

ARTICLE

Religiosity matters: assessing competing explanations of support for secularism in Quebec and Canada

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Abstract

Secularism—i.e., the separation between the state and religious institutions—is a fundamental characteristic of liberal democracies, yet support for secular arrangements varies significantly across Western countries. In Canada, such attitudinal divergences are observable at the regional level, with citizens from Quebec displaying higher levels of support for secularism than other Canadians. In this paper, we test three hypotheses to account for this regional discrepancy: religiosity, liberal values, and out-group prejudice. Using data from an online panel survey ($n = 2,000$), our findings suggest that support for secularism in Quebec is mostly explained by the province's lower baseline levels of religiosity, anticlerical feelings, and by its distinctive understanding of liberalism. These factors are likely to result from Quebec's unique religious and sociohistorical history. Results also suggest that while negative feelings toward religious minorities are positively correlated with support for secularism across the entire country, negative feelings toward ethnic minorities are associated with lower support for secularism in Quebec. These findings disprove the commonly held assumption according to which support for secularism is driven by ethnic prejudice in Quebec.

Keywords: Canadian politics; political behavior; political values; Quebec; religiosity; secularism

Secularization is a constitutive feature of Western modernity (Keddie, 1997). In contemporary liberal democracies, the separation of church and state has become a foundational feature of the political order. Today, most Western countries have established one form or another of institutional arrangements ensuring the autonomy of the political sphere from religious influences. In parallel, the number of individuals identifying as non-religious or secular has sharply risen in recent years across Western publics (Baker and Smith, 2009; Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Hout and Fischer, 2014). Political questions over secularism have concurrently gained traction in Europe and North America, mostly as a consequence of the growing—and quite

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heated—debate about the integration and accommodation of minority groups into mainstream society (Bader, 2007; Kinder and Kam, 2010; Kettell, 2019).

This political momentum has reinvigorated scholarly interest in secularism over the past decades. Cross-country studies show that support for secularism among Western publics has soared in the last 50 years as adherence to religious denominations lost ground (Hansen, 2011), primarily as a result of individual and societal secularization (Voas, 2009; Norris and Inglehart, 2011). Among scholars of political behavior, attitudinal preferences for policies enforcing a separation between the church and the state have been recognized as being correlated in important ways with other political attitudes, such as left–right ideological preferences (Huber and Yendell, 2019), party affiliation (Beard *et al.*, 2013), support for social welfare, scientific approaches to societal issues, and other liberal cultural attitudes (Layman *et al.*, 2021). In addition, research looking at the causes of support for secularism has shown that individuals’ sociodemographic background—including higher levels of education and income (Beard *et al.*, 2013)—holds significant explanatory power for attitudes toward secular policies.

In Canada, the difference in attitudes toward secularism¹ between Quebec and the rest of the country (hereafter “Rest of Canada” or “ROC”) is significant. This is one of numerous sociopolitical differences that exist between Quebecers and other Canadians (Nadeau and Bélanger, 2012; Brie and Mathieu, 2021). Yet, secularism continues to create controversy in a uniquely cyclical manner in Canada. Since the Quebec government first proposed to introduce secular legislation in 2013, debates on the ban of religious symbols in the public sphere have been recurrent both within and outside the province. Adopted in 2019, Quebec’s Bill 21—*An Act respecting the Laicity of the State*—prohibits religious symbols for people in position of coercive authority, including police officers and judges. Since its implementation, this legislation has triggered adverse reactions from political actors suggesting that the law should be challenged in court as discriminatory. The constitutionality of Bill 21 was upheld by the Superior Court of Quebec, although it concluded that the provisions were inoperative for English-language school boards. Further legal challenges are likely, with the Supreme Court of Canada expected to hear the case in the coming years. Still, in Quebec, a majority of citizen (64%) report being in favor of the law (Bourgault-Côté, 2019). Among other Canadians, however, positions are almost evenly split (Dib, 2019).

This paper tests three possible explanations for the differential support for secularism across Canadian regions: religiosity, liberalism,² and prejudice. We operationalize these concepts using multi-item scales, which allow for the measurement of such complex, latent attitudes. Among others, these items make a distinction between negative feelings toward religious and ethnic minorities—a nuance which is often sidelined in the literature—and allow us to test different subtypes of religiosity.

Our findings suggest that differences between Quebecers and other Canadians are partly explained by lower baseline individual levels of religiosity—especially anticlericalism—and by the differential effect of liberal values on support for secularism in Quebec. This is likely to result from the divergent historical and sociological trajectories of Quebec within the Canadian federation over the last 70 years, including Quebec’s fraught relationship with the Catholic Church (Zubrzycki, 2016). Our

analyses also show that while religious prejudice is a positive predictor of support for secularism both in Quebec and in the ROC, ethnic prejudice is slightly negatively correlated with that attitude in Quebec. These results disprove the commonly held assumption according to which support for secularism would be driven by ethnic prejudice in Quebec. Finally, we demonstrate that among all dimensions of religiosity, anticlerical attitudes are the most powerful predictor of support for secularism across all Canadian provinces. Based on these findings, the cleavage regarding secularism between Quebec and other Canadian provinces should be reassessed as the by-product of low levels of religiosity and of differential forms of liberalism.

Secularism in Quebec and Canada

The commitment by the government of Quebec to enforce secularism has become a recurrent contentious topic in Canada. Outside of the province, state-sanctioned secularism is often interpreted as an explicit attack on minorities, especially since it prohibits “ostentatious” religious symbols that are usually associated with religious minority groups such as Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews (Khan, 2021; Sandhu, 2021). Yet, historically, support for secularism in Quebec has increased following unique sociopolitical changes sparked by the Quiet Revolution³ in the 1960s, with religiosity dramatically declining among Francophones ever since. In the second part of the twentieth century, Quebecers transitioned rapidly from one of the most to one of the least religious communities in the world (Lefebvre, 2012). In the 1960s and early 1970s, in a rapid sequence of modernization, the state in Quebec took control of the education and of the healthcare and welfare systems that were up to then managed by the Catholic Church and re-established them as secular institutions. This radical move from one of the most pious (McQuillan, 2004) to one of the most secular societies across the globe informs a substantial part of contemporary Quebec politics (M.D. and Erasmus, 2016).

