

# Reporting and Misreporting Prejudice

## Evidence from a Large-scale List Experiment

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**Abstract:** Scholars of racism and prejudice have for long recognized that respondents frequently misrepresent attitudes that are considered socially insensitive. However, the cross-cultural and geographic variability of the social norm responsible for this bias remains understudied. We examine this possibility by investigating anti-Arab prejudice and the anti-prejudice norm within Canada, a country within which there are clear differences between the English- and French-speaking population. We do so in two steps. First, we use a list experiment and direct question to measure the extent to which Canadians are comfortable with a Canadian of Arab descent becoming Prime Minister ( $n = 11,700$ ). We then examine, in a multivariate regression context, the predictors of discomfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent and the predictors of misreporting it.

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# 1. Introduction

Overt prejudice toward ethno-cultural groups in the West is now widely recognized to be decreasing (e.g. [Sears and Henry, 2005](#); [Huddy and Feldman, 2009](#); [Wilkes and Corrigan-Brown, 2011](#)). This is in part because society is becoming less prejudiced, but also because the social norm against public expressions of prejudice has strengthened ([Huddy and Feldman, 2009](#)). Thus, although public *expressions* of prejudice have decreased over time, this decrease is due, in part, to an increase in the misrepresentation of privately held beliefs.

Yet, although there is agreement that the anti-prejudice norm has grown in strength ([Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000](#)), the cross-cultural and geographic variability of this norm remains understudied. Indeed, scholars often compare attitudes regarding sensitive issues across countries under the implicit assumption that misreporting does not vary across contexts. Recent studies, for example, have compared countries in terms of tolerance toward ethnic minorities (e.g. [Quillian, 1995](#); [Weldon, 2006](#)), attitudes toward the Muslim veil ([Van Der Noll, 2010](#)), and attitudes toward Muslims more generally ([Savelkoul et al., 2012](#)). We can expect, however, that the social norm regarding the expression of prejudice varies strongly both across and within countries. This heterogeneity is important in its own right, but leaving it unaccounted for can also lead to misleading conclusions about cross-cultural differences.

To examine this, we investigate anti-Arab prejudice and the anti-prejudice norm within Canada, a country within which there are clear and sharp differences between the English- and French-speaking population. We do so in two steps. First, we use a list experiment and direct question to measure the extent to which Canadians are comfortable with a Canadian of Arab descent becoming Prime Minister. We then examine, in a multivariate regression context, the predictors of discomfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent and the predictors of misreporting it.

## 2. Social norms and attitudes toward minorities in Canada

Public opinion data in Canada frequently show that a large proportion of the population holds favorable attitudes toward immigration and ethnic diversity (e.g. [Berry and Kalin, 1995](#); [Adams, 2007](#)), and that these favorable attitudes have been increasing ([Wilkes and Corrigan-Brown, 2011](#)). Positive attitudes also extend to ways of managing diversity. For example, Canadians' support for multiculturalism as a general principle, is consistently high compared to other countries ([Adams, 2007](#); [Berry and Kalin, 1995](#); [Kymlicka, 2008](#)). Not only are Canadians supportive of multiculturalism, but a majority identify it as a critical element of the Canadian national identity ([Jedwab, 2005](#); [Bloemraad, 2006](#), 140).<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, studies have also shown that multiculturalism policies are associated with lower levels of prejudice (e.g. [Guimond et al., 2013](#); [Richeson and Nussbaum, 2004](#)) and inclusive attitudes toward ethnic minorities (e.g. [Crepaz, 2006](#); [Weldon, 2006](#); [Wright and Citrin, 2011](#)). One possible mechanism behind these relationships relies on social norms. [Guimond et al. \(2013\)](#)

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<sup>1</sup>This glowing picture of Canadians' attitudes and its exceptionalism are put into question however, when considering support for the different policies that make up multiculturalism like accommodations of religious symbols, immigrant languages, and affirmative action. When asked about a series of policies embodying multiculturalism, Canadians are similar to Americans in opposing many of them ([Wright et al., 2017](#)). Perhaps Canadians feel more pressure to support multiculturalism when asked about its general principle.

show in a cross-country study that multiculturalism policy increases the strength of the perceived social norm against the expression of prejudice, which in turn influences individual attitudes. They find that, among their four countries of study (U.S., U.K., Germany, and Canada), Canadians perceive the anti-prejudice norm the strongest, a result they attribute to the importance attached to multiculturalism in the country.

