

# Politics and Religion: Identifying the Correlates of Support for Merging the Public and Separate School Systems in Ontario

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Adrienne Davidson  
*Queen's University*

Jack Lucas  
*University of Calgary*

Michael McGregor  
*Ryerson University*

## Abstract

This article explores the factors associated with support for a merger of Ontario's two publicly funded school systems (secular and Catholic). Drawing upon survey data from over 2,000 Ontarians, it investigates the sociodemographic and attitudinal correlates of

opinions toward school system reform. We find evidence that both political attitudes and religious identities are associated with school system attitudes, but that religious identity—specifically Catholicism—has a much more powerful impact. Our findings suggest that coalitions of support and opposition to a school system merger in Ontario are complex and not driven by a single obvious cleavage.

*Keywords:* religious education, public opinion, Ontario

## Résumé

Cet article explore les facteurs associés à l'appui d'une fusion des deux systèmes scolaires publics de l'Ontario (laïque et catholique). En nous appuyant sur les données d'une enquête menée auprès de plus de 2000 Ontariens, nous étudions les corrélations sociodémographiques et attitudinales des opinions concernant une réforme du système scolaire. Nos recherches démontrent que les opinions politiques et les identités religieuses sont associées à différentes postures au regard du système scolaire, mais que l'identité religieuse – en particulier le catholicisme – a un impact beaucoup plus puissant. Nos conclusions indiquent que les coalitions qui soutiennent et s'opposent à une fusion des systèmes scolaires en Ontario sont motivées par des idéologies complexes et non par un seul clivage évident.

*Mots-clés :* éducation religieuse, opinion publique, Ontario

## Introduction

Denominational schools are one of the few truly perennial issues in Canadian politics. From the Confederation conferences of the early 1860s to debates about public support for minority religious schools today, the politics of public funding for separate schools has shaped Canadian politics, political parties, and election outcomes through the full sweep of Canadian history. Despite profound changes to the Canadian educational system since Confederation, three provinces—Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan—continue to maintain a system in which both public (secular) and religious (Roman Catholic) school boards coexist alongside one another within a larger public system.

Despite an enormous body of scholarship on the history, politics, and policy implications of Canadian denominational schooling, we know surprisingly little about public opinion on denominational schools in Canada today. Recent public opinion polls suggest that support for the maintenance of the separate school system may be slipping; in a 2017 poll, for instance, 43% of Albertans, 40% of Saskatchewanians, and just 30% of Ontarians supported the continued existence of the separate system (Bourne, 2017). These overall rates of support are interesting, but they tell us little about *who* supports the separate system. Is opinion on the issue divided along partisan or ideological lines? Are religious believers more supportive of the system than non-believers—and how does this vary across religious groups? Does exposure to the separate system as a parent with children in school affect opinion on the issue? Answers to these questions would provide a clearer picture of how the public thinks about denominational schools in Canada today as well as the groups that are likely to line up in support or opposition to major reforms to the current system in the three provinces in which it still exists.

Drawing on survey data from the Canadian Municipal Election Study (CMES), this article explores the factors that are associated with support and opposition to a merger of the two publicly funded school systems in Ontario. With survey data from more than 2,000 Ontarians in three major cities—London, Mississauga, and Toronto—we provide a first systematic investigation of the sociodemographic and attitudinal correlates of opinions toward school system reform. We find evidence that both political attitudes and religious identities of Ontarians are associated with school system attitudes, but that religious identity—specifically Catholicism—has a much more powerful impact. Our findings

suggest that coalitions of support and opposition to a school system merger in Ontario are complex and not driven by a single obvious cleavage.

## School Board Politics—the Case of Ontario

Denominational schools are the result of a long-standing historical compromise that dates to the founding of the federation. The compromise is itself a reflection of the unique challenge of bringing together two distinct national groups—the British (predominantly English Protestant) and the French (predominantly Roman Catholic)—into a common union. The presence of minority Roman Catholic communities in Upper Canada and Protestant communities in Lower Canada necessitated that protections for religious education be built into the Constitution to protect religious minority groups from oppression. The result was the inclusion of section 93 in the Constitution Act of 1867, which assigned responsibility for education policy to the provinces and provided constitutional protection for minority religious instruction in those provinces which had a pre-Confederation history of minority religious schooling (though this was limited to Protestants and Catholics, to the exclusion of all other religious groups).

In Ontario, the only one of the founding provinces that continues to publicly fund a separate Roman Catholic school system, the post-war history of separate schooling has largely been one of *expansion* rather than retrenchment. In the early post-war period, economic and population growth led to rapid separate school enrolment increases (Stamp, 1985), but public funding for separate schools was limited to Grade 9 and below (Brennan, 2011). As the public system moved away from its Protestant roots toward an increasingly secular model of inclusive education, the Roman Catholic community advocated strenuously for separate school funding at the secondary level. By the late 1960s, Roman Catholic boards were permitted to open Catholic secondary schools in Ontario, but received limited public funds for the schools (Brennan, 2011). This situation changed dramatically when, in 1984, Progressive Conservative Premier Bill Davis extended public funding to separate schools through to Grade 13 (Stamp, 1985).

Premier Davis's decision reignited public debates over the place of religious education in Ontario. Several interest groups, including the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, the Association of Large School Boards of Ontario, and the Metropolitan

Toronto School Board came together to challenge the new legislation in court (Gidney, 1999). Some Catholic groups were also unhappy with the change, since the funding arrangement would allow non-Catholic students to attend separate Catholic high schools. This raised concerns among some Roman Catholic educators over the implications for school integrity and the potential dilution of the religious character of schools (Brennan, 2011; Haggart, 1998). Despite these organized responses from influential interest groups on both sides of the political spectrum, Ontario political parties coalesced around the decision of the Davis government.<sup>1</sup>

