Historical Injustices and Beliefs in Systemic Racism

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How do revelations of historical injustices affect dominant group members' beliefs in systemic racism against an outgroup? This article investigates changes in public opinion after hundreds of suspected unmarked graves were unexpectedly identified at former state-funded "residential schools" for Indigenous children in Canada in 2021. I find that intense media attention to this historical injustice strengthened beliefs in systemic racism among non-Indigenous Canadians surveyed just after versus just before the news first broke. Yet attitudes returned to baseline shortly afterwards. An analysis of media coverage during this period shows that the reversion coincided with a shift in framing away from descriptions of the injustice and towards discussions of possible solutions. While dominant group members were deeply affected by the initial accounts of past wrongdoing, subsequent debates over how to respond discouraged them from acknowledging the existence of a problem in the first place.

INTRODUCTION

As a way to justify their privileged position in society, dominant groups often construct myths about themselves that ignore or minimize injustices that were committed in the past against other groups. Educational curricula underemphasize these uncomfortable histories and everyday forms of commemoration overlook them entirely (Billig 1995; Zimmerman 2005). As a result, dominant group members tend to be less knowledgeable about historical injustices than members of groups that were directly affected by them (Bonam et al. 2019; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013). This selective memory can in turn shape beliefs about the victims of past transgressions and the barriers to realizing equity (Hirschberger et al. 2022; Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen 2004).

In this article, I investigate whether exposure to information about a dark history of intergroup relations can influence dominant group members' beliefs in systemic racism toward an outgroup. Experimental evidence suggest that this kind of information can shift attitudes toward an outgroup by triggering emotional responses like empathy or guilt (Doosje et al. 1998; Neufeld et al. 2022) and affecting beliefs about the causes of contemporary inequality (Fang and White 2022). However, skeptics point to how socialization processes and material incentives discourage dominant group members from acknowledging their privilege, even when confronted with injustices (Hayward 2017; Mills 2007; Phillips and Lowery 2015). Importantly, the existing literature relies almost exclusively on tightly-controlled experiments rather than real world cases of exposure to new historical information.

Reconciling the conflicting accounts, I argue that the framing of historical injustices matters. When dominant group members are presented with descriptive information that details the nature of a historical injustice and its legacies for contemporary inequalities, they are more likely to endorse the existence of systemic racism. But when information about that injustice is more solution-oriented, focusing on potential remedies and responsible actors, willingness to acknowledge this type of discrimination wanes due to concerns over intergroup

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redistribution and status threat. Most existing research on this topic has not considered how such differences in framing might affect responsiveness to information about historical wrongdoing. This is an important oversight because there is a tendency, at least in media coverage, to move quickly from descriptive to solution-oriented frames over time (e.g. Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigall-Brown 2007), providing one explanation for why changing beliefs about racism may be difficult over the long-term.

I develop my theoretical argument in the context of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.[1] This is a useful case for studying the real world effects of historical information because, for generations, non-Indigenous people have been poorly informed about their country's historical mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples (Boese, Neufeld, and Starzyk 2017; Schaefli et al. 2018). Yet over the course of six weeks in 2021, hundreds of suspected unmarked graves were unexpectedly identified at several former state-run "residential schools" for Indigenous children. These shocking revelations resulted in a massive increase in media and popular attention to the unjust history between these two groups.

Triangulating among several pieces of empirical evidence, this article examines how non-Indigenous people's beliefs about the existence of anti-Indigenous systemic racism changed in the aftermath of these events. I first analyze responses to a nationally-representative survey in which the initial announcement about unmarked graves unexpectedly occurred mid-way through the survey's field dates. Second, I use repeated cross-sectional surveys to assess the persistence of short-run attitudinal changes. Third, I analyze over-time changes in media coverage to characterize the nature of the informational frames people were receiving between survey waves.

This analysis produces several findings. First, the sudden surge in media attention to a gross historical injustice caused a significant increase in beliefs about the existence of

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1. Throughout this text, I use the term Indigenous to refer to the original inhabitants of the land that is now called Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. I use the term non-Indigenous to refer to those peoples that do not self-identify as members of any of these three groups, including settlers (the European-descended sociopolitical majority), non-Black people of colour (POC), and Black people (see Vowel 2016, Ch. 2). In the empirical analysis that follows, I focus mostly on attitudes among non-Indigenous people as a whole, so I use this terminology throughout the text.

systemic racism among members of the dominant group. However, this attitudinal change was short-lived: despite additional announcements of unmarked graves in the weeks that followed, beliefs returned to baseline levels — and even slightly worsened — just four months after the initial news broke. This reversion in attitudes coincided with a shift in media coverage away from discussions of the relevant historical injustices themselves toward debates over proposed remedies. Although this is a natural progression for most political issues, the change in framing correlates with a decrease in the public's willingness to acknowledge systemic racism. While many Canadians could sympathize with the horrifying accounts that characterized the initial news stories, subsequent debates over how to respond triggered feelings of complacency and threat, discouraging them from recognizing the existence of a problem.

To rule out explanations based on issue salience and social desirability bias, I analyze survey responses around a national day of remembrance. I find that respondents' beliefs in systemic racism are not responsive to priming the historical injustice at a time when solutions-oriented frames are more common than descriptive accounts. Finally, I show that the average patterns in public opinion about systemic racism in Canada are not masking heterogeneous responses among particular subpopulations. While this homogeneity may be context-specific, it suggests that dominant group members can react "in parallel" to the revelations of past wrongdoing (Coppock 2023).

This study makes several contributions. First, it advances our understanding of the role of information in shaping attitudes toward an outgroup (Paluck and Green 2009; Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin 2019; Williamson 2020). Most research on this relationship has focused on interventions that do not capture how learning happens outside of the experimental setting, where changing narratives and competing demands on attention are more prevalent. By contrast, I characterize the nature of real world media coverage on an issue of systemic racism and then estimate its attitudinal effects, paying close attention to over time changes in the informational environment. My findings thus echo recent calls in the media and politics

literature to rethink "forced exposure" designs that do not consider how respondents might encounter persuasive information in their everyday lives (Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019; Egami et al. 2023). Second, I add to an established body of work on the determinants of individual-level racism and attitudes toward racism. Beliefs in the existence of systemic racism and views of an outgroup have generally been treated as stable attitudes associated with early childhood socialization (Katz 1976; Kinder, Sanders, and Sanders 1996; Sears and Funk 1999; Tesler 2015), personality traits (Parker and Towler 2019; Sidanius and Pratto 1999) and long-run historical factors (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018). By contrast, this study shows that in certain circumstances, these beliefs can change quickly in response to new information (Engelhardt 2023). Finally, this study adds to a nascent literature on the how historical awareness shapes intergroup attitudes (Bonam et al. 2019; Haas and Lindstam, n.d.; Fang and White 2022; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013). Echoing prior research, I show that information about an uncomfortable history can improve attitudes toward a victimized group. However, much of the existing work in this area only investigates short-term changes from light touch and tightly controlled interventions. I show that the positive effects of historical context can be short-lived, at least when the primary channel of learning is through the episodic nature of mass media coverage.