In the past decades, Quebec’s secular tradition has found echoes in the province’s political sphere. In 2007, the Quebec government launched the Bouchard–Taylor Commission, a public inquiry on religious accommodations in the province. The commission’s heavily publicized report suggested that high-ranking public officials with coercive authority like police officers, judges, and Crown prosecutors should reflect the religious neutrality of the state (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008). Some recommendations from the report were implemented in the years that followed, but other issues remained largely unresolved (Rocher, 2014). In 2010, the Quebec government first proposed a bill to “establish guidelines governing accommodation requests” but it was not adopted (Bill 94). Then, in 2013, the government proposed a “Charter of Values” which included a prohibition on the wearing of ostentatious religious symbols by people giving or receiving public services. The Charter also never made it into law, but exacerbated years-long discords in the province.

In 2019, debates over secularism culminated with the promulgation of Bill 21 by the Quebec government. The bill, which synthesizes some recommendations of the Bouchard–Taylor report with some controversial policy additions—e.g., prohibition on wearing of religious symbols by school principals, vice-principals, and teachers—benefited from important public support, especially among the governing party’s electorate.

Since then, the law has remained contentious in both Quebec and Canada, with the legislation being challenged in courts. In 2021, the Quebec Superior Court finally ruled that some of its provisions violated minority language educational rights enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This decision exempted English-language schools in Quebec from having to apply the law. Both parties in the legal fight said they would appeal the decision. Later that year, numerous cities across Canada including Brampton, Guelph, Toronto, and London pledged money and resources in the legal fight against Bill 21. This legal battle is one of the most telling reflections of the considerable regional tensions regarding secular arrangements within Canada.

Support for secularism: religiosity, liberalism, and prejudice

We seek to identify the causes of heightened support for secularism in Quebec, which currently remain unknown. A first potential explanation concentrates on baseline differences in levels of religiosity. This hypothesis ties support for secularism in Quebec to the province's lower levels of religiosity since the decline of the Catholic Church following the Quiet Revolution. Quebec indeed experienced a significant drop in religiosity since the 1960s. This argument contrasts the social trajectories of Quebec and English Canada over the last 60 years—plainly, levels of religiosity have not dropped as significantly in the ROC during this period (Eagle, 2011; Dufresne *et al.*, 2019, 11).

The religiosity hypothesis is supported by empirical findings. For instance, Dufresne *et al.* (2019) argue that Canadian respondents with lower levels of religiosity are much more prone to support state-sponsored secularism. Meunier and Legault-Leclair also find that the importance assigned to religion in life matters in explaining support for the wearing of religious symbols by schoolteachers (2021). However, the effect of religiosity—and of one of its components, anticlericalism—on support for secularist policies in the province has largely remained unexplored. Some scholars maintain that the anticlerical tradition in North America should be distinguished from that in Europe because its development did not stem from opposition to a “pro-clerical authoritarian state”—like in Spain or Italy (Riegelhaupt, 1984; McDavid, 2012, 11)—but this point somewhat overlooks Quebec, where the government heavily relied on the Church's institutions and approval in providing various social services (Lamonde, 1994; Durou, 2011).

Still, contemporary anticlericalism is less acute in Quebec than in some formerly Catholic countries of Europe (Baum, 2000, 158). The high levels of anticlericalism in the province must indeed be understood in conjunction with the more widespread regime of “cultural Catholicism” that characterizes Quebec society (Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme, 2011). This somewhat paradoxical situation generates a regime of religiosity sometimes characterized as “catho-laïcité” (i.e., catho-secularism) (Maclure, 2014). Though Quebecers' participation in religious practices has been steadily declining—a majority of Quebecers still identify as Catholics⁴ but the province registers the lowest level of religious participation across Canada (Cornelissen, 2021)—the ubiquitous signs of the Church's cultural and social heritage have led some to label Quebecers as “recovering Catholics” (Zubrzycki, 2016). This dynamic gives rise to a distinctive yet fraught relationship between Quebecers and the Catholic Church (Mossière, 2021).

A second potential explanation of the gap in support for secularism is the distinct effect of liberal values in Quebec and in the ROC. Turgeon *et al.* (2019), for instance, demonstrate that support for restrictions regarding minority religious symbols in Quebec is primarily driven by the set of liberal values held by Quebecers, which is distinct in many regards from the ones shared by other Canadians. They show that Quebecers' understanding of liberalism is more conducive to support for religious restrictions because it rests on "a vision of liberalism (and *laïcité*) that called on the state to regulate individual expressions of beliefs and, in so doing, serve as an agent of religious emancipation" (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019, 250–51). This suggests that conservative Quebecers hold similar views than Canadians from other provinces on restrictions for minority groups, while liberal Quebecers display more pro-secularist attitudes than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. Consequently, what explains the difference in attitudes toward secularism would not be liberal values themselves, but the conceptual *discrepancies* in the meaning of liberalism between Quebecers and other Canadians. Variation in policy preferences for secularism between Quebec and the ROC might therefore be a by-product of two understandings of liberalism at odds with each other.

Finally, a third line of explanation for the heightened support for restrictive secularist policies in Quebec focuses on the role played by prejudice toward immigrants and minority groups. The literature on this phenomenon, which primarily concentrates on the United States and Europe, makes the case that there is a connection between prejudice toward religious minorities and support for wider restrictions on minority religious symbols, especially for Muslims minorities (Kinder and Kam, 2010; Helbling, 2014). In Canada, research shows that Quebecers are slightly prejudiced toward immigrants and racial minorities (Bilodeau *et al.*, 2012), and although this trend is not unique to the province (Turgeon and Bilodeau, 2014), negative attitudes toward Muslims in particular has been found to drive support for banning minority religious symbols (Bilodeau *et al.*, 2018).

This last potential explanation for Quebec's higher levels of support for secularism is likely related, on a conceptual level, to its citizens experiencing significant levels of cultural threat (Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007; Newman *et al.*, 2012; Brie and Ouellet, 2020). Quebecers indeed form a minority nation within Canada, and its government has been dedicated to protecting the French language and culture via various legislative measures introduced since the Quiet Revolution. However, research on the effect of cultural threat on attitudes toward immigration is inconclusive across various cases (Sides and Citrin, 2007; Escandell and Ceobanu, 2010), including in Quebec (Harell *et al.*, 2012; Turgeon and Bilodeau, 2014; Medeiros *et al.*, 2017).

