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# **The partisan consequences of secularisation: An analysis of (non-)religion and party preferences over time**

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## **Abstract**

While we would expect secularisation to have important consequences for voting behaviour, data limitations in previous studies leave the specific implications of secularisation for Canadian electoral politics unclear. Using a data set covering the period between 1975 and 2005, this study examines which aspects of secularisation have affected the partisan balance of the party system by estimating the effects of religious belonging, behaving, and believing on party preferences. The results show that while the effects of religion (and other social identities) have not changed over time, changes in the composition of the electorate resulting from the growing share of non-religious Canadians has benefited the NDP and undercut support for the Conservatives.

## **Key Words**

Religious cleavages; secularisation; non-religiosity; party preferences; party systems

When we apply a comprehensive definition of secularisation that encompasses people's religious identities, consciousness, beliefs, and practice (Bruce 2011: 2), we see that Canadian society has become significantly less religious over the past five decades. The share of the Canadian population not identifying with religion increasing considerably since the 1970s (Bibby 2002; *ibid* 2011). The growing share of non-religious Canadians has been accompanied by declining frequency of religious practice and faith (Eagle 2011; Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme 2011; Wilkins-Laflamme 2014), with declining rates of religious affiliation affecting both Catholic and Protestant churches (Bowen 2004; Bibby 2011; Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme 2011; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016a). Although some religiously unaffiliated Canadians still hold religious beliefs and/or engage in religious practices (Bowen 2004; Wilkins-Laflamme 2015), the inescapable conclusion is that these changes in belief and practice reflect considerable secularisation of Canadian society.

Beyond the implications of secularisation for daily life, there is reason to believe that secularisation has had important political consequences as well. In recent elections, previous research suggests the behaviour of religious and secular Canadians has become more distinct (Guth and Fraser 2001; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016b). Non-religious voters do not neatly fit into an electoral space in which the party system formed largely around religious differences between Protestants and Catholics (Meisel 1956; Blais 2005; Johnston 2017). Because they constitute a growing share of the electorate, the incorporation of non-religious Canadians into the party system (or lack thereof) can have profound consequences for the outcome of elections and the representation of interests in public policy.

But has secularisation resulted in greater differences in the behaviour of religious and non-religious Canadians, or merely increased the importance of such divisions to parties' vote

totals because the share of non-religious Canadians has increased? Previous studies analysing religious/secular divisions in voting behaviour have been limited in terms of data availability for earlier periods, and have been limited by the availability of the measures needed to isolate and identify the effects of the different aspects of secularisation. While there are reasons to believe that the religious-secular cleavage has polarised (due in part to the appearance of issues like abortion and same-sex marriage: see Matthews 2005; Overby et al. 2011; Saurette and Gordon 2013), there may also be reason to believe that differences between religious and non-religious voters have persisted for longer than previous studies have been able to detect. There is also the concern that, absent appropriate measures of religion, we might incorrectly attribute the behaviour of non-religious voters to their secularity instead of their other social identities (with the absence of religious attachments allowing these other identities to be expressed more strongly than is possible among religious voters).

This paper seeks to improve our understanding of the electoral implications of secularisation. Specifically, I examine several different aspects of secularisation—including people’s religious attachments, practices, belief, and values—to determine which of these has the greatest consequences for Canadians’ party preferences. Using a data set with a long time series and controlling for the impact of other, secular social identities, this paper examines the partisan implications of secularisation, whether secularisation has weakened the impact of variables associated with religion—and activated voters’ secular social identities instead—or merely increased the share of the electorate that is non-religious.

## **Religion and the Canadian Party System**

Any analysis of the role that social identities like religion play in politics must begin with

a discussion of the seminal work by Lipset and Rokkan (1967; Rokkan 1970) laying out the foundations of what is referred to as cleavage theory. Cleavage theory holds that the major political parties emerge during “critical junctures” in countries’ development, when society becomes divided along social-group lines. Because the conflicts in these disputes are relevant to the daily lives of ordinary people, the social identities involved become relevant to politics, which operates as an extension of the divisions in the wider society. Recognising this, politicians form political parties around the major social groups in these conflicts, representing some groups to the exclusion of others. Voters, in turn, reflect these political divisions and vote for parties representing their social group and its interests because the party is viewed as an extension of their social group. Once established, these party/voter ties endure long after the events surrounding the formation of parties (Bartolini 2000).

In Canada, the main cleavages supporting the development of the largest parties have been the religious and ethno-linguistic cleavages. These cleavages supported the development of the Conservative and Liberal parties, with Anglophone Protestants largely (at least at first) of British descent dividing in favour of the Conservatives and Francophone Catholics (initially of French descent, but later including Catholic immigrants from other countries) supporting the Liberals (Meisel 1956; Blais 2005; Johnston 2017). In addition to the two largest parties, religion was important to the development of Canada’s largest “third” parties. Social Credit’s appeal in Canada was always strongest among evangelical Protestants, which was helped in no small part that the theory of Social Credit originally championed and promoted by the radio evangelist William Aberhart, while the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation drew much of its support in founding elections from mainline Protestants, most notably members of the United Church of Canada (Lipset, 1950). More recently, the Reform Party had a strong base of support

among religious conservatives, particularly Evangelicals and other socially conservative Protestants, while support for the socially liberal Bloc Québécois nonetheless has been strongest among Catholic voters in Québec (Guth and Fraser 2001).

