

Still the Country of Deference to Government? An Empirical Examination of a Classic Theory

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A classic theory on differences between Canadian and American political life holds that, to the north, support for government authority trumps individualism. However, more recent scholarship has produced mixed results, some work has supported these claims while other work finds few differences. Utilizing original survey data, a candidate-choice conjoint experiment, and cross-sectional data from three other sources, this paper revisits this question and shows how Canada remains the country with greater deference to government authority. This difference in values translates to the electoral arena where laissez-faire attitudes have a stronger correlation with right-wing voting among Americans. Canadians are more likely to prefer political candidates who promise expansionary social policies, while Americans are more likely to prefer candidates who promise lower taxes. The characterization of Canada as the country more likely to support government interventions continues to be an apt description compared to the individualism of the United States.

Introduction

One of the foundational ideas on the key differences between Canadian and American political life is the extent to which deference to government authority trumps individualism. To the south, the founding creed born from the Declaration of Independence is ‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ To the north, emanating from the British North America Act of 1867, the founding creed is ‘Peace, Order and Good Government’. Theoretical debates on the question of how individualism or laissez-faire ideals versus deference to government authority differ in popularity across the Canada-U.S. border include several major landmarks. Hartz (1955) posits historical reasons why the American political tradition is committed to Locke’s emphasis on individual liberty. Horowitz (1966) contends that the Canadian tradition is differentiated from its southern neighbour by a “Tory touch” that emphasizes community and tradition over the more laissez-faire conservatism of the United States. Lipset (1990) argues that Canadians are, and have always been, significantly more supportive of government authority than Americans. The long-held belief is that Canada is the country much more likely to support government interventions in the economy or society, while the United States is the country much more inclined to resist government and prefer the ideals of individualism.

But not every scholar has agreed with this classical characterization. On the American side, some historians have rejected the notion that the American tradition was monolithically liberal, instead highlighting the popularity of republicanism over unfettered individualism (Bailyn 1992; Banning & Estes 2014; Mills 2021; Wood 1969). On the Canadian side, there has been significant debate surrounding Lipset and Horowitz’s thesis on the distinctiveness of Canadian ideology relative to the United States. Ajzenstat and Smith (1997) argue that Toryism was not as prominent in the Canadian tradition as is commonly thought. Instead, they contend that Canadian ideology

has largely been a balance between Lockean liberalism and the republican alternative (Ajzenstat & Smith 1997). Farney and Rayside (2013a) argue that Toryism has declined in Canada since the 1970s, in its place has risen laissez-faire attitudes, moral conservatism, and western Canadian populism on the ideological right. Nevitte, in *The Decline of Deference* (1996), presents an empirical counter to the conclusions of Lipset (1990) and others. Nevitte (1996) argues that, in the 1980s, both Americans and Canadians declined in their level of deference to government, confidence in government fell, and differences in values between Americans and Canadians were smaller than many realize. Similarly, Baer et al. (1990) and Dalton (2019) argue that there is little empirical support for Lipset's conclusions.

However, other work has produced the opposite result. Cochrane (2013) shows that from 1990 to 2006 Canadians became less supportive of the principles of individualism and the free market. Hofstede (1980) argues that Canadians are less attached to individualism than Americans. Baxter-Moore et al. (2018), as well as Krashinsky and Naylor (2023), do find significant differences between Canadians and Americans that conform to the lessons of Lipset (1990) and Horowitz (1966). Both Baxter-Moore et al. (2018) and Krashinsky and Naylor (2023) find that Canadians are consistently more pro-government compared to the support for laissez-faire attitudes among Americans.

Despite the prominence of these debates for Canadian political scholarship, there have been few systematic or determinative tests of how Americans and Canadians compare on measures of support for government action compared to ideals of individualism in the contemporary period. This paper revisits this inquiry. Is the United States still the country more supportive of individual freedoms? Is Canada still the country more deferential to government? And if so, how do these

differences translate to the electoral arena? Are there differences in the types of political candidates Canadians and Americans tend to prefer on these dimensions?

Utilizing a mix of quantitative data, this paper seeks to address these questions, examining the continued relevance of these foundational theories on Canadian and American political culture in the present. The first source of data is an original survey that contains a nationally representative sample of Canadians ($n = 2,000$) and Americans (2,000). The survey was fielded by Leger in January 2023 and posed identical questions aimed at measuring views toward the role of government in the economy and society. The second major source of original data is a candidate-choice conjoint experiment that was embedded in the same survey. Respondents were shown two side-by-side profiles of hypothetical political candidates and were asked to choose which candidate they would rather support based on randomly varied information about the candidates. The experiment varied the party, race, gender, group endorsement, previous occupation, and main policy proposal of the candidates.¹ With this experiment, the paper compares candidate preferences between Americans and Canadians on policy dimensions that necessitate larger or smaller government.

Going back further, this paper also leverages data from three other surveys, which posed identical questions on the principles of laissez-faire conservatism versus an active government among samples of Americans and Canadians. This type of comparative survey data is relatively rare, as there exist few publicly available surveys that pose identical questions to both Canadians and Americans (Nevitte 1996). Surveys that do ask similar questions are not always temporally aligned and are not always theoretically relevant. Most prior work has utilized the World Values

¹ The conjoint experiment was pre-registered at OSF prior to being fielded:
https://osf.io/x7k8a/?view_only=6d9fca1c958f47ff8a628cdbfbce3a76

Survey. Yet, there are three other cross-sectional surveys that allow for two comparisons over time on these questions. The 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey sampled both Americans and Canadians concurrently and posed five relevant questions evaluating respondents' views on the place of government. These questions pertain to whether the government should be more or less active, personal responsibility vs. public responsibility for individual failures, government responsibility for the poor, and the degree of state inefficiency. More recently, the 49th wave of the Media Ecosystem Observatory's COVID-19 survey (fielded in June 2021) contained two survey questions on laissez-faire attitudes that were exact replicas of questions posed on the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES). These questions were directed at attitudes towards government involvement in the economy and whether government wastes tax dollars. Both the ANES and the MEO survey are nationally representative surveys within their respective countries.²

Through multiple points in time, difference-in-means analyses illustrate how there is a consistent gap in the attitudes of the average Canadian and American. The 2002 data, the 2020-21 matched data, and the 2023 original data all show that Canadians are more supportive of government than Americans, while Americans are much more inclined to prioritize the principles of individualism. The 2023 data illustrate how Americans score higher than Canadians on multiple measures of laissez-faire attitudes, as well as an index measure that additively combines each question into a scale, which is termed the LFA Index.³ In comparing partisan subgroups, this paper shows how these cross-national differences are substantively meaningful. In the 2023 data, the magnitude of the difference between the average score on the LFA Index for Americans and

² The MEO survey recruited Canadian respondents using the online sample provider Dynata. National-level quotas were set on population benchmarks from the 2016 census for age (18-34, 35-54, 55+), gender, region (Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, West), and language.

³ This paper uses the terms laissez-faire attitudes, anti-government attitudes, and individualism interchangeably as a shorthand for the same attitudinal constructs that favour the ideals of individual freedoms in the economy or society as opposed to an active government.

Canadians (.1053) is equivalent to almost 40 percent of the difference on the LFA Index between the average Republican and Democrat. Data from 2023 shows that almost 70 percent of Americans believe that it is more important for individuals to be free of government to pursue their own goals, as opposed to government working to guarantee nobody is in need, relative to 46 percent of Canadians.

In terms of the electoral effects of this attitudinal difference, regression analysis shows that the index measure for laissez-faire attitudes has a strong correlation with the likelihood of voting for a right-wing party. Unsurprisingly, the more inclined individuals are to desire limited government, the more likely they are to vote Republican in the United States or Conservative in Canada. However, the magnitude of the effect size is greater for Americans than Canadians. Not only is there a greater prevalence of anti-government sentiment in the United States compared to Canada, but it also has a stronger tie to right-wing party voting than in Canada. Moreover, evidence from the conjoint experiment demonstrates how candidate preferences differ along these dimensions between Canadians and Americans. Americans prefer right-wing candidates who advocate for lower taxes more than Canadians. Canadians are more likely to prefer left-wing party candidates who advocate for improved access to education and healthcare than Americans.