Thus, in Canada, the accepted view is one that recognizes the idea that ethnic diversity positively contributes to and defines Canadian society. The flip side of this accepted view is that the social pressure against prejudice is strong. This creates a potential dilemma for Canadians who hold relatively negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities: when asked about such attitudes: does one express the publicly defined and socially acceptable response or express one's personal belief openly? The option chosen is likely to vary based on individual characteristics such as age and education (e.g. Kuklinski, Cobb and Gilens, 1997; Blair and Imai, 2012), but more importantly, this dilemma might not be as clear everywhere in Canada.

### 2.1. Variation in norm strength: The Quebec case

Social norms affect public expressions when individuals perceive them as applicable to their context and recognize the degree to which prejudiced attitudes are deemed socially unacceptable (Blinder, Ford and Ivarsflaten, 2013; Weber et al., 2013). In this sense, Quebec represents an interesting case within Canada, one that is distinct in terms of policies aimed at accommodating minorities and that also appears to be distinct when it comes to public opinion.

From its inception as an official policy, Canadian multiculturalism has always been opposed by elites in the province. Originally, this opposition was not about the consequences of the policy for the integration of immigrants. Rather, it was perceived as a strategy to diminish the role of the province by rejecting a binational vision of the country (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008, 122). Today, Quebec rejects multiculturalism in favor of a policy of interculturalism, where secularism and the French language play a central role (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008). Arguably then, when compared to English Canada, the message sent by policies and by elites in Quebec, is not one that places diversity at the core of what Quebec is.

This difference in policies and elite discourse seems to be reflected in public opinion. Quebecers are more opposed to different policies associated with multiculturalism and are less likely than Canadians to agree with a law declaring that ethnic diversity is a fundamental characteristic of Canadian/Quebec identity (Wright et al., 2017). Another recent poll showed that people in Quebec were more likely than people in the rest of Canada to view the Muslim veil as a sign of submission and to oppose the construction of a mosque in their neighborhood (Pouliot and Julien, 2017).

In sum, the pressure to see diversity positively is strong in English Canada and the attitudes of English Canadians are relatively positive. In Quebec, this pressure appears to be weaker, and Quebecers hold more negative views of ethnic minorities than their Anglophone counterparts. A question that remains however is that related to the effect of the social norm: what happens when we remove the pressure of the social norm? Are these differences “real” or are they due to one society misrepresenting attitudes to a greater extent?

## 2.2. Why ask about a “Prime Minister of Arab descent”?

In the following we focus on attitudes toward Canadians of Arab descent. Our choice to focus on Arabs rather than the more common focus on “Muslims” is driven by two closely linked reasons. First, our focus here is on prejudice toward ethnic groups. Although it is likely that “Arabs” and “Muslims” are the same group in the mind of many respondents, Muslims are not an ethnic group: not all Muslims are of Arab origin and vice-versa. Second, opposition to Muslims in politics can be based on prejudice but it can also be based on a principled opposition to religion. Hardline secularists might have a problem with a Muslim Prime Minister but also with a Catholic or Protestant one. In other words, there are no non-prejudiced reasons to be uncomfortable with a Prime Minister of Arab descent while it is possible, at least in theory, to be uncomfortable with a Muslim Prime Minister for principled reasons.

## 3. Empirical Strategy

### 3.1. The List Experiment

To test our hypotheses, we use data from a large-scale list experiment that was conducted in Canada following the 2015 federal election. List experiments are indirect questioning techniques that provide anonymity to respondents as an inherent feature of question design. This anonymity is useful because it provides respondents with the opportunity to respond truthfully regarding sensitive attitudes and behaviors, safe in the knowledge that survey enumerators cannot determine whether they hold a socially sensitive belief or have engaged in a sensitive behavior. Furthermore, recent developments in methods for the analysis of list experiments permit the sensitive item in a list experiment to be modeled within a regression framework (Imai, 2011); to be used as a predictor in an outcome regression (Imai, Park and Greene, 2015); or to be modeled in conjunction with respondents’ answers to a direct question (Eady, Forthcoming). The latter of these models, which we employ here, permits us to examine both the predictors of responses to the sensitive item, and whether respondents misreport their answer when asked to respond about it openly.