These cleavages were often reinforced, though at other times, challenged, by provincial/regional variations in party support (reflecting a centre-periphery cleavage). Beyond the fact that Québec is largely Catholic (and thus the foundation to most successful Liberal electoral strategies), Conservative politicians have struggled to make sustained inroads into the province. Since the mid 1970s with the question of independence, even Québec has provided great difficulty to the Liberals, particularly with the rise of the Bloc Québécois. Western Canada has also complicated the translation of religious differences into political support. Feelings of Western alienation have frequently compounded the Liberals' structural disadvantage in the (once) largely Protestant provinces of Western Canada, and while this tends to benefit the (Progressive) Conservatives, it has also created problems for the right, giving rise to the formation and success of the Reform Party in the 1980s and '90s. Additionally, the relative absence of Catholic voters in Western Canada helps to explain why the New Democratic Party (and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation before it) has run stronger in these provinces than they have in the East (Johnston 2017).

One cleavage that did not develop to the same extent in Canada as in other Western democracies is the class cleavage. Though the NDP in many ways compares to the centre-left parties of Western Europe that is supported disproportionately by trade union members (Alford, 1963; Gidengil et al. 2006; Johnston 2017), the NDP has enjoyed far less support than comparable social democratic parties. Both the low levels of class-based support and the weak effects of social class on voting behaviour (Clarke et al. 1979; LeDuc 1984) can be explained by

the relative strength of the religious cleavage. Similar to other Western countries where religious diversity is reflected in strong divisions in voting behaviour along confessional lines (e.g., Lijphart 1979; Bartolini 2000), socioeconomic divisions have long been overshadowed by the more salient differences between Protestant and Catholic voters (Alford, 1963).

While the religious cleavage between Catholics and Protestants has attracted the greatest attention in previous studies of the impact of religion on Canadian elections, a growing body of research suggests that divisions between religious and secular voters similar to those seen in countries like the United States (Layman 2001) also influence Canadians' voting behaviour. Canadians' opinions on several questions of personal morality have long been divided along religious-secular lines (Hoover et al. 2002; Matthews 2005; Bean et al. 2008; Ang and Petrocik 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer 2019). Such differences in opinion are reflected in voting behaviour as well. Guth and Fraser (2001) showed that religious and secular attitudes influenced Canadians' party preferences at the end of the twentieth century. Wilkins-Laflamme (2016b) has shown that over the last several decades, voters' religiosity has come to exert stronger influences on voting behaviour, with religious voters significantly more likely to support the Conservatives and non-religious voters significantly more likely to support the NDP. These trends in voting behaviour persist today even though fewer Canadians hold socially conservative positions on questions of personal morality (Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer 2019). If anything, a growing body of evidence suggests that denominational differences are being supplanted by divisions along religious-secular lines (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016b; Rayside et al. 2017).

With secularisation and the growing share of religiously unaffiliated Canadians, we might expect that non-religious voters have become more important as a voting bloc and altered the partisan balance in Canadian elections. Because the Liberals and Conservatives are rooted in the

Catholic/Protestant divide, non-religious voters holding political preferences distinct from those of Catholics and Protestants may have found it difficult to support the two major parties.

Because the party is not rooted firmly in the religious cleavage and has taken socially liberal stances on most questions of personal morality, the NDP has been the party best-positioned to attract the support of non-religious voters. While the Liberals have also positioned themselves as a socially liberal party, secularisation of the electorate may have, on balance, reduced support for the Liberals as its traditional base of support (frequently attending Catholics) shrink as a share of the electorate. Thus, secularisation may have altered the partisan balance in favour of the NDP by undercutting support for the Liberals and Conservatives.

### **Secularisation Effects on Party Preferences?**

What impact has secularisation had on the party preferences of Canadians? This paper explores three possibilities. One is that voters detached from religion may have switched to apply other markers of identification to their party preferences. For example, we might expect that voters who no longer identify with religion have started voting along ethno-linguistic lines instead. Indeed, this might be expected given the finding noted by Johnston (2017) that whereas Catholic identification was once a strong predictor of Liberal support, this effect has been supplanted by a Francophone-specific effect. Given the backlash to the Québec question among some in Anglophone Canada in the 1980s and '90s, we might expect a similar response among those outside the Francophone community, leading to polarisation along ethnic/linguistic-group lines among non-religious voters. With secularisation, we might even expect to observe that Canada's historically weak divisions along socioeconomic lines have intensified once voters are freed from their ties to parties that historically have represented the major denominations.



While several arguments point towards the strengthening of other divisions in voting behaviour over time, another possibility is that the effects of the religious-secular cleavage have been stable over time. Instead of an intensification of the effects of this divide, divisions between religious and secular may have simply become more visible in recent years due to the effect of secularisation on the composition of the electorate. With more religiously unaffiliated voters, the share of the population holding socially liberal positions on questions of morality would increase as well (due to the correlations between religiosity and attitudes: Hoover et al. 2002; Bean et al. 2008; Ang and Petrocik 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer 2019). An increasing share of the population that is religiously unaffiliated and socially liberal would create the impression that religious-secular divisions are more important to predicting individual voting behaviour due to a more equally balanced number of people on both sides of the religious-secular divide.

A third possible effect of secularisation is in part a consequence of changes in the composition of the electorate. Coinciding with declining identification with and practice of religion, there has been a secular shift in values: for example, acceptance of abortion and same-sex marriage has increased considerably over the last three decades (Matthews 2005; Rayside et al. 2017; Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer 2019). This change in values has put pressure on parties to adopt clearer, more socially liberal stances. This was particularly the case with the NDP, but even the Liberals have overcome internal divisions on abortion to present a clearer message to the electorate (Rayside et al. 2017). As these parties have adopted more socially liberal positions, the fact that the Conservatives continue to oppose further liberalisation on these issues has created a clearer choice for religious/non-religious voters holding diverging views on these issues, which in turn may have strengthened the effects of (non-)religiosity and/or

associated values on Canadians' party preferences (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016b; Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer 2019). If anything, the eclipse of the Progressive Conservatives by the more socially conservative Alliance Party (and persisting since the merger of the two in 2003) recognising their dependence on religious voters has clarified the choice among parties even further. Such clearer stances would seem to predict the conclusions seen in previous studies arguing that religious-secular divisions in voting behaviour have strengthened over time (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016b; Rayside et al. 2017).