Foundational theories comparing political culture in Canada and the United States undoubtedly have their flaws. Americans are not universally individualists, and Canadians are not universally inclined to favour greater government interventions in the economy or society. However, this paper shows that the characterization of Canada as the country of government deference and the United States as the country of individualism remains relevant in the contemporary moment. Canadians are less prone to believe in the principles of individualism and are more supportive of government than their American counterparts.

Foundations of Political Culture: Deference to Government or Individualism

Hartz (1955) famously posited that the American political tradition was fundamentally liberal. He argued that the ideological foundations of the United States were committed to Locke's notion of individual liberty and freedom from government constraints. Similarly, Rossiter (1955) contends that the United States has long been obsessed with liberty, that freedom was always the more important principle than responsibility or deference to government, and that the core faith in America has long been individualism (Rossiter 1955). Henry (2008) argues that the contemporary formulation of these ideals in the United States has become equated not only with free enterprise or free markets, but with freedom itself. In accordance with this school of thought, whether an individual is wealthy or poor is entirely a result of their own efforts, and not a symptom of societal inequities or systemic failures (Henry 2008).

In contrast to this American characterization, Horowitz (1966) argued that the Canadian tradition was differentiated by the 'Tory touch'. This element of Toryism kept the Canadian public and its politicians more aligned with the principles of hierarchy, tradition, belief in social stratification, maintenance of order, and support for community (Horowitz 1966). These values were much closer to British conservatism than the individualism of the United States (Horowitz 1966). For a significant period, the 'Tory Touch' was a key heuristic for understanding Canadian political culture (Farney & Rayside 2013a).

Following Horowitz, Lipset (1990) argued that one of the foundational differences between Canada and the U.S., originating from the American Revolution, is the degree of deference to government authority and belief in the primacy of the individual. According to Lipset, born of liberalism, individual rights, and a deep suspicion of government authority, the United States was the country of revolution (Lipset 1990). But born instead with fealty to the British monarchy, belief

in Toryism, and much wider deference to government authority was Canada, the country of counterrevolution (Lipset 1990).⁴

These academic landmarks theorized that the United States is a nation dominated by individualism or laissez-faire attitudes, markedly opposed to the ideals of government involvement in the lives of the public. But Canada is portrayed by comparison as the country much more deferential to government authority, and much more inclined to believe that government programs and interventions might do some good. These theories have shaped a great deal of subsequent scholarship and, for a long while, dominated Canadian political science course syllabi.

The Academic Debate

These arguments on the foundational political differences between Canada and the United States have since been the subject of significant debate. Some scholarship has been highly critical of Lipset, Hartz, and Horowitz, while other work finds support for their claims. On the American side, Mills (2021) argues that liberalism, or the laissez-faire program, was but one of several dominant strands of ideological thought in the United States, and which stood in contrast to expansionist government policy programs such as President Roosevelt's *New Deal* and President Johnson's *Great Society*. American research has argued against the idea of path dependence and revolutionary origins, and has instead traced the historical ebb and flow of laissez-faire attitudes in the United States over time (Cockett 1994; Henry 2008; Rossiter 1955). Other scholars have detailed how the current popularity of laissez-faire principles in America are largely a result of the efforts of an organized coalition, originating in the 1920s, and not simply rooted in the ideological origins of the United States (Aune 2001; Cockett 1994; Henry 2008).

⁴ Lipset made other claims about values differences originating from the revolutionary divide, including the primacy of populism and egalitarianism in the U.S., but this paper will focus only on the deference to government vis a vis individualism dimension.

In Canada, there has been significant debate on the prevalence of Toryism and the level of deference to government authority. Taylor (1982) argues that Canadian conservatism, while different from the individualism of the United States, is not just nostalgic Anglophilia, or Toryism, but a unique blend of ideas that also encompass western populism. Ajzenstat and Smith (1997) argue that Toryism was not as prominent in the Canadian tradition as is commonly thought. Instead, they contend that Canadian ideological origins, and Canada's ideological history, are marked by debates between Lockean liberals and the more egalitarian orientation of civic republicanism. Patten (2013) emphasizes that Toryism has not been a major force in Canada since the leadership of John Diefenbaker and Robert Stanfield. In its place, Patten contends that laissez-faire attitudes, similar in form to the United States, have dominated the conservative program in Canada since the late-1980s (Patten 2013). Farney and Rayside (2013a) similarly argue that Toryism has declined in Canada since the 1970s, giving way to a right-wing movement based on laissez-faire attitudes, moral conservatism, and western Canadian populism. The authors argue that in the 21st century, conservative policy has been primarily based on the notion of providing for individual choice, encouraging free markets, and cutting taxes and government spending (Farney & Rayside 2013a).

In his book *The Decline of Deference* (1996), Nevitte presents a wide-ranging argument on value change in Canada during the 1980s. Within this, Nevitte provides an empirical counter to the conclusions of Lipset (1990) and others. Utilizing data from the World Values Survey in 1981 and 1990, Nevitte argues that Canadians and Americans are declining in their level of deference to authority, that confidence in government institutions has fallen, and that differences in values between Americans and Canadians are smaller than many realize. By some of the measures Nevitte

presents, Canadian survey respondents were surprisingly less deferential to authority in general, and less confident in government than Americans were, at least in 1981 and 1990 (Nevitte 1996).

Nevitte's work represents a critical challenge to foundational theories on how Canadians and Americans compare. However, there are two important points to consider. First, Nevitte compares how Americans and Canadians answer the question of whether "greater respect for authority" in the future would be a good or a bad thing, finding that more Americans stated it would be a good thing in both 1981 and 1990. This is one of the main questions from which Nevitte infers that there is declining deference in Canada. Yet, this question says little about the current level of deference within either country at the time the surveys were fielded, and nothing about deference to political authority or government intervention specifically. The question is necessarily forward looking. The answer that respondents give to this question provides little insight on their values or attitudes at that moment in time but what they desire for their country in the future. It also says little about attitudes toward government specifically. 'Greater respect for authority' could mean respect for the law, the police, respect for parents, or a number of possibilities other than government policies or the role of government in the economy.

Second, there are three other survey questions that Nevitte (1996) reports, which speak more accurately to the level of support for government versus the principles of individualism in Canada and the United States, and where the conclusions of Lipset are supported. These questions include whether respondents support statements proposing that: A) "individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves" (see pg. 117); B) "private ownership of business and industry should be increased" (see pg. 117); and C) there are people who live in need "because of laziness and lack of willpower" (see p. 122). On all three of these questions, a considerably higher

percentage of American respondents take the position more closely conforming with laissez-faire attitudes than Canadians.

Baer, Grabb, and Johnston (1990) highlight inconsistencies across different formulations of Lipset's contentions on the origins of political value differences, sparking an exchange of views with Lipset in *Social Forces* in 1990. Relying on *non-identical* survey data of Canadians in 1983 and Americans in 1980, Baer et al. (1990) argue that there is little to no empirical support for Lipset's conclusions. However, the non-identical survey data from a single point in time should give pause in deciding the debate is settled.

More recently, Dalton (2019) also argues against many of Lipset's main claims. Leveraging data from the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program, Dalton (2019) emphasizes that the political values of Americans and Canadians are more similar than they are different, especially when placed in comparison to other democratic nations. Yet, even Dalton (2019) uncovers a nine-percentage point gap in the average level of confidence in government institutions and in Lipset's expected direction, which Dalton downplays (Dalton 2019; see figure 2.4). Dalton (2019), despite his critique of Lipset, shows a consistent attitudinal gap between Americans and Canadians, with Canadians being more likely to think government has a responsibility to: a) provide health care, b) aid seniors, c) provide housing, d) help unemployed, and e) reduce inequality. (Dalton 2019, see figure 2.7).

By contrast, other work has found support for Lipset's thesis. Baxter-Moore et al. (2018) survey undergraduate students in a Canadian and American university closely separated by the Canada-U.S. border, finding that on average Canadian students were much more inclined to take a pro-government stance than American students. They find that Canadian students are more likely to trust government, value peace and order over free speech, value an orderly society over a

disruptive free society, believe government has a role in healthcare, and that government should restrict firearms (Baxter-Moore et al. 2018). While the authors utilize a clever controlled comparison of a geographically contiguous population, there are reasons for caution. The sample is necessarily unrepresentative of the broader publics in Canada and the United States, and the paper can accordingly say little about cross-national differences beyond undergraduate students.