The rationale behind a list experiment is both simple and powerful. Respondents are assigned at random into control and treatment groups. The control group is assigned a list of items, typically 3 or 4 in total. The treatment group is assigned the same items in addition to another item — the sensitive item of interest. In the present study, respondents received the following question<sup>2</sup> and list:

How many of the following are you *comfortable* with?

- An increase in funding for the arts
- A raise on tuition rates
- Further limiting the power of unions
- Legalization of marijuana
- A Canadian of Arab descent becoming Prime Minister ,

<sup>2</sup>A preamble was also included for the list experiment question, the complete text of which can be found in the Supplementary Material.

where those in the control group received the first four items, and those in the treatment group received the same list in addition to the sensitive item (open bullet). Later in the survey, all respondents were asked for their response to the sensitive item directly:

Would you be *comfortable* with the following?

- A Canadian of Arab descent becoming Prime Minister

The power of the list experiment resides in the fact that respondents are not asked about the items individually, but about *how many* of the items they are comfortable with (or a similar question with a “how many” formulation). Unless a respondent answers affirmatively to all or none of the items, it is not possible to know how each item was answered individually. Responses to the individual items themselves are therefore effectively anonymous. Because respondents know intuitively that their answers cannot be deconstructed *per item* enables them to answer honestly to the sensitive item absent the pressure to provide a socially desirable response.

### 3.2. Statistical Framework

To model the data, we implement the method proposed by Eady (Forthcoming), but do so within a Bayesian context to allow more flexibility in modeling.<sup>3</sup> For notation, let  $T_i \in \{0, 1\}$  denote treatment status for respondent  $i$ ;  $Y_i \in \{0, \dots, J + T_i\}$  denote the response to the list experiment with  $J$  control items;  $D_i \in \{0, 1\}$  denote the response to the direct question; and  $\mathbf{X}_i$  denote a vector of covariates. The important step in regression analysis for list experiments is to treat the answer to the sensitive item and the  $J$  control items (in our case,  $J = 4$ ) as latent variables (see Imai, 2011). If we denote a respondent’s latent response to the sensitive item as  $Z_i^*$  and the latent response to the  $J$  control items as  $Y_i^*$ , then it is easy to see that responses to the list experiment can be decomposed as the sum of these two latent variables:  $Y_i = Y_i^* + Z_i^* T_i$ .

Given this set up, we can model the responses to the sensitive item, control items, and whether the response to the sensitive item in the list experiment is different from that given to the direct question (i.e. misreporting). First, the sensitive item is modeled as follows:

$$g(\mathbf{x}; \delta) = \Pr(Z_i^* = 1 | \mathbf{X}_i = \mathbf{x}; \delta), \quad (1)$$

where  $\delta$  is a vector of parameters to be estimated. Second, we model whether respondents’ answers to the sensitive item in the list experiment are equivalent to their answer to the direct question:

$$j(\mathbf{x}, z; \gamma) = \Pr(U_i^* = 1 | \mathbf{X}_i = \mathbf{x}, Z_i^* = z; \gamma), \quad (2)$$

where  $U_i^*$  denotes the indicator function  $\mathbb{1}(Z_i^* \neq D_i)$ , and  $\gamma$  denotes a vector of parameters to be estimated. Equation 2 represents the probability that a respondent misreports their response to the direct question, conditional on holding the sensitive attitude (as defined as the response to the sensitive item in the list experiment). By assumption, those who do not hold the sensitive belief do not misreport it on the direct question. This assumption is plausible for the case examined

<sup>3</sup>Although Eady (Forthcoming) provides statistical software to model list experiment and direct question data (Eady, 2017), implementing the model in a Bayesian inference engine gives us flexibility in defining the model, specifically to account for overdispersion, as discussed further below.

herein, because if violated, it would suggest that respondents who *are* comfortable with a Prime Minister of Arab descent would claim to be prejudiced by misreporting nonetheless.

Lastly, we model the response to the  $J$  control items as follows:

$$h(y|\mathbf{x}, z, u; \psi) = \Pr(Y_i^* = y | \mathbf{X}_i = \mathbf{x}, Z_i^* = z; U_i^* = u; \psi), \quad (3)$$

where  $\psi$  is a vector of parameters to be estimated. For implementation, we use binomial regression models with a logistic link for each of the sub-models defined above. Because the likelihood function for the full model is lengthy, we refer readers to the Supplementary Materials. Finally, to complete the model, we use weakly informative normal priors,  $\mathcal{N}(0, 5)$ , on the model parameters  $\delta$ ,  $\gamma$ , and  $\psi$ .<sup>4</sup> In the Supplementary Material, we show that the results are not sensitive to the choice of priors.