## **Research Design**

The challenge to examining these competing arguments has been the lack of appropriate data over a sufficient period of time. To assess the impact of secularisation on party preferences, we need (1) data covering a long period of time over which to observe the secularisation of the electorate and its consequences for party preferences and (2) variables measuring the different aspects of secularisation. To date, studies examining party preferences over extended periods of time have lacked one or more of the variables needed to determine which aspect(s) of secularisation—whether a decline in identification, practice, faith, or belief in certain religious values—has contributed most to long-term changes in party preferences. While some studies have included variables measuring several components of secularisation, these have been limited to a handful of recent elections.

To determine the impact of secularisation on party preferences, I examine data from the Project Canada Surveys collected by Reginald Bibby (2019), which were a series of postal surveys administered since 1975. The initial study surveyed a random sample of the adult Canadian population; each subsequent survey included both a share of respondents who had

participated in earlier waves, as well as a fresh sample (roughly half the total number of observations) randomly drawn from the population. These surveys (~1500-1900 respondents) cover the years 1975-2005 in five-year increments and include variables that allow us to measure several aspects of secularisation—as well as several variables associated with competing explanations of party preferences. I pooled each survey in order to estimate the effects of different measures of (non-)religion on party preferences over time.

### ***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable measures respondents' long-term party preferences. Specifically, respondents were asked “With respect to political party preference do you usually think of yourself as [list of parties given to respondents to choose from].” This makes the dependent variable similar to measures of long-term party preferences like party identification that, although conceptually and empirically independent of voting behaviour, nonetheless remains one of the most important predictors of how people vote.<sup>1</sup> While voting behaviour may fluctuate from election to election, the variable used here measures respondents' underlying party preferences over the long term, which should provide more stable estimates of party preferences.

That said, respondents' party preferences do track major changes in the largest parties' vote shares. This can be seen in Figure 1, which plots both the major parties' vote shares in elections between 1974 and 2006 and the shares of respondents preferring each party in each wave of the Project Canada survey. Although vote shares for the Liberals and Conservatives tend to outpace increases/decreases in respondents' longer-term party preferences, upturns and

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<sup>1</sup> This question wording makes the measure used here distinct from party identification, which requires more specific instructions to respondents to have them focus on their long-term *identities*, as opposed to the vaguer notion of “political party preference” (Green et al. 2002, 32-35; Green and Schickler 2009, 182-188).

reversals in fortune tend to be reflected in respondents' party preferences—particularly for the NDP.

*Figure 1 about here*

The analysis below focuses on support for the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP. “Conservative” includes both Progressive Conservative and Reform Party supporters, though excluding Reform supporters produces results substantively equivalent to those presented here. Because party preferences are categorical, I use multinomial logistic regression. I exclude respondents residing in Québec—where the presence of the Bloc Québécois potentially affects the impact of each predictor on respondents' party preferences—to simplify the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Measuring (Non-)Religiosity***

To determine the implications of secularisation for party preferences, I include variables measuring each of the three B's of religion: belonging, behaving, and believing. Differences in party preferences among respondents belonging to different denominations are accounted for by including separate indicators for each major religious tradition. Using Catholics as the baseline, I include separate indicators for respondents unaffiliated with religion, mainline Protestants (including Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and those belonging to the United Church), respondents belonging to non-mainline Protestants, and respondents belonging to all other non-

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<sup>2</sup> While the use of multinomial logistic regression prevents us from including Québec in the analysis below, robustness tests examining support for each party as a binary variable that include data from Québec—as well as interactions between each measure of (non-)religiosity and a dummy variable for respondents in Québec—confirm the conclusions drawn here. Moreover, Québécois respondents were indistinguishable from respondents in the rest of Canada as regards the effects of religious non-affiliation, church attendance, and belief in God; Québécois respondents were also statistically indistinguishable in terms of the effects of support for abortion, tolerance of gay men, and tolerance of same-sex relations on support for the Conservatives and NDP.

Christian religions (grouped together due to small numbers of observations).

To determine the robustness of previous findings suggesting that the party preferences of religiously unaffiliated Canadians tend to differ from Protestants and Catholics, I also include variables measuring differences in religious practice and belief. Differences in religious behaviour are measured using respondents' reported frequency of attendance of religious services using a nine-point scale (re-scaled to range from zero to one) ranging from those who never attend religious services (coded zero) to those who attend several times a week (coded one).

Religious belief is measured using a variable coded one for respondents reporting that they believe in God, and zero otherwise. In 1975 and 1980, respondents are treated as believing in God if they gave one of the following answers to the question "Which of the following statements come closest to expressing what you believe about God?": "I know God exists, and I have no doubt about it," "While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God," "I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times," and "I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind." From 1985, respondents were given a different question wording ("Do you believe – That God exists?") with different response options. Those answering "Yes, I definitely think so" or "Yes, I think so" to the question "Do you believe – That God exists?" are treated as believing in God.

