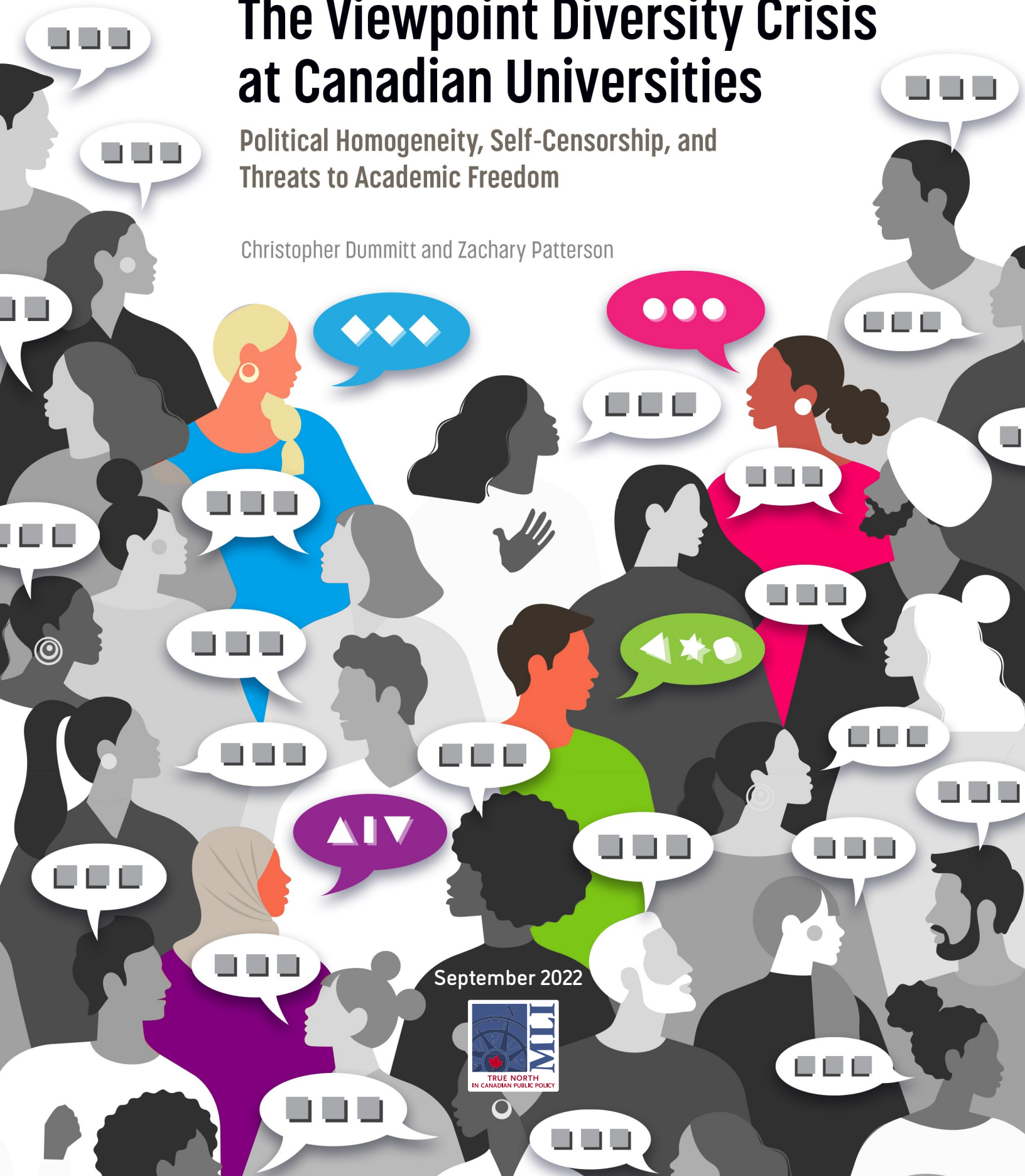


The Viewpoint Diversity Crisis at Canadian Universities

Political Homogeneity, Self-Censorship, and
Threats to Academic Freedom

Christopher Dummitt and Zachary Patterson



September 2022



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Executive Summary

Academic freedom has a long history of protecting unorthodox thinkers and contributing to the search for knowledge and truth. Unconventional ideas can later prove to be incredibly important. Unfortunately, we can't know ahead of time which unconventional ideas will prove useful. Academic freedom – and the related concept of free speech – is part of the way a liberal society remains open to diverse views, to scientific inquiry, and to self-correction.

This paper substantiates the claims that there is a serious crisis in higher education in this country. Canadian universities are political monoliths whose lack of viewpoint diversity contributes to serious problems on campus including a weakening of support for academic freedom, a hostile climate for those who disagree with left-leaning values, and significant levels of self-censorship.

We conducted a survey from March 3 to 17 (administered by Leger) with the aim of understanding how the general public and professors themselves think about the role of universities and university professors in Canada today. The results described in this paper were drawn from that survey.

Our survey shows that Canadian universities are seriously deficient in viewpoint diversity and have instead become politically homogenous institutions. Professors vote overwhelmingly for parties of the left and 88 percent self-identify as left-leaning, with only 9 percent voting for conservative parties (compared to 38 percent more generally). Further, it seems as though political skew is increasing in Canadian universities but a lack of good data prevents us from seeing by how much.

Organizations filled with like-minded individuals often fall prey to some of the most dangerous forms of conformity. They are likely to make significant errors in the absence of a diverse array of information, and the sameness of those within the organization leads to overconfidence by the majority and self-censorship by those who might be inclined to disagree. This leads to a climate that is hostile to those with minority political viewpoints.

