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Racial discrimination at the polls? The Canadian case of Jagmeet Singh

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ABSTRACT

Discriminatory attitudes towards racial minorities are prevalent throughout society. However, there is mixed evidence of electoral discrimination for racial minority candidates beyond the American context. This paper investigates the effect of racial attitudes on the electoral performance of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP), by examining the case of Jagmeet Singh, the country's first major federal party leader of color. Relying on three surveys from the Canadian Election Study (2015–2021) and controlling for demographics, ideology, and partisanship, we find voters with more negative attitudes toward racial minorities were significantly: (1) less likely to vote for the NDP under Singh's leadership; (2) more likely to abandon than join the party in his first federal election; and (3) more likely to view Singh negatively than his predecessor. The findings suggest that some racial minority candidates likely face significant electoral penalties, which may contribute to the consistent underrepresentation of racial minorities throughout democracies.

Introduction

Political power in Western democracies has traditionally been dominated by white men of privilege. Over time, parties have diversified their candidates along a number of dimensions, though we tend to see less and less diversity as we go from running for office to being elected, and even less as we climb the hierarchy to presidents and prime ministers. The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 was a breakthrough moment that raised serious questions about how racism may have affected his electoral outcomes. Despite his overwhelming victory, racial prejudice likely cost him some votes – estimated to be as high as 5 percentage points (Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau 2010) – and is a key moment whereby racial attitudes became more polarized in American democracy (Luttig and Motta 2017; Tesler 2016), which has persisted even after Obama was no longer on the ballot (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2017).

In Canada, although there is a comparatively weak nativist cleavage (Banting and Soroka 2020), roughly a third of Canadians consistently hold negative views about multiculturalism and prefer immigration rates to be lowered (Besco and Tolley 2019).

Before the selection of Jagmeet Singh in 2017 as leader of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP), there had never been a major party leader from a racialized minority community, and the country has yet to see a racialized minority become Prime Minister. In this article, we focus on the case of Singh and the impact that his leadership has had on support for the NDP.

The leftist NDP has long been Canada's third party, averaging 16.7% vote share since its formation in 1961, although it has never formed government at the federal level (Heard 2022). In 2015, the party attained 19.7% vote share but fell nearly four percentage points to 16% in 2019 in Singh's first election as leader, before gaining back roughly half of that decrease with a 17.8% share in 2021 (Heard 2022). Therefore, we ask specifically whether attitudes toward racial minorities have become more closely aligned with voter's perception of the party and its leader, which has in turn affected its support at the polls, particularly in 2019. Did electors with more negative attitudes toward racial diversity penalize the NDP? And did Singh's leadership attract more racially progressive voters to the party that election and/or in the following election two years later?

In order to examine the effects of racial attitudes on party support, we draw on the Canadian Election Study (CES) from 2015 to 2021 (Fournier et al. 2015; Stephenson et al. 2020; 2022). This period provides a unique test of the impact of Singh's leadership on the relationship between racial attitudes and NDP support because it includes the election prior to his leadership, as well as two elections in which he led the party. Our findings suggest that racial attitudes were not a predictor of NDP voting when the party was led by a white man, Thomas Mulcair. The election of Singh saw racial attitudes become a predictor of voting for the NDP, as well as predicting abandonment of the party from those who had voted for them in the past. At the same time, those with positive attitudes were relatively more likely to vote for the NDP. We also find that racial attitudes become a stronger predictor of negative NDP leadership evaluations under Singh. The results suggest that the election of Singh has led to some racial attitude sorting in Canada, as well as electoral penalties for the NDP among voters with negative racial attitudes.

The next section reviews the state of the existing literature on electoral discrimination cross-nationally and within Canada, providing the basis for the key hypotheses, which are discussed in the subsequent section. The research design and modeling strategy are then outlined, followed by a test of the expectations on a CES sample of the last three federal elections. The study concludes with a discussion of the key implications and avenues for future enquiry.

Electoral discrimination

Western democracies have become increasingly racially diverse and are seeing more electoral candidates from ethnic and racial minorities than ever before. However, racial minorities are still consistently underrepresented relative to their population in all democracies (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust 2011; Bloemraad 2013), they face biased treatment by the media (Tolley 2016), and they do face some electoral costs of discrimination, particularly on parties of the right (Besco 2020). While racialized candidates in diverse districts may benefit from some affinity affects from racialized minority voters (Besco 2019; Bouchard 2022; Goodyear-Grant and Tolley 2019), we know much less about how

racialized *leadership* affects not only the chances of the individual party leader, but also their party's image and electoral chances.

Of course, the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency led to a flurry of interest in the ways in which his nomination to the top of the Democratic Party ticket would affect the party's chances. While Obama was easily elected with a clear majority in 2008, evidence suggests that negative racial attitudes did affect his chances: by some estimates, he suffered a "racial cost" of roughly 5 percentage points in his vote share (Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau 2010). It was not enough to cost him the presidency, but it did deny him an outright landslide. Further work shows that he again suffered a racial cost in his 2012 presidential re-election bid, albeit at a lower cost of 3 percentage points (Tien, Nadeau, and Lewis-Beck 2012), and importantly, this period in US history has also seen an important realignment of racial attitudes along party lines (Tesler 2012; 2016). This suggests that the negative effects of electoral discrimination towards a candidate could reduce over time, as people get more used to a racial minority, or possibly a glass ceiling effect of finally seeing a racial minority in the leading position of power.

Outside of the American context, scholars have provided evidence of electoral discrimination towards ethnic minority candidates, though there is no study to our knowledge of political leadership. The United Kingdom offers the most widespread work on candidates. Thrasher et al. (2017) found in an extensive four-decade study of over 400,000 candidates, that candidates with a British ethnic origin surname received an advantage in local elections, while non-European surnames were penalized the most. In a 2010 general election study, Stegmaier, Lewis-Beck, and Smets (2013) found that when a challenger to an incumbent was a racial or ethnic minority, then incumbency provided a two-percentage point advantage. Similarly, relying on 2010 election survey data, Fisher et al. (2015) estimate that ethnic minority candidates were penalized four percentage points relative to white British candidates among white British voters. Lastly, Martin and Blinder (2021) found in a 2017 British Election Study Internet Panel that Pakistani candidates were penalized for their ethnicity, while Black Caribbean candidates were only penalized if they expressed support for pro-minority policies.