Before proceeding, as a non-Indigenous academic, it is important to acknowledge my position in this research (Kovach 2021). I do not represent or speak for Indigenous Peoples; I merely bring an expertise in the study of public opinion and intergroup relations. My goal is for this article to advance justice by shedding light on the barriers to and opportunities for better educating non-Indigenous people about the history of colonialism and contemporary inequalities.

HISTORICAL INJUSTICES AND OUTGROUP ATTITUDES

This study is concerned with how dominant groups − those that hold a disproportionate share of societal resources, privileges, and power − react to learning about historical injus-

tices committed by their group against other groups in the past. Dominant groups offer an informative case study for reactions to past injustices because their members are often deeply uninformed about their groups' troubled histories (Bonam et al. 2019; Kraus et al. 2019; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013). Partly this is a result of media and educational systems that discourage dominant group members from considering whether their advantages are due to an unfair treatment of others. It is also likely driven by a selective avoidance of information that portrays one's own group in a negative light (Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall 2010; Takahashi 2021; Zillmann 2000).

My focus is specifically on how historical information affects beliefs in the existence of *systemic racism*. This concept, sometimes used interchangeably with structural racism, refers to mutually reinforcing laws, policies and practices that produce unequal outcomes across groups (Souissi 2022). The group being discriminated against may face barriers to accessing resources like education, employment or public services, or be denied fair treatment under the law. While focusing on belief in systemic racism excludes other important intergroup attitudes, like prejudice, it is particularly informative when examining reactions to historical injustices, which are often the antecedents to contemporary intergroup inequalities.

A nascent literature in social psychology posits that a lack of knowledge about historical discrimination among dominant group members helps explain their inability to recognize contemporary racism (Bonam et al. 2019; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013; Strickhouser, Zell, and Harris 2019). Much of the evidence for this hypothesis is correlational, but several studies have demonstrated that correcting the gap in historical awareness can improve attitudes towards an outgroup through emotional and learning mechanisms. Informational interventions describing the nature of past wrongdoings can trigger feelings of empathy or guilt, with positive downstream effects on attitudes (e.g. Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen 2004; Neufeld et al. 2022; Quinn 2021). Other research has shown that learning the historical context may increase individuals' beliefs in the systemic − as opposed to cultural or personal − causes of contemporary intergroup inequality (Fang and White 2022).

Yet there are reasons to be skeptical about the efficacy of historical information. Normative theorists have pointed to the problem of "white ignorance" (Mills 2007), in which many whites are not only unaware of past injustices and contemporary racism, but actively resist acknowledging oppression when presented with evidence (see also Knowles et al. 2014). Dominant groups members' internalized beliefs and assumptions, combined with a psychological investment in maintaining a positive self-image, can make it difficult for them to update their beliefs about the marginalization of an outgroup (Hayward 2017). Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018), for example, find that correcting misperceptions about a historical injustice in Israel results in more accurate factual knowledge, but does little to move actual attitudes toward the outgroup.

Motivated reasoning theory suggests one mechanism by which information may not necessarily change attitudes (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). Because of their socialization into an ingroup identity, individuals may unconsciously discount signals about systemic racism against an outgroup as a way to protect their group-based self-esteem (Cole 2018). Feldman and Huddy (2018) find that exactly this type of racially motivated reasoning correlates negatively with factual knowledge about historical discrimination. Other research has documented the types of counter-arguments that dominant groups employ to mitigate feelings of threat. Phillips and Lowery (2015) finds that when presented with evidence of their racial privilege, white Americans claim to have faced more personal hardships in their life. Kendall (2022) shows that when given the opportunity, Britons exposed to negative information about their country's colonial history often engage in historical 'whataboutism' by making deflective comparisons to another country's past wrongdoing.

Long-term attitudinal change

While information about historical injustices may or may not shift attitudes toward systemic racism in the short-term, there are also open questions about whether any attitudinal changes will persist over time. The general view in the public opinion literature is that the persuasive

effects of new information tend to be ephemeral. Most political advertisements have effects on candidate choice that disappear within just a week or two (e.g. Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013). Coppock, Ekins, and Kirby (2018) find that reading a single newspaper opinion piece produces large short-run changes in policy attitudes, but effects decline by approximately 50% after ten days. Studies on American service personnel deaths in the Iraq War find that these events reduced support for the war in the soldier's home area, but only in the first few weeks after the news breaks (Althaus, Bramlett, and Gimpel 2012; Hayes and Myers 2009). Beyond these general results, opinions toward an outgroup may also be uniquely difficult to change over the long-term. There is evidence that outgroup attitudes are formed early in life (Katz 1976; Sears and Funk 1999), which may make them especially resistant to durable updating in adulthood.

None of this is to say that attitudinal changes must be short-lived. Baden and Lecheler (2012) argue that information can affect public opinion more or less persistently depending on whether individuals are exposed to genuinely new information versus primed about their pre-existing beliefs about an issue. Coppock (2023) finds evidence to support these claims, namely that treatments which merely tap into pre-existing considerations tend to have fleeting effects on attitudes, while those that introduce new information tend to see more long-lasting change. This result is important because, for most dominant group members, information about historical injustices is typically novel.

Framing injustice

Chong and Druckman (2010) offer another explanation for why the effects of persuasive information may not persist: when individuals receive competing messages about an issue over the course of several days or weeks, they tend to give greater weight to the more recent information. So while a lack of persistence may have to do with how much new knowledge individuals have gained about an issue, it may also be caused by subsequent changes in the information presented to them.

Framing analysis offers one way to conceptualize the different types of information that people may receive about an issue over time. Framing involves selecting certain aspects of a problem and making them more or less salient to an audience in order to advance a particular issue definition, solution, causal interpretation, or moral evaluation (Entman 1993). While there are debates about the psychological mechanisms behind framing effects (Iyengar 1991; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997), a central claim of this literature is that framing, by emphasizing some features and not others, can change public opinion on an issue (Druckman 2001; Jacoby 2000; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). By extension, changes in the framing of an issue over time could cause individuals to update their beliefs.

In the context of historical injustices, two contrasting frames are particularly important: descriptive versus solutions-oriented frames. This dichotomy builds on a categorization of issue frames developed in sociology (Benford and Snow 2000) that, while originally applied to the study of social movements, can also help conceptualize representations of intergroup conflict (King 2017). *Descriptive* frames identify a problem or case of wrongdoing, explaining what injustice was done to whom and why. *Solutions-oriented* frames articulate a solution to the problem, assign responsibility for that solution to a particular actor, or motivate the audience to support a solution through a call to action.

There are good reasons to expect that these two frames will have different impacts on attitudes toward systemic discrimination. Much of the research cited earlier on the positive effects of historical information on outgroup attitudes is implicitly thinking of descriptive information (Bonam et al. 2019; Fang and White 2022). That is, when the dominant group is made to know more about injustices perpetrated against an outgroup, they are more likely to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism, either through an emotional reaction or genuine learning.