We see evidence of secularisation over time in Table 1, which presents the sample proportions/mean values of each variable above across the seven waves of the Project Canada Survey for respondents outside Québec. Whereas the religiously unaffiliated comprised only eight percent of the sample in 1975, this number had increased to 18 percent by 2005. While the shares of Catholics and non-Mainline Protestants have remained stable, Mainline Protestants

have declined by nearly 20 percentage points. The rise in religious non-affiliation corresponds with a seven-point drop in belief in God: belief in God decreases from 86 percent in 1975 to 79 percent in 2005. Average religious attendance has decreased slightly as well, particularly in the two most recent waves.<sup>3</sup>

*Table 1 about here*

In addition to the three aspects of (non-)religiosity described above, respondents are also distinguished according to several opinions on matters pertaining to religion and religious teaching that have been relevant to political debates in recent years. One variable measures respondents' support for abortion. This variable is created as an additive scale measuring permissible attitudes towards abortion in six scenarios: rape, serious defect, maternal health, low income, married women who do not want further children, and women who do not want to marry their partners. The resulting 0-6 scale is recoded to range from 0-1 (from unsupportive to permissive attitudes towards abortion, respectively). A second variable measures respondents' tolerance of gay men using responses to the following prompt: "Please put yourself in the situation of just having met a person and the only thing you know about them is the following. What do you think your immediate reaction would be? – A male homosexual." Those responding that they would be at ease upon encountering a gay man are coded one (and zero otherwise). A third variable measures respondents' attitudes towards same-sex relationships. Respondents were asked "There has been a lot of talk about how morals and attitudes toward sex are changing in this country. What is your opinion of the following? – Two adults of the same sex having sex relations." Responses were coded from zero ("Always wrong") to three ("Not

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<sup>3</sup> Previous research argues that attendance has declined considerably more than Table 1 suggests (Eagle 2011). Even if the Project Canada data understate the decline in attendance, the data nonetheless remain suitable to estimate the effect of attendance on respondents' party preferences and to examine the consequences of declining attendance for parties' support.

wrong at all”), which was re-scaled to range between zero and one.

Even more dramatic than the increase in the share not affiliated with religion are the changes in some of the variables measuring respondents’ opinions on matters pertaining to religious teachings and traditional morality.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the share of respondents saying that they feel at ease upon meeting gay men has increased from 26 percent in 1975 to 70 percent in 2005. While not as dramatic, attitudes towards same-sex relations have become significantly more permissive since 1990. This suggests that while Canadian society has become more secular, the average person has not become significantly more liberal in their views towards abortion in the same way as with attitudes towards homosexuality. Interestingly, however, Canadians have not become any more permissive in their attitudes towards abortion with the average Canadian outside Québec supporting roughly four of six commonly given reasons for abortion.

### ***Control Variables***

To determine the robustness of any relationships found between party preferences and the variables listed above, I include several control variables associated with the key alternative explanations of social/political divisions in party support. In addition to respondents’ sex and

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<sup>4</sup> Opinions on these three sets of issues are rooted in respondents’ religious identities, attendance, and belief in God. In analyses not reported here modelling each opinion using the other variables in Table 2 below, frequent church attendance is associated with more conservative attitudes, as is belief in God in the model of support for abortion. (Belief in God has no effect on attitudes towards same-sex relations, and is *positively* associated with tolerance of gay men.) Net of all other predictors, each religious group holds more conservative attitudes than religiously unaffiliated respondents across all three variables (except mainline Protestants, who are slightly more supportive of abortion). This suggests that declining identification with religion, rates of church attendance, and belief in God explain an important amount of the secularisation in opinion on these three variables. Thus, any relationship between these three variables and party preferences reflects an indirect effect of secularising trends in belonging, behaving, and believing.

marital status, I include two variables measure respondents' views regarding gender relations. The first measures respondents' views regarding the future of women's influence in society using two questions. One question asked respondents "How do you feel about the future for the following [women]? Do you think it will gain more influence, lose some influence, or remain about the same?" while the second asked "How much power do you think the following group has?" Progressive responses (those responding "Will gain influence" to the first question and "Too little" to the second) are coded 0.5 (and zero otherwise) and summed to produce the scale. The second variable measures respondents' views towards traditional gender roles. Specifically, respondents agreeing with two statements—"Married women should not be employed if their husbands are capable of supporting them" and "Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to the men"—were coded 0.5 (and zero otherwise) and summed to produce the scale.

To account for differences in socioeconomic status, I include variables measuring respondents' household incomes,<sup>5</sup> whether they identified as middle class (in response to the question "Which social class do you classify yourself in?"), whether they belonged to a trade union, and whether they had completed a university degree. I account for the urban-rural cleavage with a variable measuring respondents residing on farms or in other rural areas. I also include variables measuring whether respondents speak French, reside in British Columbia, the three Prairie provinces, or in the four Atlantic provinces (leaving respondents in Ontario as the baseline). Finally, I control for age, cohort, and period effects by including variables for respondents' ages and generation, as well as the year of the survey.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Because the income scales differ from survey to survey, both in terms of the number of points on each scale and the range of dollar values, the income scales are re-scaled to range from zero to one in each wave.

<sup>6</sup> While it would have been preferable to add variables measuring respondents' racial and/or



## Results

Parameter estimates appear in Table 2 and show that even after accounting for several of the prominent alternative explanations for the differences in party support seen in previous research, many of the variables measuring respondents' (non-)religious characteristics remain significantly associated with party preferences. Religiously unaffiliated respondents are significantly more likely than Catholics (the baseline category) to support the Conservatives and NDP over the Liberals. Additionally, attendance at religious services is associated with significantly lower probabilities of supporting the NDP relative to the Liberals. Only belief in God fails to emerge as a significant predictor of party preferences.