Data and methods

Our data emanate from a web panel survey carried out by the public opinion firm *Synopsis* between September 3 and September 7, 2020, on 2,000 respondents across Canada. Oversampling was carried out in Quebec to allow for a substantial comparison between Quebec respondents and those in the ROC. Data were weighted using sociodemographic variables from the Canadian census to ensure the representativeness of results. The survey includes sociodemographic questions as well as questions

on secularism and religiosity, which were worded based on a systematic review of studies of these issues and of their multiple dimensions (Allport and Ross, 1967; Hill and Wood, 1999; Slater *et al.*, 2001; Hill and Pargament, 2003; Idler *et al.*, 2003; Beckford and Demerath, 2007; Cutting and Walsh, 2008; Koenig and Büssing, 2010; Berry *et al.*, 2011; Zwingmann *et al.*, 2011; Cohen *et al.*, 2017).

We investigate three distinct possible explanations found in the literature for the gap between Quebecers and other Canadians regarding support for secularism. Our explanatory variables of interest are (1) the level of religiosity, i.e., the importance given to religious life and to the place of religion in society; (2) liberal values, i.e., attitudes that stress individual freedom (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019, 249), which, due to the distinct political legacies of Quebec and the ROC, could explain their differential support for secularism; (3) and, finally, greater negative feelings toward ethnic and religious minorities as well as in-group preferences measured using a feeling thermometer.

We use multi-item scales to operationalize these complex concepts. There are significant advantages of using scales to measure latent concepts that cannot be directly assessed, like the ones described above (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, multi-item scales are often more reliable than single items, and these scales are useful in complex statistical models with limited degrees of freedom. The factor loadings for our four additive scales are presented in Table A in the Annex.⁵ First, the measure of secularism—our dependent variable—is a scale made up of six theoretically related questions. We operationalize secularism as a single measure composed of respondents' position on (1) whether elected officials should have the right to cover their faces for religious reasons, (2) what efforts should be made to accommodate religious minorities in Canada, (3) whether religious leaders should influence voting during elections, and (4) whether teachers, (5) judges, and (6) police officers should be able to wear religious symbols at work.

Second, our measure of religiosity is made up of 25 religiosity-related survey questions selected following a systematic review of the literature. These questions capture the more inward-looking nature of religiosity. For instance, it includes whether one tries hard to live one's life according to one's religious beliefs, how important is religion to one's life, and whether belonging to a religious group is an important part of one's self-image. The scale also comprises some more socially oriented questions, such as on one's position regarding whether a decline in religiosity leads to the decline of civilization and culture, and whether religious education is essential to preserve morals. We also disaggregate religiosity into four indexes—anticlericalism, religious fundamentalism, social religiosity, and intrinsic religiosity—that synthesizes the theoretical literature on religiosity (Hill and Hood, 1999; Hill and Pargament, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2017).

Third, liberal values are measured using a four-item scale selected from commonly used indicators in the literature (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019). These items are: (1) "society would be better off if more women stayed home with their children," (2) "euthanasia (or assisted suicide) is never ethically justified," (3) "gays and lesbians should not be allowed to marry in Canada," and (4) "it is too easy to get an abortion nowadays."⁶

Finally, we build two distinct measures of prejudice toward minorities. First, attitudes toward *ethnic* minorities are measured using respondents' feeling toward

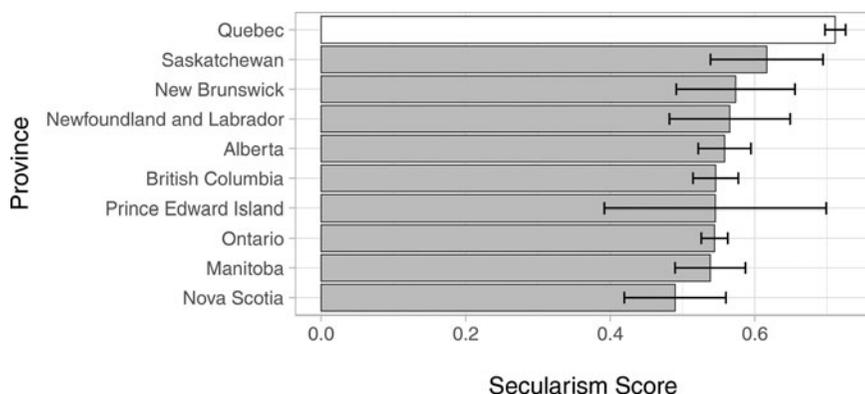


Figure 1. Secularism score across Canadian provinces.

Note: [Figure 1](#) displays the average secularism score (0–1) in all Canadian provinces ($n = 2,000$). Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals around the sample mean.

Data: Synopsis, 2020.

Blacks, Asians, Aboriginals, and Latinos⁷ on a feeling thermometer. Second, attitudes toward *religious* minorities are measured using attitudes toward Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. These allow us to distinguish between negative feelings toward racial and religious minority groups.

Results

Attitudes toward secularism in Quebec and in the ROC

Previous research suggests that there is a significant gap in support for secularism—and for restriction on minority religious symbols—between Quebecers and other Canadians (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019; Dufresne *et al.*, 2019). Descriptive evidence presented in [Figure 1](#) supports this claim, with Quebecers displaying a significantly higher level of pro-secular attitude than citizens from all other Canadian provinces. While there is strong support for secularism among Quebecers, other Canadians reveal less enthusiastic preferences. The asymmetry between both groups reaches a difference of over 15 percentage points ($p < 0.01$)—with the Quebec average being at 0.71 and the ROC average at 0.54 on a scale ranging from 0 to 1. The regional divide over secularism is on display across all items in our secularism scale (see [Figure A](#)). This variation is also apparent in almost all demographic subgroups, including foreign-born Quebecers (see details in [Table B](#) in the Annex).