List experiments can be cognitively demanding on respondents, and thus a screener question was included to address measurement error due to inattentiveness (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014). The screener question was shown following the list experiment question and asked respondents to identify the topic of a control item from the previous question (see Supplementary Material for complete question text). Eight percent of respondents answered “Don’t know” to this question or did not answer correctly. These respondents are thus removed from the data prior to analysis. Lastly, a series of tests were conducted to check for violations of the list experiment’s design assumptions. These tests do not find strong evidence of violations (for further details, see the Supplementary Material).

## 4. Results

We begin by comparing the proportion of support for a Prime Minister of Arab descent as estimated by the direct question and by the list experiment. Estimates from these two measures are presented in Figure 1. As we can see in the first panel of Figure 1, the proportion of those who would be comfortable with a person of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister is 0.71 when respondents are asked directly. As expected given the potential for social desirability bias on the direct question response, this estimate drops to 0.61 when using responses to the list experiment.

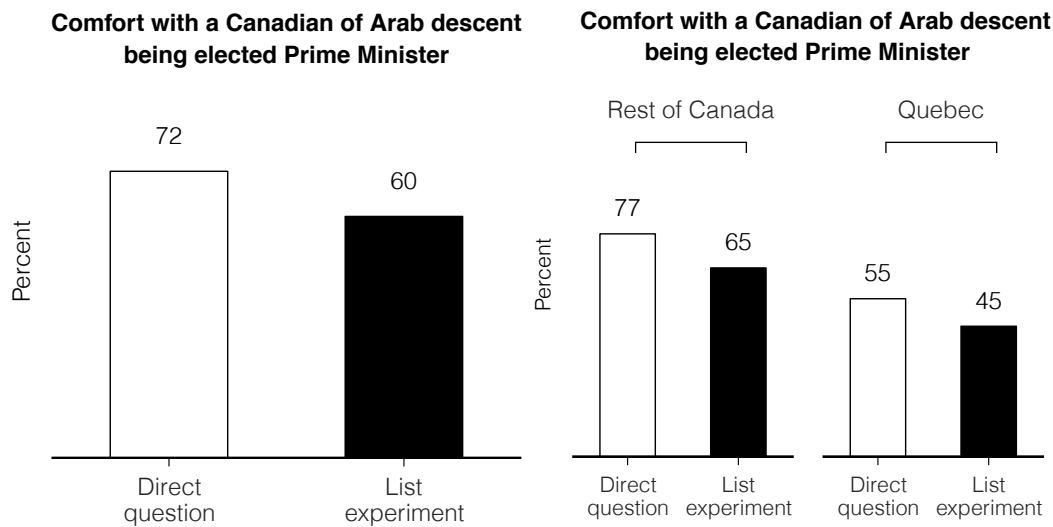
The level of discomfort with the potential election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent is surprisingly large given the extent to which Canada, as one of the most multi-cultural and -racial countries, officially values and celebrates its racial, ethnic, and religious diversity and acceptance. This shows, however, the virtue of using survey statements that tap into potential prejudices in milder forms (i.e. ‘discomfort’) compared to those that have been used in previous research (e.g. ‘anger’).<sup>5</sup>

In the second panel of Figure 1, we present differences in discomfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent between Quebecers and English-Canadians. As expected, people in Quebec are substantially more likely to express discomfort with a candidate of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister compared to those in the rest of Canada. The proportion of English Canadians who express such discomfort, as estimated through the list experiment, is 0.66,

<sup>4</sup>The model itself is fit in Stan (Stan Development Team, 2016). To ensure that the model, as defined, correctly recovers the model parameters, we provide simulation results in the Supplementary Material.

<sup>5</sup>By contrast, in the classic list experiment by Kuklinski et al. (1997), respondents were asked whether they would be angry if a black family were to move next door.

Figure 1: List experiment &amp; direct question comparison



*Notes:* This figure presents estimates of the proportion of respondents who indicate being comfortable with a person of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister as calculated using responses to the list experiment and direct question.

compared to a proportion of 0.45 in Quebec.