*Table 2 about here*

To see the effects of these variable more clearly, Figure 2 presents the estimated changes in probability associated with the variables measuring religious (non-)identification on support for each party. These values are produced holding all other variables at their median values. Figure 2 shows that respondents unaffiliated with religion are 5.2 percent more likely to support the NDP than Catholics, and 13.4 percentage points less likely to support the Liberals. Although support for the Conservatives among the religiously unaffiliated remains lower than support for the Liberals (39.6 versus 45.3 percent, respectively), the religiously unaffiliated are 8.1 percent more likely to support the Conservatives than are Catholics. Although less powerful than the marginal effects of belonging to Mainline or other Protestant denominations—which increase support for the Conservatives (by 18.9 and 24.3 percentage points, respectively) and reduce support for the Liberals (by 21.2 and 26.4 percentage points, respectively)—these effects

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ethnic backgrounds to the model, such variables were not available for the entire series, leaving me to exclude such variables from the model.

nonetheless demonstrate that religious non-affiliation results in significantly less support for the Liberals and higher support for the NDP and Conservatives.

*Figure 2 about here*

Figure 2 also presents the estimated changes in probability associated with church attendance and belief in God. These estimated effects simulate the impact of each variable among religiously unaffiliated respondents (holding all other variables to the median values). The results in Figure 2 show that attendance at religious services leads to a 5.5 percentage-point increase in support for the Liberals. The comparable reductions in support for the Conservatives and NDP are negligible and statistically insignificant, as are the effects of belief in God.

Beyond the effects of respondents' religious belonging and behaving, Table 2 reveals that the effects of respondents' attitudes towards abortion and homosexuality also have strong effects on party preferences. Support for abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as tolerance of gay men, reduce support for the Conservatives relative to the Liberals, while viewing same-sex relationships favourably increases support for the NDP. The effects of these variables can be seen more clearly in Figure 3, which presents the predicted changes in probability of supporting each party associated with these three variables (assuming respondents are religiously unaffiliated, and holding all other variables to their median values). Support for abortion decreases support for the Conservatives by 9.7 percentage points and increases support for the Liberals and NDP by 5.7 and 4.1 percentage points, respectively. Tolerance of gay men reduces support for the Conservatives by just over six percentage points and increases support for the Liberals and NDP by 3.8 and 2.2 percentage points, respectively. Finally, open attitudes towards same-sex relationships decreases support for the Conservatives by 14.7 percentage points, increasing support for the Liberals and NDP by 4.8 and 9.9 percentage points, respectively.

*Figure 3 about here*

Thus, the results suggest that several aspects of secularisation have affected the partisan balance of the electorate. The rising share of the population that is unaffiliated with religion has hurt the Liberals (whose support comes disproportionately from Catholic respondents) and benefited the NDP (which tends to draw more support from the religiously unaffiliated). Declining attendance has benefitted the NDP (whose supporters attend church less frequently) and hurt the Liberals (whose supporters attend church more frequently). Even more important has been the secularisation of values: increasing tolerance of gay men and same-sex relationships have increased support for both the NDP and the Liberals (counteracting some of the other effects of secularisation on their support), and significantly reduced the Conservatives' base of potential supporters.

These findings emerge after controlling for several other markers of social identity that have important effects on respondents' party preferences. Namely, we observe significant effects in line with previous literature pertaining to respondents' socioeconomic status, region of residence, and gender/gender attitudes. To what extent has secularisation strengthened the effects of these variables on party preferences?

To determine whether secularisation has strengthened the effects of other variables on party preferences, I compare the results seen in Table 2 with the results of models allowing for interaction effects with three components of secularisation: religious non-affiliation, church attendance, and belief in God. To test for possible differences over time reflecting some unobserved process of secularisation, I also estimate models interacting each variable with the variable measuring the year of the survey.<sup>7</sup> I repeat this latter set of model comparisons but

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<sup>7</sup> The results treating the year of the survey as a linear scale provide even weaker evidence of interaction than Table 3 suggests.

focus solely on interactions between each predictor and a dummy variable comparing the 2005 wave with all previous waves to test whether the divergence in parties' positions on same-sex marriage and abortion during this period has led to stronger effects of each measure of respondents' (non-)religiosity and values.

Table 3 provides little evidence to suggest that the effects of any of the other predictors of party preferences have changed due to secularisation. While likelihood-ratio chi-squared tests provide some evidence that the effects of these other predictors on party preferences intensify among more secular respondents, none of the models including interaction terms with religious non-affiliation or belief in God improves model fit when using the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), which is preferable when trying to avoid false positives. Only the effects of the variables measuring tolerance of same-sex relations and respondents in Atlantic provinces appear to interact with frequency of attendance, and even then, the improvements in model fit are marginal.

*Table 3 about here*

Table 3 similarly fails to provide clear evidence of variation in the effects of any of the predictors included in Table 2 over time. Although several interactions appear to improve model fit when looking at the results of the likelihood-ratio chi-squared tests, BIC values suggest such improvements in model fit are not efficient enough to outweigh the costs of adding additional parameters to the model. This finding holds even when we focus only on interactions between each predictor and a dummy variable for the 2005 wave controlling for the potential impact that clarification in the parties' positions on same-sex marriage and abortion during this period had on the effects of each variable relative to those effects seen in earlier waves.

Taken together, the results in Table 3 suggest that the primary effect of secularisation on

the Canadian party system is compositional. Rather than altering the effects of secular markers of social identity on Canadians' party preferences, the results in Table 3 suggest that the primary impact of secularisation for the party system has been to increase the share of the non-religious population. These results are in keeping with an interpretation rooted in cleavage theory holding that the effects of social-group identities on party preferences should tend to be steady across long stretches of time.