Furthermore, questions related to religious symbols worn by individuals in position of coercive authority reveal that support for the prohibition of such symbols for police officers is at 70% among Quebecers but only 49% among other Canadians. Support for extending this prohibition to judges is similar to that of police officers in Quebec but soars to 54% in the ROC. There is also a similar gap on the issue of religious accommodation. In Quebec, 62% of respondents believe that less should be done to accommodate religious minorities. This number contrasts sharply with the position of other Canadians on this issue, 45% of whom responded that less

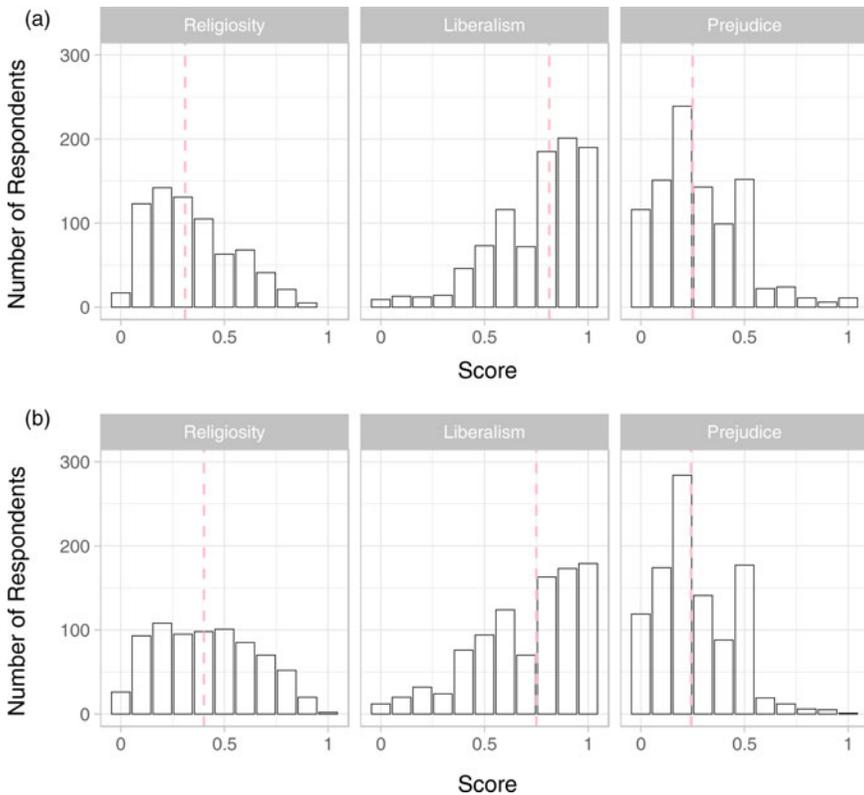


Figure 2. Religiosity, liberalism, and prejudice scores in Canada. (a) Quebec and (b) Rest of Canada. Note: Figure 2(a) represents the distribution of scores for Quebec ($n = 974$), and (b) for the Rest of Canada ($n = 1,026$). The dotted vertical line represents the median value for each of these distributions. Data: Synopsys, 2020.

should be done. All these differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Although these results underscore a considerable divide between Quebec and ROC respondents, differences in opinion about secularism between Quebecers and other Canadians are, surprisingly perhaps, not as dramatic as one might expect. While support for secularism is more important in Quebec, other Canadians are not openly opposed to the legal regulation of public display of religious symbols (see Figure A in the Annex).

Determinants of secularism across Canadian regions

The score distributions of the religiosity, liberalism, and prejudice scales presented in Figure 2 allow for a general comparison of these baseline determinants of secularism between Quebec and the ROC. First, regarding religiosity, the discrepancy between Quebecers and other Canadians is notable—there is an 8 percentage point difference between both groups (0.32 for Quebec and 0.40 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$) on the 25-item religiosity index. Our unique set of data enables us to measure four distinct indexes which capture distinct dimensions of religiosity (see Figure B in the Annex). On all four of those, Quebecers express *less* religious feelings than other Canadians.

Quebecers are less religiously fundamentalist (0.38 for Quebec and 0.47 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$), express less religious behavior (0.31 for Quebec and 0.36 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$), score lower on the intrinsic religiosity index (0.32 for Quebec and 0.39 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$), and express higher anticlerical attitudes than other Canadians (0.78 for Quebec and 0.71 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$). It is striking, however, to note that these important differences of religiosity are largely unacknowledged, with 86% of Canadians from other provinces believing that Quebecers are *as much* or *more* religious than the rest of the country (Synopsis, 2021), although low levels of religiosity are one of the province's most distinctive features apart from language.

Although regional contrasts across these various items are remarkable, they have historical roots. Quebec's peculiar trajectory over the last 70 years has led to drastic declines in church attendance, religious ordination, and religious marriage. Moreover, the Catholic Church's wide-ranging control and domination of Quebec's society until the early 1960s have left some substantial marks over collective attitudes, especially among older generations, as "the reactions of many to religion in general come from deep personal grievances about their Catholic upbringing as well as from broader political, socio-cultural resentment toward the role of the Church in Quebec until the Quiet Revolution" (Zubrzycki, 2016, 186). Of course, while these dynamics cannot entirely explain low levels of religiosity in Quebec, they account for a significant part of the explanation.

Second, turning to liberal values, the distribution of respondents' attitudes on these topics displays a different trend. Quebecers are only modestly more liberal than other Canadians among a set of related social issues (a 5 percentage point difference between the Quebec and the ROC average, $p < 0.01$), including same-sex marriage (a 7 percentage point difference, $p < 0.01$), abortion (4 percentage point difference, $p < 0.01$), the place of women in society (4 percentage point difference, $p < 0.01$), and euthanasia (3 percentage point difference, $p < 0.01$). However, one important caveat is that the meaning of liberalism in Quebec and in the ROC might be characterized by a conceptual discrepancy. This thesis—the "tale of two liberalisms" argument put forward by Turgeon *et al.* (2019)—leads us to expect distinct effects of liberal values on secularism in Quebec and the ROC. We test this hypothesis later with the inclusion of an interaction term between liberalism and Quebec.