Education politics in Ontario shifted toward other issues in the 1990s and early 2000s. Major shifts in education funding, school board amalgamations, and an (unimplemented) proposal for vouchers to improve “parent choice” dominated the headlines in education policy during the tenure of Premier Mike Harris. A “trial balloon” floated by the Harris government in 1996 to abolish *all* school boards in Ontario was retracted as quickly as it was proposed (Lucas, 2016). The election of Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal government in 2003 came with a promise to focus intensively on “fixing” the education system, but McGuinty’s government never proposed a dismantling of the separate system. During the 2000s, the only major attempt at reform came in the 2007 Ontario election, when Progressive Conservative leader John Tory campaigned on a proposal to expand public funding to all minority religious schools. Though Tory and his Conservative party were soundly defeated in the election, he nevertheless put the topic of publicly funded religious education on the public agenda.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the separate school system in Ontario has faced serious challenges. Demographic shifts present some of the most immediate practical (and political) obstacles. Though they remain a minority within the province (the condition for their initial inclusion in the Constitution), Catholics are today the second largest religious denomination in Ontario (at approximately 31.5% of the Ontario population), just below Protestants. However, relative to other minority religious groups, the growth of the

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1 Though Bill Davis lost the election in 1985, it cannot be easily connected to the Catholic school funding question. All parties had come out in support of the funding decision, and they furthermore refused to debate the policy publicly during the election campaign; as such, the electoral implications of the policy decision are hard to concretely pin down.

2 See MacLellan (2012) for a detailed historical account of the political intersection of religion and education in Ontario.

Catholic population has largely stagnated. Since the early 1990s, there has been considerable growth in the presence of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and other non-Catholic Christians. These demographic shifts raise two challenges for Catholic education. First are practical considerations. Education in Ontario is funded on a per-student basis, and some Catholic boards face stagnant or declining enrolment at the elementary level.<sup>3</sup> To compensate for these changes, several boards have responded by changing the eligibility requirements for students to attend Catholic elementary schools. Until recently, most Catholic school boards required parents to show a Catholic baptismal certificate for children being enrolled and/or for the parents/guardians enrolling their children in Catholic schools. However, most Catholic boards have begun to relax this requirement and admit non-Catholic students (Alphonso, 2018a).

These changes in Ontario echo similar challenges for separate school boards in other provinces. A recent court decision in Saskatchewan ruled that provincial funding of non-Catholic children to attend separate schools is unconstitutional under the Charter. The decision threatened to move over 10,000 children from the Catholic board into the public one, prompting the government of Saskatchewan to invoke the notwithstanding clause to override the court's decision while they appeal (CBC News, 2017). In Newfoundland and Labrador, the economic costs of maintaining separate boards in the face of declining enrolments was an important factor in that province's decision to establish a single public school board system in 1998.

The second consideration stems from an ideational shift regarding the relationship between the state and religious institutions, and a growing trend toward secularization. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, Ontario's third-largest religious group is "no religion." A growing secularization movement in Quebec figured prominently in the decision to remove that province's denominational school system. As religious identity in Ontario becomes both more diverse and less important as a central organizing feature of the province's political culture, challenges to public funding for a Catholic separate school system are likely to persist.

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3 The expansion of public funding support to Catholic high schools under Progressive Conservative Premier Davis in 1980 meant that any Ontarian, regardless of religious background, is eligible to attend. However, the same is not true at the elementary school level.

These difficulties appear to be reflected in recent public opinion polling on the separate school system in Ontario. In a 2012 poll, 48% of Ontarians disagreed with taxpayer support for the Catholic board (Ferguson, 2012). Subsequent polling suggests public support for Catholic schools has slipped further, with polls in 2015 and 2018 finding public support for a merger of public and separate schools at 51% and 56%, respectively (Forum Research, 2015; Russell, 2018). Though the constitutional basis for the continued existence of Catholic schools in Ontario is thus firm, public support is much less so.

## Expectations

### Political Expectations

The historical context of the Ontario school system, along with recent controversies related to faith-based school funding and the public school curriculum, suggests four main dimensions on which we might expect attitudes toward a school system merger to vary. We outline these expectations in this section and then move on to operationalizing and testing. The first two dimensions can be described as “political,” in that they involve partisan or ideological considerations. The latter two (discussed below) are related to religion, in that they entail either one’s personal religious beliefs or one’s relationship with the Catholic school system.

The first political dimension is *partisanship*. Given a longstanding connection between Catholics and the Liberal Party in Canadian politics, we might initially expect to see some connection between Liberal partisanship and support for the status quo system (Blais, 2005). However, this electoral connection has decayed over the past twenty years (Johnston, 2017), and even if it had remained strong at the federal level it is not clear that we should expect it to translate to the Ontario provincial arena. We thus have few clear expectations about Ontario Liberal partisans’ position on the school system. The same is true of New Democrats.

For the Progressive Conservative Party, however, our expectations are somewhat clearer. While few in Ontario may remember that it was a Progressive Conservative premier, Bill Davis, who extended funding to Catholic secondary schools in 1984, John Tory’s commitment to funding for faith-based schools in 2007 is a more recent memory, one

that may remain especially salient to Progressive Conservatives. To the extent that Tory's commitment represented an attempt to secure public funding to faith-based schools, it seems that it was a move to bring supporters of faith-based funding into the PC camp (while it may have also pushed opponents away). As such, we would expect to see lower levels of support for a merged school system among Progressive Conservative partisans.

*H1: Progressive Conservative partisans are less likely to support a school system merger than non-partisans and other partisans.*

We also expect that *political ideology* (the second political dimension on which we expect to see a relationship with attitudes toward merging school systems) shapes patterns of support and opposition to a school system merger. Recent scholarship on denominational schooling in Canada has emphasized how Canada's education institutions are bound up in deep theoretical questions of state neutrality and cultural inclusion (Vipond, 2017; White, 2003). On one side, "liberal neutralists" emphasize the need for a single secular education system in which all children are provided with the same opportunities and learn the shared values that sustain a liberal democratic community. These liberal neutralists, believing that the state should neither discriminate among nor promote particular cultural or religious traditions, strongly support a single public education system.

On the other side of the educational debate, according to recent scholars, are "cultural pluralists" who oppose the liberal neutralist vision for practical and normative reasons. Practically speaking, cultural pluralists follow many other critics of liberalism in arguing that the state is *unable* to be neutral; in the Canadian context, for instance, the structure of the calendar itself (a Christian week, Christian holidays, and so on) privileges some cultural or religious traditions at the expense of others. And at a more normative level, cultural pluralists emphasize the normative *value* of a pluralist education system, in which children have the opportunity to pursue their education alongside members of the same faith or cultural community. This approach emphasizes the injustice of a secular education system that invariably weakens the hold of these cultural commitments, undermining the ability of cultural or religious communities to maintain their differences within a pluralist society.