### **Conclusions and Directions for Future Research**

As Canadian society continues to secularise, the transformations in religious identification, practice, faith, and values will have political consequences as well. Because the Canadian party system was founded in large part on the divisions between Protestants and Catholics, the rising share of religiously unaffiliated Canadians raises questions as to how secular voters will engage with the parties and be incorporated into the party system. While previous studies have demonstrated the distinctiveness of non-religious voters' behaviour, particularly in recent elections, these studies have lacked the data and measures needed to determine what consequences secularisation has had on Canadians' party preferences over the past several decades. Specifically, we have been unable to determine whether secularisation has affected the party preferences of non-religious Canadians by allowing for other markers of social identity to be expressed, or whether the primary consequence of secularisation has been to increase the distribution of non-religious, non-practicing, and non-believing voters (who have preferences distinct from Protestants and Catholics that have been stable over time).

To this end, this study has examined the party preferences of Canadians since the 1970s. Using variables measuring several different aspects of (non-)religion and secularisation,

the analysis revealed that several aspects of religious belonging, behaving, and belief (or the lack thereof) influence respondents' party preferences. The results show that while frequency of church attendance influences party preferences (increasing support for the Liberals and decreasing support for the NDP), belief in God does not. On questions of personal morality linked to church teachings, respondents supportive of abortion and same-sex relations and who are tolerant of gay men are significantly more likely to support the Liberals and NDP and less likely to support the Conservatives. Even after controlling for these measures of behaving and belief, the results show that religiously unaffiliated Canadians tend to behave as a group, with religious non-affiliation associated with significantly lower probabilities of support for the Liberals.

Rather than observing that secularisation has intensified the effects of other social identities, the results seen here suggest that the chief impact of secularisation has been to increase the non-religious share of the electorate. With fewer Canadians identifying with or practicing religion, there are more voters available for parties that, historically, have appealed to non-religious voters. The increasing share of non-religious and non-observant voters holding increasingly secular values has, in turn, increased the base of potential support for parties appealing to these voters. While Canadians divide along other social-group lines, with variables like socioeconomic status and region found to be important determinants of party preferences as well, the analysis revealed that the effects of these variables have not strengthened over time and have not intensified as people have disengaged from religious practices and shed their religious identities associated with support for the Liberals or Conservatives. In line with expectations derived from cleavage theory, the effects of religious (non-)identification and religiosity remain stable over time. These findings hold even when we allow for the possibility that the effects of

(non-)religiosity have changed over time due to divergence in the parties' positions on matters of personal morality in recent years, which might be expected to intensify the effects of religion—but which our analysis does not support.

These developments have worked principally to the benefit of the NDP and to the detriment of the Conservatives. With fewer Canadians identifying as Protestant, and fewer Canadians holding socially conservative views on homosexuality and same-sex relationships, the Conservatives have had to compete for a dwindling base of potential supporters. All these trends have worked to the benefit of the NDP. Although the Liberals attract some support from those holding socially liberal views, the growing share of the population not identifying as religious and the declining levels of church attendance undercut their support. While parties also compete along other lines of social division whose distributions have changed over time (e.g. rising incomes for the average Canadian since the 1970s have offset some of the loss in support suffered by the Conservatives due to secularisation), the results seen here demonstrate how particular aspects of secularisation have affected Canadians' party preferences over time.

Going forward, additional research is needed to explore other political implications of secularisation. While the analysis in this study revealed that secularisation benefited the NDP during the period examined here, the impact of an increasingly non-religious electorate is not restricted to the NDP and may also create space for other secular parties to emerge and compete for this expanding share of the electorate. Increasing vote shares for the Green Party at both the federal and provincial levels in recent years support this conclusion. This suggests further that an increasingly non-religious electorate may produce a more fragmented party system, reducing the advantages previously enjoyed by the Liberals and Conservatives that resulted from the fact they represented Catholics and Protestants (who once constituted a larger share of the electorate

than they do today).

While this study has illuminated the partisan consequences of secularisation, more research focusing on secularisation and public opinion and attitudes is needed. With the numbers adhering to and practicing religion in decline, we would expect to observe increasing social liberalism on questions of personal morality and/or tolerance of alternative lifestyles. Because voters' attitudes and opinions are more proximate determinants of their voting behaviour than are religious identities, practices, and beliefs, investigating the impact of secularisation on social attitudes will help to identify the full range of consequences that the secularisation of society has on politics and elections.



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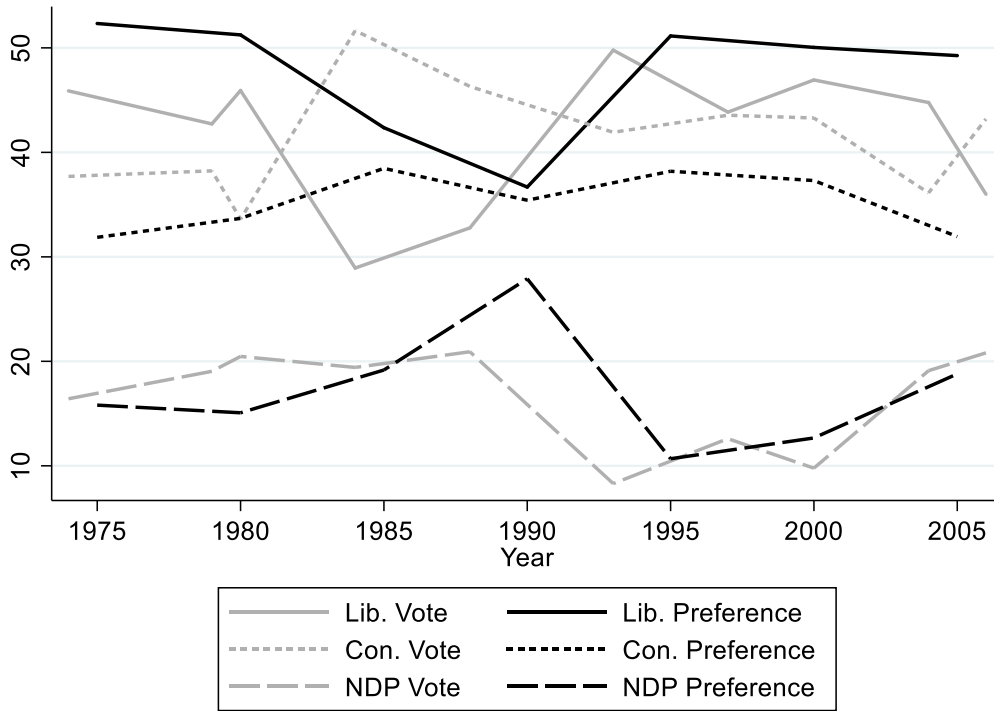
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Figure 1: Voting Behaviour Versus Party Preferences Over Time