This echoes findings in other European countries. For example, Portmann and Stojanovic confirm electoral discrimination in the selection of candidates, though show it was driven by right-wing voters in both Switzerland (2019; 2022) and in Italy (Portmann 2022). They also found that immigrant-origin candidates with non-Swiss names received less preference votes in ballot selections than candidates with typically Swiss names, but non-Western origin names did not fare any worse than Western names. In Belgium, Van Trappen Sigrid and Wauters (2020) found in an online survey experiment that voters evaluated ethnic minority candidates as being less competent on certain issues and more leftist than ideologically similar majority candidates, particularly among right-wing respondents. This echoes a common ideological stereotype for Black candidates in the American context (Jacobsmeier 2014; Lerman and Sadin 2016; Sigelman et al. 1995).

Race, racism, and vote choice in Canada

Canadian scholars have paid less attention to the role of race in politics compared to American scholars (Thompson 2008). The political consequences of some group

memberships rooted in language, religion, and immigrant-origin have long been key features of Canadian politics (Anderson and Stephenson 2010; Blais 2005; Johnston 1985; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016). However, the study of political behavior in Canada has only recently begun to take race and processes of racialization more seriously, in addition to a longstanding, though limited, literature on ethnicity and immigration.

Prior to 2017, no racial minorities had acquired leadership of a major federal party, and leaders of provincial parties have also been exceedingly sparse. Therefore, scholars have instead focused on possible discrimination towards local candidates in Canada. Tossutti and French Najem (2002) fail to find evidence of white voters penalizing racial minorities in Canadian federal elections held between 1993 and 2000, in their study of 3,634 candidates. Black and Erickson (2006) reach similar conclusions by finding no evidence of race-based discrimination in determining candidate vote shares for the 1993 federal election. Yet, we know that racial minorities are indeed underrepresented in relation to their share of the population (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust 2011) and that racial attitudes play meaningful roles in shaping electors' views of policies (Harell et al. 2012; Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar 2016), as well as evidence of "racial spillover" in partisan politics (Besco and Matthews 2022). Furthermore, Tolley (2016) shows convincingly that while Canadian media is rarely overtly racist, candidates from racial minority backgrounds tend to be covered in racialized ways – both less prominently and with a larger focus on their background. Yet in general, the evidence is limited that the racial origin of *specific* candidates is indeed causing people to vote – or not – for specific parties.

Besco (2020) provides some explanation for many of the null findings in the racial electoral discrimination literature. He finds in a recent survey experiment that it is mainly ethnic minority candidates on the right of the political spectrum that suffer from electoral discrimination and candidates from the left are largely insulated from the same effect. This is due to a much larger concentration of individuals with racial prejudice existing on the right. Therefore, a "friendly fire" effect is inflicted on racial minorities on the right during candidate selection phases. Since most racial minorities run for left-wing or left-of-center parties, racial discrimination is thus not detectable at the general election level (Street 2014).

Moreover, the ethno-racial background of candidates can have multiple effects on how voters react. Some of these may be positive, from signaling affinity for those who share the same background (Besco 2019; Bird et al. 2016; Bouchard 2022; Goodyear-Grant and Tolley 2019; McGregor et al. 2017) to providing shortcuts to the policy positions and ideological placement of the candidate, as well as general impressions of the candidate, what Lau and Redlawsk call candidate appearance shortcuts (2001, 954).

A prominent aspect of electoral discrimination found in the US context is racial-spillover theory, which posits that the connection between a politician and their policy proposals may suffice to generate an association between racial and policy attitudes through the politician's perceived racial characteristics (Tesler 2012). Previously, its analysis has been limited to examining Obama, where a few studies find evidence in favor of the theory (Luttig and Motta 2017; Tesler 2012; 2016). However, Besco and Matthews (2022) recently extend racial-spillover theory to Singh and the NDP. Although Singh has not formed government as Obama has, they find experimental and observational evidence of racial spillover when connections are made between Singh and various prominent NDP policy offerings. This likely contributes to their finding of a statistically

significantly increased relationship between racial attitudes and NDP evaluations in 2019, compared to any single election since 1988.

A contrasting effect of the ethno-racial background of electoral candidates lies with affinity voting. Even though "the NDP is one of very few parties in the world that have formal guidelines for recruiting more visible minority candidates" (Bird 2005, 453), throughout Canadian elections, it has been the centrist Liberal Party that has long captured the most votes of ethnic and racial minorities (Blais 2005; Harell 2012; Johnston 2017). This is in part due to the Liberal Party's success among successive waves of immigrant groups, first of Eastern and Southern European origin, and increasingly among immigrants of non-European origin (Johnston 2017, 128–130). While the explanation for this support is the Liberal Party's central role in the policy of multiculturalism (Johnston: 130), the link between individual policy preferences related to multiculturalism and Liberal vote choice is less clear (Blais 2005). Affinity voting, as Besco (2015) finds in a survey experiment, may extend to parties that nominate ethnic and racial minorities by creating a "rainbow coalition" of racial minority affinity for candidates from other racial minorities. Bouchard (2022), however, is unable to extend a more generalized affinity vote to Singh. She finds evidence of affinity for Singh from the large Sikh Canadian population in their leadership evaluations in 2019, but no affinity support from other racial minority groups for the NDP and Singh. Notably, while not the focus of her paper, she also documents a negative effect of racial attitudes on evaluations of Singh, but no evidence that these attitudes affected voting for the NDP or intent to migrate to them. We return here to this relationship but extend it to examine the rise of Singh's leadership to the NDP across time, focusing on electoral behavior prior to and during his leadership.[1]

Singh provides a uniquely prominent example to study the effects of the ethno-racial background of an electoral candidate. Not only is he one of the first racial minorities of a major political party throughout Western democracies, but he visually stands out: he wears a turban and has a long beard, which make him identifiable as a Sikh. Rather than downplaying Singh's race and religion for fear of being viewed as a weakness, in his first election as leader the NDP chose to embrace Singh's Sikhism in their campaign advertisements and frequently positioned him engaging with voters from diverse backgrounds (McGrane 2020). However, although many Sikhs have been elected to offices in Canada, the group still suffers electoral penalties. Prior to Singh's leadership in 2017, Angus Reid surveyed Canadians on voting for diverse hypothetical candidates. Only 63% said they could vote for a Sikh, and only 56%, for a man who wears a religious head-covering, as Singh does, compared to hypothetical Black (94%) or Indigenous (85%) candidates (Angus Reid 2017).