Another example of a recent article finding support for Lipset, Hartz, and Horowitz is Krashinsky and Naylor (2023), who examine how individualism vs. deference to government authority compares between Canada and the United States, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors find that laissez-faire attitudes were significant predictors of resistance to public health measures such as wearing a mask and intending to get the COVID-19 vaccine, and that individualist attitudes are much more prevalent in the United States compared to Canada (Krashinsky & Naylor 2023).

While there is likely a more significant tradition and a stronger contemporary adherence to laissez-faire attitudes in Canada than Lipset and Horowitz believed, other scholars maintain that laissez-faire attitudes remain much less prevalent in Canada than they are in the United States (Adams 2003; Farney & Rayside 2013b; Ajzenstat & Smith 1997). Hofstede (1980) finds that Canadians are less attached to values of individualism than Americans (as well as Australians, but more attached than many Asian and Latin American countries). Cochrane (2013) contends that from 1990 to 2006, Canadians became less supportive of private industry, more supportive of income equality, and less likely to agree that people should look after themselves. Farney and Rayside (2013b) argue that the Canadian public, while more individualistic than Western Europe, remains more supportive of state policy than Americans (Farney & Rayside 2013b). Smith argues that since the second world war, Canada has been more successful at instilling public obedience

to law and wider popular support for social programs, whereas individual rights reign supreme in the United States (Ajzenstat & Smith 1997). Adams (2003) shows how the majority of Canadians continue to be in favour of the social welfare state and express greater levels of social responsibility, whereas Americans are much more committed to the “laissez-faire approach of U.S. government” (Adams 2003, p. 58).

Data and Measurement

Empirical data for this paper comes from four sources that utilize identical question sets for Canadians and Americans. The first is an original survey of a nationally representative sample of Canadians (n = 2,000) and Americans (n = 2,000), which also contained an embedded conjoint experiment that tested candidate preferences in response to experimental stimuli. The second source of data is the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which contains five identical questions gauging laissez-faire attitudes among samples of both Americans (n = 1,257) and Canadians (n = 430). The third source is the 2020 ANES (n = 7,314), and the fourth source is the 49th wave of the MEO’s COVID-19 survey (fielded in 2021; n = 1,193), both of which contained two identical questions on the role of government. The bulk of this paper’s analysis is based on the original survey and experimental data (2023) of Canadians and Americans, but data from the 2020 ANES, the 49th wave of the MEO COVID-19 survey, and the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey are utilized for additional comparisons of attitudes over time.

In the original survey, fielded with Leger, national survey weights were calculated and appended to the data set. The sample was recruited from Leger’s online panel utilizing quotas for national population targets on age, gender, and region. Survey respondents from each of the American and Canadian sample answered five questions that pertained to support for government authority. Out of these possible questions, four questions were then combined into an index

measure, titled the LFA Index.⁵ The final index measures the degree to which people support or oppose the role of government in the economy and society, the level of responsibility government has for poor individuals, societal failure vs. individual failure, and the degree to which government controls too much of an individual's life. These four questions are as follows:

- 1) What's more important in [American/Canadian] society – that everyone be free to pursue their life's goals without interference from the government OR that the government play an active role in society so as to guarantee that nobody is in need?⁶
- 2) Some say that most people who don't succeed in life fail because of society's failures. Others say that most people who don't succeed do so because of their own individual failures. Which comes closer to your point of view?

“Here is a list of statements. For each one, please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with it.”

- 3) “The government controls too much of our daily lives.”
- 4) “It is the responsibility of the government to take care of very poor people who can't take care of themselves.”

The 2020 ANES featured two relevant questions that invoke the role of government and the efficiency or effectiveness of government, versus the importance of individuals being left to their own devices. These two questions were replicated in their exact form, aside from the name of the national capital, in one wave of the MEO's COVID-19 survey. Accordingly, with identical questions and temporal proximity, direct comparisons are possible between Canadians and Americans on these measures. The two questions are as follows:

- 1) "Some people feel the government in Washington [Ottawa] should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these

⁵ A PCF analysis was conducted that confirmed the statistical relevance of these questions. Based on the results of this analysis, one of the questions was dropped from the eventual index measure combining four questions. The LFA Index is used as a shorthand throughout this paper, but the questions pertain to the desire for greater government involvement on the one hand versus individualism on the other.

⁶ The word 'American' or 'Canadian' was interchanged depending on whether the survey sample consisted of Americans or Canadians.

people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

- 2) "Do you think that people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?"

The 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey is one of the few international surveys that includes samples of Americans and Canadians and that poses relevant questions on the role of government versus ideals of individualism. The 2002 Pew survey contained five relevant survey questions on whether the government should be more or less active, personal responsibility vs. public responsibility for individual failures, government responsibility for the poor, and the degree of state inefficiency. The questions are displayed below, numbers 1, 2A, 2B, and 3 were replicated in the original survey (2023) mentioned above.⁷

- 1) "Turning to another subject, what's more important in (survey country) society – that everyone be free to pursue their life's goals without interference from the (state/government) OR that the (state/government) play an active role in society so as to guarantee that nobody is in need?"
- 2) "Here is a list of statements. For each one, please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with it."
 - A) "The (state/government) controls too much of our daily lives."
 - B) "It is the responsibility of the (state/government) to take care of very poor people who can't take care of themselves."
 - C) "When something is run by the (state/government), it is usually inefficient and wasteful."
- 3) "Some say that most people who don't succeed in life fail because of society's failures. Others say that most people who don't succeed so because of their own individual failures. Which comes closer to your point of view?"

⁷ When designing the original survey, the questions on the role for government used in the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey were used as models.

In this project's conjoint experiment, the policy priority treatments were intended to model general policy preferences as opposed to evaluations of specific policy ideas (such as building a highway in a particular region or changing a certain tax code). The policy attributes for the hypothetical candidates in the experiment are as follows: creating jobs, improving access to education and health care, lowering taxes, protecting the environment and fighting climate change, reducing reliance on foreign imports, and reducing immigration and refugee settlement. Many of these policy priorities correspond to specific ideological schools of thought. This allows us to determine whether policies consistent with the ideals of laissez-faire conservatism, versus policies that invoke a greater role for government, might lead voters to support a candidate. In particular, the treatment "lowering taxes" is inherently consistent with laissez-faire attitudes, while "improving access to education and health care" requires more support for government.

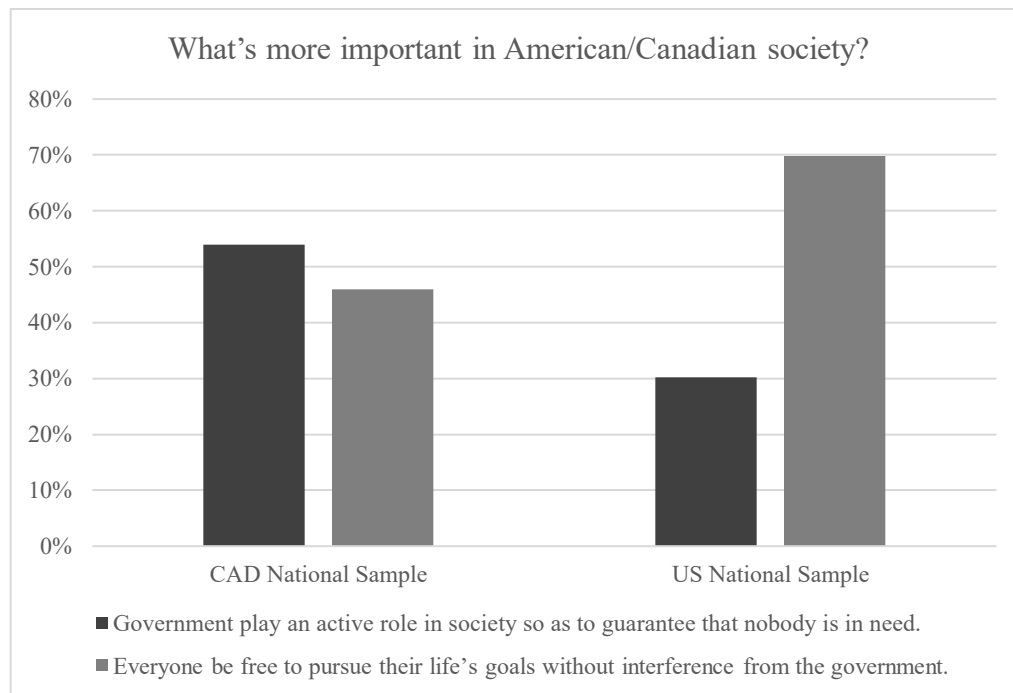
However, because some of the policy treatments have a particular ideological lean, the political party that each policy treatment could appear with was purposefully predetermined. For example, it would make little sense for respondents to encounter a candidate from the NDP, Liberals, or the Democrats who campaigned on a platform of reducing immigration and refugee settlement. Therefore, to enhance realism and external validity, the levels of the policy priority attribute that had clearly leaned to the ideological right or left were constrained to the corresponding political party on that end of the spectrum. Specifically, the 'creating jobs' and 'reducing reliance on foreign imports' treatments could go with any party (due to the fact that candidates from both left and right-wing parties might make this policy appeal); the 'lowering taxes' and 'reducing immigration and refugee settlement' treatments were constrained to match either the Republicans or the Conservatives; and the 'improving access to education and health care' and 'protecting the environment/fighting climate change' treatments were constrained to