Notes: Values are the shares of the three-/four-party vote/preferences supporting each party. Conservative values include both Progressive Conservatives and Reform/Alliance during the 1980s and '90s.

Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Religious Variables Measuring Belonging, Behaving, and Believing Effects on the Probability of Supporting Each Party

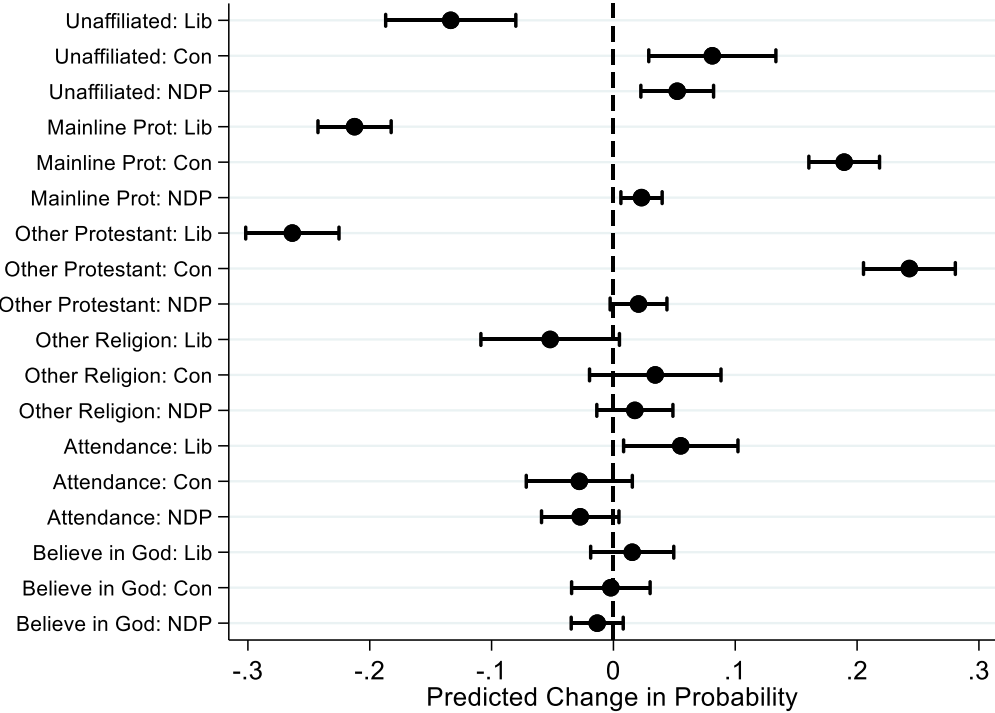


Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Opinions on Questions of Personal Morality on the Probability of Supporting Each Party