The distinction between liberal neutralism and cultural pluralism is embedded in larger debates about liberalism and its critics and within liberal theory itself (Levy, 2017; Macedo, 1995). Its relationship with political ideology is thus quite complex, especially



among those who might describe themselves generally as “conservatives.” Economically conservative citizens might be expected to favour an integrated system, on the grounds that a school system merger would require less administrative overhead than two separate systems and thus would (at least theoretically) cost less money. Social conservatives, on the other hand, might be inclined to favour the status quo system on the grounds that it provides a bulwark against a single secular system—a matter of substantial concern for social conservatives amidst highly charged debates about the sex-ed curriculum, gay—straight alliances in schools, or school funding for organizations that support abortion, euthanasia, or stem cell research (Fatima, 2015; Dabu Nonato, 2012; Alphonso, 2018b). Social conservatives may hope that the existing separate system might one day lead to funding for other faith-based school systems as well.

These varying ideological positions, and their complex relationship with support and opposition to the Ontario school system, make it difficult to outline simple expectations for our analysis. To try to capture at least some of the complexity, we will assess the relationship between merger support and three particular ideological perspectives. The first is *economic conservatism*, which we expect to be related to support for a school system merger for simple reasons of cost savings and “less government.” The second is *cultural pluralism* (operationalized here using indicators of attitudes toward cultural and ethnic diversity). While cultural pluralists may not be enthusiastic about the existing school system, we expect that they are even less keen on a single, secular, “neutral” system (Turgeon et al., 2019), and thus cultural pluralist attitudes should reduce support for a school system merger. Moreover, though Catholic schools only provide funding to one religious group, there may be the hope that public funding might be extended to other groups in the future (as John Tory proposed in 2007). Finally, we investigate *traditionalist* values on gender and sexuality; given criticisms of the public school curriculum by social conservatives, we expect that those who hold traditionalist values on gender and sexuality will be less likely to support a single secular public system.

*H2: Economic conservatives are more likely to support a school system merger than economic liberals.*

*H3: Cultural pluralists (those who support immigration and ethnic diversity) are less likely to support a school system merger than non-pluralists.*

*H4: Those who hold socially conservative values on gender and sexuality are less likely to support a school system merger than those who hold socially liberal values on gender and sexuality.*

## Religious Expectations

Our remaining expectations can be categorized as “religious” in nature. The third important dimension of variation is *religion*. Here our expectations are simpler. We expect Catholics to favour the status quo system. We expect atheists to favour a merged system. The attitudes of those with other faiths—non-Catholic Christians and members of non-Christian religions—are somewhat less obvious; they may favour a merged system on the grounds that the present system is unfair to other faiths, or they may favour the status quo in the hope that the separate system may one day lead to broader faith-based funding along the lines proposed by Tory’s Progressive Conservatives in 2007.

*H5: Catholics are less likely to support a school system merger than non-Catholics.*

*H6: Atheists are more likely to support a school system merger than non-Catholic Christians and members of other faiths.*

Our fourth and final dimension of variation is *school system participation*. We expect Ontarians with children in Catholic school to be less likely to support a school system merger than those without children in the separate system. Not only does participation in the separate system indicate some implicit level of support for that system, but a school system merger would likely be more disruptive to students in separate schools. We expect that the revealed preferences of those who have placed their children in separate schools will be reflected in attitudes toward a school system merger.

*H7: Parents with children in the separate system are less likely to support a school system merger than parents with children in the public system, non-parents, and parents whose children are not in school.*

Finally, we posit that the relationship between religion and support for a merger may be moderated by participation in the separate school system. In other words, we

expect that the divide between Catholics and non-Catholics outlined in *H5*, if it exists at all, is likely to be less pronounced among those with students in the Catholic school system.

*H8: Non-Catholics with children in the Catholic system are less likely to support a merger than non-Catholics who do not have children in the Catholic system.*

Taken together, these hypotheses reflect our more general argument that coalitions of support and opposition to a school system merger in Ontario are complex and are not driven by a single obvious cleavage. If these expectations are accurate, they illustrate the difficulties involved in building a cohesive coalition for institutional change in the education sector within any of the three major political parties. We will return to this issue after we have presented our results.

## Data and Methodology

Our analysis is based on survey data from the Canadian Municipal Election Study (CMES), collected in the fall of 2018. The CMES includes pre- and post-election survey results from electors in eight Canadian cities, three of which (London, Mississauga, and Toronto) are located in Ontario.<sup>4</sup> The surveys include a variety of attitudinal, behavioural, and experiential questions related to politics (particularly at the municipal level). They were largely modelled after established national surveys such as the Canadian Election Study, but include a series of questions to account for the unique nature of local elections in Canada (the level at which school board trustees are selected). Importantly for our purposes, respondents from cities in Ontario were asked questions related to school boards, including attitudes toward merging the public and Catholic systems. CMES respondents were recruited via phone using random digit dialing, and surveys were sent via email and completed online. Participants were incentivized to participate with a prepaid Visa card. Both recruitment and administration of the survey were conducted by Forum Research

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<sup>4</sup> The other cities are Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Quebec. Attitudes toward school boards were not measured in these other cities.

Inc.<sup>5</sup> Data from Toronto ( $N = 1,033$ ), Mississauga ( $N = 482$ ), and London ( $N = 621$ ) have been pooled here to consider the correlates of support for merging the public and Catholic school boards in Ontario.

Our dependent variable is a binary measure of support (yes/no) for merging school systems. Survey respondents were asked, "Do you support or oppose the creation of one publicly funded education system in Ontario by merging the Catholic and public school boards across the province?" Respondents were coded as either supporting or opposing the merger (a small group did not hold an opinion on the matter, and they are discussed briefly below).