We now fit our statistical model to the list experiment and direct question data. Recall that this model permits us to (1) examine the predictors of (dis)comfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent, and (2) examine the predictors of misreporting if one is uncomfortable with a candidate of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister.

Results from the fitted model are presented in [Table 1](#), which provides the parameters from the model for both the sensitive item and misreporting. An analogous table for the control items, which is fit simultaneously, can be found in the Supplementary Material.

As expected, those from Quebec are substantially less likely to express comfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent. To better convey the magnitude of this relationship, we calculate the predicted probabilities of answering affirmatively to the sensitive item for each batch of parameters drawn from the posterior. We calculate the predicted probabilities of expressing comfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent for each respondent in the data set, first setting Quebec to 1 for all respondents, and then to 0, with all other covariates are held at their observed values ([Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013](#)). We then calculate an average in the difference in these probabilities.

Results from this procedure are presented in the first panel of [Figure 2](#). As the figure shows, when setting region to be outside of Quebec (Quebec = 0), the mean predicted probability of expressing comfort with a Prime Minister of Arab descent is 68%. This compares with a mean predicted probability of 48% when region is specified as Quebec (Quebec = 1). As expected, there is a substantial 20 percentage point difference (95% CI: -24.0, -17) in attitudes toward a Prime Minister of Arab descent in Quebec.

Lastly, we investigate whether those from Quebec also less likely to misreport discomfort with a Prime Minister of Arab descent. Looking at the Quebec parameter in the misreport sub-model in



Table 1: Multivariate list experiment results

	Sub-model			
	Sensitive item		Misreporting	
<b>Culture</b>				
Rest of Canada ( <i>base</i> )	—	—	—	—
Quebec	-0.687	(-1.116, -0.258)	-0.487	(-0.868, -0.102)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male ( <i>base</i> )	—	—	—	—
Female	0.016	(-0.389, 0.425)	-0.067	(-0.487, 0.318)
<b>Age</b>				
Age	-0.416	(-0.613, -0.223)	0.377	(0.094, 0.718)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.093	(-0.111, 0.299)	-0.167	(-0.377, 0.035)
<b>Education</b>				
High school or below ( <i>base</i> )	—	—	—	—
Community college	-0.029	(-0.611, 0.564)	0.239	(-0.202, 0.759)
University degree	1.228	(0.664, 1.809)	0.051	(-0.411, 0.560)
<b>Race</b>				
Non-white ( <i>base</i> )	—	—	—	—
White	0.478	(-0.275, 1.221)	-0.389	(-0.968, 0.260)
<b>Ideology</b>				
Ideology (-5 = Left, 5 = Right)	-0.484	(-0.592, -0.377)	0.002	(-0.077, 0.087)
<b>Constant</b>				
Constant	0.129	(-0.787, 1.032)	-0.542	(-1.339, 0.126)
N	11,751			

This table presents model results for the list experiment in which the sensitive statement is “A Canadian of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister.” The treatment indicator in the misreport model represents whether having previously received the treatment list affects whether one is more or less likely to misreport on the direct question. Model coefficients are represented by the posterior medians, with the 2.5th and 97.5th quantiles in parentheses.

Table 1, we see that there is evidence to support such a conclusion. To convey this relationship on a probability scale, we calculate the predicted probabilities of misreporting for each respondent in the data set for draw from the posterior, setting Quebec to 1 and then to 0, and holding all other covariates at their observed values.