Solutions-oriented frames, despite their importance in identifying steps to redress, can have more pernicious attitudinal effects. For one, these frames increase the perceived costs, whether material or symbolic, of acknowledging systemic racism. By specifying the tangi-

ble actions that must be taken, solutions-oriented frames force dominant group members to consider the privileges, resources and status they must forgo to address the issue, possibly triggering concerns about intergroup redistribution and group esteem (Lowery et al. 2006). Indeed, Schmitt et al. (2008) show that as the perceived difficulty of rectifying a wrong against an outgroup increases, ingroup members tend to feel less responsibility for addressing it. Alternatively, when solutions-oriented frames describe actions that are currently underway, this can encourage complacency by triggering a belief that the underlying issue of systemic racism is already being addressed. Finally, solutions-oriented frames often assign responsibility for addressing a problem to a particular actor. A concern with this responsibility attribution is that it can minimize the extent to which intergroup inequality is understood as a product of systemic discrimination rather than the wrongdoing of "a few deviant group members" (Wohl, Branscombe, and Klar 2006, 17).

Indigenous perspectives

The preceding discussion has focused on the abstract relationship between information about historical injustices and attitudes toward an outgroup. But the empirical context of this study focuses specifically on injustices toward Indigenous Peoples in Canada and many Indigenous authors have offered their own perspective on these issues. For example, Taiaiake Alfred (2005, 152-4), a Kanien'kehá:ka scholar, argues that one of the main barriers to true restitution for Canada's past wrongs is ignorance and denial of historical realities by non-Indigenous society. Others have connected a lack of historical knowledge to the prevalence of racist attitudes among the Canadian population (e.g. Bear and Andersen 2017; Sinclair 2017).

Listening and learning have been articulated as essential correctives to this problem. Many Survivors of the residential school system (discussed more below) were motivated to tell their stories about this injustice to inform Canadians about this little known history (TRC 2015, vol. 6, p. 117-8). Jody Wilson-Raybould (2022), the first Indigenous Justice Minister

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and Attorney General in Canada, writes that non-Indigenous Canadians must begin by educating themselves about the true history and contemporary reality of Canada's treatment of Indigenous Peoples. To a large degree, this will require unlearning many of the country's foundational myths. As Ladner (2018, 248) puts it, "Canada not only has to confront its past, it must also confront its mythologized exceptionalism ... [of] Canada as the good colonizer, a peaceful nation that did not engage in Indian wars but has instead always dealt justly with Canada's Indigenous peoples" (see also Logan 2014).

Learning the true history requires effortful engagement by non-Indigenous people. On the question of long-term attitudinal change, Wilson-Raybould notes that, more often than not, interest in Indigenous issues waxes and wanes in response to particular news stories. Jurgens (2020) is also skeptical about the media's ability to provide non-Indigenous audiences with sufficient historical context. Partly this is because of the episodic nature of news cycles, but it is also because Indigenous Peoples have historically been prevented from their own stories through traditional media (McCue 2023; Wente 2021).

Empirical implications

Information about historical injustices has important consequences for how dominant groups think about systemic discrimination against outgroups. Members of those outgroups − in this study, Indigenous Peoples − have made clear that learning the true history of wrongdoing is essential to changing prejudicial attitudes, a claim that is supported by recent experimental research. Information that is oriented towards proposing solutions can instead make dominant groups hesitant to acknowledge a problem in the first place. This leads to my central empirical prediction: information about historical injustices can increase beliefs in the existence of systemic racism, but mostly when descriptions of the actual wrongdoing, rather than debates over possible solutions, are central in public discourse.

Implicit in this claim is that when media attention shifts from descriptive to solutions-oriented frames, willingness to acknowledge systemic racism will decrease. Unfortunately,

prior research on media coverage suggests that descriptive frames tend to decline in prevalence over time and are often quickly replaced with solutions-oriented debates (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigall-Brown 2007). For this reason, my argument, while pessimistic, echoes an insistence among Indigenous advocates that "truth must come before reconciliation" (e.g. Yesno 2018). It also suggests that relying on media coverage of injustices may not be a reliable means for improving outgroup attitudes in the real world.

INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN CANADA

In Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have had a fraught history since European colonization began in the 16th century. Non-Indigenous society has stolen the land of Indigenous nations, banned their governmental institutions and sought to destroy their cultures, all while denying Indigenous Peoples many of the same rights and privileges afforded to non-Indigenous Canadians. Colonialism and discrimination have resulted in severe disparities in the economic, social and health outcomes of Indigenous Peoples relative to non-Indigenous Canadians (Sawchuk 2020). While Canada as a whole ranked 12th globally on the United Nations' Human Development Index in 2016, Indigenous communities would have ranked 52nd, just ahead of Venezuela (Cooke 2019).

Today, both groups perceive a strained relationship: 49% of non-Indigenous Canadians and 60% of Indigenous people describe current relations negatively (Environics 2022). While many non-Indigenous people express support for improving the relationship (e.g. Abacus Data 2021; Reconciliation Canada 2016), anti-Indigenous attitudes also remain a strong undercurrent in non-Indigenous public opinion (Beauvais 2021). Outgroup animus tends to be greatest among those that are older, more conservative, less-educated, Christian and men (see Appendix Figure A1).

The residential school history

Much of the contemporary tension between these two groups has been animated by a reckoning over the country's most notorious injustice against Indigenous Peoples: the residential school system. Between the 1830s and 1990s, approximately 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their homes and sent to boarding schools across the country (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). For most of this period, the schools were run by missionaries and funded by the government. Assimilation was the cornerstone of this policy from its inception: children were given Christian names, stripped of their traditional clothing and hair styles, and forbidden from speaking their Indigenous languages. As one government official told a parliamentary committee in 1920, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem ... our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic" (quoted in Titley 1986, 50).

Survivors describe nearly universally negative experiences at the schools (e.g. Knockwood and Thomas 1992; Sellars 2013). Physical and sexual abuse were common, and over 4,000 deaths have officially been documented, but the true number is likely far higher (Puxley 2015). Children died due to malnutrition, fires, suicide, failed escapes and infectious diseases, although the cause of death remains unknown in at least half of all deaths (TRC 2015, vol. 4). Due to cost considerations, governmental policy was generally not to transport the bodies of children who died at the schools back to home communities. As a result, the grounds of many former schools contain unmarked burial sites, a large number of which are poorly documented, overgrown and inactive (Hamilton 2021).

Canada began reckoning with the residential school history in the 1990s, but it did not become a national political issue until the early 2000s, when a series of civil litigation cases over abuse at the schools were combined into a class action suit and settled by the government (Miller 2017). The 2006 settlement established a $1.9 billion compensation package for survivors and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that would document the history of the residential school system. The TRC began in 2008, the same year that the

government made an official apology to survivors in the House of Commons, and issued its final report in 2015.

Awareness of the residential school history

Despite these official steps toward reconciliation, most non-Indigenous people remain uninformed about the residential school history. When the TRC was first established, it commissioned a survey of Canadians and found that only 51% of non-Indigenous respondents had ever heard of residential schools. That number improved over time, increasing to two-thirds after the Commission released its final report in 2015. As Figure 1 shows, however, non-Indigenous Canadians' awareness of the schools only caught up to Indigenous peoples' in 2022, after extensive media coverage of this history in the year prior (see below).