As elections for school board trustee are held concurrently with those for council and mayor, the CMES included a number of survey questions related to education and school boards. Combined with more general political indicators, these questions form the basis of our explanatory variables. The first independent variable (used to test *H1*) is a standard measure of partisanship, whereby respondents are asked which provincial party they identify with, and the strength of this identification (see Blais et al., 2002).<sup>6</sup> We created dummy variables for each major provincial party, with non-partisans serving as the baseline group. The ideological measures used to test *H2* to *H4* are operationalized by way of a series of indices, each of which is based on three survey questions. Our economic conservatism measure is based on responses to three questions about government intervention in the economy. Cultural pluralism scores are based on three questions on attitudes toward Muslims, immigrants, and racial minorities. The traditionalism index is based on three questions about feelings toward gays, lesbians, and trans individuals; attitudes towards traditional gender roles; and feminists. Each index has high internal consistency.<sup>7</sup> Though these measures are related to one another, they are nevertheless independent enough to warrant their inclusion, simultaneously, on the models below.<sup>8</sup>

Religious variables were measured with two questions. First, to test *H5* and *H6*, survey participants were asked their religion (if they had one). Responses were converted

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5 The pre-election survey was in the field from September 25 to October 21, 2018, while the post-election survey was completed between October 23 and November 20, 2018. The return to a sample rate for the post-election survey was 67.2%.

6 Following Blais et al. (2002), respondents who only weakly identify with a party are coded as non-partisans.

7 Cronbach's alpha = 0.70 for economic conservatism, 0.75 for cultural pluralism, and 0.73 for traditionalism.

8 Pearson correlation values for the pairings range from 0.39 to 0.72.

to a series of dummy variables indicating Catholic, atheist, and other (non-Christian). Non-Catholic Christians serve as the baseline category for this variable. To test *H7*, respondents were asked if they have children and, if they do, what type of school those children attend. Again, we created dummy variables for Catholic school, public school, other schools (which might include private schools), and no school (indicating that the children are not enrolled in school). Respondents who did not have children served as the reference category.

We considered our hypotheses by running a series of logistic regression models, where support for merging school systems served as the outcome variable. In each iteration of the model, we add new variables to test the robustness of any findings that might be observed in more basic models. By the end, all political and religious variables were considered simultaneously, along with a series of sociodemographic controls (gender, age, education, income, visible minority status, immigrant status, and city). To test *H8*, we ran an additional model in which religion and school system participation variables interacted with one another and then we graphed the predicted probability of supporting a merger for each combination of religion and school attendance.

A few final notes are worthy of mention. First, the wording of all survey questions used here can be found in Appendix I. Second, all theoretical variables were coded to range from 0 (minimum) to 1 (maximum) in order to allow for a straightforward comparison of the magnitude of observed effects. Finally, we wish to comment on the fact that this study is based upon data from three cities. Together, Toronto, Mississauga, and London make up 29.5% of Ontario's population. Due to this geographic limitation, we are hesitant to generalize to the remainder of the province regarding overall levels of support for merging the publicly funded school boards. At the same time, however, we see no reason why our findings with respect to the correlates of support for merging the two school systems would not apply outside of these municipalities. Our findings thus provide a rigorous analysis of nearly one third of the Ontario population and are likely to generalize to the Ontario public more broadly, though replication of our analysis using a province-wide sample would certainly be welcome.

## Results

In general, our respondents strongly support a merger of the public and separate school systems. Among the sample as a whole, 67.0% of respondents supported a merger, as compared to 22.2% who opposed it and 10.8% who did not have an opinion on the matter ( $N = 2,136$ ).<sup>9</sup> The level of opposition to merging the systems tracks remarkably closely to the share of the Catholic population in our sample (22.8%). Is opposition to a school system merger simply a function of the divide between Catholics and non-Catholics in Ontario, or is the relationship more complex?

To answer this question, and to test our expectations covered by *H1* to *H7*, we present the results of a series of logistic regression models in Figure 1, which provide the marginal effects (and 95% confidence intervals) of each explanatory variable upon the probability of supporting a merger—results to the right of the zero line indicate that a variable is positively associated with merger, while those to the left indicate opposition. Results in bold indicate that a result is significant at  $p < 0.05$ . As all variables have been scaled from 0 to 1, results are to be interpreted as the effect of moving from the lowest to highest value for each variable. We introduce theoretical variables in a step-wise fashion, beginning with the political variables and moving on to the religious indicators.<sup>10</sup>

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9 These participants responded either that they were “not sure” or that they “don’t know.”

10 Full results for these models are found in table format in Appendix II. We have chosen to focus here upon respondents who provided a response to this question, dropping cases where respondents did not answer. We see no reason why these missing cases might introduce any bias into our estimates of the relationships between our theoretical variables. Still, in the interests of transparency, we have conducted an analysis of the correlates of responding to this question (or not), reproducing Model E from Figure 1 and the specification used to produce Figure 2, with a different outcome variable (response vs. non-response). Full results are found in Appendix III. We find that a small number of our theoretical variables are related to the likelihood of providing a “don’t know” response. Atheists and those with no children in school were relatively likely to provide “don’t know” responses. None of the interaction terms is statistically significant. We also note the very weak explanatory power of the models (in both instances, R-squared values are below 0.04).