Religious headwear such as a turban and displaying of a long beard have also been shown to be commonly mis-associated with Muslims, which typically endure greater distrust and discrimination than nearly all other social groups throughout the West (Fisher et al. 2015; Jardina and Stephens-Dougan 2021; Lajevardi 2020; Martin and Blinder 2021). Indeed, Singh was mis-identified by a white woman as an Islamic extremist in a long racially motivated verbal attack at a Brampton, Ontario town hall meeting, during his party leadership campaign in 2017 (McLaughlin 2017). During the federal election campaign of 2019, Singh was also prominently confronted by a white man at a market in Montreal, who told him to "cut (his) turban off" to "look like a Canadian"

(CBC News 2019). Recently, Singh was confronted, cursed at, and threatened by an angry crowd in Peterborough, Ontario in what he described as "disheartening, morally unacceptable" and ranking "among the worst experiences" of his political career (Boisvert 2022). Though not described as a racially motivated incident, it reflects the type of verbal abuse that candidates can face and tend to be disproportionately faced by women and candidates of color.

Yet, Singh is not simply a candidate of color but the leader of his party. Past research suggests that local candidate effects are relatively rare and small in the Canadian system (Bodet et al. 2022; Stevens et al. 2019). In contrast, *leadership* evaluations are a central, enduring feature of vote choice in Canada, as they are elsewhere (Bittner 2011; 2018; Clarke et al. 2019; Johnston 2002). While there is some debate about whether positive leader's evaluations translate into more seats in recent elections (Gidengil et al. 2012, 113), there is no doubt that leadership matters to individual vote choice. Leaders are central to election campaigns – their images often are ubiquitous on a party's campaign materials, leaders' debates are highly mediatized, and campaign teams work hard to manage a leaders' public image. And voters use information about leaders when voting.

In perhaps the most comprehensive work on leadership evaluations, Bittner (2011) argues that leaders tend to be evaluated on two core dimensions: competence and character. These evaluations are driven in part by the partisan preferences and ideology of individual electors, but they also vary across parties and institutional contexts. Notably for this article, she demonstrates that left-leaning parties like the NDP tend to be evaluated better in terms of character compared to right-leaning parties that are viewed more favorably on the competence dimension. Furthermore, these evaluations tend to have less impact on the vote choice for smaller parties. In a recent study that focuses specifically on the Canadian case, she shows that competence tends to be more predictive of vote choice for the two largest parties (Liberals and Conservatives) but that the effect of each trait was similar for NDP vote choice from 1984 to 2015 (Bittner 2018).

Yet, up until Singh assumed the leadership of the NDP, candidates for leadership were largely and almost exclusively white. In one study of particular importance, Trimble et al. (2015) analysed 14 leadership contests in Canada drawing on an intersectional analysis of news coverage of candidates. They note that the "racial identities of most White candidates went unnoticed," which resulted in the "taken-for granted nature of whiteness as the norm in elite Canadian politics" (Trimble et al. 2015, 323). They highlight that coverage of the 1975 contest between a white man, Ed Broadbent, against a Black woman, Rosemary Brown, focused heavily on Brown's race and gender. While not focused on leadership, Tolley (2016) provides compelling evidence that the coverage of "visible minority" candidates is less prominent, particularly when they have not yet proven their electoral viability. This systemic bias focuses on aspects that might affect perceptions particularly of competence: how attitudes are driven by minorities backgrounds, their ability to win, and their interest in pushing a policy agenda.

How might this affect evaluations of Singh? There are few examples beyond Obama of how racial bias might affect leadership judgments. There is clear evidence that racism influenced leader ratings of Obama (see, for example, Dwyer et al. 2009), though less that focuses specifically on specific leadership traits. As noted earlier, Van Trappen Sigrid and Wauters (2020) found some evidence of a bias in competence judgements toward minority *candidates*. Yet, we know that racial prejudice often maps onto

similar dimensions. In Fiske's (2018) foundational work, she argues that group perceptions more generally fall on two dimensions: competence and warmth. Competence, like in the leadership literature, focuses on ability, whereas warmth captures likability through characteristics such as friendliness and trustworthiness. In a study in Canada, she shows that some racial minority groups tend to be rated low on both dimensions (Black people, Muslims, and people of Middle Eastern origin), whereas the category Asian was ranked higher on competency but low on warmth (Fiske 2012: Figure 1). While this study is not specific to Sikhs Canadians, we might expect that racial prejudice would lead people to rate Singh negatively on at least competency, but potentially on both.

In this paper, we focus on the period of 2015–2021 to test the extent to which racial attitudes predict not only views of Singh, but also affect the electoral chances of the NDP. As noted, Singh provides a strong test case of both racial spillover theory (Besco and Matthews 2022) and racial affinity voting (Bouchard 2022). We build on these studies using Singh and the NDP as a test case to also examine racial electoral discrimination via three hypotheses:

H1: Individuals with more negative attitudes toward racial minorities are less likely to vote for the federal NDP under Jagmeet Singh's leadership than his predecessor Tom Mulcair.

H2: Individuals with more negative attitudes toward racial minorities are more likely to rate Jagmeet Singh's leadership negatively than his predecessor Tom Mulcair.