Simply asking whether respondents have heard of residential schools also obscures the fact that few non-Indigenous people have much more than a superficial knowledge of this issue. In their research with non-Indigenous undergraduate students, Boese, Neufeld, and Starzyk (2017) report that 88% failed a test about the basic facts of the system. Schaefli et al. (2018) document similar findings among Ontario's first-year university students in 2014: students had an average a score of 25% on a test covering key topics that Indigenous educators believed the students should know, including the residential school history. Encouragingly, Neufeld et al. (2022) find that students with greater awareness of this history tend to have more empathy toward Indigenous Peoples and better understand the ongoing legacies of the schools. To date, there are no studies testing the same relationship among the non-student population.

Announcements of suspected unmarked graves

Non-Indigenous Canadians' lack of historical knowledge was suddenly disrupted in 2021. On May 27, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced it had identified a suspected 215 unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School using ground-penetrating
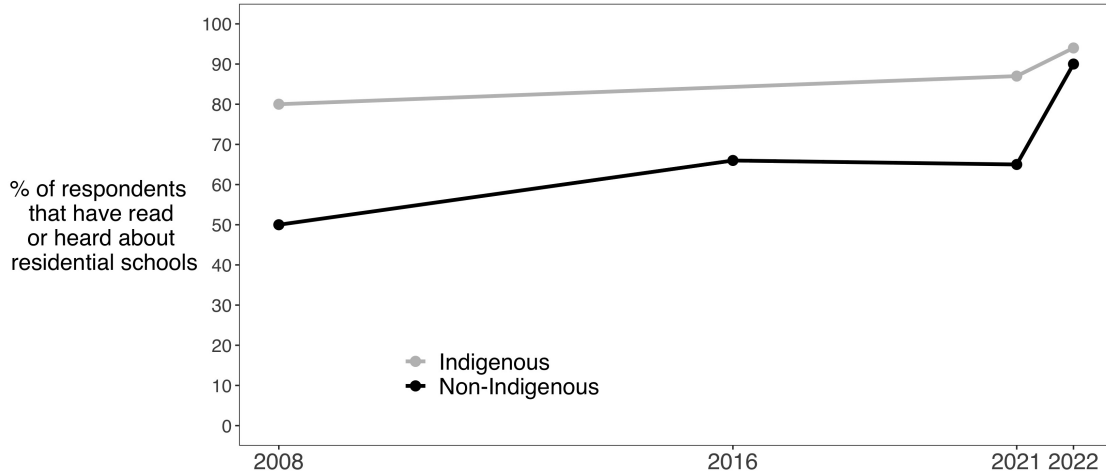
Figure 1: Awareness of residential school history, 2008 to 2022

Plot presents the percentage of respondents that answered "yes" to the question (with small variations in wording), "Have you heard or read anything about Indian Residential Schools?" Note: the 2021 survey occured prior to the announcements of unmarked graves at former school sites. Data are from four polls: Truth and Reconciliation Commission National Baseline Survey (2008); Environics Canadian Public Opinion on Aboriginal Peoples (2016); Canadian Reconciliation Barometer (2021; 2022).

radar technology. While survivors of the schools had long known about the possibility of such graves, this announcement was wholly unexpected among non-Indigenous Canadians. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had alerted the country to the likely presence of unmarked burials at former schools in its 2015 report and a small number of Indigenous communities had conducted searches or accidentally uncovered remains at former school sites before 2021. Yet these earlier stories were not widely covered in the media and so few non-Indigenous people were aware of this possibility (see Appendix Figure A15). Just days after the first announcement of suspected graves, only 24% of Canadians claimed they were not surprised by the news (Abacus Data 2021).

Over the following six weeks, three more Indigenous communities announced similar findings of suspected children's remains at former schools and the unmarked graves quickly became the most important news story in the country. To illustrate the media's sudden and intense interest in this issue, I assembled a corpus of every article published in six of Canada's largest English-language newspapers over the course of 2021.[2] I then trained a

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2. French language sources were not available in a machine readable format at the time of writing.
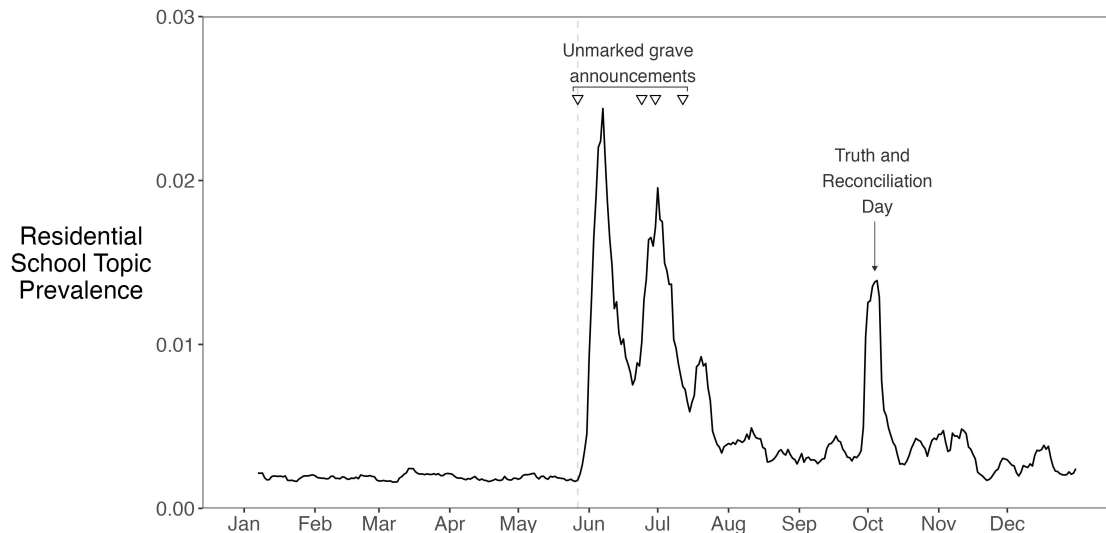
Figure 2: Prevalence of residential school topic in Canadian newspapers, 2021

Plot presents a 7-day rolling average of the residential schools topic prevalence estimated from an LDA topic model on the full-text of every news story in six of Canada's largest English-language newspapers.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model to estimate the prevalence of the residential schools topic for each article in the data (see Appendix D.2 for details).

Figure 2 summarizes coverage related to this issue in 2021. In the months leading up to the first unmarked graves announcement in Kamloops, the Canadian media essentially never discussed the residential schools history. Immediately afterwards, coverage increased more than eightfold, with subsequent spikes in attention coming in response to revelations of unmarked graves at other former school sites. In Appendix D.4, I look at the prevalence of the residential school history over a much longer time horizon and from that data it is clear that this period in 2021 represented the most intense exposure that Canadians had ever had to this historical injustice. However, the media's focus on this story gradually faded as a federal election approached on September 20. Coverage briefly increased again around September 30 to mark the country's first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a newly created holiday to honour the victims of the residential school system.