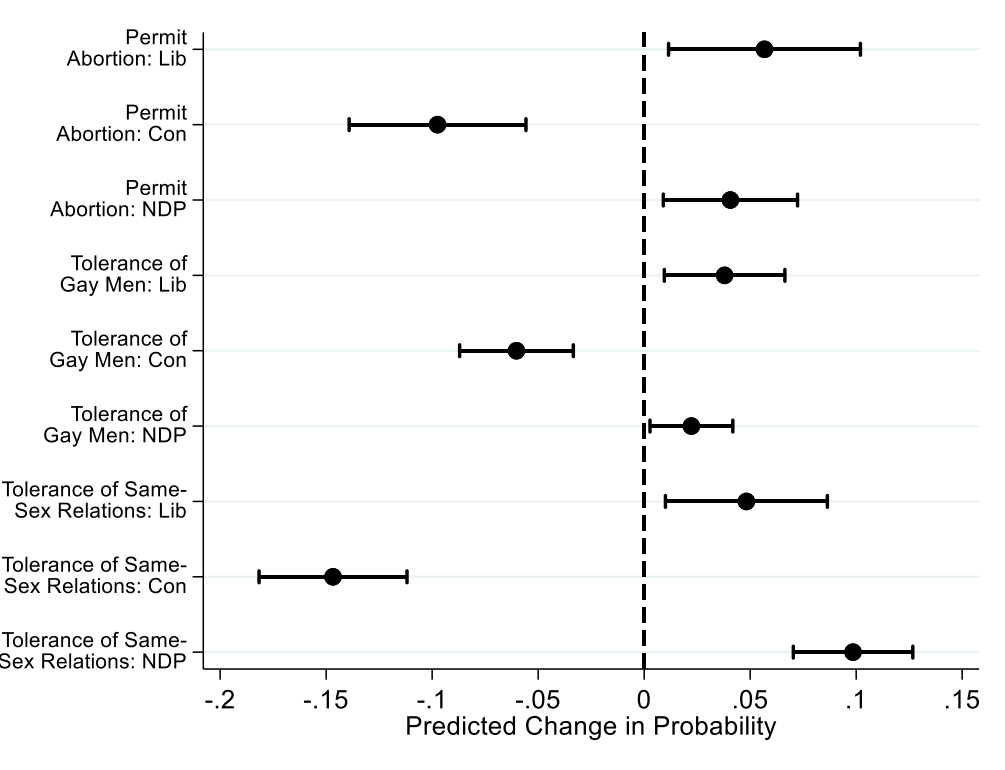


Table 1: Secularisation in Canada Outside Québec, 1975-2005

Measure	Year						
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
Unaffiliated	0.08	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.14	0.18
Catholic	0.24	0.23	0.28	0.29	0.26	0.28	0.25
Mainline Protestant	0.52	0.48	0.46	0.45	0.41	0.39	0.33
Other Protestant	0.12	0.15	0.14	0.13	0.16	0.16	0.11
Other Religion	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.17
Attendance	0.43	0.39	0.40	0.38	0.38	0.35	0.39
Believe in God	0.86	0.84	0.79	0.78	0.76	0.77	0.79
Permit Abortion Scale	0.68	0.68	0.66	0.69	0.66	0.68	0.67
Tolerance of Gay Men	0.26	0.32	0.33	0.39	0.55	0.64	0.70
Tolerance of Same-Sex Relationships	0.25	0.25	0.27	0.29	0.44	0.55	0.57

Entries are the sample proportions (the religious identity variables and “Tolerance of Gay Men”) or means.



Table 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates of Party Preferences, 1975-2005

Predictors	Party	
	Con.	NDP
Unaffiliated	0.51**	0.72**
Mainline Protestant	0.98**	0.66**
Other Protestant	1.24**	0.78**
Other Religion	0.21	0.27
Attendance	-0.20	-0.32*
Believe in God	-0.04	-0.13
Permit Abortion Scale	-0.40**	0.18
Tolerance of Gay Men	-0.25**	0.08
Tolerance of Same-Sex Relations	-0.53**	0.62**
Women (ref: Men)	-0.00	-0.19*
Married	0.01	-0.10
Positive Views of Women's Influence	-0.33**	0.36**
Supports Traditional Gender Roles	-0.01	-0.02
Household Income	0.55**	-0.81**
Middle Class Self ID	0.07	-0.31**
Union Members	-0.05	0.90**
University Degree	-0.25**	0.04
Rural	0.31**	0.12
Francophone	-0.28**	-0.25
British Columbia	0.20*	0.35**
Prairie Provinces	0.65**	0.67**
Atlantic Provinces	0.27**	-0.38**
Age	-0.02	-0.69
Lost Generation	0.35	0.94*
Greatest Generation	0.28	0.37
Silent Generation	0.16	-0.04
Generation X	0.15	-0.22
Millennials	-0.01	0.20
1980	0.40**	-0.18
1985	0.69**	0.51**
1990	0.62**	0.85**
1995	0.43**	-0.24
2000	0.61**	0.01
2005	0.60**	0.15
Constant	-0.92**	-1.46**
McFadden's R <sup>2</sup>	0.11	
n	7250	

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01. Entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients. Baseline category: Liberal Party.

Table 3: Model Comparison Tests for Interaction Between Each Predictor and Non-Affiliation, Attendance, and Belief

Alternative Model	Interaction with:				
	Unaffiliated	Attendance	Believe	Year	2005 Only
Unaffiliated	-	13895.90	13894.10	13974.57	13893.28
Mainline Protestant	-	13893.99	13894.75	13971.74	13890.11
Other Protestant	-	13885.95**	13889.88	13977.23	13894.42
Other Religion	-	13889.96	13894.46	13969.32	13890.87
Attendance	13894.90	-	13894.29	13957.71**	13893.48
Believe in God	13894.10	13894.29	-	13977.24	13895.34
Permit Abortion Scale	13895.67	13885.08**	13893.40	13948.47**	13879.36**
Tolerance of Gay Men	13895.59	13890.36	13892.57	13973.51	13892.21
Tolerance of Same-Sex Relations	13888.95*	<u>13877.63**</u>	13882.87**	13962.05*	13884.69**
Women	13895.20	13894.05	13894.68	13968.36	13895.06
Married	13889.87	13889.62*	13883.73**	13967.30	13888.53*
Positive Views of Women's Influence	13892.46	13894.77	13890.71	13978.34	13894.09
Supports Traditional Gender Roles	13893.37	13890.14	13892.60	13974.87	13895.56
Household Income	13893.76	13888.29*	13894.56	13967.88	13893.58
Middle Class Self ID	13894.67	13894.73	13894.65	13956.83**	13883.29**
Union Members	13892.37	13889.29*	13890.98	13971.51	13895.14
University Degree	13893.14	13891.42	13891.53	13958.72*	<u>13877.44**</u>
Rural	13894.70	13891.48	13893.37	13967.01	13893.60
Francophone	13894.90	13887.81*	13895.24	13969.61	13895.42
British Columbia	13895.14	13890.25	13894.56	13956.55**	13891.88
Prairie Provinces	13890.34	13879.97**	13895.61	13956.73**	13885.72**
Atlantic Provinces	13887.52*	<u>13875.14**</u>	13886.74*	13953.73**	13884.54**
Baseline	13877.93				

Values are Bayesian Information Criteria (lower values = preferred model). Underlined values suggest that the variable listed in the column interacts with the variable listed in the row. \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01 indicate that likelihood-ratio tests suggest the interactions significantly improve model fit over the baseline.