H3: Individuals with more negative attitudes toward racial minorities are more likely to abandon than join the federal NDP under Jagmeet Singh in the 2019 election, compared to the 2015 and 2021 elections.

Data and methods

To examine racial electoral discrimination in Canada, this study relies on merged data from the Canadian Election Study (CES), which are the most extensive surveys on public opinion and voting in Canada. We utilize the online version of the CES from the three most recent federal elections: 2015, 2019, and 2021 (Fournier et al. 2015; Stephenson et al. 2020; 2022). The elections were chosen because they provide both elections that Singh has contested as federal leader of the NDP, as well as the prior election to his leadership, contested under Tom Mulcair, a more traditional party leader (male, white). Weights are included to reflect the national demographic distribution in terms of age, education, and gender.[2]

Three different dependent variables are utilized. First, to measure NDP support we rely on the reported vote choice from the post-election wave of each CES. *NDP vote* is a binary dependent variable, with NDP voters coded as 1 and all other parties a 0 (note that multinomial models are provided separately in the appendix). Second, to compare the evaluation of Singh's leadership with his predecessor, we rely on a feeling thermometer question asking respondents: "how do you feel about the federal political leaders below?" We rescale the *NDP Leader* from 0–100 to 0–1 where higher scores indicate more positive evaluations. Third, we seek to answer if past voters are also more likely to abandon, rather than stay with or join the party under Singh's leadership. Unfortunately, panel data is not available for the period under study, instead we rely on the

retrospective vote question from the campaign portion of the CES, which asks for the party the respondent voted for in the last election. It should be noted that the reliability of accurate voter recall has been questioned, which is compounded when relying on recall from two elections prior. However, we rely on recall from only one election prior, and measurement error in recall data has been shown to have a limited impact on the validity of research findings (Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017). The retrospective vote-based NDP *party switch* dependent variable has three categories (leave NDP; stay with NDP; join NDP).

Our key independent variable measures *attitudes toward racial minorities* via a feeling thermometer question asking respondents: "how do you feel about racial minorities?" We rescale the original 0–100 feeling thermometer to 0–1 (where 0 = like and 100 = dislike). Higher scores thus indicate more negative attitudes. A feeling thermometer is a common measure used to capture intergroup attitudes in political psychology. We use the feeling thermometer to capture relative warmth toward racialized minorities in Canada, with the expectation that higher scores capture a source of intergroup prejudice, namely group distance. We focus specifically on this measure as it is available across all three waves of the survey and therefore allows for comparison over time. Racial prejudice is of course a multifaceted attitude and could – and should – be measured in multiple ways, from belief in negative group stereotypes to belief in one's own group superiority. That being said, we would expect all of these measures to be correlated and to show the same direction of effects. If our available but rather noisy measure shows significant effects, we expect that tapping into more specific components of prejudice would find similar, and potentially even greater effects.

We also control for partisanship and ideology. *NDP partisanship* is a dummy variable indicating preference for the NDP, and ideology is measured using three variables: *immigration attitude*, via the question regarding immigration rate preferences, as well as *economic ideology* and *cultural ideology*, which are left–right indices comprising questions from the economic and socio-cultural dimensions.[3] Finally, we rely on a range of standard demographic controls known to influence vote choice in Canada (Fournier et al. 2013; Gidengil et al. 2012; Johnston 2017; Nevitte et al. 2000). *Age* is included as a continuous variable. Education is measured as a dummy variable coded 1 for *degree* holders. A pronounced gender voting cleavage has also appeared, with women more likely to support the left (Gidengil et al. 2012). Therefore, a *female* dummy variable is included. Household *income* is measured in quintiles (low to high). To reflect Canada's pronounced regional cleavages, *region* is coded as a four-category variable (Atlantic, Ontario, Quebec, and West). Since our key independent variable measure's racial attitudes, we also control for ethno-racial background via a binary *racial minority* variable, whereby racial minorities are coded as 1 and white respondents as 0.[4]

Results

First, we explore the relationship of our dependent variables with our key independent variable, across the 2015, 2019, and 2021 elections. Figure 1 displays the estimated mean scores for those above the midpoint on the *attitudes toward racial minorities* thermometer compared to those at 0.5 or below. This provides a sense of the relative
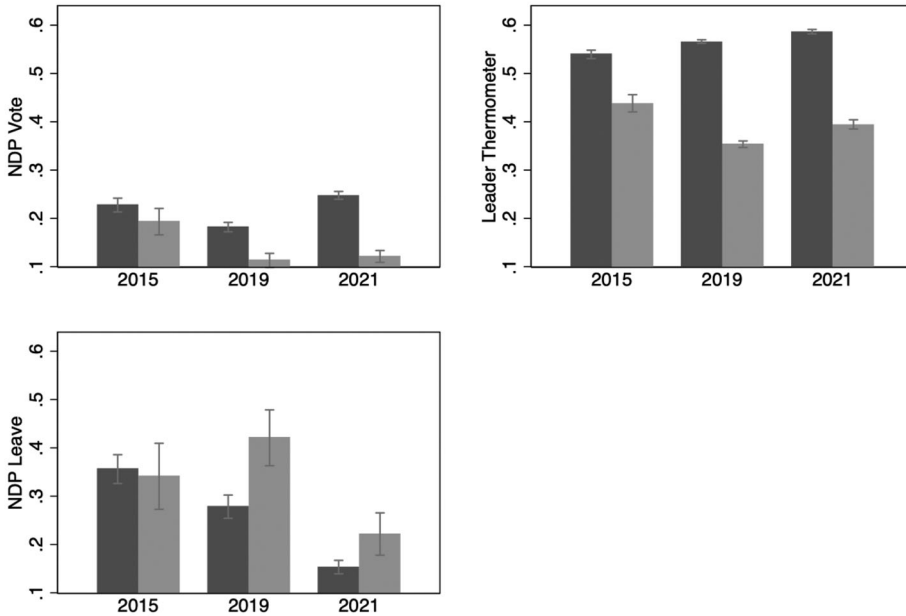
Dark bars=positive attitudes, Lighter bars=negative attitudes, with 95% confidence intervals, weighted

Figure 1. Mean responses by level of racial attitudes, by election year.

difference in voting for the NDP, leadership scores, and percent of shifters, for those with more negative versus positive racial attitudes.