While the media's attention to this topic declined over time, the sudden initial increase in coverage caught the attention of the public: shortly after the first announcement of

unmarked graves, 93% of respondents said they had heard the news, with over 60% following the story "very" or "quite" closely (Abacus Data 2021). Public displays of mourning then appeared across the country. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ordered the Canadian Flag to be flown at half-mast indefinitely as Canada grieved the Indigenous children who never returned home. Impromptu demonstrations, vigils and remembrance walks were organized (I identified almost 90 such events from media reports in the two weeks after the first discovery; see Appendix A.3). Statues that honoured the architects of the residential school system and other symbols of colonialism were torn down in protests.

These public acts of grieving were accompanied by a belief that Canadians were truly and finally reckoning with their history. On June 24, *The Hill Times*, an Ottawa-based newspaper, ran the following headline:

> 'This time may be different': pollsters track 'record' shift in core public attitudes and
> a moral imperative to do something after Indigenous children's remains found

In the next section, I investigate these claims empirically. How large were these changes in public opinion? How long did they last?

EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

As the previous section documented, non-Indigenous people were deeply uninformed about the residential school system before 2021 and the unmarked grave discoveries were a shocking revelation to many of them. In this section, I present the results from several empirical investigations into how non-Indigenous people updated their attitudes toward Indigenous Peoples after the injustices became widely publicized. I begin by looking at the short-run effects of the unmarked grave announcements, and then ask whether these events caused persistent attitudinal changes.

For all of these analyses, my main outcome variable is respondents' average agreement on a Likert scale with the following two statements:

Item 1: Generations of colonialism and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Indigenous Peoples to work their way out of poverty.

Item 2: Over the past few years, Indigenous Peoples have gotten less than they deserve.

These items are part of a larger "Indigenous resentment" scale based on a measure developed in the American context (Beauvais 2021; Kinder, Sanders, and Sanders 1996). While agreement with these items may correlate with resentful attitudes (i.e. an affective dislike of the outgroup), I argue that endorsement of these statements can more accurately be viewed as belief in the existence of systemic racism against Indigenous Peoples. The first item taps into the importance of historical antecedents in shaping contemporary intergroup inequality and the second asks about Indigenous Peoples' perceived deservingness (although this item does not explicitly state what exactly Indigenous Peoples have gotten less of or relative to what; see Wilson and Davis 2011, 119). Interpreting these items as a belief in systemic racism is in line with recent research treating agreement with these items as a manipulable outcome rather than a stable predisposition (e.g. Fang and White 2022). Moreover, at least in the American context, when respondents are asked to provide open-ended reflections on these items, they tend to understand them as articulating structural (rather than individualistic) attributions for Black Americans' socioeconomic status (Kam and Burge 2018).

Short-run attitudinal effects

I begin by looking at how non-Indigenous people's beliefs in anti-Indigenous systemic racism changed in the immediate aftermath of the first news story about the unmarked graves. Using a nationally representative survey that was in the field when the unmarked graves were initially announced, I compare responses from those interviewed just before versus just after the announcement. The survey, fielded by the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem), ran for eight days before and eleven days after the story broke (Harell et al. 2022). Because this event was unexpected, whether respondents were surveyed before or after the announcement is essentially as-if random, providing causal leverage on the effects

of the sudden media attention that followed. Balance tests confirm that pre- and post-announcement respondents exhibit no meaningful difference in their baseline characteristics, except that those surveyed after the discovery were marginally younger on average (see Appendix Table A3 and Figure A3). Given the surprising nature of the announcement, there are no reasons to expect that this imbalance is driven by any type of endogenous selection; in any case, I control for age using birth-decade fixed effects.

Focusing only on the sample of respondents who do not self-identify as Indigenous, I run the following OLS regression:

$$\text{SystemicRacism}_i = \beta \text{PostAnnouncement}_i + \mathbf{X_i}\gamma + \varepsilon_i$$

where SystemicRacism_i is respondent i's average agreement with the two systemic racism items above, $\text{PostAnnouncement}_i$ is a binary indicator for whether a respondent was surveyed after the news first broke and $\mathbf{X_i}$ is a vector of pre-treatment covariates used to improve statistical efficiency (see notes to Table 1 for full list of variables). Under the as-if random assignment of respondents to the pre- and post-discovery samples, β captures the causal effect of the news on outgroup attitudes.

Table 1 presents the $\hat{\beta}$ estimates. The outcome has been standardized such that the coefficients measure effect sizes in terms of pre-announcement standard deviations. Regardless of whether I adjust for pre-treatment covariates or not, there is a robust strengthening of beliefs in systemic racism after the announcement. Average agreement with the existence of systemic racism increased by about 10% of a standard deviation. This effect size is comparable to estimates from experiments testing the effectiveness of more interventionist prejudice-reducing methods, like door-to-door canvassing (e.g. Kalla and Broockman 2021). The effects are also larger and more consistent than survey experiments that provide short informational texts about the historical causes of racial inequality in the United States (e.g. Fang and White 2022).[3]

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3. Using data shared by the authors, I find that their informational treatments reduce non-African Amer-

Table 1: Unmarked graves announcement and belief in systemic racism

	Belief in systemic racism	
Surveyed after graves announcement	0.113*	0.096*
	(0.032)	(0.030)
Observations	3,849	3,752
Controls	No	Yes
R^2	0.003	0.197

Coefficients are expressed in terms of pre-announcement standard deviations. In model 2, the following covariates are included but not reported: gender, born in Canada, education, household income, party ID, political interest, religion, language, ethnicity, electoral district Indigenous percentage, province, and birth-decade fixed effects. *$p<0.05$

This effect is also probably understating the impact of the news. The initial announcement was made late on a Thursday night, but most media outlets did not begin covering the story intensely until the following Monday (see Appendix D.3). If I instead treat that date as when the informational treatment truly began, effect sizes are around 25% larger (see Appendix Table A5). The survey also only covers the first eleven days after the news emerged. In Appendix B.3, I show that beliefs in structural racism were trending upward over the post-announcement period as the story became more widely known. In fact, a different outcome, public concern about Indigenous issues, continued increasing for at least another five weeks after the initial survey ended (see Appendix C.7). The effects of the initial news reported in Table 1 should therefore be treated as a lower bound.

