the research universities produce.

Proponents of demographic-based hiring practices should approach these findings with openness and self-reflection. The results suggest that current arguments for demographic-based hiring practices have not persuaded the majority of Canadians who oppose them, and that not all diversity initiatives are equally popular or low-risk. Pushing forward in the face of widespread public resistance risks eroding trust in higher education. If universities become a partisan flashpoint, they could face reduced public funding and increased scrutiny of international student programs, undermining long-term institutional stability.

Finally, the wisdom of spending substantial public funds on hiring practices opposed by most citizens warrants serious reconsideration. Public opposition grows stronger when people learn how these policies operate, raising questions about their democratic legitimacy. Any defence of such initiatives must address both their high cost and their growing unpopularity. [MLI](#)

Les universités canadiennes recourent couramment à des critères démographiques pour sélectionner les candidats à un poste d'enseignement. Comment ces politiques modèlent-elles l'opinion publique sur le secteur universitaire?

Les universités font l'objet d'une surveillance publique et politique croissante, une tendance qui ressort des récentes audiences devant le Comité permanent des sciences et de la recherche de la Chambre des communes. Les voix critiques commencent à interroger le bien-fondé des politiques de diversité dans le milieu académique et notamment du « recrutement démographique » qui cible les candidats en fonction de leur genre, de leur race, de leur religion ou de leur orientation sexuelle.

Si les recherches montrent que les Canadiens appuient généralement les valeurs de diversité, d'équité et d'inclusion, la grande majorité s'oppose systématiquement aux pratiques d'embauche fondées sur des critères démographiques. Or, malgré la dichotomie évidente, les universités les intègrent toujours dans leurs plans stratégiques. Pourtant, aucune étude n'a encore analysé comment se comporte l'opinion publique lorsqu'elle apprend leur mise en œuvre.

Nos travaux expérimentaux montrent à quel point la connaissance de ces pratiques d'embauche influe sur l'opinion publique canadienne, ce qui devrait préoccuper ses partisans. Notre recherche permet de dégager les trois grandes conclusions suivantes :

- Tout d'abord, lorsqu'on présente aux Canadiens un énoncé neutre sur le recours au recrutement démographique dans l'enseignement supérieur, leur soutien à cette pratique diminue fortement; l'effet causal est à la fois important et très significatif sur le plan statistique.
- Ensuite, un plaidoyer en faveur du recrutement démographique ne parvient pas à susciter plus de soutien; l'effet est réduit, mais demeure significatif sur le plan statistique.
- Puis, fournir des renseignements neutres sur cette pratique entame la confiance des Canadiens à l'égard de la qualité de la recherche réalisée par les universités, de manière notable et significative sur le plan statistique.

Les principales répercussions politiques sont claires :

- À mesure que les Canadiens en apprennent davantage sur le recours aux pratiques d'embauche fondées sur des critères démographiques dans les universités, leur soutien diminue. Cela permet de supposer que l'opposition déjà élevée risque encore d'augmenter.
- Les renseignements qui permettent de défendre expressément ces politiques et d'affirmer leur importance ne convainquent pas les Canadiens de leur bien-fondé.
- Nos données expérimentales indiquent au moins un inconvénient évident : le recrutement démographique diminue fortement la confiance du public à l'égard de la qualité de la recherche dans les universités.

Les partisans du recrutement démographique doivent évaluer ces conclusions avec ouverture d'esprit et réflexion. Nos résultats laissent entendre que les arguments actuels ne convainquent pas la majorité des Canadiens qui s'y opposent, et que les initiatives de diversité ne soulèvent pas autant d'enthousiasme parmi ces derniers ni ne sont sans risque.

Faire avancer ce type de recrutement malgré l'opposition du public risque de nuire à la confiance dans l'enseignement supérieur. Si les universités devenaient un enjeu partisan, elles pourraient perdre des financements publics et subir un contrôle renforcé sur leurs programmes destinés aux étudiants internationaux, un défi pour leur stabilité institutionnelle à long terme.

Enfin, il convient de reconsidérer sérieusement l'opportunité de consacrer des fonds publics importants pour des pratiques d'embauche rejetées par la majorité des citoyens. L'opposition publique s'intensifie lorsque les gens comprennent leur fonctionnement, ce qui soulève des questions quant à leur légitimité démocratique. Toute défense de ces initiatives doit tenir compte à la fois de leur coût élevé et de leur impopularité croissante. **MLI**

Introduction

For decades, surveys have shown a clear distinction in Canadian attitudes toward diversity: Canadians broadly welcome efforts to promote inclusion,¹ but they draw the line at demographic-based hiring policies. While a majority of Canadians say focusing on increasing diversity in the workplace is a good thing, when the same individuals are asked about considering race and ethnicity in hiring, a supermajority oppose taking such into consideration (Djuric 2022), with further survey data by the Environics Institute (2010) corroborating that demographic-based hiring preferences² have minimal support. In 2010, barely one in five Canadians offered support for such policies, with even a majority of allophones (Canadians whose first language is neither English nor French) rejecting such policies. The above survey results are not atypical: a 1993 Gallup poll reported that 74 per cent of Canadians think an individual's qualifications should be the sole factor in hiring decisions (Gallup Canada 2019), which is confirmed by more recent polling (Akin 2010; Woolley 2011; Jedwah 2024).

The contrast between public attitudes and institutional practices is especially striking in the context of Canadian higher education. Universities have not only embraced a wide variety of pro-diversity policies, but have also systematically integrated demographic preferences in their hiring policies. Universities Canada recently reported that 89 per cent of universities include diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies in their strategic plan (up from 77 per cent three years prior), and 83 per cent have a DEI action plan in effect or development (Universities Canada 2023). These plans frequently involve demographic-based hiring preferences, ranging from restricted faculty searches limited to applicants from specified demographic groups, to cluster hires designed to recruit multiple candidates from targeted demographic categories.

At times, these measures are pursued formally, including applications for exemptions from provincial human rights legislation to permit job postings restricted to certain groups. At other times, they operate more informally, with deans or provosts making clear that successful hires must advance diversity objectives. Demographic-based hiring can also be externally mandated. The most prominent example is the Canadian Human Rights Settlement Agreement (amended in 2019), which requires that each university's allocation of Canada Research Chairs (CRCs) reflect the demographic distribution of four designated groups³ within Canadian society.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this disconnect between voter preferences and university practices, scholars have devoted little attention to how such policies shape public attitudes toward higher education and its role in society.⁴ Regardless of one's political stance on DEI initiatives, understanding public opinion is critical. For proponents of demographic-based hiring, it is essential to consider how to build public support and shift opinion. Conversely, for critics of demographic-based hiring, understanding how the public responds to information regarding these policies is equally important for understanding the broader social and political consequences.