Finally, another point on which one might expect Quebecers to differ from other Canadians is the issue of out-group prejudice. Yet, attitudes toward minority groups are highly similar in Quebec and in the ROC. The only notable difference appears when considering only *religious* minorities, with Quebecers holding more negative feelings than other Canadians toward these groups (0.46 for Quebec and 0.36 for the ROC, $p < 0.01$). We therefore test religious and ethnic minorities separately in one of our subsequent models.⁸

Table 1 presents separate linear regression models testing each of these scales as a determinant for secularism in Quebec and in the ROC. These results suggest that religiosity plays the most important role in explaining attitudes toward secularism in both regions, with a -0.3 to -0.37 coefficient (see models 2 and 4)—an effect more sizable than that of both other scales combined. Indeed, while liberalism and prejudice are both significantly negatively correlated with secularism, the effect is less considerable (-0.09 to -0.19), although greater in the ROC than in Quebec. Results therefore suggest that the effect of religiosity on secularism is similar in magnitude in Quebec and in

Table 1. Religiosity, liberalism, and prejudice as determinants of secularism (0-1)

	Quebec		Rest of Canada	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Religiosity	-0.29*** (0.05)	-0.30*** (0.04)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.37*** (0.05)
Liberalism	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.21*** (0.04)	-0.19*** (0.04)
Prejudice	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.13** (0.04)	-0.12** (0.05)
Francophone		0.23*** (0.02)		0.08* (0.04)
Born in Canada		0.03 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.02)
Female		-0.04* (0.02)		-0.01 (0.02)
Age (<34)		-0.08*** (0.02)		-0.09*** (0.02)
Age (>55)		0.09*** (0.02)		0.02 (0.02)
Income low		0.003 (0.02)		0.02 (0.02)
Income high		0.08** (0.03)		0.05* (0.02)
Educ. below high school		-0.01 (0.02)		0.003 (0.03)
Educ. college		-0.02 (0.02)		-0.04* (0.02)
Constant	0.91*** (0.05)	0.72*** (0.05)	0.86*** (0.04)	0.90*** (0.05)
N	692	617	724	622

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Data: Synopsis, 2020 (n = 692 in Quebec, n = 724 in the Rest of Canada).

Method: Ordinary least squares.

Dependent variable: Six-item secularism scale (0-1).

the ROC, and that the gap in support for secularism might be partly driven by lower levels of religiosity in Quebec. In other words, we observe a difference in the intercepts of this relationship across regions, but not in the magnitude of their slopes. Finally, we note that the second most important predictor of support for secularism in Quebec is

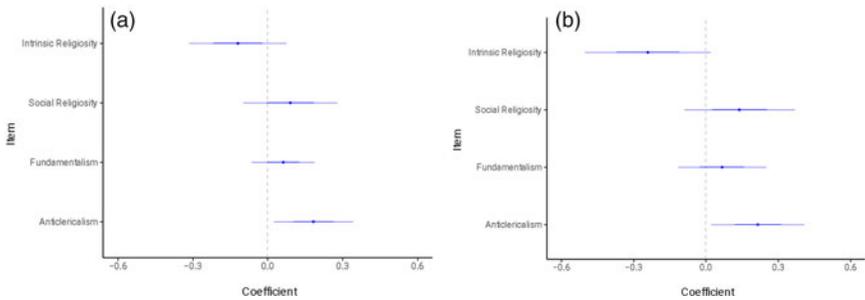


Figure 3. Items of religiosity as determinants of secularism score. (a) Quebec and (b) Rest of Canada. *Note:* Figure 3 represents the results from a multivariate regression model testing each item of the religiosity scale as a determinant of secularism score (0–1), controlling for being a Francophone, having Canadian citizenship, gender, age, income, and education. Figure 3(a) displays the correlation plot for Quebec ($n = 617$) and (b) for the Rest of Canada ($n = 622$). Error bars represent standard deviations from the coefficient (1 for the bold lines, 2 for the light lines) and the dotted vertical line indicates a regression coefficient of 0. *Data:* Synopsi, 2020.

being a Francophone, which increases one’s secularism score by 0.23 points on average —yet only by 0.08 points in the rest of the country.

Let’s now turn to a more fine-grained analysis of the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward secularism. Our measurement strategy enables us to disaggregate religiosity into four indexes—anticlericalism, religious fundamentalism, social religiosity, and intrinsic religiosity. Figure 3 displays the regression coefficients of each of these indexes as determinants of support for secularism. Our first finding is that anticlerical attitudes provide a powerful explanation of support for secularism in both regions. Yet, while we might expect anticlericalism to have a distinct effect in Quebec as a result of the province’s fraught relationship with the Catholic Church—Quebecers also score higher than other Canadians on the anticlericalism scale (see Figure B in the Annex)—we find that anticlerical feelings do not have differentiated effects on support for secularism: it is simply more widespread in Quebec.

Since the baseline levels of negative feelings toward ethnic minorities and religious minorities differ across regions, we also need to test the effect of both types of prejudice separately. Figure 4 displays the descriptive relationship between both types of prejudice per region. Data suggest that the correlation between prejudice against ethnic and religious minorities is considerable in both regions, but stronger in the ROC ($r = 0.67$) than in Quebec ($r = 0.52$). In other words, prejudice toward ethnic minorities is a less powerful predictor of prejudice toward religious groups in Quebec, where heightened religious prejudice might rather be explained by the province’s tense relationship with its own religious history.⁹

Table 2 displays the results from a multivariate regression model testing negative feelings toward ethnic and religious minorities as determinants of support for secularism. Results show that while negative feelings toward religious minorities is the strongest predictor of support for secularism (0.25 in Quebec and 0.26 in the ROC), negative feelings toward ethnic minorities is a statistically significant *negative* predictor of support for secularism in Quebec. This directly opposes claims according to which support for secularism in Quebec would be fueled by ethnic prejudice. Moreover, in models 2

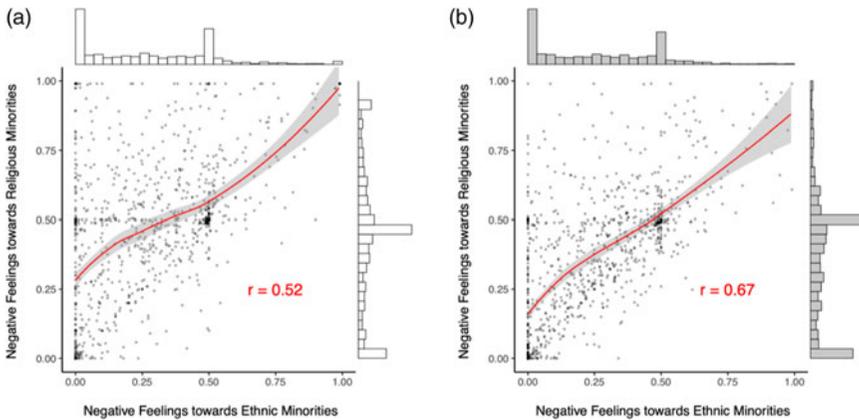


Figure 4. Relationship between negative feelings toward ethnic and religious minorities. (a) Quebec and (b) Rest of Canada.