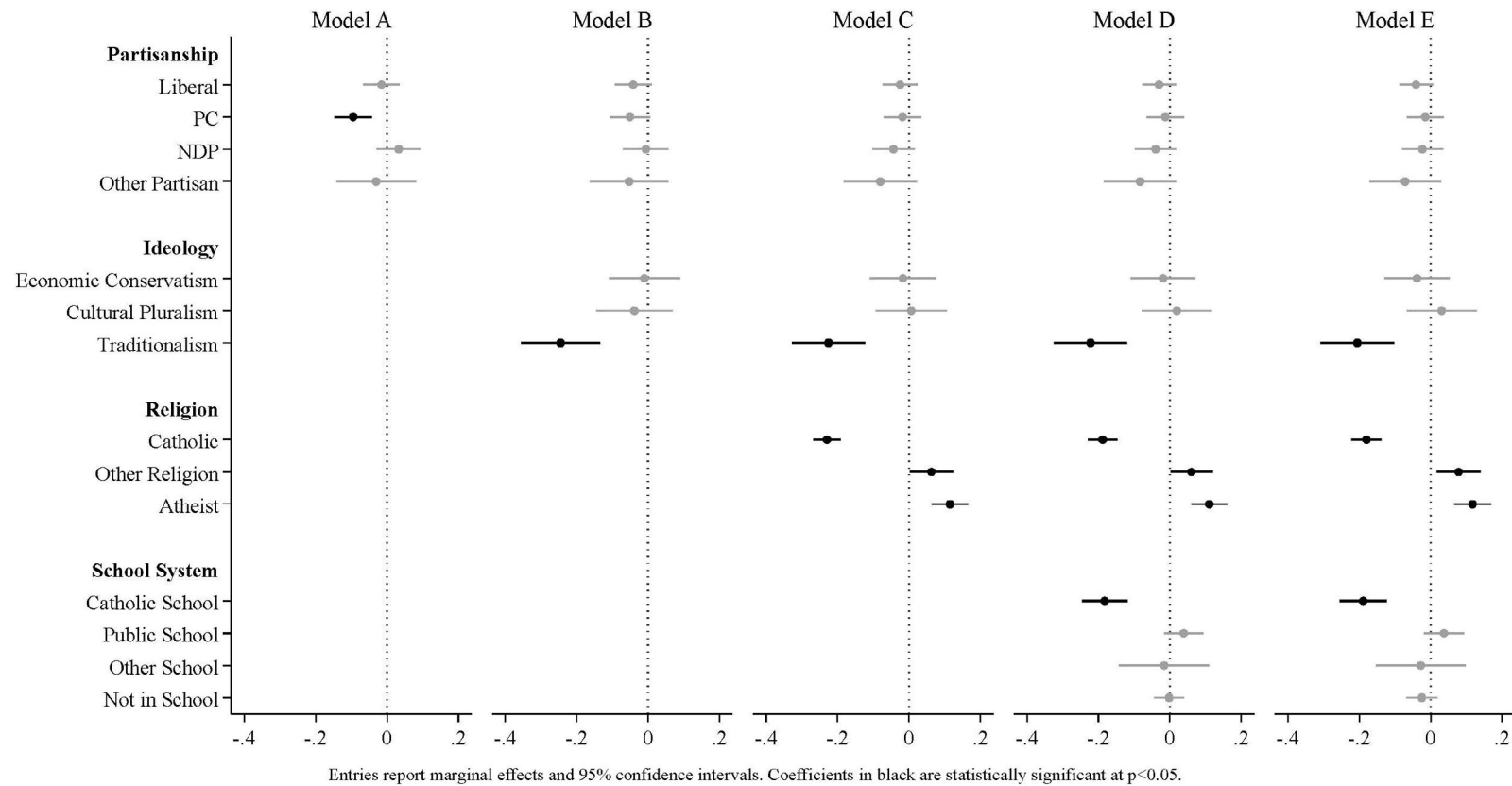


Figure 1. Correlates of support for merging school systems—marginal effects

Our expectations regarding partisanship are not borne out by the analysis. While Model A does suggest that Conservative partisans are more likely to oppose a merger, this effect is not robust to the addition of other variables in other models. The data are therefore unresponsive of *H1*; partisanship, by itself, has no independent effect upon attitudes toward the structure of Ontario's school system.

Our results related to ideology are more mixed. First, neither economic conservatism nor cultural pluralism appears to be significantly related to school system attitudes. It does not seem, therefore, that either a desire to save public money through mergers (*H2*) or attitudes toward immigrants and minorities (*H3*) are related to attitudes toward maintaining parallel school systems. Social traditionalism, however, is robustly associated with *decreased* support for a school system merger. Individuals who hold socially conservative values toward gender and sexuality are strongly opposed to merging school systems. Social conservatives may believe that Catholic schools are better “defenders” of these values—a view that might be strengthened by recent tensions between the Government of Ontario and Catholic school boards related to sexuality and sex education. Whatever the precise mechanism, we did find strong support for *H4*.

The religion and school system participation variables in our models are highly significant and consistently in the direction suggested by our expectations. Catholics are significantly less likely to support a merger than members of other religions. Atheists are more supportive of a merger than are Catholics or non-Catholic Christians, but they are no different from members of “other” religions. These findings are congruent with *H5* and *H6*. Similarly, those with children in the Catholic system are much less likely to support a school system merger than those with children in other schools and those without children (*H7*). The data therefore provide compelling evidence of the roles that religion and school system participation play in attitudes toward school system reform.

As a final test of the effect of these religious variables, we have run an additional model that allows us to test *H8*, in which we interact the religion of respondents (Catholic vs. other) with the variables that indicate the school attended by the children of respondents. This allowed us to determine if the effect of the school attendance variables is moderated by the religion of respondents. Recall that we expect that non-Catholics with children in the separate school system will be more supportive of Catholic schools than respondents without children in the system. Figure 2 summarizes these results by plotting the predicted probability of support for a merger for each combination of the variables



(Catholic vs. other and the type of school attended by respondents' children) based upon this new model specification, along with 95% confidence intervals. Note that full model results are found in Appendix IV.