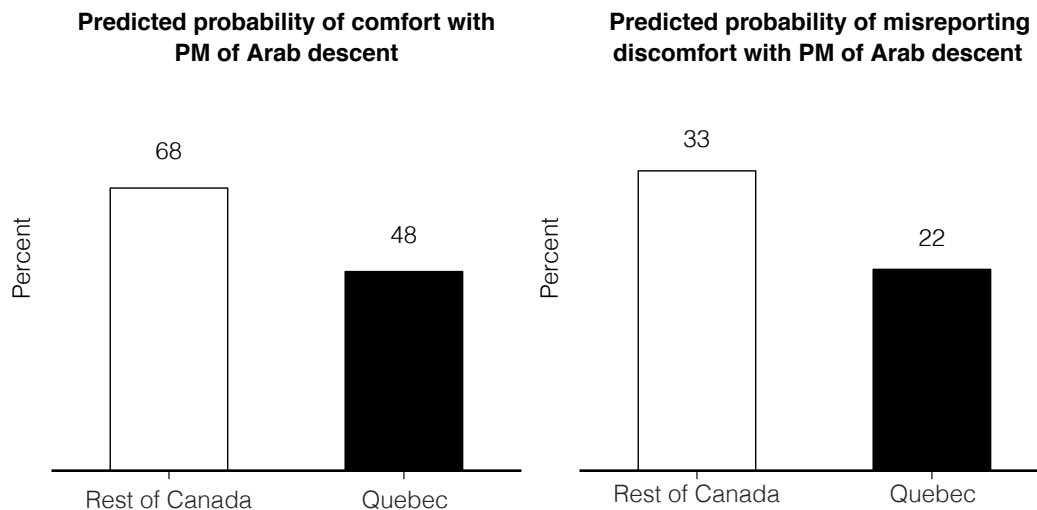
Results are presented in the second panel of Figure 2. As the figure shows, when Quebec is set to 0, the mean predicted probability of misreporting is 33%. When Quebec is set to 1, however, the predicted probability of misreporting is 22%, an 11 percentage point difference (95% CI: -18, -4). Therefore, although being from Quebec is associated with substantially more discomfort with the election of a Prime Minister of Arab descent, it is also associated with a substantially lower probability of misreporting that discomfort.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

We believe that the comparison between English-Canada and Quebec offers insights into the consequences of variation in social desirability across contexts. Using a large-scale list experiment, we showed that Quebecers are less likely than English Canadians to be comfortable with an



Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of discomfort with and misreporting of discomfort with a Prime Minister of Arab descent



*Notes:* This figure presents predicted probabilities of comfort with a candidate of Arab descent being elected Prime Minister, setting Quebec to 1 and 0, holding all other covariates at their observed values.

Arab Prime Minister but that even in English Canada, an important proportion of respondents willingly admit their discomfort. More importantly, the design employed made it possible to test the proposition that a stronger (weaker) norm in Canada (Quebec) would lead to variation in misrepresentation. Indeed, the results demonstrate that Quebecers who hold the socially undesirable attitude are less likely to misrepresent it than their counterparts in English Canada.

This would indicate that assuming a social norm of equal strength across contexts is unwarranted and runs the risk of erroneous conclusions on the prevalence of undesirable attitudes. To give a recent example, a Pew Global survey conducted in Europe a year ago, showed that the proportion of respondents with negative attitudes toward Muslims varied quite importantly, ranging from 28% in the UK to 72% in Hungary (Pew Research Center, 2016).<sup>6</sup> Based on the findings presented here, one could conclude that although it is probably true that Hungarians are much more negative towards Muslims than Brits are, the difference between the two countries might be amplified by a stronger social norm in the UK.

Methodologically, this article also demonstrates that indirect measurement techniques should be used for more than just obtaining unbiased estimates of opinions on sensitive issues. For example, the combination of a direct question and list experiments, something that we are not the first to exploit (Gilens, Sniderman and Kuklinski, 1998; Janus, 2010; Blair and Imai, 2012; Eady, Forthcoming), makes it possible to gain more insight in the dynamics of social desirability. More generally, and as we show here, adding a direct question to the baseline condition in a list experiment only has advantages. Of course, some questions might be too sensitive to be asked directly, but we believe that when possible, a direct question should be part of basic list

<sup>6</sup>For the other countries surveyed, the proportions were: Germany - 29%, France - 29%, Sweden - 35%, Netherlands - 35%, Spain - 50%, Greece - 65%, Poland - 66%, and Italy - 69%.

experiment designs.

Politically, these results have implications both for our specific case, Canada, and for immigration countries in general. A country like Canada that prides itself on its acceptance of immigration should want its citizens to hold these views genuinely. The fact that we find these levels of support and of misrepresentation in a country that is often hailed as a success story of host-society and immigrants relations offers grim prospects for other countries of immigration.

Based on what we presented here, it is not surprising that a study such as Guimond et al. (2013) finds that a stronger anti-prejudice norm is associated with less prejudice toward a minority group—in their case Muslims. These scholars see this result as a demonstration of the positive effect of multiculturalism as an integration policy (Guimond et al., 2013, 955). However, our results suggest that this finding could actually rest on citizens misrepresenting their attitudes toward Muslims to a greater extent in countries that have a stronger anti-prejudice norm. Whether this still represents a positive effect of multiculturalism remains, empirically, an open question, and a research agenda which, we hope, will be explored more fully.

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