Note: Figure 4 displays the distribution of scores for negative feelings toward ethnic minorities scale and negative feelings toward religious minorities scale in Quebec ($n = 974$) and in the Rest of Canada ($n = 1,026$). The correlation coefficient between both variables is indicated for each region. A locally weighted scatterplot smoothing (including standard errors) visualizes the descriptive relationship between both scales.

Data: Synopsis, 2020.

and 4, we test whether attitudes toward Quebecers themselves impact support for secularism. Indeed, having a positive perception of individuals living in Quebec—rather than a negative perception of ethnic/religious minorities—could have been positively correlated with support for the province’s secular values. However, results suggest that feelings toward Quebecers are non-significant in the province itself and are even negatively correlated with support for secularism in the rest of the country.

In order to test whether the effect of our three explanatory variables—religiosity, liberalism, and prejudice (both ethnic and religious)—differs in nature between Quebec and the ROC, we need to estimate whether the relationships observed within the separate regional samples have different slopes (Figure C in the Annex presents the predicted probabilities from the linear models presented in Table 3). These results show that there is no significant interaction effect between religiosity and prejudice toward religious minorities and residing in Quebec. In other words, religiosity or ethnic prejudice does not hold additional explanatory power for attitudes toward secular arrangements in either region. However, results show that liberal attitudes have a disproportionate effect on secularism in Quebec compared to the ROC, which supports the hypothesis that liberal values might not be expressed similarly by Quebecers and other Canadians. The result differs from previously reported findings (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019, 256, Table 1), although the fact that our dependent variable is an index rather than a single item and that we oversampled Quebec respondents could explain the absence of variation across provinces in our data.

Discussion

The results presented in this paper allow us to draw a few conclusions. First, using our unique 25-item scale which ensures a comprehensive measure of religiosity, we show

Table 2. Negative feelings toward ethnic and religious minorities as a determinant of secularism

	Quebec		Rest of Canada	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Prejudice (ethnic minorities)	-0.09**		0.01	
	(0.03)		(0.04)	
Prejudice (religious minorities)	0.25***		0.26***	
	(0.03)		(0.04)	
Feeling therm. Quebec		0.03		-0.12***
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Francophone	0.20***	0.23***	0.09**	0.11***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Born in Canada	0.05	0.06*	-0.01	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Female	-0.03*	-0.03*	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age (<34)	-0.06***	-0.07***	-0.07***	-0.09***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age (>55)	0.07***	0.07***	0.03	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Income low	0.002	-0.002	0.01	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Income high	0.07**	0.08**	0.05*	0.05*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Educ. below high school	-0.05*	-0.03	0.01	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Educ. college	0.02	0.000	-0.02	-0.04*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	0.42***	0.46***	0.47***	0.67***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
<i>N</i>	819	819	825	825

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Data: Synopsis, 2020 ($n = 819$ in Quebec, $n = 825$ in the Rest of Canada).

Method: Ordinary least squares.

Dependent variable: Six-item secularism scale (0–1).

that Quebecers score lower than other Canadians on all dimensions, which accounts for a substantial part of the difference between Quebec and the ROC with regard to support for secularist policies. Though it cannot fully explain this difference, lower levels of religiosity among Quebecers account for some of the province's higher

Table 3. Interaction between explanatory variables and region of residence as determinants of secularism

	Canada	
	(1)	(2)
Religiosity	-0.29***	-0.33***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Quebec	-0.02	-0.08
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Liberalism	-0.12**	-0.12
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Prejudice (ethnic minorities)	0.002	0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)
Prejudice (religious minorities)	0.24***	0.21***
	(0.05)	(0.05)
Francophone		0.16***
		(0.02)
Born in Canada		-0.01
		(0.02)
Female		-0.02
		(0.01)
Age (<34)		-0.08
		(0.01)
Age (>55)		0.05***
		(0.01)
Income low		0.01
		(0.01)
Income high		0.06***
		(0.02)
Educ. below high school		-0.003
		(0.02)
Educ. College		-0.01
		(0.01)
Religiosity × Quebec	0.09	0.10
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Liberalism × Quebec	0.14*	0.12*
	(0.06)	(0.06)

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued.)

	Canada	
	(1)	(2)
Prejudice (ethnic minorities) × Quebec	−0.10 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.06)
Prejudice (religious minorities) × Quebec	0.11 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)
Constant	0.66*** (0.05)	0.69*** (0.05)
<i>N</i>	1,416	1,239

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Data: Synopsis, 2020 ($n = 1,416$).

Method: Ordinary least squares.

Dependent variable: Six-item secularism scale (0–1).

support for secularism. In addition, we find that once religiosity is disaggregated into more precise dimensions, anticlerical feelings play an independent role in explaining preferences for secularism. Anticlericalism indeed drives a substantial part of the observed effect on support for secularist policy among Canadians, regardless of regional differences. This finding, which confirms the role played by religiosity in explaining political behavior (Esmer and Pettersson, 2009; Huber and Yendell, 2019; Ksiazkiewicz and Friesen, 2021), also highlights the importance of conceptual and methodological sophistication in modeling the effect of religiosity.

Second, differences in the understanding of what liberal values entail exist between Quebecers and other Canadians. Our results show that Quebecers are slightly more liberal than other Canadians on a range of issues from same-sex marriage to abortion, yet these liberal values constitute a crucial part of the explanation for Quebec's heightened support for secularism, especially among Francophones. This explanation supports the argument made by other scholars that liberalism as it is found in Quebec is somewhat distinct from the form of liberalism that dominates in the rest of the country, and that these two variants of liberalism have differentiated effects on public preferences toward secularism (Turgeon *et al.*, 2019).

Third, we find a particular dynamic between support for secularism and attitudes toward minority groups in Quebec. Although negative attitudes toward religious minorities are related to support for secularism, attitudes toward ethnic minorities are less so. Low levels of religiosity among Quebecers, especially Francophones, are strongly associated with less favorable opinions toward *religious* minorities, but not toward *ethnic* minorities. This finding suggests that scholars should make a clear distinction between religious and ethnic minorities in evaluating preferences toward secularism.