Overall, we see few differences in the outcomes of interest for Mulcair in 2015. Those with more negative attitudes were equally likely to vote for the NDP or switch to the NDP compared to 2011. There is a difference in leader evaluations, though the difference is smaller than in 2019 and 2021. In contrast, we see dramatic differences for all three dependent variables in both of Singh's elections. For example, voters with negative attitudes were about half as likely to vote for the NDP in 2019 and 2021 respectively. Singh's arrival in 2019 also led to a disproportionate number of those with negative racial attitudes to abandon rather than join the party (19 percentage points more in 2019). This switching tendency is lower in 2021, when presumably those with negative attitudes had already abandoned the party in the previous election. Thus, 2019 marks a watershed in NDP vote sorting along racial attitudes. Finally, we observe stark differences in leadership evaluations, as voters with positive attitudes toward racial minorities rated Singh increasingly more positively, but we especially see a decrease in evaluations among those with more negative attitudes.

NDP voting

To test the first hypothesis – whether individuals with more negative racial attitudes are less likely to vote for the federal NDP under Singh – logistic regression with *NDP vote* as the dependent variable is undertaken for each election. The models control for gender,

Table 1. Logistic regression models predicting NDP vote.

	2015 NDP Vote	2019 NDP Vote	2021 NDP Vote
Attitudes toward Racial Minorities	0.125	−0.687**	−0.740***
	(0.296)	(0.257)	(0.198)
Age	−0.008*	−0.013***	−0.021***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Degree	0.091	−0.143	−0.252**
	(0.119)	(0.105)	(0.081)
Female	−0.212	0.139	0.039
	(0.109)	(0.106)	(0.084)
Income	−0.144***	−0.095*	−0.121***
	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.033)
Ontario	Ref	Ref	Ref
East	0.139	0.164	0.366*
	(0.192)	(0.175)	(0.165)
Quebec	0.746***	−0.581***	−0.871***
	(0.139)	(0.161)	(0.107)
West	0.522***	0.326**	0.454***
	(0.130)	(0.113)	(0.092)
Racial Minority	0.095	−0.202	−0.518***
	(0.237)	(0.164)	(0.129)
Economic Ideology	−1.456***	−1.469***	−2.037***
	(0.263)	(0.274)	(0.223)
Cultural Ideology	−0.339	−1.000***	−0.617**
	(0.341)	(0.264)	(0.221)
Immigration Attitude	−0.417**	−0.004	−0.235
	(0.162)	(0.162)	(0.123)
NDP Partisanship	2.577***	2.647***	2.978***
	(0.115)	(0.108)	(0.088)
Constant	−0.729*	−0.401	0.524*
	(0.291)	(0.276)	(0.232)
N	3319	5612	10564
R^2	0.25	0.26	0.36

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

age, *degree*, *income*, *region*, *economic ideology*, *cultural ideology*, *immigration attitude*, *NDP partisanship*, and *racial minority* status. Table 1 displays the results. Younger, lower-income, and economically leftist individuals significantly prefer the NDP in each election. In 2019 and 2021, socio-culturally leftist voters also significantly preferred the NDP. This sorting aligns with Polacko, Kiss, and Graefe's (2022) finding that moral traditionalism became a significant driver of working-class (a key base of the NDP) Conservative support in 2019. Most importantly, we can see *attitudes toward racial minorities* had a null effect in 2015. However, in 2019 we see a negative and statistically significant effect at ($p < 0.01$), which then reaches the highest level of significance in 2021.

To attain a better grasp of vote choice and racial attitudes, the predicted probabilities of voting NDP in each election, by racial attitude, are displayed in Figure 2. Although there is a positive effect in 2015, there is no evidence to suggest that racial attitudes mattered to NDP voting under Mulcair. However, we can see those individuals with higher degrees of racial animosity are significantly less likely to vote NDP in both 2019 and 2021. When moving from 0 to 1 on the attitude scale, the likelihood to vote NDP declines roughly 6 percentage points in 2019 and 7 in 2021. Therefore, we find strong support for (H1), as individuals with negative racial attitudes slightly favored the NDP under Mulcair but are significantly less likely to vote NDP once Singh became leader.
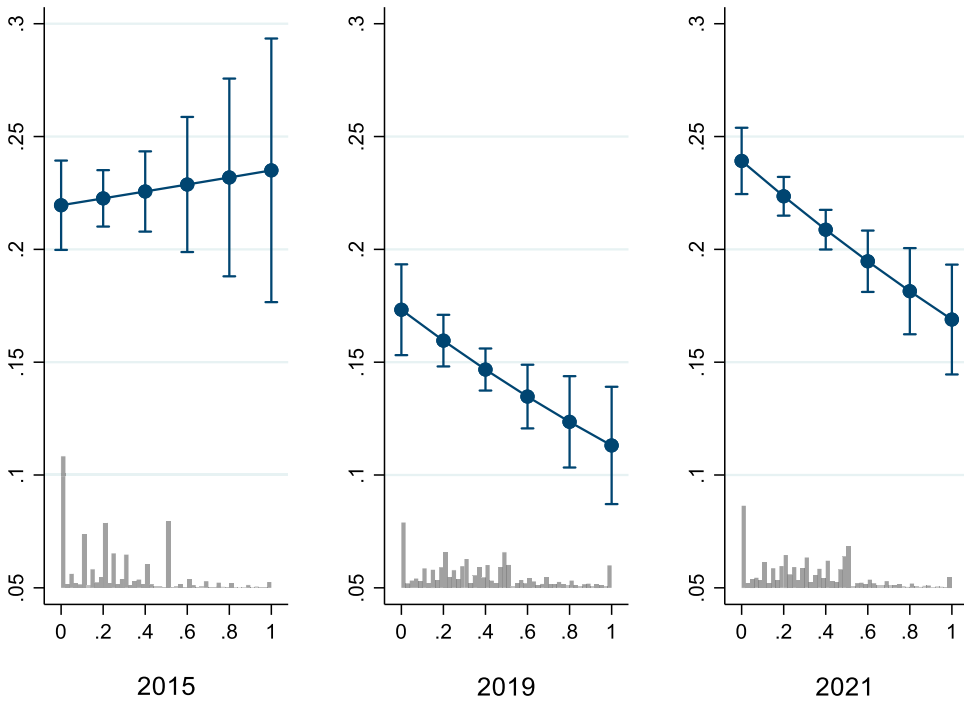
Figure 2. Marginal effect (predicted probabilities) of feelings toward racial minorities on voting NDP. Note: The distribution of racial attitudes is shown below the marginal effects.