Regardless of one's position on demographic-based hiring, there is a compelling reason to examine the issue more closely: the long-term legitimacy of Canadian universities depends upon sustaining public support, trust, and funding. If institutions widely adopt policies that citizens oppose, public support will erode. While Canadian universities have avoided the sharp declines in trust and culture-war flashpoints seen in the US, there is little reason to assume this stability will endure. Indeed, a recent survey commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) found that large majorities of Canadians are increasingly skeptical of the value of a university education, and an even greater share believe that political and social conflicts on campus are intensifying (Lavigne 2024).

The fact that these attitudes are more prevalent on the right raises concerns that Canada may follow the US, where higher education has become a deeply partisan battleground. Signs of such polarization are already emerging. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, for instance, has dismissed DEI as "garbage." On the left, prominent advocates of DEI often ascribe malign motives to their opponents. In a recent piece for *The Conversation* (Taylor 2024), the University of Waterloo's associate vice-president for

equity, diversity, and anti-racism argued that “Anti-DEI sentiments today are part of an anti-Black movement... [and] are a contemporary reflection of the country’s right-wing extremism.” With critics branding DEI as worthless and proponents portraying any and all critics as racists or extremists, the hope that Canada might avoid American-style partisan polarization around higher education is rapidly fading.

Without making any normative claims regarding the desirability of demographic-based hiring, our aim is to examine how public awareness of universities’ reliance on such policies, despite their broad unpopularity, shapes support for higher education. Specifically, we ask whether emphasizing the benefits and justifications of preferential hiring alters attitudes, or whether Canadians, who for a quarter century have been heedlessly replacing public funding with foreign tuition, become even less willing to fund higher education when it pursues these strategies (Stuart-Hitchcox and Parker 2025).

If information about current hiring policies reduces public trust in universities, then advocates must take seriously the challenge of persuading taxpayers, the primary funders of Canadian higher education, rather than focusing only on administrators or departments that favour these policies. To explore this issue, we conducted a survey experiment to test how different information and framings about demographic-based hiring affect Canadians’ views of universities, including their research, hiring practices, and public funding.

Background context

Canadian universities have increasingly adopted internal demographic-based hiring policies, both through large-scale initiatives and within individual faculty searches. Some universities have launched programs that limit multiple faculty hires to specific demographic groups, while others incorporate such preferences more informally, with administrators or hiring committees signalling that new hires must contribute to diversity; in some cases, universities even seek exemptions from human rights legislation to permit restricted searches.⁵ While the specific mechanisms differ, the common thread is that demographic criteria are now a regular feature of academic hiring.

At the national level, demographic-based hiring has also been institutionalized through the Canada Research Chair program. Since 2017, these prestigious positions, funded at over \$300 million annually, have been subject to quotas requiring universities to meet representation targets across designated groups in order to remain eligible. As a result, it is now typical for advertisements for these positions to specify that they are restricted to candidates from certain demographics. Yet despite the prominence of such policies, most Canadians appear largely unfamiliar with their specifics. Surveys show broad support for diversity initiatives in the abstract, but widespread uncertainty about whether such programs even exist in respondents' own workplaces (Dannetta 2019). This gap in knowledge demonstrates the importance of examining how exposure to information about university hiring practices shapes public opinion. This is the central focus of our study.

The survey experiment

To better understand Canadian attitudes toward universities and their hiring policies, we conducted a nationally representative survey experiment of 1,530 Canadian adults.⁶ A standard survey samples from a population to get responses to one or many questions, from which average opinions can be discerned (for example, a standard public opinion survey of 1,200 randomly sampled Canadians asking about voting intentions). A survey experiment leverages the power of experimentation within a survey framework. While a standard medical trial of some new medication might randomly assign research participants to treatment (i.e. receiving the new drug) and control (i.e. a placebo) conditions, a survey experiment randomly assigns different information to survey participants. As such, when properly conducted, a survey experiment allows one to uncover whether, and how much, this information affects respondents' stated beliefs. In our case, trying to understand how demographic-based hiring affects Canadian attitudes towards higher education, respondents received either a control condition (with no information about these hiring practices), or one of three different treatments describing demographic-based hiring in Canadian universities.⁷

Our survey experiment sought to ascertain how information regarding demographic-based hiring at Canadian universities affects citizens' attitudes regarding universities and their opinions regarding policy changes that some have proposed for Canadian universities. Respondents were first asked a standard series of demographic questions, as well as their thoughts on a number of policy matters. They then randomly received one of four possible conditions: either a neutral control condition or one of three treatments. After reading their brief control/treatment vignette, participants were then asked three questions regarding their attitudes, and two regarding public policy changes affecting universities.

“ *If institutions widely adopt policies
that citizens oppose,
public support will erode.*

We designed our three treatments to address both the internally driven form of demographic-based hiring discussed above (when administrators and/or faculty *within* the university use demographic characteristics as a job requirement), as well as the externally driven form (the de facto ban on one demographic group, straight, able-bodied white men, being considered as eligible for Canada Research Chairs). We also, however, wanted to better understand whether the way this information was framed affected public attitudes. To achieve this, we employed three treatments in our survey experiment: (1) a pro-diversity advocacy statement; (2) a possibly neutral, arguably mildly critical statement regarding internal actors pressuring departments to hire based on demographics; and (3) an inarguably neutral treatment that provides brief information regarding the CRC program and its rules restricting consideration to certain demographic groups. These were contrasted with a control vignette that made broad commentary on diversity in Canadian universities.

The first of these treatments (**Advocacy treatment**), the pro-diversity advocacy frame, read:

It is accepted by many that a diverse faculty is vital to a healthy university. Advocates claim that diversity broadens faculty perspectives, experiences, and research topics, as well as provides students from diverse backgrounds with the opportunity to take courses and be mentored by professors who share their background; in an increasingly diverse Canada, a diverse faculty is critical. For these reasons, universities are more often searching for faculty with the explicit goal of improving diversity on campus.

The second treatment (**Internal hiring treatment**), which some may read as a neutral statement describing a common reality in Canadian higher education, and others may read as critical of demographic-based hiring diversity policies, read:

Increasing diversity is an important priority for most universities. As a result, individual departments are pressured by campus administrators when hiring a new faculty member. There can be expectations that new hires will need to be female or a visible minority, leading a department to not consider or interview male or white candidates. At other times, departments can vote to hire a white male candidate only to have their decisions rejected by administrators with no expertise in the relevant academic discipline, even when a female and/or minority candidate is not the best candidate.