Overall, our findings represent an addition to our understanding of the different dynamics that drive the controversial debate over secularism in Quebec and Canada. What distinguishes both “solitudes” is not simply language but also religion (Gidengil, 1992; Johnston, 2017) and, as this article argues, religiosity. Both Quebec and the ROC

have historically progressed through vastly distinct religious ecosystems and this reality still informs their respective political landscapes. Such cultural differentiation between Quebec and Canadian publics is now reflected in incompatible policy preferences about state secularism. This fact ought to be taken into consideration in assessing the nature of the conflict over the place and role of religion—including mere symbolic religious displays—in public life as debates over Quebec’s secularist legislation move forward.

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Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. There is a conceptual difference between secularism and “laïcité” (or laicity) that, although essentially connected, do not share the same intellectual histories. Here we use secularism as it is the commonly used term in English. We use “laïcité” where appropriate.
2. We understand, like Turgeon *et al.* (2019, 249), liberalism and liberal values as attitudes that stress individual freedom.
3. Quebec’s Quiet Revolution (*Révolution tranquille*) denotes a period of intense, state-led political, cultural, and socioeconomic transformations in the province starting in 1960, including the secularization of education, healthcare, and the development of a modern welfare state.
4. Between 2011 and 2021, the percentage of self-identified Catholics in the province of Quebec fell from 74.7 to 53.8% (Statistics Canada, 2022).
5. For each scale, we calculated the average score for all relevant items—each having a score between 1 and 5 on a Likert scale or a score between 1 and 100 on a thermometer scale—after these were rescaled to a value between 0 and 1.
6. The legalization of prostitution item was removed because of reliability issues—the factor loading was under the conventional 0.3 threshold (Field, 2013). Results are not substantially affected by the inclusion or exclusion of this item.
7. We excluded Arabs from our ethnic minorities scale as respondents tend to conflate Arabs and Muslims (Park *et al.*, 2007; Ahmed, 2010).
8. See multivariate linear models in Table 2.
9. Negative feelings toward Catholics are similar in Quebec and in the ROC (mean negative feeling score of 0.35 in both regions), but on average Quebecers (0.46) display more negative attitudes toward religious minorities than other Canadians (0.36). This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

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Annex

Table A. Scale items and factor loadings

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Secularism	Elected officials should be allowed to cover their faces for religious reasons (reversed).	0.537
	We should make great efforts to accommodate religious minorities in Canada (reversed).	0.524
	Religious leaders should not influence how people vote in elections.	0.341
	Teachers should not be permitted to wear religious symbols or clothing while at work.	0.871
	Judges should not be permitted to wear religious symbols or clothing while at work.	0.842
	Policemen should not be permitted to wear religious symbols or clothing while at work.	0.819

Cronbach's α : 0.83.

First eigenvalue: 3.26.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Religiosity	I generally prefer being with people who are not religious (reversed).	0.467
	When I was a child, religion was a natural part of my life.	0.439
	I try hard to live all of my life according to my religious beliefs.	0.765
	Religion helps me answer questions about the meaning of life.	0.865
	I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force.	0.649
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how important is religion in your life? (100 means very important, and 1 means not at all important).	0.913
	How often do you talk about religion with your friends, neighbors, or fellow workers?	0.508
	Belonging to a religious group is an important part of my self-image.	0.767
	The loss of religious life leads to the decline of civilization and culture.	0.771
	In the past, religion has done more harm than good to humankind (reversed).	0.585
	Religion is out of date and has no attraction to me (reversed).	0.766
	Organized religion is really an obstacle to human progress (reversed).	0.6
	How much confidence do you have in the Church?	0.747
	Religion helps secure a better life on earth.	0.781
	I do not believe there is any life after death (reversed).	0.479
	On a scale from 1 to 100, to what extent are you convinced of the existence of a superior divine entity?	0.818
	Which of the two theses best reflects the explanation of human life on Earth? (a) God created human life on Earth about 6,000 years ago. (b) Human life is the result of natural selection and the evolution of bacteria (single-celled beings) that appeared on Earth nearly 4 billion years ago.	0.671
	Knowledge, insight, and reason ought to guide people's behaviors more than religious, moral norms (reversed).	0.547
	Religious education is essential to preserve the morals of our society.	0.763
	How often do you pray outside of religious services?	0.781
Apart from weddings, funerals, and baptisms, about how often do you attend religious services these days?	0.712	
A marriage should be the object of a religious ceremony.	0.618	
Ceremonies following my death must absolutely be religious.	0.734	

(Continued)

Table A. (Continued.)

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
	Do you think that religion in the future will be more important, less important, or equally important for people in your country?	0.509
	Religious practice, i.e., worship, rites, clothing, and religious symbols, is a private matter and has no place in public space (reversed).	0.369

Cronbach's α : 0.95.
First eigenvalue: 12.04.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Anticlericalism	In the past, religion has done more harm than good to humankind (reversed).	0.74
	Religion is out of date and has no attraction to me (reversed).	0.85
	Organized religion is really an obstacle to human progress (reversed).	0.79
	How much confidence do you have in the Church? (reversed)	0.60

Cronbach's α : 0.83.
First eigenvalue: 2.66.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Religious fundamentalism	I do not believe there is any life after death (reversed).	0.57
	On a scale from 1 to 100, to what extent are you convinced of the existence of a superior divine entity?	0.97
	Which of the two theses best reflects the explanation of human life on Earth? (a) God created human life on Earth about 6,000 years ago. (b) Human life is the result of natural selection and the evolution of bacteria (single-celled beings) that appeared on Earth nearly 4 billion years ago.	0.59

Cronbach's α : 0.74.
First eigenvalue: 1.99.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Social religiosity	How often do you pray outside of religious services?	0.66
	Apart from weddings, funerals, and baptisms, about how often do you attend religious services these days?	0.68
	A marriage should be the object of a religious ceremony.	0.7
	Ceremonies following my death must absolutely be religious.	0.86

Cronbach's α : 0.81.
 First eigenvalue: 2.59.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Intrinsic religiosity	I try hard to live all of my life according to my religious beliefs.	0.78
	Religion helps me answer questions about the meaning of life.	0.88
	I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force.	0.66
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how important is religion in your life? (100 means very important, and 1 means not at all important).	0.90
	How often do you talk about religion with your friends, neighbors, or fellow workers?	0.5
	Belonging to a religious group is an important part of my self-image.	0.74

Cronbach's α : 0.88.
 First eigenvalue: 3.81.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Liberal values	Society would be better off if more women stayed home with their children.	0.57
	Euthanasia (or assisted suicide) is never ethically justified.	0.7
	Gays and lesbians should not be allowed to marry in Canada.	0.7
	It is too easy to get an abortion nowadays.	0.72

Cronbach's α : 0.77.
 First eigenvalue: 2.36.