match the Democrats, Liberals, or NDP. Given this randomization constraint, I created an interaction variable (Party_Policy) that combined each possible pairing of the two attributes.

The Contemporary Empirical Comparison

This section leverages the original survey (2023) to investigate the level of deference to government authority versus individualism between Canadians and Americans. The first question presents respondents with a binary choice: do they believe that it is more important that individuals are free to pursue their own goals without government interference or that the government acts to ensure every member of society is without need. This question directly captures the trade-off between individualism and an active government involved in the betterment of society.⁸

Figure 1: Active Government in Society or Individuals Free of Interference?

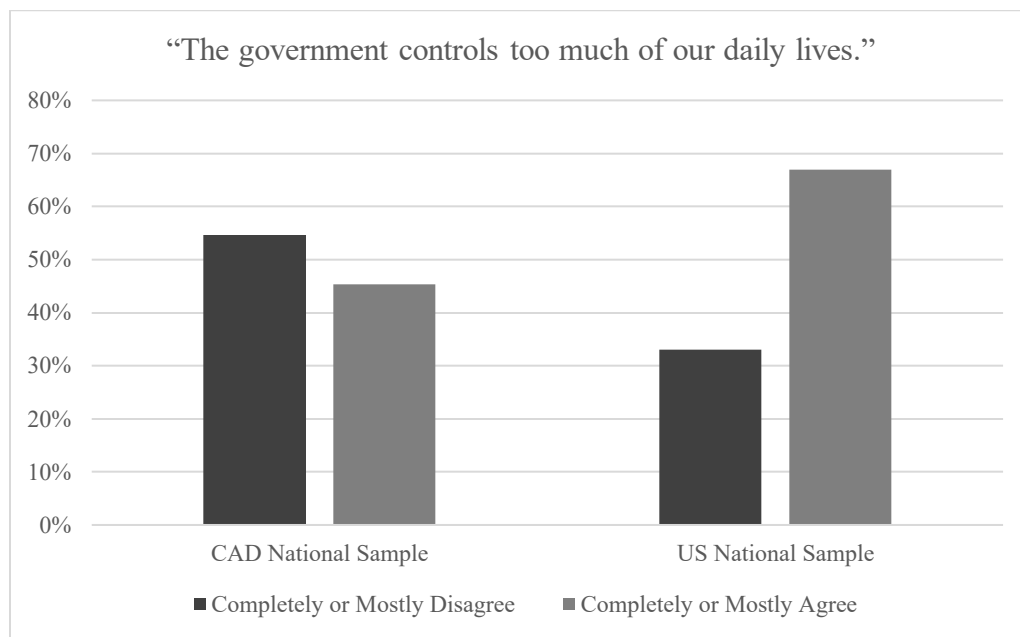


Source: Original survey data (2023). Nationally representative samples from the United States ($N = 2,025$) and Canada ($N = 2,010$). Y-axis is percentage of the respective sample. X-axis indicates which sample. Colour indicates answer given to question.

⁸ One drawback to this question is that it forces respondents to choose one option or the other and does not allow respondents to select a middle option or options that lean to either answer by various intensities. Accordingly, this paper utilizes multiple questions to fully capture the variance of attitudes between Canadians and Americans.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the national samples of Canadians and Americans on this question. Over 53 percent of the national sample of Canadians agreed that it is more important for government to ensure nobody is in need, while only 30 percent of Americans did the same. A much higher percentage of Americans (69.83%) believe that individuals are better left to their own devices relative to the Canadian sample (46.02%).

Figure 2: Anti-Government Control

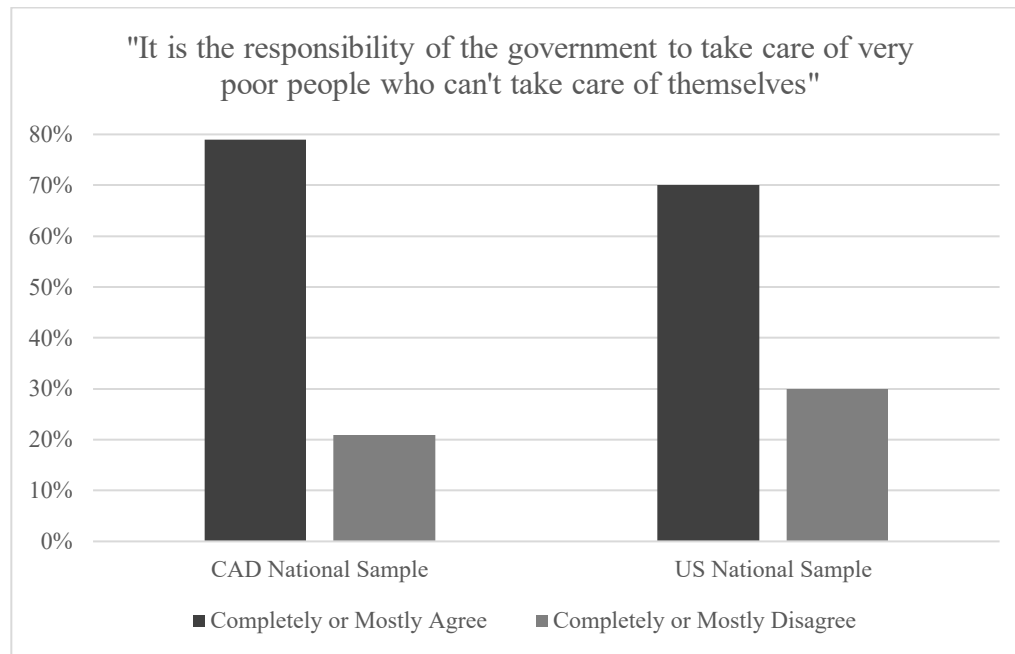


Source: Original survey data (2023). Nationally representative samples from the United States (N = 2,025) and Canada (N = 2,010). Y-axis is percentage of the respective sample. X-axis indicates which sample. Colour indicates answer given to question.

Figure 2 shows the answers provided to the third survey question, which measures whether respondents believe the government controls too much of daily life. This question provides respondents with an intensity scale for how much they agree or disagree with the prompt. Among the sample of Canadians, a majority of respondents completely or mostly disagreed with the prompt on government control (54.68%), whereas a much lower percentage of the national sample of Americans did the same (33.07%). This is despite the fact that government interventions and

the social safety net are arguably more extensive in Canada, suggesting that, despite an already more limited government, anti-government sentiments are more prevalent among Americans.

Figure 3: Government Responsibility for the Poor



Source: Original survey data (2023). Nationally representative samples from the United States (N = 2,025) and Canada (N = 2,010). Y-axis is percentage of the respective sample. X-axis indicates which sample. Colour indicates answer given to question.

Figure 3 displays the distribution of the survey samples on the fourth measure of laissez-faire attitudes. This question assesses the degree of support an individual has for the notion that government is responsible for taking care of very poor people who cannot take care of themselves. Only the more extreme adherents to laissez-faire conservatism will likely disagree with this prompt. This question again offers respondents more than two choices and allows them to select whether they completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the prompt on government responsibility.