Leadership evaluation

We now turn to consider a different dependent variable – leadership evaluation. (H2) posits that individuals with more negative racial attitudes are more likely to view Singh's leadership negatively than his predecessor Mulcair. NDP leadership evaluation is measured via a similar thermometer rating to racial attitudes (0–1), thus linear regression is performed with the same controls as the earlier analyses. Table 2 displays the results for each election. We find that individuals with more negative racial attitudes significantly view both NDP leaders negatively. However, the effect is much stronger under Singh in both 2019 and 2021 reaching the highest level of significance, whereas in 2015 it is only significant at ($p < 0.05$). We do see a somewhat lower effect in 2021, which we speculate may be partially owing to Canadians getting increasingly used to Singh as a leader, given it was his second federal election.

To attain a better grasp of the leadership evaluation picture, the predicted probabilities of leader evaluations, by racial attitude, are displayed in Figure 3 for each election. All three elections outline a pattern of lower ratings of NDP leaders among more racially prejudicial individuals. However, there is a clear difference in 2015 under Mulcair. Under Mulcair, individuals with a racial attitude of 1 (the most right-wing position), rated the leader on average roughly 0.48 on the 0–1 scale, while individuals with a racial attitude of 0 (the most left-wing position), rated the leader on average roughly 0.54. Only a 6-percentage point gap. However, people with racially prejudicial attitudes (1) rated Singh exceedingly poor in both elections – roughly 0.35 and 0.41, respectively. While pro-racial

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting NDP leader evaluations.

	2015 NDP Leader	2019 NDP Leader	2021 NDP Leader
Attitudes toward Racial Minorities	−0.063*	−0.226***	−0.193***
	(0.025)	(0.019)	(0.016)
Age	−0.000	−0.001***	−0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Degree	0.038***	−0.001	0.014*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.006)
Female	0.002	0.012	0.019**
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.006)
Income	−0.001	0.001	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Ontario	ref	ref	ref
East	0.011	−0.029	0.035**
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.012)
Quebec	0.065***	0.008	−0.046***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.008)
West	−0.052***	−0.034***	0.001
	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.007)
Racial Minority	0.059***	0.035**	0.018*
	(0.017)	(0.012)	(0.009)
Economic Ideology	−0.151***	−0.139***	−0.246***
	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.016)
Cultural Ideology	−0.178***	−0.183***	−0.163***
	(0.028)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Immigration Attitude	−0.083***	−0.105***	−0.090***
	(0.014)	(0.012)	(0.009)
NDP Partisanship	0.241***	0.224***	0.235***
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.007)
Constant	0.636***	0.797***	0.784***
	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.018)
N	3522	6607	11613
R^2	0.28	0.28	0.34

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

minority people (0) rated Singh very highly – roughly 0.57 and 0.60, respectively. These are substantial gaps of 22 and 19 percentage points, respectively. Therefore, we find substantial support for (H2). Although all individuals with more negative racial attitudes viewed NDP leaders poorly in 2015–2021, Singh's leadership was viewed far more negatively than Mulcair among the same group. Importantly, those with very positive racial attitudes were also *more* likely to vote NDP under Singh than Mulcair.

Party switching – leaving, staying with, or joining NDP

While voters with more negative attitudes toward racial minorities are less likely to vote for the NDP under Jagmeet Singh (H1), the third hypothesis seeks to answer if they are also more likely to abandon, rather than stay with or join the party under his leadership. Multinomial probit regression is undertaken with the same controls. The *party switch* dependent variable has three categories (leave NDP; stay with NDP; join NDP), which derive from a respondent's retrospective (one election) vote. Stay NDP is the reference category, so that the effects of joiners and leavers can be equally compared. Table 3 displays the results.

Importantly, in 2019 under Singh's first election, voters were more likely to leave the party compared to 2015 and leavers reach statistical significance. In 2021,
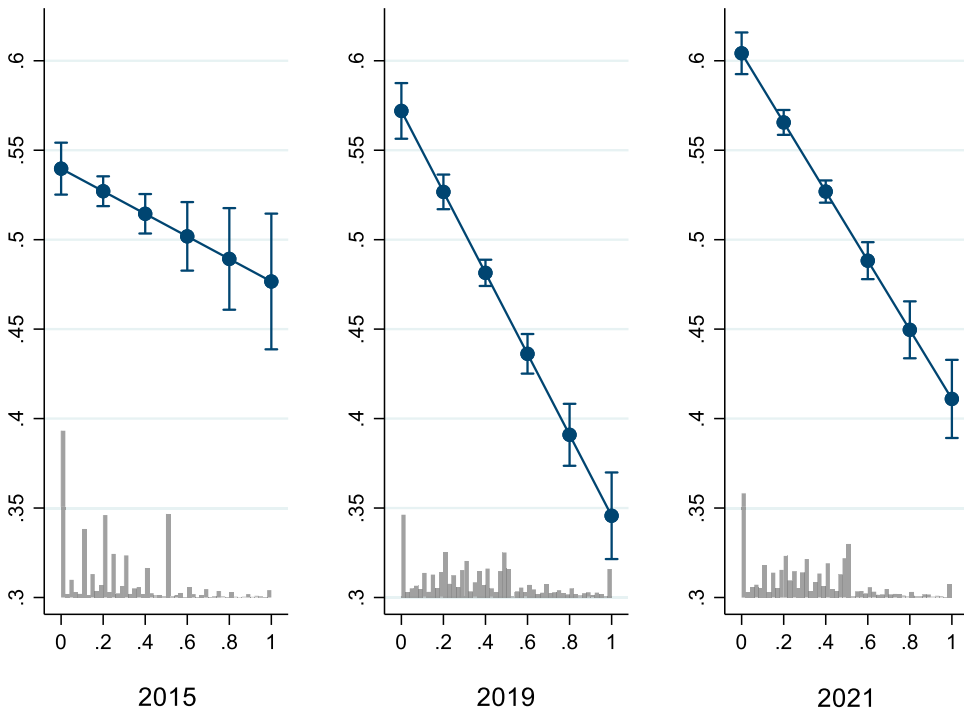
Figure 3. Marginal effect (predicted probabilities) of feelings toward racial minorities on NDP leader evaluations. Note: The distribution of racial attitudes is shown below the marginal effects.