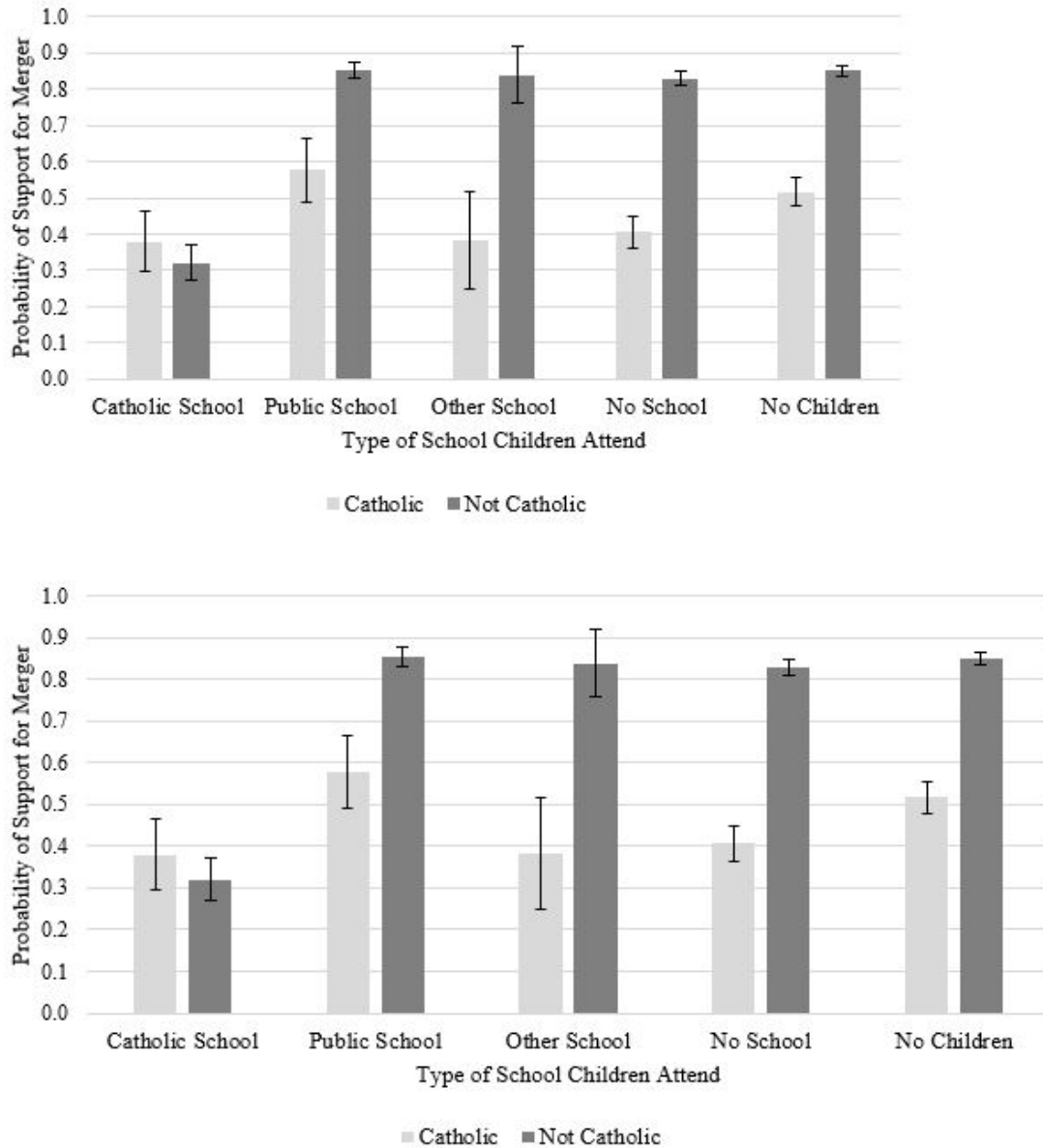


Figure 2. Predicted probability of supporting merger, by religion and type of school

Figure 2 reveals a clear interactive effect between religion and having children enrolled in Catholic school that is in keeping with *H8*. Among respondents with children in the Catholic system, there is no discernible difference in the attitudes of Catholics and non-Catholics—a minority of respondents in both groups support a merger. For all other groups, however, the difference between Catholics and other respondents is sizable and statistically significant. Among these groups, average levels of support are 84.2% for non-Catholics and 47.1% for Catholics. These data thus provide strong support for *H8*—having a child or children in Catholic school is associated with a significant decline in support for merging the two school systems regardless of one's own religious beliefs. Increasing the non-Catholic population in the separate school system, as many Ontario separate school boards have done in recent years, could therefore increase support for the separate system among non-Catholics.

## Conclusion

Despite institutional reforms in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, conventional wisdom would seem to suggest that a merger of Ontario's public and Catholic school systems is highly improbable. From a practical standpoint, such a change would require a radical restructuring of the province's massive education system, which includes 72 school boards and nearly 5,000 schools (both of which are organized not only according to religion but also by language). Additionally, such a change would require a constitutional amendment requiring the assent of the Ontario legislature and the federal Parliament.

Pursuing a policy of merger would also undoubtedly pose a significant political risk to both the provincial and federal governments engaging on this issue. Provincially, though we have found that a significant share of respondents in our three case cities are supportive of a merger, none of the partisan groups are any more supportive of merger than the others. This could make it difficult for party policy makers to justify making merger a component of their platforms (either in the name of appeasing their base or attracting supporters of other parties). At the same time, it is unclear how supporters and opponents of merger would react to such a change. It seems entirely plausible that the group most affected by the elimination of their schools and school board would react in a

comparatively strong manner. That is, they may be more willing to punish a government for making the change than supporters of a merger might be willing to reward that government. Furthermore, the issue—if raised in Ontario—would have implications for the two remaining provinces with separate boards (Alberta and Saskatchewan), which would likely result in significant polarization across political parties at the federal level. These institutional and political dynamics suggest that the abolition of the separate school system in Ontario, while not impossible, is highly unlikely.

Still, we do not rule out completely the possibility of a school system merger in Ontario. Aside from broad public support for the change, there is at least one other factor that suggests that a merger is not inconceivable. The provincial government, led by Progressive Conservative Doug Ford, is prone to making significant changes to those institutions under its purview—the 2018 restructuring of Toronto's municipal ward boundaries and the dissolution of the province's local health integration networks (LHINs) in 2019 are but two examples of the province's willingness to unilaterally impose its will upon organizations over which it has control. A merger of the two publicly funded systems would fit this pattern, with the same argument of economic savings being made in support of the change. To reduce political risk, the province could potentially propose a referendum, as was the case when Newfoundland and Labrador moved forward with its merger in the 1990s (though this option would no doubt lead to a significant expenditure of political capital, and would not altogether absolve the government of credit/blame for the referendum outcome).

Regardless of the likelihood of change, we see considerable value in understanding who actually supports and opposes school system reform among the Ontario population. CMES data show that those individuals who are Catholic, who have children in Catholic schools, and who hold traditional social values are particularly likely to oppose a merger of the two systems. On the flip side, atheists and members of non-Christian religions, as well as those who are not social traditionalists, are the strongest proponents. The combined effect of these factors is noteworthy. Among respondents who were Catholic, had children in Catholic school, and scored above the median in the traditionalism social values index, support for merging school systems is 33.9% ( $N = 65$ ). For those who are non-Christians (either atheists or theists) and socially liberal, this figure jumps to 91.0%

( $N = 502$ ).<sup>11</sup> The fact that there are significantly more people in the latter group than in the former helps to explain why, on balance, public opinion is strongly tilted against the separate school system.