Attitudinal persistence

How durable were the attitudinal changes identified in the previous section? To answer this question, Figure 3 tracks the average agreement with the two systemic racism items over the

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icans' racial resentment towards African Americans by between 0.02 and 0.06 control group standard deviations, although these estimates are not statistically distinguishable from zero.
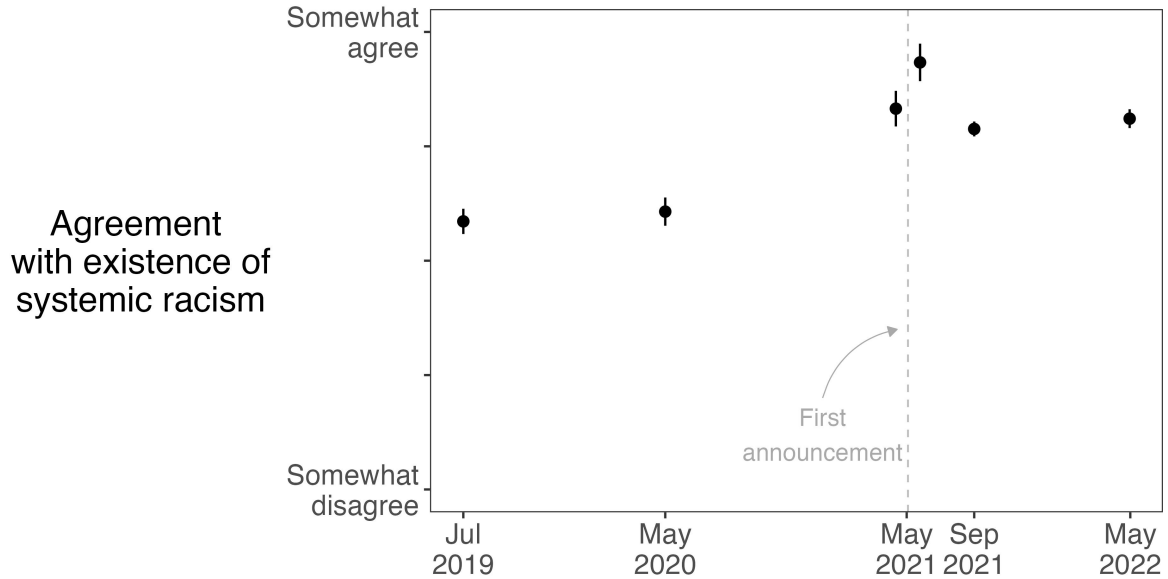
Figure 3: Belief in systemic racism, 2019 to 2022

Plot presents average and 95% confidence intervals for the mean of a respondent-level average of the two items measuring systemic racism beliefs (see Appendix Table A6 for each item plotted separately). In all but the September 2021 survey, this question was asked on a four-point Likert scale. For that specific survey, a five-point scale was used, but responses have been rescaled to match the four-point scale (see Appendix Figure A7 for individual response level prevalence over time).

course of four other cross-sectional surveys commissioned by C-Dem between 2019 and 2022.

The vertical dashed line indicates the timing of the first unmarked graves announcement, with the points directly on either side of that line providing a graphical analog to the results in Table 1. Despite the significant increase in beliefs about structural racism in the immediate aftermath of the announcement, average agreement was actually slightly worse compared to the pre-treatment period in a poll from later that year. While beliefs in structural racism increased by 0.10 on the four-point scale in the first few days after the initial announcement, the average response was 0.04 points lower overall four months later. No further changes were apparent in a May 2022 survey. While these results are not causally identified, they do suggest that the initial effects of the unmarked graves announcement were not persistent. This reversion occurred despite the fact that several more revelations of unmarked graves emerged in the intervening period.

There is another important pattern in Figure 3. Shortly after the May 2020 survey, the

murder of George Floyd in the United States triggered a period of racial reckoning in Canada. When a new survey was fielded in May 2021, general feelings toward racial minorities had improved (see Appendix C.6), with spillover effects on beliefs about discrimination against Indigenous Peoples. Between 2020 and 2021, the average percentage of non-Indigenous Canadians agreeing with both of the anti-Indigenous systemic racism items increased from 43 to 55%.

These patterns in the aftermath of George Floyd's death are notable for two reasons. First, they help contextualize the size of the effect that occurred as a result of the unmarked graves announcement. After this event, the short-term change in agreement with both items was smaller, at 4.2 p.p. (although this may be underestimating the true effect, for reasons discussed in the previous section). Second, they demonstrate that not all public reckonings with racial injustice are bound to reverse over time. Despite the fact that systemic racism and police brutality were no longer highly salient issues when Canadians were surveyed a year after the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, they still agreed with the two anti-Indigenous racism items at a higher rate than before the George Floyd protests. The next section offers one explanation for why public opinion reversed after the unmarked graves story.

Media framing

The previous results show that the unmarked graves announcement had positive, but fleeting, effects on beliefs in systemic racism among non-Indigenous Canadians. I argue that the reversion in attitudes can be explained not simply by a decline in the amount of attention paid to this story, but rather by changes in the media discourse in the months following the initial announcement. As time went on, the media moved away from discussing the residential schools topic as a human tragedy and toward attributing responsibility and identifying potential remedies for this injustice. While many non-Indigenous Canadians could empathize with the horrific injustices of the schools, a greater focus on solutions may have

made them reluctant to agree with the existence of a problem − systemic racism − in the first place.

To illustrate this change in media framing, I collected all articles published in six of Canada's largest English-language newspapers between the two survey dates in 2021 that were related to residential schools ($n = 628$). I then read and coded whether *descriptive* or *solutions-oriented* frames appeared in each story. I flag an article as including a given frame based on the criteria in Table 2. Articles can contain a mix of both frames, but to be associated with a frame, the primary focus of the article had to relate to the relevant criteria. Appendix D.5 provides details and validation tests for the data collection and coding procedures.

Figure 4 summarizes frame prevalence in the period between the two survey dates. Overall, solutions-oriented frames were most common, appearing in around three-quarters of all stories. But prevalence is not constant over time: during the initial survey period, when I observe a sharp increase in beliefs about structural racism around the first unmarked graves announcement, descriptive and mixed framings are especially apparent. These frames declined gradually over time, briefly increasing in response to subsequent announcements five to seven weeks later. At the time of the second survey, 18 weeks after the first announcement, just 17% of articles contained either a descriptive or mixed framing, compared with 67% in the first week after the initial announcement.

The descriptive accounts that appeared during the initial survey also likely had an outsized impact on public opinion. In the first two weeks after the first announcement, nearly all of the descriptive accounts focused on the shocking and viscerally upsetting topic of the unmarked graves themselves. Then as the total amount of descriptive coverage decreased over time, there was also a shift within descriptive frames away from a focus on deaths at the schools toward stories that emphasized the experiences of victims and the assimilative goals of the policy (see Appendix D.5). While these topics may also have encouraged learning and empathy, they likely did not have the same impact as stories describing children's deaths.