Figure 3 shows that most people, regardless of whether they are American or Canadian, agree to some extent that government should be responsible for very poor people who cannot take care of themselves. Yet, cross-border differences are still evident. Just under 80 percent of

respondents from the national sample of Canadians completely or mostly agree with the government responsibility prompt, compared to the national sample of Americans where roughly 70 percent of respondents agreed.

Table 1: Difference-in-Means	US National Mean (SE)	CAD National Mean (SE)	Difference (p-value)
LFA Index	0.5869 (.005)	0.4816 (.006)	0.1053 (p<.0001)
LFA Index Republican vs. Conservative	0.7366 (.008)	0.6426 (.009)	0.0940 (p<.0001)
LFA Index Democrat vs. Liberal	0.4732 (.008)	0.4324 (.009)	0.0408 (p=.0014)
LFA Index Democrat vs. NDP	0.4732 (.008)	0.3328 (.013)	0.1404 (p<.0001)

Source: Original Survey Data (2023). Each variable has been recoded between 0-1 to improve comparability. Means are calculated and rounded to four decimal points. Standard errors are reported in brackets. Sample sizes: Total CAD National Sample (N = 2,003), Total U.S. National Sample (N = 2,018), Canadian Conservatives (N = 450), Canadian Liberals (N = 562), Canadian NDP (N = 345), U.S. Republicans (N = 579), U.S. Democrats (N = 805).

Above, I conduct a more formal comparison of these attitudes utilizing difference-in-means analysis. I directly compare the overall samples, and subsets of the samples based on partisanship, on the overall index measure of laissez-faire attitudes (LFA Index). As stated above, this index additively combines the four separate measures of attitudes on individualism versus support for government interventions. I then rescaled this measure to be theoretically bound between 0-1, where 0 represents the lowest possible support for laissez-faire attitudes (highest support for government) and 1 represents the most possible support for laissez-faire attitudes (lowest possible support for government). This index measure allows for a broader consideration of how Canadians and Americans compare, utilizing all the information gathered in each question.

Table 1 shows that the average level of support for laissez-faire attitudes among Americans is considerably higher than for Canadians. This difference-in-means is statistically significant and equals over .10 on the 0-1 scale. Table 1 also shows how the average level of support for laissez-faire attitudes compares across different partisan groups in Canada and the United States.

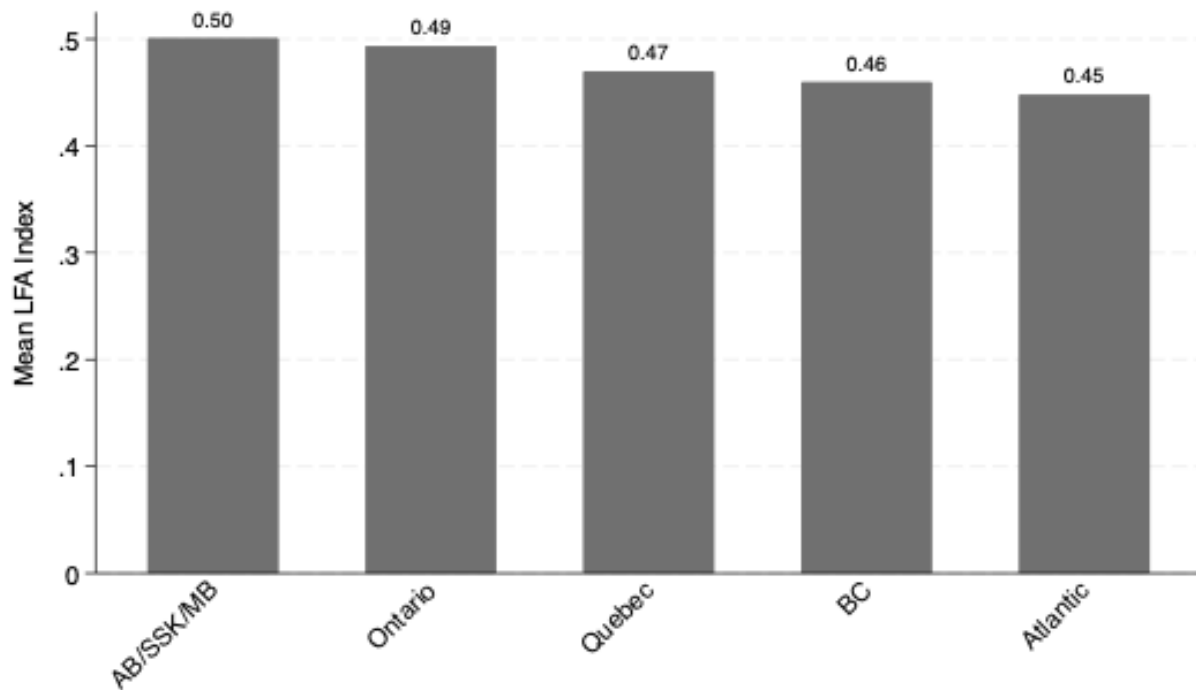
Unsurprisingly, partisans of right-wing parties, on average, express the highest level of support for laissez-faire attitudes while those who support left-wing parties express much lower average levels of support. However, Table 1 demonstrates that across each partisan pairing those from Canada average much lower levels of support for laissez-faire ideals. Between American Republicans and Canadian Conservatives, Republicans are much more supportive of laissez-faire ideals than Conservatives (difference = .094). Between supporters of the Democrats in the U.S. and supporters of the Liberals in Canada, Democrats are modestly more supportive of laissez-faire ideals than Liberals (difference = .0408), but Democrats are much more supportive on average than partisans of the NDP in Canada (difference = .1404).

These results on partisan subsets help to contextualize the magnitude of differences between Canadians and Americans. There has been extensive research on the ideological polarization of the American public, and this is evident in the wide gap between Democrats and Republicans on the LFA Index. The average score on the LFA Index for Republicans equals .7366, while the average score on the LFA Index for Democrats equals .4732 (difference = .2634). Accordingly, the magnitude of the difference between average for Americans and Canadians (.1053) is roughly equivalent to 39 percent of the difference on the LFA Index between the average Republican and Democrat. Given the extent of ideological polarization among the American public, these attitudinal gaps between Canadians and Americans are substantively meaningful.

How do attitudes toward government vary across Canadian regions? Figure 4 reports the means of the LFA Index measure in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, the prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba), and the Atlantic provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and PEI). While the magnitude of the differences is not large, there is a contrast between parts of the country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, support for the principles of

individualism is highest in the prairie provinces. Deference to government authority, as measured with the LFA index, is highest in the Atlantic provinces, followed by BC and Quebec.

Figure 4: LFA Index Mean by Canadian Region



Source: Original Survey Data (2023). Mean LFA Index (bound between 0 and 1) by Canadian region. Atlantic = NS + NB + NFL + PEI.

Going Back Further

The previous analysis is based on data that was collected in January 2023. But how do attitudes on government action versus individualism compare between Canadians and Americans at other points in time? Cochrane (2013) shows that from 1990 to 2006, Canadians became less supportive of the private market, more in favour of income redistribution, and less supportive of the notion that people should look after themselves. Data from 2020-2021, as well as 2002, confirm the contrast between the populations: Canadians are consistently more deferential to government than Americans in each data source examined here.

<u>Table 2: Difference-in-Means 2020-21 Data</u>	American Mean (SE)	Canadian Mean (SE)	American- Canadian Difference (P-value)
Variable			
Government Involvement in Living Standards or Self-Reliance	0.5950 (.0044)	0.5731 (.0065)	0.0219 (<i>p</i> = .0026)
Government Wastes Tax Dollars	0.8864 (.0027)	0.8219 (.0058)	0.0645 (<i>p</i> < .0001)
	(<i>n</i> = 7,314)	(<i>n</i> = 1,193)	

Source: American Data from the 2020 ANES, Canadian data from Wave 49 of the MEO Survey. Note: Cell entries are 0-1 means rounded to four decimal places. Each variable has been recoded such that higher scores are attitudes more consistent with laissez-faire conservatism. Standard errors or p-values in parentheses.

Table 2 reports the differences between American and Canadian samples from the 2020 ANES and one of the waves of the MEO's COVID-19 survey, which was fielded in 2021. Table 2 shows that on both survey questions pertaining to laissez-faire attitudes, American respondents scored higher on average than Canadian respondents, and that each of these differences were statistically significant.