In a more general sense, another key finding here is that religious variables, on the whole, have a much greater effect than political factors on attitudes toward merging the school systems. Religion, having children who attend Catholic school, and the interaction of these two factors are all strongly correlated with our attitudes of interest. In contrast, only one of the three ideological variables is significant, and partisanship has no independent effect. This latter null finding could speak to the fact that discussions over merging school systems are often seen as a “third rail” in Ontario politics. None of the major parties has campaigned in favour of ending public funding for the Catholic system. The fact that this is largely a non-issue during campaigns (despite the fact that education, in general, is often important) suggests that the attitudes of party supporters are not influenced by the fact that their preferred party has taken a stance on the issue. Similarly, the lack of variation policy between parties means that supporters/opponents of a merger have no natural “home” party. Regardless of the explanation for the absence of a partisan effect on attitudes toward school funding, our results are clear: it is religion rather than politics that shapes opinions about the structure of Ontario’s publicly funded school system.

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<sup>11</sup> The difference between these groups is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

## Appendix I: Survey Questions

### Opinions of School System Merger

Do you support or oppose the creation of one publicly funded education system in Ontario by merging the Catholic and public school boards across the province? <I STRONGLY BELIEVE that the systems should be MERGED, I BELIEVE that the systems should be MERGED, I'm not sure, I BELIEVE that the systems should remain SEPARATE, I STRONGLY BELIEVE that the systems should remain SEPARATE, Don't know/prefer not to say>

### Partisanship

In PROVINCIAL politics, do you usually think of yourself as a: <Liberal, Progressive Conservative, NDP, Green, Other, None of the above, Don't know>

How strongly do you identify with that party? <Very strongly, Fairly strongly, Not very strongly, Don't know>

### Economic Conservatism Index

For each statement below, please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree:

- "Government should leave it entirely up to the private sector to create jobs."
- "Government should see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living."
- "More should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and poor in Canada."

### Cultural Pluralism Index

Please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement:

- "Immigrants make a positive contribution to [City name]."

How do you feel about each of the following groups? Please use the sliders to indicate your feelings on a scale from 0 to 100, where zero means you REALLY DISLIKE the group and one hundred means you REALLY LIKE the group.

- "Racial minorities"
- "Muslims"

### Traditionalism Index

Please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement:

- “Society would be better off if more women stayed home with their children.”

How do you feel about each of the following groups? Please use the sliders to indicate your feelings on a scale from 0 to 100, where zero means you REALLY DISLIKE the group and one hundred means you REALLY LIKE the group.

- “Feminists”
- “Gays, lesbians, and trans individuals”

### Religion

What is your religion, if you have one? <None/Atheist, Buddhist, Catholic/Roman Catholic, Evangelical Christian, Other Christian (e.g., Orthodox), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Sikh, Other, Prefer not to say/Don't know>

### Children in School

If you have children, what type of school do they attend? <I do not have children, They do NOT attend school, They attend PUBLIC school (English or French), They attend SEPARATE (Catholic) school (English or French), They attend an OTHER type of school (i.e., Charter, Private, etc., Prefer not to answer>

### Controls

Are you: <Male, Female, Other/gender non-binary, Prefer not to say>

In what year were you born? Please enter your year of birth in the box below. <Open ended box, Prefer not to say>

What is the highest level of education that you have completed? <No schooling, Some elementary school, Completed elementary school, Some secondary/high school, Completed secondary/high school, Some technical or community college, Completed technical or community college, Some university, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Professional degree or doctorate, Prefer not to say/Don't know>

Which of the following best indicates your annual household income before taxes?

*<Less than \$25,000, \$25,000–\$49,999, \$50,000–\$74,999, \$75,000–\$99,999, \$100,000–\$124,999, \$125,000–\$149,999, \$150,000–\$174,999, \$175,000–\$199,999, \$200,000 or more, Prefer not to say/Don't know>*

To which ethnic or cultural group or groups do you belong? *<Extensive list provided to respondents. Minorities are coded as those who list responses other than European>*

Were you born in Canada? *<Yes, No, Prefer not to say/Don't know>*

## Appendix 2: Logistic Regression Models—Marginal Effects

**Table 2.1.** The correlates of support for merging school systems—marginal effects following logistic regression

|                       | Model A                                 | Model B        | Model C        | Model D        | Model E        |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Liberal partisan      | -0.02 (0.03)                            | -0.04 (0.03)   | -0.02 (0.02)   | -0.03 (0.02)   | -0.04 (0.02)   |
| PC partisan           | Baseline =<br>non-partisan              | -0.10 (0.03)** | -0.05 (0.03)   | -0.02 (0.03)   | -0.02 (0.03)   |
| NDP partisan          |   | 0.03 (0.03)    | -0.01 (0.03)   | -0.04 (0.03)   | -0.04 (0.03)   |
| Other partisan        |   | -0.03 (0.06)   | -0.05 (0.06)   | -0.08 (0.05)   | -0.08 (0.05)   |
| Economic conservatism |   | -0.01 (0.05)   | -0.02 (0.05)   | -0.02 (0.05)   | -0.04 (0.05)   |
| Cultural pluralism    |   | -0.04 (0.05)   | 0.01 (0.05)    | 0.02 (0.05)    | 0.03 (0.05)    |
| Traditionalism        |   | -0.24 (0.06)** | -0.23 (0.05)** | -0.22 (0.05)** | -0.21 (0.05)** |
| Catholic              | Baseline =<br>Non-Catholic<br>Christian |                | -0.23 (0.02)** | -0.19 (0.02)** | -0.18 (0.02)** |
| Other religion        |   |                | 0.06 (0.03)*   | 0.06 (0.03)*   | 0.08 (0.03)*   |
| Atheist               |   |                | 0.11 (0.03)**  | 0.11 (0.03)**  | 0.12 (0.03)**  |
| Catholic school       |   |                |                | -0.18 (0.03)** | -0.19 (0.03)** |
| Public school         | Baseline = No<br>children               |                |                | 0.04 (0.03)    | 0.04 (0.03)    |
| Other school          |   |                |                | -0.02 (0.06)   | -0.03 (0.06)   |
| Not in school         |   |                |                | 0.00 (0.02)    | -0.02 (0.02)   |
| Female                |   |                |                |                | -0.02 (0.02)   |
| 35–64                 | Baseline = <35                          |                |                |                | 0.08 (0.03)**  |
| 65+                   |   |                |                |                | 0.13 (0.03)**  |
| University educated   |   |                |                |                | 0.05 (0.02)*   |
| Above median income   |   |                |                |                | 0.03 (0.02)    |
| Visible minority      |   |                |                |                | -0.04 (0.03)   |
| Immigrant             |   |                |                |                | 0.02 (0.02)    |
| London                | Baseline =<br>Toronto                   |                |                |                | -0.01 (0.02)   |
| Mississauga           |   |                |                |                | 0.02 (0.02)    |
| N                     |   |                | 1906           |                |                |
| Pseudo-R2             | 0.0090                                  | 0.0277         | 0.1410         | 0.1585         | 0.1760         |