attitudes toward racial minorities has an overall limited effect on leaving compared to staying, and in all three elections, it has a limited effect on joining the NDP. Overall, there are signs of a partial realignment with regards to racial attitudes amidst the leadership change, as the majority of racially prejudicial NDP voters appear to have left the party in 2019. This result aligns with Besco and Matthews (2022) finding of a statistically significantly increased relationship between racial attitudes and NDP evaluations in 2019, compared to any single election since 1988.[5]

The predicted probabilities of retrospective voters abandoning, staying with, or joining the NDP, by racial attitude, are displayed in Figure 4 for each election. In each election, more negative racial attitudes predict leaving, rather than staying with the NDP. However, Singh's first election in 2019 displays much stronger effects than the 2015 or 2021 elections. In 2015, voters were much more likely to leave than join the NDP, including even the most racially progressive individuals, which is a function of the NDP's large vote decline and racial attitudes limited predictive capacity that election. In 2021, the variable displayed an even lesser effect, but the NDP's vote share increased, so we see that many more voters joined the party than left along all racial attitudes. In 2019, NDP vote share also increased, but only at racially progressive points below 0.4 on the (0–1) scale, do we see more NDP joiners than leavers. But as racial prejudice increases, more individuals leave than join the party. We also see that racial attitudes had roughly twice as strong an effect in 2019 than 2015 on leaving and staying with the party, and roughly three times an effect on joining the party. Thus, we find some

Table 3. Multinomial probit regression models predicting retrospective voters who leave, stay with, or join the NDP.

(Base = Stay NDP)	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021
		Leave NDP			Join NDP	
Attitudes toward racial minorities	0.374	0.869*	0.162	−0.033	0.095	0.056
	(0.392)	(0.367)	(0.321)	(0.426)	(0.376)	(0.279)
Age	−0.005	−0.001	−0.004	−0.001	−0.015**	−0.007
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.003)
Degree	−0.134	0.099	0.160	−0.108	−0.111	−0.027
	(0.146)	(0.157)	(0.117)	(0.159)	(0.149)	(0.099)
Female	0.383**	0.132	−0.044	0.190	0.317*	0.144
	(0.133)	(0.159)	(0.123)	(0.149)	(0.147)	(0.115)
Income	0.067	0.059	0.117*	−0.009	0.005	0.065
	(0.052)	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.059)	(0.051)	(0.040)
Ontario	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
East	0.082	−0.093	0.117	−0.153	0.206	0.229
	(0.243)	(0.274)	(0.237)	(0.292)	(0.258)	(0.210)
Quebec	−0.191	0.671**	0.572***	−0.102	−0.353	−0.240
	(0.168)	(0.207)	(0.158)	(0.188)	(0.226)	(0.147)
West	−0.366*	−0.242	−0.228	−0.090	−0.064	0.044
	(0.174)	(0.168)	(0.138)	(0.192)	(0.154)	(0.115)
Racial Minority	−0.241	0.202	0.063	−0.002	0.330	0.007
	(0.367)	(0.268)	(0.168)	(0.419)	(0.260)	(0.141)
Economic Ideology	0.781*	0.789	1.101**	0.589	0.258	0.271
	(0.366)	(0.440)	(0.349)	(0.417)	(0.433)	(0.335)
Cultural Ideology	−1.105*	0.559	0.506	−0.831	−0.505	0.307
	(0.486)	(0.422)	(0.318)	(0.529)	(0.396)	(0.292)
Immigration Attitude	0.032	0.029	0.431*	−0.051	0.043	0.187
	(0.202)	(0.245)	(0.182)	(0.231)	(0.231)	(0.159)
NDP Partisanship	−1.282***	−1.262***	−1.337***	−1.580***	−1.953***	−1.598***
	(0.132)	(0.148)	(0.118)	(0.148)	(0.143)	(0.104)
Constant	0.555	−0.226	−0.846**	0.408	1.777***	0.633*
	(0.393)	(0.440)	(0.311)	(0.465)	(0.374)	(0.281)
N	993	1117	2253	993	1117	2253
R^2	0.10	0.16	0.12	0.10	0.16	0.12

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

support for (H3), as a realignment along racial attitudes occurred under Singh in 2019, whereby individuals with greater racial prejudice significantly abandoned the NDP at greater rates than the other elections, even though many more voters overall abandoned the NDP in 2015.