Our third treatment vignette (**CRC treatment**), which provided information on the CRC program and its federally mandated de facto eligibility rules, offered a purely neutral, descriptive frame. It read:

Canada Research Chairs (CRC) are a prestigious federal program designed to “attract and retain some of the world’s most accomplished and promising minds.” They grant their recipients advantages such as extra salary, a reduction in teaching duties, and research funding unavailable to other professors. In recent years, the CRC program requires that CRCs at Canadian universities must match the demographic proportions of various groups in the Canadian population. Since men hold more CRCs, universities have started to exclude

men from such opportunities. This March, a major Canadian university advertised a CRC position open only to candidates who do not identify as male. Universities are incentivized to do so by the government, or they may lose CRC funding.

These three treatments were in contrast to our control condition, which read:

Canadian universities stand among the highest-ranked in the world. Their mission includes education, research, the pursuit of truth, and the dissemination of knowledge. Universities across Canada are making efforts to broaden the diversity of the professors they employ. Their activities are funded by private donations, tuition, and public funding from both federal and provincial governments.

After receiving a treatment (or control) condition, respondents answered a small number of questions regarding their attitudes on our outcomes of interest: those regarding their attitudes, and those regarding their policy preferences.

The first question asked and measured the respondents' support for diversity policies in academia, using a standard 5-point Likert scale. This is a standard way to gauge levels of agreement, with the particular wording varying depending on the question, but more often than not taking the form of strongly *X* / somewhat *X* / neutral / somewhat *not X* / strongly *not X*. Depending on the question, *X* could be “agree” (with *not X* then “disagree”), like our first post-treatment question, which looked like this:

Keeping the above in mind, do you agree or disagree with these efforts to increase diversity in universities?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

The second of our three post-treatment questions assessed the degree to which respondents prioritized demographics in faculty hiring, juxtaposing a “best candidate” that was a white male with a job candidate who contributed to diversity, reading:

Keeping the above in mind, what would you prefer to do if the best candidate for a professor position was a white male?

- ☐ I would strongly prefer hiring this candidate
- ☐ I would prefer hiring this candidate
- ☐ I would have no preference regarding hiring
- ☐ I would prefer to hire another candidate who contributes to the department's diversity
- ☐ I would strongly prefer to hire another candidate who contributes to the department's diversity

We asked the above question not because we think white male academics are the best candidates, but because demographic-based hiring preferences do exist in Canada, and we seek to understand how voters respond to information regarding these preferences.

The motivation for our study was straightforward but important: we are academics, and worry that the high levels of trust in and support for Canadian universities could become entangled in partisan politics and begin to erode further than they already have. The third attitudinal question captures one dimension of this concern, asking about trust:

Keeping the above in mind, how much trust will you have toward reported findings coming from universities in the future?

- ☐ Very high trust
- ☐ High trust
- ☐ More or less trust
- ☐ Little trust
- ☐ No trust

As noted, we were also curious whether our treatment conditions changed not only Canadian attitudes, but also policy preferences on two relevant dimensions. We stress the distinction between attitudinal and policy questions because they are quite different: one can have more positive or negative views on a given matter without thinking their views, or the matter, warrant changes in public policy. The first of these was asked to assess whether treatment conditions might affect policy preferences regarding funding of universities, and the second taps into actual policy proposals that have been tabled in response to recent campus controversies. These two questions read as follows:

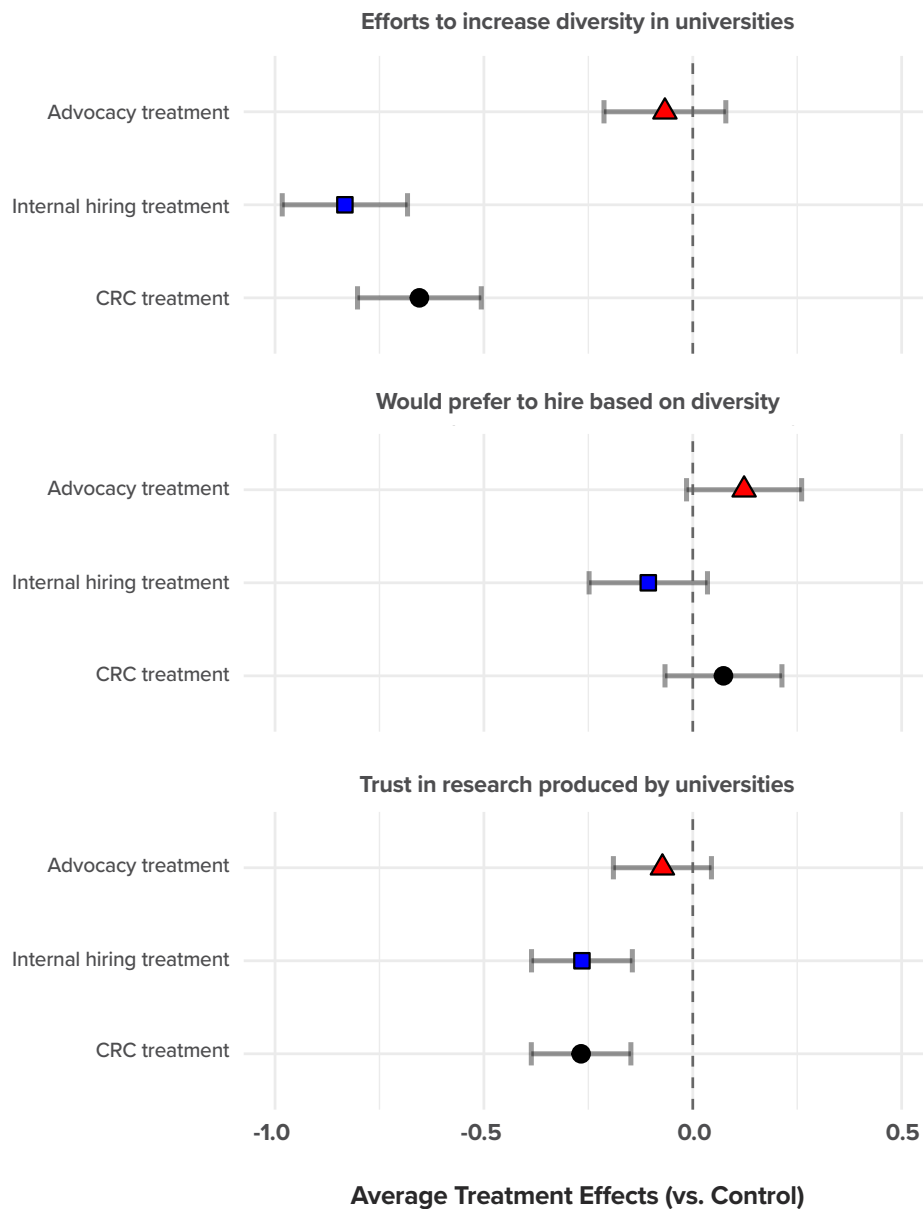
- Do diversity initiatives like the ones described above influence your views of public funding for Canadian universities? [5-point Likert scale with various levels of funding]
- Following free speech controversies in universities, a number of provincial governments have recently tabled bills to protect free speech on campuses by provincial law. Keeping the above in mind, how do you view such provincial bills? [5-point Likert scale of support/opposition]