Next, this paper moves to the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Below, I conduct a difference-in-means analysis that utilizes the questions on the role for government from the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey among Americans and Canadians. The results of this analysis again confirm the same finding as the previous section: on average, Americans are more supportive of laissez-faire principles than Canadians. The results displayed below in Table 3 are based on the laissez-faire questions from the 2002 Pew data and show a markedly similar result to Table 2. On four of the five questions in Table 2, and the additive index combining all five of the questions, American respondents exhibited stronger laissez-faire attitudes than their Canadian counterparts. On the LFA index, which is comprised of each of these questions, the difference between American and Canadian respondents was .0420. This difference was statistically significant.

<u>Table 3: Difference-in Means</u> <u>2002 Pew Data</u>	American Mean (SE)	Canadian Mean (SE)	American - Canadian Difference (P-value)
Variable			
LFA Index (2002)	0.7326 (.0034)	0.6906 (.0058)	0.0420 ($p < .0001$)
Freedom from Government Interference or Active State Role	0.8146 (.0069)	0.7276 (.0116)	0.0870 ($p < .0001$)
Personal Failures are the Fault of Society or the Individual	0.9345 (.0048)	0.9031 (.0094)	0.0314 ($p = .0002$)
State Controls too Much of Daily Lives	0.7011 (.0059)	0.6752 (.0109)	0.0259 ($p = 0.0327$)
State has Responsibility for Very Poor People Who Cannot Care for Themselves	0.5017 (.0056)	0.4312 (.0084)	0.0705 ($p < .0001$)
Something Run by the State is Usually Inefficient and Wasteful	0.6987 (.0055)	0.6998 (.0101)	-0.0011 ($p = 0.9236$)
	(n = 1257)	(n = 430)	

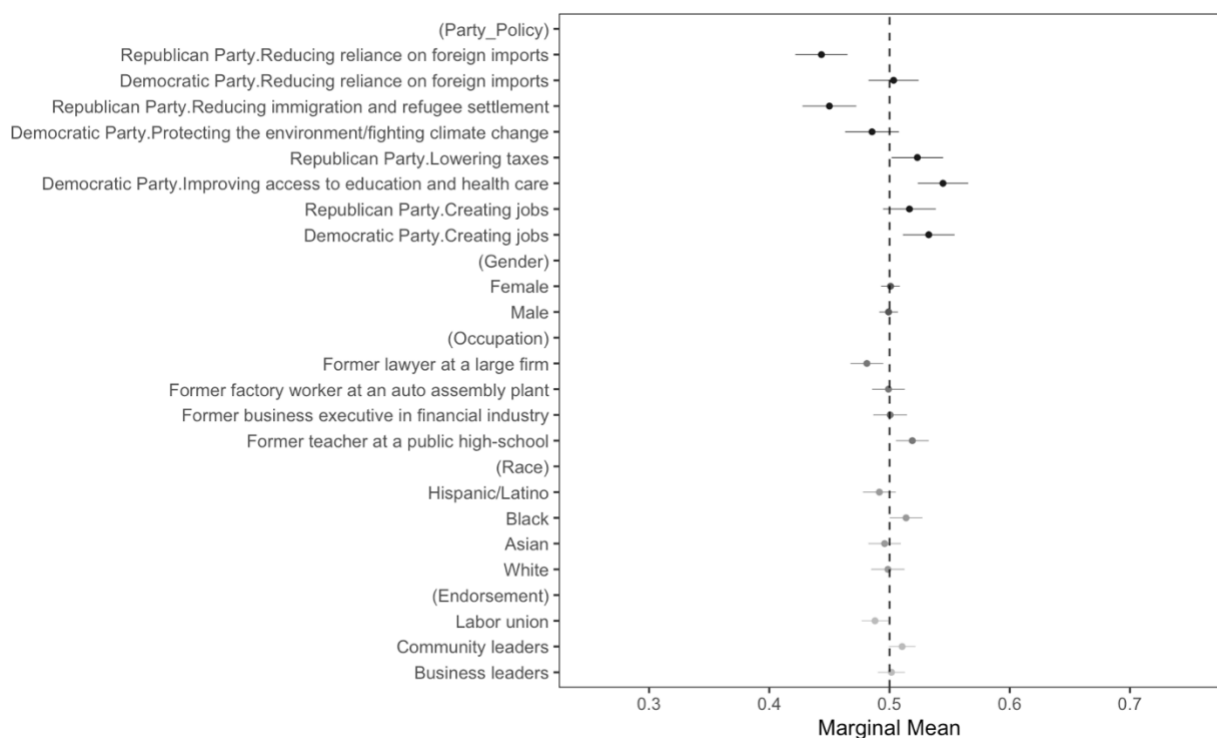
Source: Data from the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Note: Cell entries are 0-1 means rounded to four decimal places. Each variable has been recoded such that higher scores are attitudes more consistent with laissez-faire attitudes. Standard errors or p-values in parentheses.

Candidate Preferences

This section of the paper compares political candidate preferences along different policy dimensions for Canadians and Americans. Leveraging the project's candidate-choice conjoint experiment, I investigate the extent to which policies that invoke a larger or smaller role for government generate differential levels of support for candidates between Americans and Canadians. The conjoint experiment asks respondents to choose between two hypothetical candidates, while randomly varying different characteristics of each candidate including their party, main policy priority, gender, previous occupation, race, and group endorsement. The policy priority treatments that most explicitly call for larger or smaller government are “lowering taxes” and “improving access to education and health care.” As stated previously, the experiment constrained the possible pairs of a candidate's policy priority and their party to enhance experimental realism. Accordingly, I created an interaction variable (Party_Policy) that combines each possible pair of a candidate's party and policy priority.

Figure 5 plots the marginal means, with confidence intervals, of each treatment in the conjoint experiment for the sample of American respondents.⁹ Marginal means provide the average predicted probability of choosing a candidate with the presence of a specific attribute, while averaging across all other attribute levels in the conjoint. Unlike Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), marginal means do not select a baseline value to compare treatment effects and are optimal for comparisons across different groups (Bansak et al. 2021).

Figure 5: American Candidate Preferences



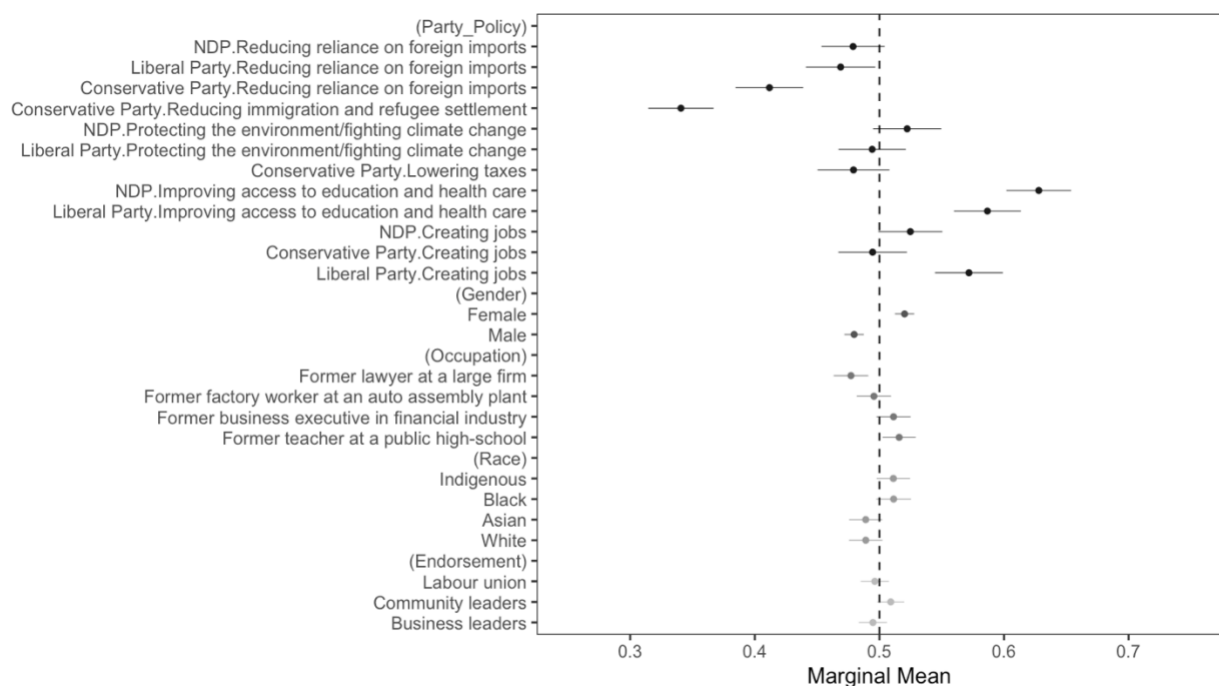
Marginal means of all candidate attributes in the conjoint experiment. Outcome is a binary forced choice variable of which candidate you would vote for. Lines represent confidence intervals. Respondents are nationally representative sample of Americans.