Conclusion

Despite the relatively small literature on the effect of racial animus in electoral politics in Canada, the selection of Jagmeet Singh to lead the NDP in 2017 provides a unique test of the way in which a high-profile politician of color can shape a party's electoral fortunes and the way voters view the party and its leader. We show evidence that the relationship between racial attitudes changed under Singh, showing a starker relationship between racial attitudes and voting for the NDP, as well as with leadership evaluations. This sorting suggests that Singh's leadership has made racial attitudes a stronger predictor of his electoral support, and while polarizing on racial attitudes may create strategic incentives for other parties to appeal to racially conservative electors, it also may allow the NDP to position itself more clearly as the party of racial diversity.
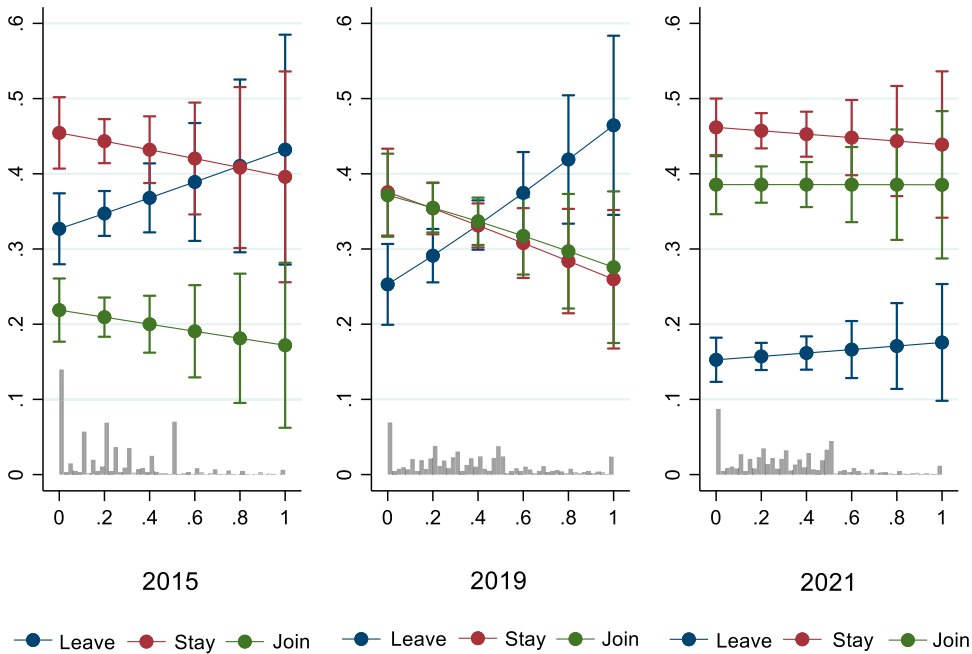
Figure 4. Marginal effect (predicted probabilities) of feelings toward racial minorities on retrospective voters who leave, stay with, or join the NDP. Note: The distribution of racial attitudes is shown below the marginal effects.

Our finding that voters with more negative attitudes towards racial minorities are more likely to leave than join the party under Singh challenges the assumption that it is principally electoral candidates on the right of the political spectrum that suffer from electoral discrimination (Besco 2020; Van Trappen Sigrid and Wauters 2020). This is consistent with the idea of sorting, especially because the significant effect of leaving the NDP disappears in 2021, after a strong effect in 2019 after his ascent to leadership. It implies those with more negative attitudes left the party in 2019 and so there were fewer left to leave in 2021. The NDP also made tackling hate crime and systemic racism in the Canadian Armed Forces a key campaign issue in 2021, which resonated due to the Liberal government's inability to push for reform following the 2020 Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) racism scandal or to address increasing hate crime. Trudeau's record on Indigenous reconciliation, including lying about litigation against Indigenous children also became a campaign issue. These issues likely contributed to sorting along racial attitudes, but the persistent effects of Singh's leadership on party perceptions is of course an open question that can only be explored once he leaves office.

These results hold up to alternative regression methods, additional controls, among a sample of white-only respondents, and outside of Quebec (see Appendix A2–A7). Our findings hold across Canada, and we do not find an urban/rural effect in a limited analysis. In Quebec, we find that the pattern for leadership evaluations holds, but we fail to find similar effects for vote choice or party switching (Appendix A4). Given constraints of sample size in Quebec, more research is clearly needed to explore regional aspects of discrimination in the case of Jagmeet Singh. One avenue of enquiry into regionalism would be to examine district-level election results, which would allow comparison across geographic areas and district urbanity with different ethnic-group compositions.

Future research might also explore electoral discrimination further by examining the case of Annamie Paul, the short-lived Black leadership candidate of the left-of-center Green Party in the 2021 federal election. Although, evidence of racial discrimination of Black candidates is typically lower than Sikhs in Canada and most of the West, and the Greens are a minor party in Canada which was beset with organizational problems and intense infighting in the leadup to the election (Reynolds 2021), the party did lose over half its vote share from 2019, when the party was led by a white woman. One of the challenges of exploring racial effects of leadership are that there are just so few cases to examine, leading to contextual explanations often over-taking larger patterns of the ways in which race and racial attitudes might influence and bias more proximate explanations of leadership failures.

Notes

1. While there is evidence of internal reliability, the measure of prejudice used by Bouchard (2022) includes a range of items that are dominated by attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. We differ in our focus on items that are specific to racial minorities.
2. We use the weights provided by the CES team.
3. *Economic ideology* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.40$) and *cultural ideology* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$) each consist of two questions. *Economic ideology* measures market liberalism and redistribution via the questions: "the government should leave it to the private sector to create jobs," and "how much do you think should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor." *Cultural ideology* measures gender roles and sexuality via the questions: "how much should be done for women," and "how much should be done for gays and lesbians." *Immigration attitude* is measure via the question: "do you think Canada should admit more, fewer, or about the same number of immigrants as now?"
4. The CES has not traditionally asked about racial background but ethnic ancestry (with the exception of the CES 2021, where an explicit racial identification question was included for the first time). We use the explicit racial identification question in 2021 to identity those who select one or more of the racialized minority categories listed. In 2015 and 2019, this measure is not available, so we rely on reported ethnic ancestry and recode those who indicate ancestry outside of North America, Europe, or Australasia as a racial minority.
5. Note that we find a significant effect for Quebec in both 2019 and 2021. This effect is likely driven by the unexpectedly high number of votes for the NDP in the 2015 election in Quebec, the so-called "Orange Wave." In 2019 and 2021, Quebec voters returned to the other major parties in the province.

Disclosure statement

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