The results

Visualizing the results of our survey experiment is fairly straightforward, and we do this in Figure 1, showing the treatment effects of our three treatment conditions on the three attitudinal questions discussed above.⁸ In Figure 1, the x-axis measures the difference between a given estimate (the blue squares, black circles, and red triangles, respectively) and the control condition; that is, it shows the average treatment effect. A point estimate of 0 on the x-axis would thus mean that the treatment has no effect on the attitude in question, whereas a value of 0.5 would mean that the average effect of that treatment is to shift Canadian attitudes half of one point on our Likert scale. While half a point may seem small, recall that this is a 5-point Likert scale, and thus the maximum amount a person could possibly be moved is from one extreme to the other (e.g. “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), which is only four points. A half-point change is, therefore, a substantively important change. In all instances, the direction of movement on the x-axis follows the logical framing of the question: a positive effect would mean Canadians, respectively, are more supportive of diversity hiring, more favourable to hiring diverse candidates over a “best” white male candidate, and show higher trust in the research produced by Canadian universities. Conversely, any negative estimates to the left of zero would mean that treatment decreases support for diversity hiring, increases support for hiring the “best” candidate even if that candidate is a white man, and diminishes trust in research.

The confidence intervals in the figure show how accurate the estimates for the average treatment effects are. The standard level of statistical

FIGURE 1: Average treatment effects for each of three treatments on three questions concerning Canadian attitudes towards universities, with 95 per cent confidence intervals.



significance is 0.05, and an estimate is said to be statistically significant if it meets this threshold.⁹ Visually, in Figure 1, we can in effect see if something reaches this level of statistical significance by looking at the confidence intervals around each estimated average treatment effect. If they overlap with zero, it means we cannot reliably distinguish the effect from zero, i.e. it is

not statistically significant. The larger the distance between the error bars and zero, the more confident we are that our estimated effect is statistically distinguishable from zero.

The y-axis of Figure 1 shows each of our three attitudinal questions and lists each of our three treatments below. The actual plot space, then is the estimated treatment effect for each treatment condition in each of the three questions. From top to bottom, those were:

- Keeping the above in mind, do you agree or disagree with these efforts to increase diversity in universities?
- Keeping the above in mind, what would you prefer to do if the best candidate for a professor position was a white male?
- Keeping the above in mind, how much trust will you have toward reported findings coming from universities in the future?

Recall, participants read their randomly assigned treatment/control vignettes immediately preceding these questions, which is what they are being prompted to keep in mind. The plotted effects in Figure 1, therefore, show *on average* how being exposed to that particular treatment condition changes attitudes as compared to reading the control vignette.

Figure 1 therefore shows us a number of interesting results. First, in no instance does the pro-diversity **Advocacy treatment** (red triangle) cause a statistically significant change in Canadian attitudes. That is, advocating for the importance of diversity in faculty hiring changes neither Canadians' support for diversity in faculty hiring, their preference for hiring diverse candidates over a "best" white male candidate, nor their trust in the research produced by universities. In every instance, the confidence intervals overlap zero.¹⁰

The second and third treatment conditions, however, *do* change Canadians' attitudes in ways that are both statistically and substantively significant. As we note above, the **Internal hiring treatment** condition (its estimates plotted with blue squares in Figure 1) could be viewed as being a neutral description of demographic-based hiring policies, or by some as possibly providing a more critical take on these policies. The third, **CRC treatment** (black circles in Figure 1), however, is inarguably neutral, merely describing the Canada Research Chair (CRC) program, and its demographic restrictions in eligibility. Looking at the "Trust in Research" effects at the bottom of Figure 1, we see that being exposed to neutral information on how the CRC program operates causes a quarter-point drop in reported trust in the research

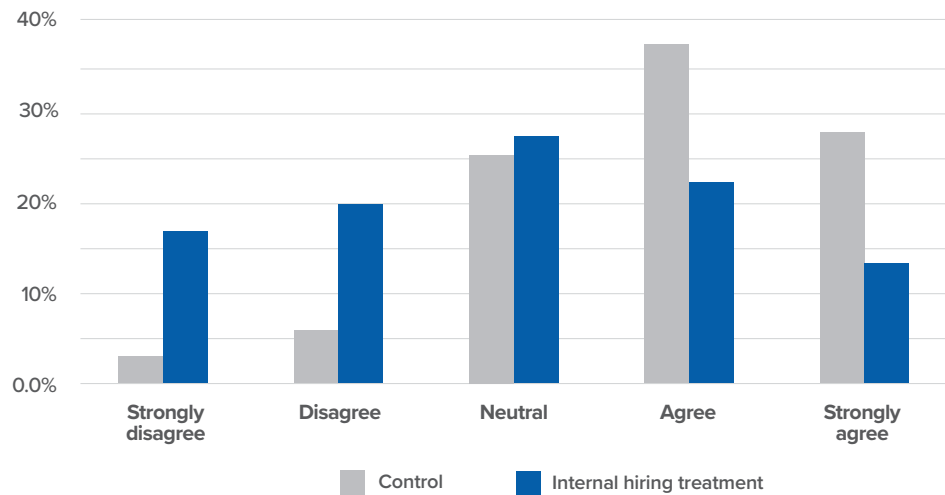
produced by Canadian universities. Being informed that sometimes university administrators lacking subject-specific expertise override departmental hiring decisions for demographic-based reasons has a similar, though slightly larger, effect. Put another way: learning about the demographic-based hiring practices common in Canadian universities decreases popular trust in the research these universities produce.