Table 2: Frames in residential schools coverage

| Frame	Criteria	Example headlines
Descriptive	Identifies an injustice against Indigenous Peoples	"True extent of damage lies beyond unmarked graves"
		"Why so many children died at Indian Residential Schools"
		"Unmarked graves provide proof of residential school atrocities"
Solutions-oriented	Identifies a solution to address an injustice	"For aboriginals, a 'drop in the bucket': B.C. to spend $1.5M on counselling for those damaged by residential schools"
		"Statues, schools and renaming: Municipalities rush to remove symbols of those tied to residential schools"
	Attributes responsibility to actor for an injustice or its remedy	"The Catholic Church in Canada is worth billions. Why are its reparations for residential schools so small?"
	Makes a call to action or seeks to mobilize support for a solution	"Time for non-Indigenous Canadians to act"
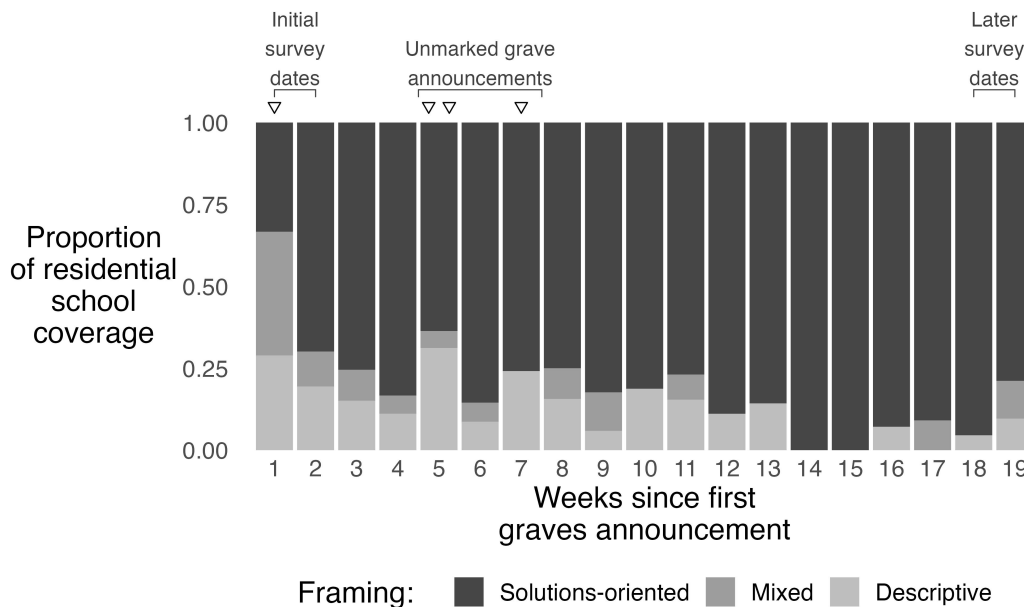
Figure 4: Prevalence of frames in residential school coverage over time

Plot presents the proportion of residential school-related articles in each week that include descriptive and solutions-oriented frames.

As the solutions-oriented coverage increased over time, a number of possible remedies were proposed. The most common were those that focused on symbolic actions, like cancelling the country's national holiday, followed by substantive reforms, including new government funding for Indigenous communities. Many, but not all, of the symbolic proposals were unpopular. Few Canadians approved of cancelling Canada Day (14%; Hopper 2021), removing statues and place names honouring the schools' creators (52−56%; Bricker and Jones 2021) or keeping the flag at half-mast in mourning (37−41%; Maru Public Opinion 2021). Many did support creating a new holiday for National Truth and Reconciliation Day (77%; Bricker and Jones 2021), although subsequent surveys suggest that most people did not actually use the day to engage in any reconciliation activities (Leger 2023). It is also not clear that substantive solutions were any more popular with voters. According to the 2021 Canadian Election Study, while large majorities agreed there should be more progress on certain substantive actions, only 36% believed the government should actually increase spending on reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

These public opinion data point to two risks of a solutions-oriented focus. First, proposing remedies can be threatening. Symbolic reforms can undermine the self-image of dominant group members by questioning the validity of their cherished symbols, whereas substantive redress can create concerns about resources being unfairly redirected away from one's ingroup to an outgroup. Second, identifying solutions can induce complacency. This is especially the case with symbolism, which can signal that "the problem is solved," without actually producing any change in the outgroup's material well-being.

The over-time patterns I document in Figure 4 are correlational, but it is not surprising that the reversion in beliefs in systemic racism coincided with a shift from descriptive to solutions-oriented media coverage. Descriptive frames inform the public of a problem, providing the essential historical context needed to recognize discrimination against an outgroup. When they are replaced by solutions-oriented frames, feelings of complacency or concerns about status threat and intergroup redistribution can discourage dominant group members from recognizing the existence of a problem in the first place.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Issue salience and social desirability

Zaller's (1992) theory of the survey response argues that people form political opinions in the moment they are asked, sampling among competing considerations that are more or less salient at any given time. An alternative account of the effects of the unmarked graves announcements is that the news only increased respondents' ability to recall pre-existing concerns about the existence of systemic racism, rather than truly changing their underlying attitudes towards this issue (see Tesler 2015). Those effects also could have been driven by social desirability bias: respondents may not have changed their attitudes toward systemic racism after the news broke, but did recognize that the prevailing mood in the country leaned toward sympathy for Indigenous Peoples. When media coverage about the unmarked graves
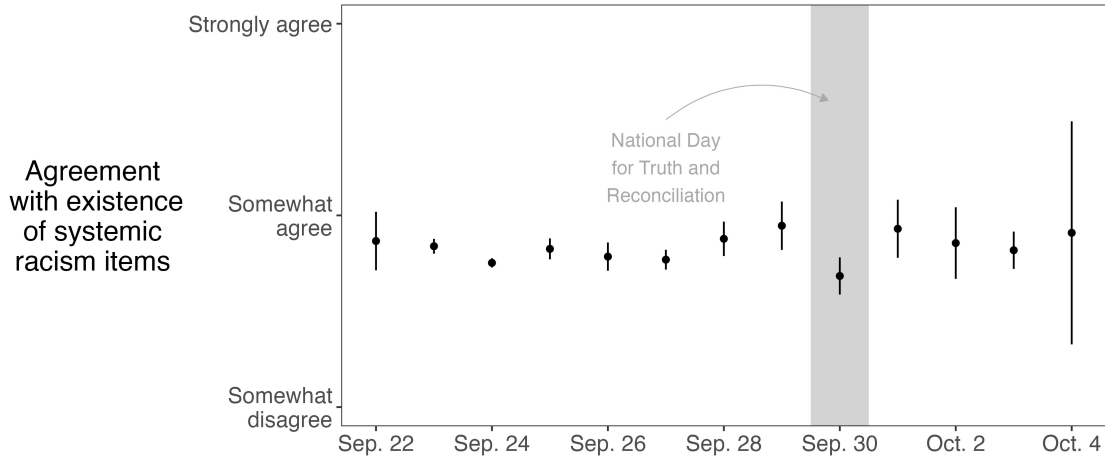
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Figure 5: Agreement with systemic racism around the NDTR

Plot presents mean and 95% confidence intervals for the average reported agreement with the existence of systemic racism among respondents for each field date of the 2021 Canadian Election Study.

and public displays of solidarity became less prevalent, both salience and social desirability concerns would have decreased as well, producing the reversion in attitudes observed above.

To test this explanation, I look at public opinion data around Canada's first ever National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (NDTR). This official day of remembrance, intended to honour the victims of the residential school system, occurred on September 30, eighteen weeks after the first unmarked graves announcement. The NDTR triggered both a renewed media attention to the residential schools issue and widespread displays of collective solidarity. Coincidentally, the holiday occurred in the middle of the field dates for the second 2021 survey described above, allowing me to again compare those surveyed just before and just after salience and social desirability concerns became heightened.