Table B. Support for secularism across population subgroups

	Quebec	ROC
Women	0.70	0.54
Man	0.73	0.55
Young	0.64	0.47
Old	0.77	0.58
Low income	0.71	0.56
High income	0.78	0.58
Education below high school	0.73	0.57
College education	0.72	0.52
Born in Canada	0.72	0.54
Foreign-born	0.62	0.55

Note: Table B represents the average scores for population subgroups on the index of support for secularism.
 Data: Synopsis, 2020 (*n* = 974 in Quebec, 1,026 in ROC).

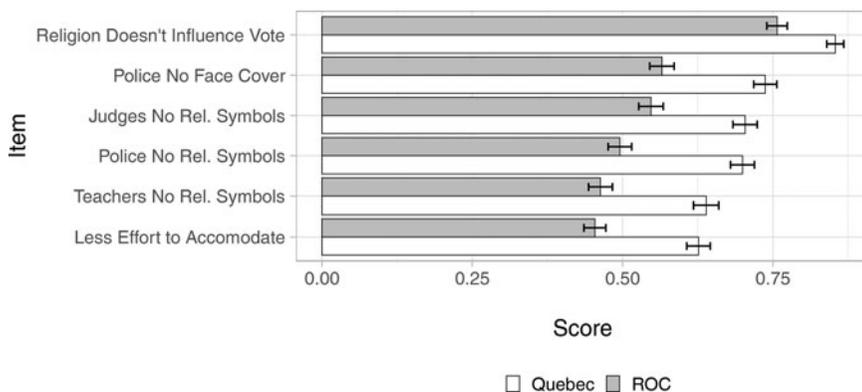


Figure A. Secularism item scores by region.

Note: Figure A represents the average scores for Quebec (*n* = 974) and for the Rest of Canada (*n* = 1,026) on each of the items composing the secularism scale (0–1). Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals around the sample mean.

Data: Synopsis, 2020.

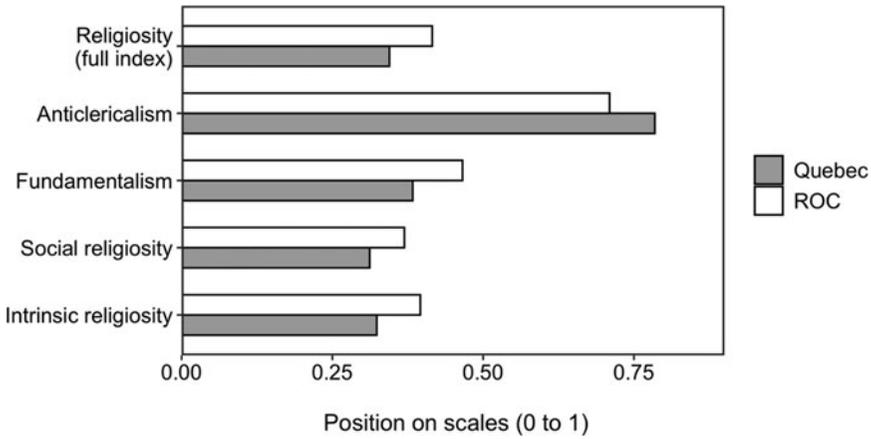


Figure B. Levels of religiosity in Quebec and Canada by dimensions of religiosity. Note: Figure B shows details for religiosity and each of its dimensions. Anticlericalism is coded in reverse. Data: Synopsys, 2020 (n = 974 in Quebec, n = 1,026 in the Rest of Canada).

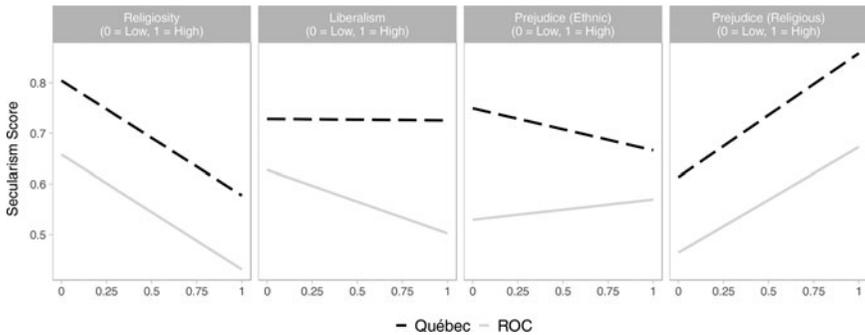


Figure C. Predicted probabilities for religiosity, liberalism, ethnic prejudice, and religious prejudice on secularism score. Note: Lines represent predicted probabilities computed from the multivariate model of Table 3, column 2. Data: Synopsys, 2020 (n = 1,239).

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Feeling toward ethnic minorities	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Blacks	0.884
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Asians	0.885
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Aboriginals	0.822

(Continued)

Table A. (Continued.)

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Latinos	0.918

Cronbach's α : 0.93.
First eigenvalue: 3.31.

Scale	Indicators	Factor loading
Feeling toward religious minorities	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Jews	0.803
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Muslims	0.811
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Hindus	0.942
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Buddhists	0.816
	On a scale from 1 to 100, how do you feel about the following groups? Sikhs	0.922

Cronbach's α : 0.93.
First eigenvalue: 3.94.

Note: **Table A** represents the factor loadings for all items used in our scales. For each scale, we calculated the average score for all relevant items—each having a raw score between 1 and 5 on a Likert scale or a raw score between 1 and 100 on a thermometer scale—after these were rescaled to a score between 0 and 1. For all questions, “don't knows” were recoded as NAs. Missing values were removed from our analyses using list-wise deletion. Most of the missing values in the regression models are from the religiosity variable, which is made up of 25 items.

Data: Synopsis, 2020 ($n = 974$ in Quebec, 1,026 in ROC).

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