The effects of this information on public support for diversity in academia at the top of Figure 1 are even more emphatic, and more striking. Here, the effects of exposure to treatment are substantively far larger and highly statistically significant. Learning about the CRC program and its restrictive eligibility policies markedly decreases support for diversity hiring in universities (the estimate is -0.65). If someone is exposed to information regarding internally driven demographic-based hiring policies, the effect is even greater: learning that actors within the university sometimes hire based on demographic characteristics decreases support for doing so by over three-quarters of a full point (0.83). This effect is not only highly statistically significant, as substantively it is also a very large effect. Recall, this is only a 5-point Likert scale, which means the largest change theoretically possible is 4, i.e. moving from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” or the reverse. A value of -1, therefore, would mean that, on average, being briefly informed of these policies means moving to the next-lower response category.

“ Learning about demographic-based hiring practices in Canadian universities decreases popular trust in research.

The substantively large effects of information regarding the internally driven demographic-based hiring policies practiced at Canadian universities are perhaps even clearer if we compare the distribution of reported Canadian attitudes depending on whether those Canadians received the control scenario or the internal hiring treatment scenario. Figure 2 compares the answers of Canadians who received the control scenario with those who received the internal hiring treatment to the question: “Keeping the above

FIGURE 2: Support for university diversity policies based on whether Canadians received the control condition (gray) or internal hiring treatment (blue).



in mind, do you agree or disagree with these efforts to increase diversity in universities?” Figure 2 illustrates that public support shifts dramatically when Canadians learn more details about how demographic-based hiring is implemented in universities and colleges. Put simply, the effects are massive, with the percentage of Canadians who agree or strongly agree nearly halving. While only 9 per cent of Canadians who receive the control vignette report that they disagree or strongly disagree with university diversity policies, 66 per cent report that they agree or strongly agree. Providing Canadians with information about how demographic-based hiring is used causes a large shift in attitudes: 37 per cent of these Canadians, more than four times as many, say they disagree or strongly disagree with university diversity policies, and those who support or strongly support nearly halve, falling down to 35 per cent.

To clarify, once Canadians learn about university hiring practices, supermajority support for university diversity policies falls to a minority position, dwarfed by those who disagree or are neutral to these policies. These results tell us that if a person is on the fence when it comes to diversity practices in academia, exposure to information about demographic-based hiring pushes them off the fence, leading them to a position of moderate opposition to these practices; similarly, this information causes someone moderately opposed to change to strong opposition, and someone moderately supportive of these policies would cease being supportive.

The results for the second (middle) question are indistinguishable from zero; exposure to any of the three treatments causes no discernible change in attitudes. This might seem inconsistent with the first and third, but we suspect we know (at least partly) why: *regardless* of treatment, Canadians, despite being overwhelmingly supportive of diversity, would on average prefer to hire the best candidate even if that candidate is a white man. Regardless of treatment or control received, *almost no Canadians prefer hiring a candidate who contributes to diversity if the best-identified candidate is someone else*, even if that someone else is a white man: only approximately 6 per cent of all respondents (again, regardless of treatment) answered that they would either prefer or strongly prefer hiring a diverse candidate in such a situation.

The final takeaway from the results presented in Figure 1 is what *isn't* shown: the average treatment effects for the two policy-related, as opposed to attitudinal, questions. These concerned changing levels of funding for higher education and support for (or opposition against) provincial legislation to protect free speech on campus.¹¹ We do not show these because in no instances were the results statistically significant. In other words, no matter what treatment or control vignette participants received, their policy opinions regarding funding levels and speech legislation remained unaffected.

While we are unable to conclude why we find these non-effects without further experimental work, we have two hypotheses as to why these are both unaffected. The first reason is that these are not directly connected to the three treatment conditions used in the experiment: neither funding nor support for free expression are tied to hiring policies. As such, we should have a lower expectation that participants change their views on policy because of such. The second reason is that there is not necessarily a unidirectional effect from the treatment to the response. That is, while we may suspect some people who oppose demographic-based hiring to want to “punish” universities for engaging in it by lowering their funding, we might suspect many other opponents nevertheless think higher education is a vital sector and any possible perceived harms of diversity policies are outweighed by the many contributions the university sector makes to Canada. After all, even the staunchest opponent of demographic-based hiring may nevertheless think funding levels should increase. Similarly, even the most committed proponent may think provincial legislation to ensure free expression is welcome.

Implications and conclusions

We expect that these experimental results will be received differently by proponents and critics of demographic-based criteria in faculty hiring. As such, before we present what we think are the implications of this research, we will present some counterarguments to anticipated responses of some proponents and critics.

The most vocal proponents of these policies will likely dismiss our findings. Perhaps as a result of assumptions regarding the demographic characteristics of the authors,¹² but hopefully for more intellectually defensible reasons. First, we could envision proponents rejecting our view that the second treatment condition (internal demographic-based hiring criteria) is just a neutral description of current practices, but is rather a critical frame. This, of course, is a non-sequitur, given the third treatment offers an entirely neutral frame (drawing in no small part on how the CRC program describes itself), and has very similar effects.

The second objection we anticipate from proponents concerns the null findings for the pro-diversity treatment. Here, we expect some proponents might contend that the pro-diversity framing just wasn't pro-diversity enough: stronger language would produce a statistically significant positive effect, and our watered-down verbiage is putting a thumb on the scales. Perhaps. But we would point such an objector to the overall results presented in Figure 1: the coefficient for the pro-diversity frame is *negative* in two of the three attitudinal questions. Such an objection might be plausible if in all instances the treatment was positive and just shy of statistical significance, but that is decidedly not the case. A second response to this objection is simply to point out that despite the pro-diversity frame being markedly more "pro" than the hiring frame was possibly "con,"¹³ the second treatment caused significant changes in reported attitudes.

It is certainly possible that proponents of demographic-based hiring can craft appeals that produce substantively and statistically significant changes in Canadian public opinion on the issue of demographic-based hiring. Our results are mute as to whether such appeals would be successful. These results do, however, suggest that advocates of demographic-based hiring will face significant public skepticism and may need to reconsider how, or whether, such policies can be effectively justified to Canadians.

Proponents may also point out that while it seems that these treatments did change attitudes regarding diversity practices and trust in the research universities produce, they did not change any policy preferences, and therefore there is no real cause to worry. It is true that our experiment did not show any changes in policy attitudes. However, we think this fact should be cold comfort to proponents of demographic-based hiring in higher education, for two reasons. First, as we pointed out above, neither of the policy changes our survey asked about are directly related to demographic-based hiring, and as such there is little reason to expect them to produce major changes in policy preferences. Second, insofar as our research is interpreted as showing a strong anchor of support for the policy status quo, we think that universities should not take any such anchor for granted because the ideological leanings of Canadians can shift. Indeed, the 2025 election showed significant shifts even from late-2023 when our survey was conducted. In our 2023 survey, younger Canadians tended to be more trusting of university research and supportive of public funding than older Canadians. But the 2025 election showed significant ideological and party voting fluctuations that could have huge consequences. Compared with the 2021 federal election, in 2025 the Liberal Party made a massive 19-point gain with voters over 60, while the Conservative Party increased their share of voters from 30 to 44 by 17 points (Coletto 2025).