Among Americans, Figure 5 shows that much of the variance in the evaluation of candidates comes from the combination of a candidate's party and policy. There are large differences in the likelihood of candidate selection depending on the policy priority treatment.

⁹ Table A2 in the appendix also displays the full marginal means estimates among the American sample. Table A1 displays the full marginal means estimates of the Canadian sample.

Republican candidates who advocate for reducing reliance on foreign imports or reducing immigration and refugee settlement perform poorly. Candidates from either the Democrats or Republicans who prioritize creating jobs perform better than average. Most notably for the purposes of this paper, the combinations invoking a larger or smaller role for government both generate higher than average levels of support among Americans. The estimated marginal mean for Republican candidates who advocate for lower taxes is .523, and the estimated marginal mean for Democratic candidates who advocate for improving access to education and health care is .544. While the differences between these two estimates are slim, it is surprising that the policy invoking a larger role for government is more popular among the American sample. However, these results look much different than what we see among Canadian respondents.

Figure 6: Canadian Candidate Preferences



Marginal means of all candidate attributes in the conjoint experiment. Outcome is a binary forced choice variable of which candidate you would vote for. Lines represent confidence intervals. Respondents are nationally representative sample of Canadians.

Figure 6 plots the estimated marginal means of each treatment in the conjoint experiment among Canadian respondents. Similar to the American results, much of the variance in candidate

evaluations is driven by the party and policy treatments. The policy treatment reducing reliance on foreign imports, as well as the treatment reducing immigration and refugee settlement, generate markedly low levels of support among Canadians. The creating jobs policy treatment generates above average levels of support, especially when paired with candidates from the Liberal Party (marginal mean = .572). But far and above the most popular policy treatment for Canadian respondents is “improving access to education and health care”. This broadly pro-government intervention policy when paired with the Liberal Party generates a marginal mean of .586, and when paired with the NDP generates a marginal mean of .628. By contrast, the combination of candidates from the Conservative Party who advocate for lower taxes generates a marginal mean of .479.

Comparing the results of the experiment show considerable differences in preferences for candidates between Americans and Canadians along the dimensions of more or less government action. The treatment “lowering taxes” paired with a right-wing party is more popular for American respondents. The marginal mean of “Republican Party + Lowering taxes” equates to .523 for Americans, while the marginal mean of “Conservative Party + Lowering taxes” equates to .479 for Canadians. A difference of almost 4.5 percentage points. By contrast, the treatment “improving access to education and health care” is much more popular for Canadian respondents. The marginal mean of “Democratic Party + Improving Access to Education and Health Care” equates to .544 for American respondents. The marginal mean of this treatment paired with the Liberal Party equates to .586 (a difference of 4.2 percentage points relative to the American results), and this treatment paired with the NDP equates to .628 (a difference of 8.4 percentage points relative to the American results). In short, evidence from the conjoint experiment suggests that candidates who advocate for policies consistent with less government intervention, such as lowering taxes, are

more likely to be supported by Americans, while candidates who advocate for policies consistent with more government intervention, such as greater access to education and health care, are more likely to be supported by Canadians.

Effects on Vote Choice

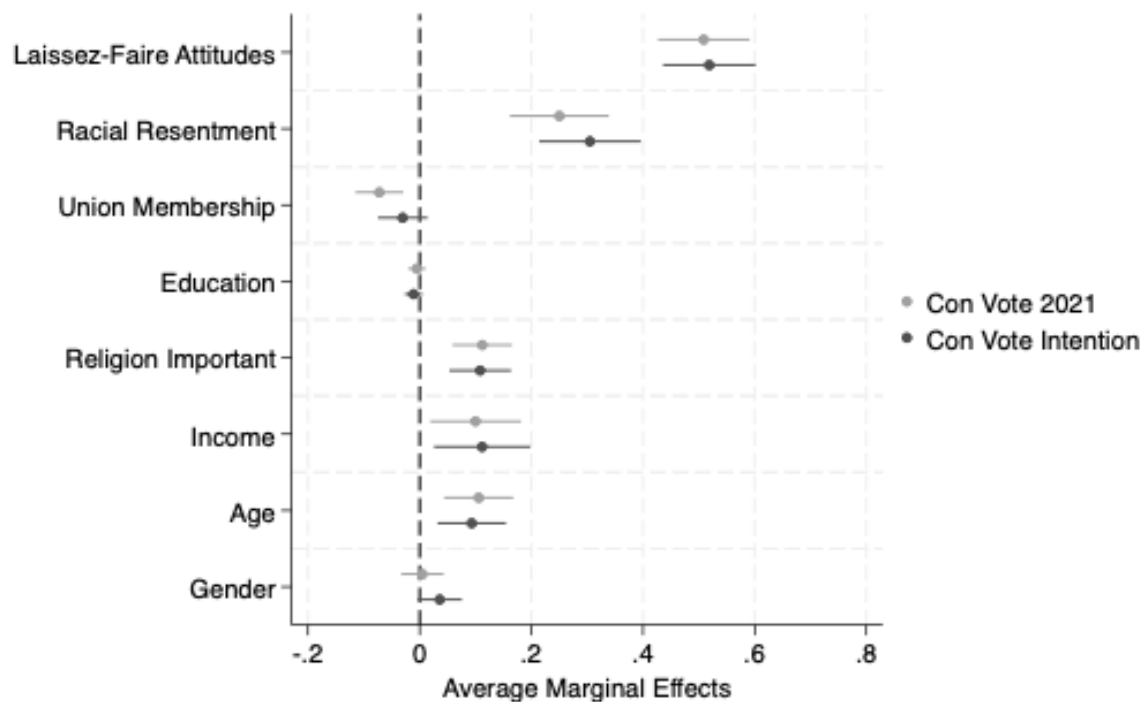
This paper now moves to comparing the electoral effect of attitudes toward the role of government between Canadians and Americans. Utilizing multiple regression analysis, I test the effect of the LFA Index on past vote choice and vote intention among the samples of Canadians and Americans. The LFA Index, as described above, combines each of the four questions on attitudes toward the role of government from the surveys and is scaled such that 1 is the highest level of support for laissez-faire principles and 0 is the lowest. To limit concerns of omitted variable bias, each regression model controls for racial resentment, union membership, education, religiosity, income, age, and gender. Racial resentment is measured using the classic American scale, which has been shown to be a relevant attitudinal construct for Canadians (Krashinsky 2025). The forthcoming analysis shows how a desire for more limited government intervention is strongly correlated with right-wing party voting in both Canada and the United States, but that the effect is consistently stronger among Americans.

Figure 7 begins with the regression models for the Canadian sample. I estimate a multinomial logit model for vote choice in the 2021 Canadian Federal Election, as well as a multinomial logit model for future vote intention. Figure 7 displays the derived average marginal effects from both models for voting Conservative in 2021 and intending to vote Conservative in the next federal election.¹⁰ Figure 7 shows that the LFA Index has a strong and statistically

¹⁰ The base category in both models is vote choice for the Liberals in 2021, and intending to vote Liberal in the future.

significant effect on the likelihood of voting Conservative in 2021 and intending to vote Conservative in the next federal election. A one-unit increase on the LFA Index translates to Canadian respondents being over 50 percent more likely to have voted Conservative in 2021, and over 51 percent more likely to intend to vote Conservative in the next election. Desiring limited government interventions and more individual freedoms has a stronger effect on Conservative vote and Conservative vote intention than all other variables in the regression models, including racial resentment, religiosity, income, and age.