Entries report marginal effects and standard errors (in parentheses).

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$



### Appendix 3: Correlates of “Not Sure” or “Don’t Know” Responses

The following table shows the results of two logistic regression models, where the outcome is a “don’t know/prefer not to say” response to the survey question about merging the public and Catholic school boards. Entries report raw regression results and standard errors (in parentheses).

**Table 3.1.** Correlates of “not sure” or “don’t know” responses

|                                   |                |                        |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Liberal partisan                  | 0.06 (0.19)    | -0.03 (0.19)           |
| PC partisan                       | -0.10 (0.23)   | -0.05 (0.23)           |
| NDP partisan                      | 0.14 (0.21)    | 0.14 (0.21)            |
| Other partisan                    | -0.18 (0.43)   | -0.14 (0.43)           |
| Economic conservatism             | -0.33 (0.41)   | -0.27 (0.40)           |
| Cultural pluralism                | -0.73 (0.43)   | -0.77 (0.43)           |
| Traditionalism                    | 0.30 (0.46)    | 0.49 (0.45)            |
| Catholic                          | -0.35 (0.20)   | 0.20 (0.24)            |
| Other religion                    | -0.27 (0.22)   |                        |
| Atheist                           | -0.64 (0.20)** |                        |
| Catholic school                   | -0.05 (0.30)   | 0.46 (0.42)            |
| Public school                     | -0.42 (0.23)   | -0.37 (0.24)           |
| Other school                      | 0.14 (0.50)    | 0.62 (0.52)            |
| Not in school                     | -0.45 (0.19)*  | -0.31 (0.21)           |
| <i>Catholic school X Catholic</i> |                | -0.94 (0.58)           |
| <i>Public school X Catholic</i>   |                | -0.19 (0.67)           |
| <i>Other school X Catholic</i>    |                | <i>Omitted/Dropped</i> |
| <i>Not in school X Catholic</i>   |                | -0.49 (0.45)           |
| Female                            | 0.33 (0.15)*   | 0.38 (0.15)*           |
| 35–64                             | -0.20 (0.22)   | -0.12 (0.22)           |
| 65+                               | -0.35 (0.24)   | -0.21 (0.23)           |
| University educated               | -0.31 (0.15)*  | -0.33 (0.15)*          |
| Above median income               | -0.16 (0.15)   | -0.19 (0.15)           |
| Visible minority                  | 0.15 (0.20)    | 0.19 (0.20)            |
| Immigrant                         | -0.05 (0.18)   | -0.10 (0.18)           |
| London                            | -0.37 (0.18)*  | -0.33 (0.18)           |
| Mississauga                       | -0.26 (0.19)   | -0.23 (0.19)           |
| Constant                          | -0.97 (0.33)** | -1.50 (0.30)**         |
| N                                 | 2136           | 2124                   |
| Pseudo-R2                         | 0.0371         | 0.0325                 |

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

## Appendix 4: Interaction Results—Test of *H8*

The following table shows the results of the interaction between religion and Catholic school attendance. Note that entries report raw regression results. This table corresponds with Figure 2.

**Table 4.1.** The correlates of support for merging school systems –logistic regression results—interactions included

|                            |                         |                |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Liberal partisan           |                         | -0.31 (0.16)   |
| PC partisan                | Baseline = non-partisan | -0.19 (0.18)   |
| NDP partisan               |                         | -0.13 (0.20)   |
| Other partisan             |                         | -0.54 (0.34)   |
| Economic conservatism      |                         | -0.27 (0.31)   |
| Cultural pluralism         |                         | 0.23 (0.34)    |
| Traditionalism             |                         | -1.52 (0.36)** |
| Catholic                   | Baseline = Non-Catholic | -1.69 (0.20)** |
| Catholic school            |                         | -2.34 (0.38)** |
| Public school              | Baseline = No children  | 0.15 (0.21)    |
| Other school               |                         | 0.01 (0.64)    |
| Not in school              |                         | -0.10 (0.18)   |
| Catholic school X Catholic |                         | 1.54 (0.47)**  |
| Public school X Catholic   |                         | 0.41 (0.45)    |
| Other school X Catholic    |                         | -0.36 (0.89)   |
| Not in school X Catholic   |                         | -0.23 (0.30)   |
| Female                     |                         | -0.25 (0.12)*  |
| 35–64                      | Baseline = <35          | 0.41 (0.19)*   |
| 65+                        |                         | 0.61 (0.21)**  |
| University educated        |                         | 0.34 (0.13)**  |
| Above median income        |                         | 0.20 (0.13)    |
| Visible minority           |                         | -0.32 (0.17)   |
| Immigrant                  |                         | 0.19 (0.16)    |
| London                     | Baseline = Toronto      | -0.16 (0.15)   |
| Mississauga                |                         | 0.04 (0.16)    |
| Constant                   |                         | 1.76 (0.27)**  |
| N                          |                         | 1906           |
| Pseudo-R2                  |                         | 0.1732         |

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

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