“*Canadians, including non-white Canadians, are overwhelmingly opposed to considering demographic characteristics in hiring.*”

Critics of demographic-based hiring will likely be happier with the results of this experiment. After all, we find that information, even purely neutral, descriptive information, about demographic-based faculty hiring decreases support for these very policies, and decreases support at substantively meaningful levels. If this is the sole conclusion that critics take from our research, we cannot reasonably object. But it is important to note that our research specifically shows results about demographic-based hiring policies at universities, not any other pro-diversity policies.

We are entirely *unsurprised* by these findings. Because, despite the fact we expect to be pilloried by some for this research, *our results are entirely consistent with almost half a century of survey data*. Readers should remember that Canadians are overwhelmingly supportive of diversity. But they should likewise remember that Canadians, including non-white Canadians, are also overwhelmingly opposed to considering demographic characteristics in hiring. Such practices are not and never have been supported by the Canadian electorate.

Policy implications and options for reform

We think that the primary implications of this research are simple:

- When Canadians are provided with more information on how demographic-based hiring practices are used in the university sector, they are less likely to support such practices. This suggests that the already-high levels of opposition among the Canadian population to using sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other demographic characteristic in hiring decisions could go higher.
- Information that explicitly advocates for these policies and says they are important does not persuade Canadians that these policies are desirable.
- Our experimental evidence indicates that demographic-based hiring policies have at least one clear downside: they substantially decrease public trust in the research universities produce. Any benefits claimed by proponents of demographic-based hiring policies must be weighed against this at least one (as there may be other) major harm they cause.

Proponents of diversity policies will hopefully approach this experiment and its results with an open mind and some self-reflection. Taking these results seriously might perhaps lead proponents to craft a more compelling case for such hiring policies; clearly those on offer to date have not succeeded in

persuading the supermajority of Canadians who oppose them. Or, perhaps these results, and the reminder that demographic-based hiring policies are wildly unpopular, might serve to convince DEI proponents that the fact that *many* diversity policies are popular and possess little downside does not imply that *all* diversity policies are such. And, again, demographic-based hiring policies are not popular, and do have downsides.

It is vital for DEI advocates within Canadian universities to remember that if our sector becomes a polarized partisan issue in Canada, with a significant portion of the Canadian public losing faith in or turning against universities, then we will all be in dire straits. Such a shift might lead to calls for reduced public funding and greater scrutiny of international student programs, which have become a significant component of many institutions' financial models. Heedlessly pursuing policies in the face of widespread public opposition may be a viable political strategy in the short-term, but could be detrimental in the medium- or long-term.

Finally, we urge proponents of DEI hiring to reflect on the appropriateness, and indeed, the wisdom, of spending large amounts of public money implementing policies that two-thirds to three-quarters of citizens oppose. As our research shows, citizens oppose these policies even more strongly when they are provided information regarding how these policies actually operate. This could be the tens of millions of dollars every major Canadian university is spending on hiring initiatives that are explicitly restrictive based on demographic characteristics. Or it could be the hundreds of millions of dollars the federal government spends every year on a CRC program that refuses to consider applicants from one demographic group. Regardless, any claim to democratic legitimacy these policies have needs to grapple with their unpopularity, and the fact that research shows that the more Canadians learn about these policies, the more unpopular they become. [MLI](#)

About the authors



Brad Epperly is associate professor and Political Science program coordinator at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. Previously he was a faculty member at the University of South Carolina and a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute. He has published in numerous journals, including *Comparative Political Studies*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and the *Journal of Law and Courts*. His book, *The Political Foundations of Judicial Independence in Dictatorship and Democracy* was published by Oxford University Press in 2019. [MLI](#)



Geoffrey Sigalet is the director of the UBC Research Group for Constitutional Law and assistant professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. He has held research fellowships at McGill's Research Group for Constitutional Studies, Queen's Faculty of Law, and Stanford Law School's Constitutional Law Center. He has published in numerous journals, including *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, and the *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*. His co-edited collection *Constitutional Dialogue: Rights, Democracy, Institutions* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2019. [MLI](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 Surveys consistently show that Canadians value diversity, equity, and inclusion, both in the public as well as the private sector, with Canada being more welcome to diversity than almost any other country in the world, regardless of the survey (Gallup, World Values, etc.) or the specific question. A recent effort by the Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research at the University of Saskatchewan finds that supermajorities of Canadians, for example, support diversity of those in government, and think workplace diversity is important (Djuric 2022). Similarly, a study commissioned by Queen’s University’s Smith School of Business finds that 69 per cent of Canadian employees react favourably towards workplace DEI initiatives, with 70 per cent reporting that such initiatives “help encourage all employees to reach their full potential” (Dannetta 2019).
- 2 For the sake of clarity, throughout this report we use the term “demographic-based hiring preferences” instead of the more common, but fuzzier and less concrete, terms of “employment equity” (Canada) or “affirmative action” (US).
- 3 The four designated groups referenced in the Canadian Human Rights Settlement Agreement (2019 amendment) are women, visible minorities (also referred to as racialized groups), persons with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples, as defined under the *Employment Equity Act*.
- 4 A possible cause of this is the disconnect between faculty political preferences and citizen political preferences, with faculty leaning much further left than the electorate in general, and far more supportive of using demographic preferences in hiring, specifically. In fact, studies of Canadian faculty attitudes show that faculty are 3 to 4 times more likely to support such policies than university students (and that non-white faculty in Canada are less supportive of these policies than white faculty).

This is corroborated by US research that shows faculty preferences also diverge markedly from the electorate more generally (Carey et al. 2018).