Figure 7: Laissez-Faire Attitudes and Canadian Voting

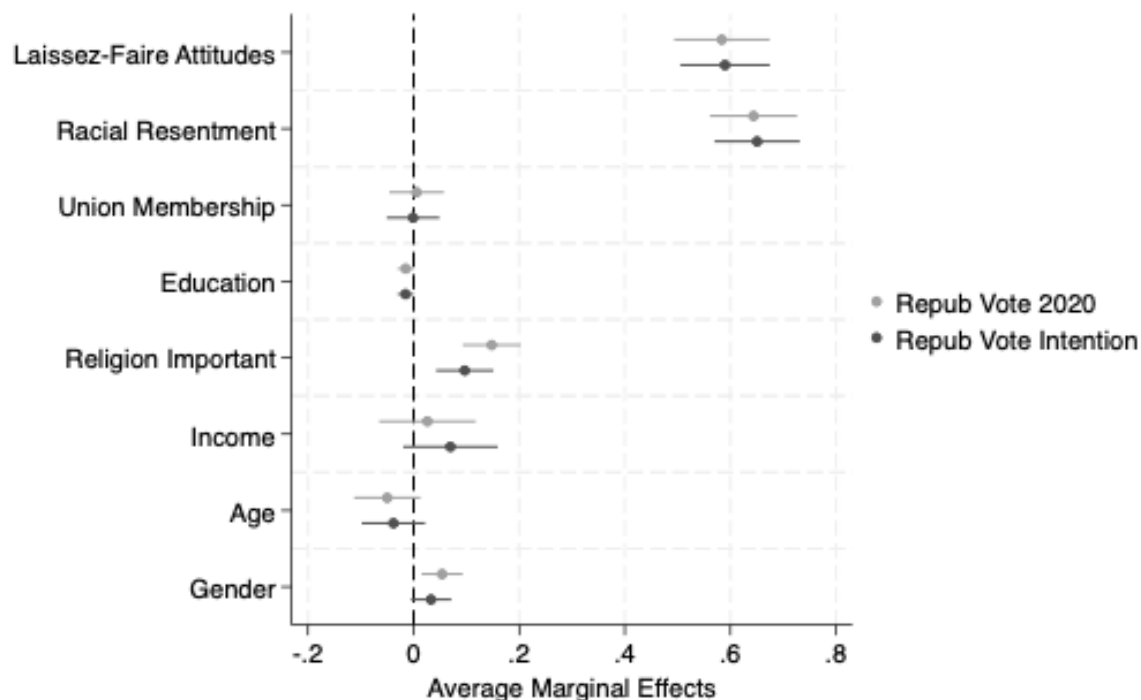


Source: Original Survey Data (2023). Average marginal effects derived from multinomial logit models for Conservative vote choice (Liberal vote base; $N = 1,668$) and Conservative vote intention (Liberal vote base; $N = 1,639$). Effects of LFA Index on Conservative vote 2021 = .509; on Conservative vote intention = .519.

Figure 8 displays the regression models for the sample of Americans. I estimate a logit model for Republican vote choice in the 2020 Presidential Election, as well as a logit model for Republican vote intention in the future. Each model includes the same set of controls as the previous Canadian models. Figure 8 displays the average marginal effects of each variable derived

from both logit models. Similar to the Canadian results, Figure 8 illustrates that desiring limited government, as measured with the LFA Index, has a strong and statistically significant correlation with Republican vote choice and Republican vote intention. A one-unit increase on the LFA Index translates to American respondents being over 58 percent more likely to have voted Republican in the 2020 Presidential Election, and 59 percent more likely to intend to vote Republican in the future. Only racial resentment has a stronger statistical effect on the likelihood of voting Republican among Americans.

Figure 8: Laissez-Faire Attitudes and American Voting



Source: Original Survey Data (2023). Average marginal effects derived from logit models for Republican vote choice in 2020 ($N = 1,532$) and Republican vote intention ($N = 1,643$). Effects of LFA Index on Republican vote 2020 = .584; on Republican vote intention = .590.

For both Americans and Canadians, desiring less government is strongly correlated with voting for a right-wing party. However, the magnitude of the effects of the LFA Index are greater for Americans. In terms of past vote choice for a right-wing party, the effect of the LFA Index is almost 7.5 percentage points higher for Americans. For right-wing vote intention, the effect of the

LFA Index is almost 8 percent greater for Americans relative to Canadians. Accordingly, Americans are less deferential to government, more likely to prefer political candidates promising policies consistent with smaller government, and the correlation of laissez-faire attitudes with right-wing voting is stronger among Americans compared to their Canadian counterparts.

Conclusion

It has been theorized that one of the deeply rooted differences between Canadian and American political culture is the level of support for government interventions in the economy and society. Lipset (1990) argues that this attitudinal difference, emanating from the foundational break of the American Revolution, translates to greater emphasis on individual rights in the United States and greater deference to government authority in Canada. Prior to Lipset, Hartz (1955) argued that the American political tradition is fundamentally committed to Locke's notion of individual liberty. Comparing this to the Canadian context, Horowitz (1966) posits that the Canadian tradition was differentiated from their American neighbours based on the influence of British Toryism and the emphasis on community, tradition, and hierarchy instead of the primacy of individualism. But other work has pushed back in important ways. Scholars have shown that the American tradition was not monolithically liberal, and that the Canadian attachment to Toryism has grown weaker over time (Ajzenstat & Smith 1997; Bailyn 1992; Banning & Estes 2014; Farney & Rayside 2013b; Mills 2021; Wood 1969). Nevitte (1996) argued that deference to government authority in Canada and elsewhere is on the decline.

This paper revisits this topic. Do these foundational theories still hold relevance in characterizing the current political differences between Canada and the United States? This paper puts these arguments to the test, investigating the prevalence and political effects of attitudes towards the role of government comparatively between Canada and the United States. To do so, I

leverage matched survey questions from multiple cross-sectional public opinion surveys. This includes an original survey of a nationally representative sample of Canadians and Americans (2023), as well as past data from wave 49 of the MEO's COVID-19 survey (2021), the 2020 ANES, and the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Moreover, I also utilize evidence from a candidate-choice conjoint experiment, embedded in the 2023 survey, that asked Americans and Canadians to choose their preferred political candidate in response to experimental manipulations of candidate attributes, including their policy priorities.

This paper finds that at multiple points in time over the last twenty-five years, Canadians are more supportive of government than Americans. Difference-in-means analysis shows that this holds true with matched survey questions from 2023, 2020-21, and 2002. In each of these periods, Americans consistently score higher on the LFA Index than Canadians, and these differences are substantively meaningful. For example, in 2023, the magnitude of the difference between the average score on the LFA Index for Americans and Canadians (.1053) is equivalent to almost 40 percent of the difference on the LFA Index between the average Republican and Democrat in the United States. On each matched survey question from these years, a greater percentage of Americans are inclined to take the anti-government and pro-individualist position relative to Canadians.

Data from 2023 shows that Canadians are much more inclined to prioritize governmental support for those in need relative to Americans. Almost 70 percent of Americans believe that it is more important for individuals to be free of government to pursue their own goals, as opposed to government working to guarantee nobody is in need, relative to 46 percent of Canadians. Many more Americans (67%) believe that government controls too much of daily life compared to

Canadians (45%). And more Canadians (79%) believe that it is the responsibility of government to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves than Americans (70%).

These core attitudinal differences also translate to the electoral arena. Evidence from this project's conjoint experiment shows that Americans are more likely to prefer political candidates from right-wing parties who prioritize policy positions consistent with limited government. By contrast, Canadians are much more likely to support left-wing candidates who prioritize policy positions that are consistent with an expanded role for government in areas like education and health care. Regression analysis shows that laissez-faire attitudes have a strong correlation with right-wing electoral support. The more respondents are inclined to the principles of individualism over an active role for government, the more likely they are to have voted for and intend to vote for right-wing parties. But the magnitude of these effects is greater for Americans. The LFA Index has a stronger correlation with Republican vote and Republican vote intention for Americans relative to Conservative vote and Conservative vote intention for Canadians.

Despite their flaws, the foundational theories of comparative political culture in North America are still applicable to the contemporary moment. Americans are not universally individualists. But on average, Americans remain more inclined to laissez-faire ideals relative to their Canadian counterparts who are more supportive of public programs and who remain more deferential to government authority and the role of government in the economy and society.

Competing Interests Declaration

The author declares no competing interests. There are no conflicts of interest which could influence the interpretation of the findings in this research article.

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