By this time, media coverage had largely shifted away from factual accounts of the historical injustices. Of the stories appearing on the NDTR and the days immediately surrounding it, only 8% were descriptive in nature and 13% contained a mixed framing (see Appendix E.2). The content of the descriptive coverage at this time also contained much less about the unmarked graves and more about victims' experiences and the system's legacies; no truly new information was presented.

By comparing survey responses in the days before and after the NDTR, I can determine how an increase in issue salience affects beliefs in systemic racism, absent the descriptive framing that characterized the initial coverage. As Figure 5 shows, there is no distinct trend or discontinuous change in respondents' average agreement with the two systemic racism items after the NDTR to indicate a positive effect of being primed by the renewed media attention and public events. If anything, respondents reported less agreement with the existence of structural racism on the holiday itself, when attention to the residential school issue was greatest. In Appendix E.3, I estimate the impact of being surveyed on or after the NDTR, finding only small and statistically insignificant effects. If the patterns documented in my earlier analyses were caused purely by salience or social desirability bias, a change in responses should have also been observable around the NDTR.

<center>Effect heterogeneity</center>

My main analyses focused on average treatment effects and over time changes. It is plausible that these averages are masking countervailing effects on particular subgroups. For example, Conservatives, Christians, racial minorities and recent immigrants all could have reacted differently to the information about unmarked graves. In Appendix F I investigate these possibilities for the public opinion analyses presented above across a host of pre-treatment respondent characteristics.

I first train a causal forest using the survey around the initial unmarked graves announcement, which allows me to descriptively analyze the determinants of individual-level treatment effects for each respondent in my sample (Wager and Athey 2018). The central conclusion from this analysis is that most people reacted to the news similarly. The point estimate treatment effects indicate that 90% of the respondents in the sample saw an increase in their beliefs in systemic racism, suggesting there was very little backlash. There is also no real evidence of significantly stronger or weaker effects for any particular subgroup in the data.

These homogeneous effects also extend to the patterns over time: across all observable

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subgroups, beliefs in systemic racism returned to group-specific baseline values or slightly worsened in the survey four month after the news first broke. Some studies have identified heterogeneous responses to information about historical injustices in other contexts (e.g. Doosje et al. 1998; Fang and White 2022), but those patterns are not evident in this case.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated how dominant group members react to information about historical injustices committed against an outgroup. Looking at the announcements of unmarked graves at former schools for Indigenous children in Canada in 2021, I demonstrated that non-Indigenous people updated their beliefs in the aftermath of these events. I find meaningful short-run increases in agreement with the existence of systemic racism, but those changes dissipated within just four months. Issue salience, social desirability bias and heterogeneous responses do not offer convincing accounts of these public opinion patterns. Instead, a simultaneous shift in media coverage away from stories that described the nature of the injustice and toward potential remedies offers a plausible explanation for the reversion in attitudes. Although most Canadians were moved by the initial accounts of the schools' violence, fewer were willing to acknowledge systemic racism when the proposed solutions threatened their group status and resources.

My results do not imply that dominant groups should never be pushed to consider redress. Rather, the results here suggest that descriptive accounts can have meaningful attitudinal effects and that more constructive debates over remedies may require a stronger initial foundation of historical, descriptive knowledge (see Quinn 2021). Unfortunately, the pattern of mass media quickly shifting away from descriptive frames is not unique to this case (e.g. Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigall-Brown 2007). For this reason, relying on the media to inform citizens about past injustices may not be a dependable means for moving public opinion on intergroup relations.

Encouragingly, the news of the unmarked graves did catalyze several more intensive ed-

ucational interventions that may have longer lasting effects on public attitudes. After the events of 2021, several provincial governments announced plans to update their public school curricula to better represent Indigenous Peoples and residential schools. The federal government also signalled its intention to revise the citizenship study guide for new immigrants to include more about the history of Indigenous Peoples, although progress on this goal has since stalled (El-Sherif 2023). Uptake of training sessions on Indigenous issues remains low among public servants, but several government departments did make such training mandatory after 2021 (Major 2022). Of course, these are not the transformative, structural reforms that are needed to fully address systemic racism and colonization (Jewell and Mosby 2021). But, if these efforts can provide Canadians with descriptive historical context in a more fulsome way than the media was able to, they may allow for more constructive debates over policy action in the future.

Turning to the generalizability of the findings, several scope conditions are worth noting. First, the events at the heart of Canada's historical reckoning were viscerally upsetting. Tragedies like the death of children may trigger responses that are particularly likely to disrupt otherwise stable outgroup attitudes, whereas information about less shocking injustices may not have the same immediate impacts. Second, at the time of the revelations, a majority of Canadians already acknowledged the existence of systemic racism. In settings where views of the outgroup are more antagonistic, the short-run effects I document may be less likely to occur (e.g. Nyhan and Zeitzoff 2018). Finally, the Canadian media environment is not especially polarized (see Appendix Figure A11). In the unmarked graves coverage, there were only minor differences in content or tone across outlets of differing ideologies, which may be less common in other contexts.

In terms of future research, a notable finding in this study is the lack of heterogeneous responses across subgroups. Yet this is not likely to be true in all cases. In a more contemporary revelation of injustice, Chudy and Jefferson (2021) summarize attitudes towards Black Lives Matter (BLM) after the murder of George Floyd. Despite an initial boost in support

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for the movement from partisans across the political spectrum, just weeks later Republicans became much less supportive of BLM than they were at the beginning of 2020. Reny and Newman (2021) and Drakulich and Denver (2022) similarly find partisan differences in racial attitudes after George Floyd's death. Revelations of wrongdoing in the distant past can also exhibit heterogeneous responses. The Jedwabne pogrom, which saw the massacre of hundreds of Jews by ethnic Poles in 1941, was effectively unknown until 2000, when the publication of a history book caused a "moral earthquake" in Poland (Wróbel 2006, 387). Compared to Canada, this sudden revelation was followed by a more polarized debate over the country's self-image and the truthfulness of the history (Michlic 2002). Future research would benefit from investigating when evidence of injustice is likely to trigger more versus less similar attitudinal responses across partisan groups. The contextual differences described in the previous paragraph offer possible starting points.

The Canadian and American cases also suggest that attitudinal changes driven by sudden revelations of injustice tend to be short-lived. Most of the literature on prejudice reduction has not tested for the persistence of treatment effects (Paluck and Green 2009), but given the real world evidence of decay presented here, it should be a priority going forward. Why do some interventions produce more long-lasting changes in attitudes toward in outgroup? What types of informational content may be more or less persistent in their persuasive effects on intergroup attitudes? Research on active versus passive information processing, as well as narrative persuasion techniques, seems promising (Adida et al. 2023; Broockman and Kalla 2016; Hill et al. 2013; Kalla and Broockman 2021). Yet, more importantly, researchers should strive to link existing theory to how people are exposed to persuasive information in their everyday lives, where shifting narratives and competing demands on attention present challenges that are often absent in survey and lab experiments.

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