- 5 For example, Simon Fraser University recently sought an exemption from anti-discrimination policy from the BC Human Rights Commissioner, and received approval to restrict a search for 15 new faculty members to Black applicants, and 15 additional faculty solely to Indigenous applicants (Simon Fraser University 2023). Similar policies exist elsewhere in British Columbia (Forst 2024), Alberta (Ross 2022), Nova Scotia (Education News Canada 2023), Ontario (Dolski 2017; Redden 2020), and Quebec (Hinkson and Schingler 2022).
- 6 Our survey was drafted in both English and French and administered by Qualtrics at the end of 2023.
- 7 To ensure that our analyses after data collection were not driven by the data we collected, our survey experiment procedures and post-collection analysis plans were pre-registered. That is, we specified all the following analysis *before* we collected the data, to ensure our results are not the result of (intentional or unintentional) researcher bias or decision.
- 8 These are the results of linear regression models with demographic characteristics used as covariates to improve precision and reduce bias by accounting for pre-existing differences among respondents.
- 9 While $p < 0.5$ is the standard threshold for statistical significance, in the first and third panes of Figure 1 the estimates that are statistically significant (blue squares and black triangles) reach far higher levels of statistical significance, with $p < 0.00001$.
- 10 One might be tempted to point out that the estimates for the pro-diversity treatment condition are in fact negative in the first (top) and third (bottom) questions, meaning that even pro-diversity advocacy frames decrease support for diversity in hiring and trust in research. This, however, would be incorrect: the confidence intervals overlapping with zero means that we cannot comfortably distinguish this effect from the control condition. The same logic, of course, applies to the effect of the pro-diversity frame in the second (middle) question: the estimate is positive, but it is not statistically significant from zero.
- 11 While the results of Figure 1 are treatment effects conditional on a large number of individual-level demographic variables (to improve estimates), Figure 2 simply plots the answers of those Canadians who received treatment and control without taking these into account. However, as we have a random, nationally representative sample, we are still able to make inferences from these unconditional differences.

- 12 One of the authors is, in fact, eligible for a Canada Research Chair based on their demographic characteristics.
- 13 Again, we find it closer to a neutral description of some current practices than critical of demographic-based hiring. Indeed, if proponents of demographic-based hiring find fairly neutral descriptions of these hiring policies to be critical, we wonder if they are akin to many Psychology faculty at the University of Washington, who so preferred to pursue these policies without having to face criticism that they did so in secret, falsifying hiring documents (Quinn 2023).

Appendix

Table 1 reports the linear regression coefficient estimates (with standard errors in parentheses) for the five post-treatment outcomes in our survey experiment. As we are interested in the causal effect of each treatment condition, the effects of demographic and political attitude covariates are included in the models are included to improve to precision of these estimated treatment effects by accounting for baseline differences across respondents. Note: the effects of each treatment across the first three models are visualized in Figure 1 of the main policy brief.

TABLE 1: Regression results for five post-treatment outcomes.

| | Increase diversity | Prefer to hire | Trust in research | Public funding | Provincial bills |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Intercept | 2.75*** (0.54) | 2.57*** (0.51) | 3.62*** (0.44) | 2.02*** (0.46) | 2.99*** (0.46) |
| Treatment | | | | | |
| Advocacy | -0.07 (0.07) | 0.12 (0.07) | -0.07 (0.06) | 0.03 (0.06) | 0.08 (0.06) |
| Internal hiring | -0.83*** (0.08) | -0.11 (0.07) | -0.27*** (0.06) | -0.07 (0.06) | 0.1 (0.07) |
| CRC | -0.65*** (0.08) | 0.07 (0.07) | -0.27*** (0.06) | -0.04 (0.06) | 0.01 (0.06) |
| Demographics | | | | | |
| Age 30–39 | -0.01 (0.1) | -0.26** (0.09) | -0.07 (0.08) | -0.15 (0.08) | 0.01 (0.08) |
| Age 40–49 | -0.18 (0.10) | -0.16 (0.09) | -0.20* (0.08) | -0.16 (0.09) | 0.08 (0.09) |
| Age 50–59 | -0.13 (0.10) | -0.22* (0.09) | -0.07 (0.08) | -0.25** (0.08) | 0.03 (0.08) |
| Age 60–69 | -0.24** (0.09) | -0.24** (0.09) | -0.13 (0.08) | -0.39*** (0.08) | 0.15 (0.08) |
| Age 70–79 | -0.17 (0.11) | -0.24* (0.1) | -0.12 (0.09) | -0.28** (0.09) | 0.19* (0.09) |
| Age 80–89 | -0.07 (0.19) | -0.08 (0.18) | 0.23 (0.16) | -0.24 (0.16) | 0.21 (0.16) |
| Age 90+ | 0.27 (0.59) | -0.36 (0.56) | -0.06 (0.47) | -0.90 (0.50) | 0.14 (0.50) |

| | Increase diversity | Prefer to hire | Trust in research | Public funding | Provincial bills |
|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Gender: female | 0.04 (0.06) | 0.08 (0.05) | -0.12** (0.04) | 0.06 (0.05) | -0.08 (0.05) |
| Gender: other | -0.36 (0.26) | -0.17 (0.25) | -0.54* (0.21) | 0.03 (0.22) | 0.22 (0.22) |
| Asian | -0.55*** (0.16) | 0.24 (0.16) | -0.17 (0.13) | -0.21 (0.14) | -0.15 (0.14) |
| Latino | -0.30 (0.24) | 0.40 (0.22) | -0.29 (0.19) | -0.21 (0.20) | -0.18 (0.20) |
| White | -0.50*** (0.15) | 0.12 (0.14) | -0.22 (0.12) | -0.21 (0.13) | -0.16 (0.13) |
| Other | -0.55** (0.19) | 0.21 (0.18) | -0.37* (0.15) | -0.32* (0.16) | -0.21 (0.16) |
| Indigenous | 0.09 (0.13) | 0.02 (0.12) | 0.15 (0.10) | 0.02 (0.11) | 0.11 (0.11) |
| Immigrant | 0.18* (0.08) | 0.05 (0.08) | 0.01 (0.07) | 0.10 (0.07) | 0.06 (0.07) |
| Language: French | 0.18 (0.10) | 0.09 (0.09) | 0.21** (0.08) | 0.06 (0.08) | 0.02 (0.09) |
| Language: other | 0.02 (0.09) | 0.04 (0.08) | 0.00 (0.07) | 0.09 (0.07) | -0.07 (0.07) |
| Political interest | 0.02* (0.01) | -0.04*** (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.04*** (0.01) |
| Ideology | -0.01 (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | -0.02 (0.01) | -0.01 (0.01) | 0.02 (0.01) |

Province

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| British Columbia | -0.10 (0.11) | 0.01 (0.11) | 0.00 (0.09) | -0.04 (0.09) | -0.15 (0.10) |
| Manitoba | 0.02 (0.15) | 0.14 (0.15) | 0.04 (0.12) | 0.18 (0.13) | -0.22 (0.13) |
| New Brunswick | -0.22 (0.21) | -0.28 (0.20) | -0.05 (0.17) | -0.06 (0.18) | 0.31 (0.18) |
| Newfoundland and Labrador | 0.49* (0.22) | 0.38 (0.21) | -0.09 (0.18) | 0.19 (0.19) | -0.13 (0.19) |
| Nova Scotia | 0.03 (0.19) | -0.01 (0.18) | -0.01 (0.16) | -0.09 (0.16) | -0.44** (0.16) |
| Ontario | 0.07 (0.09) | 0.12 (0.09) | -0.01 (0.07) | 0.01 (0.08) | -0.10 (0.08) |
| Prince Edward Island | 0.47 (0.3) | -0.31 (0.29) | 0.14 (0.24) | 0.41 (0.26) | -0.08 (0.26) |
| Quebec | 0.10 (0.12) | -0.04 (0.12) | 0.14 (0.10) | 0.03 (0.10) | -0.04 (0.10) |
| Saskatchewan | 0.06 (0.18) | -0.12 (0.17) | -0.07 (0.15) | 0.09 (0.15) | -0.12 (0.15) |
| Yukon | 0.02 (0.75) | -0.20 (0.71) | 0.60 (0.60) | -0.29 (0.64) | -0.01 (0.64) |

| | Increase diversity | Prefer to hire | Trust in research | Public funding | Provincial bills |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Party ID | | | | | |
| Conservative | -0.27* (0.12) | 0.16 (0.11) | -0.22* (0.09) | -0.14 (0.10) | -0.16 (0.10) |
| NDP | -0.05 (0.12) | 0.06 (0.11) | -0.16 (0.10) | 0.01 (0.10) | -0.11 (0.10) |
| Bloc Quebecois | -0.18 (0.18) | 0.21 (0.17) | -0.02 (0.14) | 0.14 (0.15) | -0.14 (0.15) |
| Green | -0.28 (0.17) | 0.05 (0.16) | -0.14 (0.14) | -0.11 (0.15) | 0.09 (0.15) |
| Other | -0.43 (0.23) | -0.06 (0.22) | -0.33 (0.19) | -0.27 (0.20) | -0.38 (0.20) |
| None | -0.19 (0.12) | -0.04 (0.11) | -0.35*** (0.10) | -0.31** (0.10) | -0.33** (0.10) |
| Don't know | -0.10 (0.12) | 0.10 (0.12) | -0.12 (0.10) | -0.01 (0.10) | -0.19 (0.11) |

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Vote in last election | | | | | |
| Conservative | 0.23 (0.20) | 0.10 (0.18) | 0.23 (0.16) | 0.02 (0.17) | 0.01 (0.17) |
| Green | 0.45* (0.22) | 0.10 (0.21) | 0.20 (0.18) | 0.35 (0.19) | -0.17 (0.19) |
| Liberal | 0.17 (0.18) | 0.24 (0.17) | 0.14 (0.15) | 0.11 (0.15) | -0.07 (0.16) |
| NDP | 0.13 (0.20) | 0.29 (0.19) | 0.26 (0.16) | 0.13 (0.17) | -0.09 (0.17) |
| PPC | -0.09 (0.31) | 0.35 (0.30) | -0.04 (0.25) | 0.01 (0.27) | -0.56* (0.27) |
| Other | 0.90* (0.35) | 0.15 (0.33) | 0.39 (0.28) | 0.25 (0.30) | -0.12 (0.30) |
| Did not vote | 0.21 (0.18) | 0.20 (0.17) | 0.20 (0.15) | 0.01 (0.16) | -0.05 (0.16) |
| Don't know | 0.27 (0.21) | 0.08 (0.20) | 0.24 (0.17) | 0.09 (0.18) | -0.08 (0.18) |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Views: freedom of speech | | | | | |
| Not very important | -0.17 (0.54) | -0.26 (0.51) | -0.96* (0.43) | 1.17* (0.45) | 0.44 (0.46) |
| Somewhat important | -0.24 (0.48) | -0.33 (0.45) | -0.80* (0.39) | 0.89* (0.41) | 0.44 (0.41) |
| Important | -0.16 (0.48) | -0.53 (0.45) | -0.77* (0.38) | 0.91* (0.40) | 0.75 (0.41) |
| Very important | -0.22 (0.48) | -0.55 (0.45) | -0.73 (0.38) | 0.84* (0.40) | 1.02* (0.41) |

| | Increase diversity | Prefer to hire | Trust in research | Public funding | Provincial bills |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Views: diversity | | | | | |
| Not very important | 0.48* (0.19) | -0.26 (0.18) | 0.39* (0.15) | 0.18 (0.16) | 0.14 (0.16) |
| Somewhat important | 1.18*** (0.18) | -0.02 (0.17) | 0.63*** (0.14) | 0.50*** (0.15) | 0.05 (0.15) |
| Important | 1.45*** (0.18) | 0.03 (0.17) | 0.81*** (0.14) | 0.73*** (0.15) | 0.03 (0.15) |
| Very important | 1.92*** (0.18) | 0.15 (0.17) | 1.03*** (0.14) | 1.08*** (0.15) | 0.16 (0.15) |
| Views: freedom of speech vs. diversity | | | | | |
| Speech somewhat more important | 0.09 (0.08) | 0.20** (0.08) | 0.17** (0.07) | 0.04 (0.07) | -0.13 (0.07) |
| Same importance | 0.10 (0.07) | 0.31*** (0.07) | 0.11 (0.06) | -0.02 (0.06) | -0.18** (0.06) |
| Diversity somewhat more important | 0.30* (0.13) | 0.22 (0.13) | 0.25* (0.11) | -0.03 (0.11) | -0.38*** (0.11) |
| Diversity much more important | 0.24 (0.18) | 0.03 (0.17) | 0.09 (0.15) | 0.31* (0.15) | -0.42** (0.15) |
| Observations | 1502 | 1502 | 1502 | 1502 | 1502 |
| R-squared | 0.335 | 0.112 | 0.191 | 0.206 | 0.167 |
| *= $p < 0.05$ *= $p < 0.01$ ***= $p < 0.001$ | | | | | |

constructive *important* *forward-thinking*
excellent *high-quality* *insightful*
timely *active*

GOOD POLICY

is worth fighting for.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT **MLI**

MLI has been active in the field of indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with indigenous organizations, promoting indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada.

– The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

I commend Brian Crowley and the team at **MLI** for your laudable work as one of the leading policy think tanks in our nation's capital. The Institute has distinguished itself as a thoughtful, empirically based and non-partisan contributor to our national public discourse.

– The Right Honourable Stephen Harper

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

– The Honourable Irwin Cotler

M A C D O N A L D - L A U R I E R I N S T I T U T E



323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327
info@macdonaldlaurier.ca

macdonaldlaurier.ca