When we asked if professors would be worried if their political opinions became known, almost 88 percent of left-leaning professors were either not very worried or not worried at all. However, when we looked to the right-leaning political minority, the situation changed considerably: 44 percent were somewhat or very worried about facing negative consequences if colleagues, students, or others on campus learned of their political opinions. And 40 percent of right-leaning professors feel like they face a hostile work environment.

This form of self-censorship is evident in how professors behave today. Among right-leaning professors, 57 percent have self-censored in universities out of fear of negative consequences. It affects professors of all political leanings, as 34 percent of all professors admit to self-censoring out of fear of negative consequences should their views on certain topics become known. Most professors support academic freedom in principle. But in practice, a large minority of professors – from 32 percent to 34 percent – are prepared to limit academic freedom and “cancel” their colleagues out of a commitment to their political views on social justice

This level of fear and hostile climate should raise a red flag about freedom of speech at universities. Not wanting to be singled out for wrong-think, political minority professors will instead self-censor.

In response to our survey, professors provided a range of examples and scenarios in which they have kept silent on topics – from changing the way they teach and avoiding topics altogether to even changing their research career in order to avoid possible negative repercussions. While right-leaning professors are largely those who feel the most need to self-censor, this does not mean that self-censorship isn't also an issue for some other scholars including those on the left.

Academic freedom protections in collective agreements don't seem sufficient to protect academic freedom on campus today. Most importantly, those provisions are often not as strong – or are nonexistent – for part-time staff who make up a significant portion of the teaching component at most Canadian universities. Further, collective agreement provisions also often don't effectively protect faculty from online campaigns or complaints from students or the public.

What, then, can be done? We recommend several options including 1) the creation of an *Academic Freedom Act*; 2) insisting that universities remain politically neutral in their public statements, hiring practices, and organizational structure and rules; 3) eliminating political loyalty tests from hiring, research funding, and other human resource decisions and bodies; 4) legislate that unions cannot discriminate based on politics in the defence of their members; and 5) generally promote a culture of academic freedom.

Sommaire

Depuis longtemps, la liberté académique protège les penseurs anticonformistes et contribue à la recherche du savoir et de la vérité. Les idées non conventionnelles peuvent ensuite s'avérer extraordinairement importantes. Malheureusement, il est impossible de reconnaître d'emblée celles qui devraient se révéler utiles. La liberté académique – et la notion connexe de liberté d'expression – est consubstantielle à une société libérale qui demeure ouverte à la diversité des opinions, à la recherche scientifique et à l'autodiscipline.

Ce document permet de confirmer l'existence d'une grave crise de l'enseignement supérieur dans ce pays. Les universités canadiennes forment un monolithe politique présentant un manque de diversité de points de vue qui cause de sérieux problèmes sur les campus, notamment un soutien affaibli à la liberté académique, un climat fermé à toute opposition aux valeurs de gauche et des niveaux importants d'autocensure.

Nous avons réalisé une enquête (administrée par Léger du 3 au 17 mars) en vue de connaître l'opinion du grand public et des professeurs sur le rôle des universités canadiennes et de leurs corps enseignants à l'heure actuelle. Les résultats présentés dans ce document sont tirés de cette enquête.

Notre enquête montre que les universités canadiennes présentent de graves lacunes en matière de diversité de points de vue : elles sont devenues des institutions politiquement homogènes. Les professeurs votent massivement pour les partis de gauche – quelque 88 p. cent d'entre eux déclarent être des sympathisants, alors qu'ils sont seulement 9 p. cent à voter pour des partis conservateurs (contre 38 p. cent plus généralement). En outre, l'asymétrie politique semble s'amplifier, quoiqu'un manque de données fiables nous empêche d'estimer dans quelle mesure.

Les organisations composées d'individus aux opinions similaires courent souvent le risque d'être victimes de certaines formes les plus dangereuses de conformisme. Elles sont susceptibles de commettre d'importantes erreurs en raison de l'inexistence en leur sein d'un savoir diversifié, tandis que la similitude de leurs membres mène à un excès de confiance parmi la majorité d'entre eux et à l'autocensure parmi les opposants en puissance. Cela crée un climat hostile pour les individus aux points de vue politiques minoritaires.

À la question portant sur l'inquiétude de voir leurs opinions politiques ébruitées, près de 88 p. cent des professeurs de la « gauche » ont répondu ne ressentir que peu ou pas de crainte. Toutefois, la situation est tout autre pour la minorité de droite : 44 p. cent craignent quelque peu ou beaucoup les effets négatifs de leurs opinions de la part de leurs collègues, de leurs étudiants ou d'autres personnes sur le campus; de plus, 40 p. cent ont le sentiment d'être confrontés à un environnement de travail hostile.

Cette forme d'autocensure se voit clairement dans le comportement des professeurs. Quelque 57 p. cent des professeurs de la « droite » se censurent à l'université par crainte des conséquences négatives. Or, ce phénomène touche les professeurs de toutes les tendances politiques, puisque 34 p. cent admettent se censurer par crainte de représailles si leurs opinions sur certains sujets sont connues. La plupart des professeurs soutiennent la liberté académique en principe. Toutefois, dans la pratique, une forte minorité de professeurs (entre 32 et 34 p. cent) est disposée à limiter la liberté académique et à « isoler » ses collègues par attachement à certaines opinions politiques en matière de justice sociale.

Un tel niveau de peur et de climat d'hostilité devrait tirer la sonnette d'alarme quant à la liberté d'expression dans les universités. En effet, lorsqu'ils souhaitent éviter d'être stigmatisés, les professeurs des minorités politiques se censurent.

En réponse à notre enquête, les professeurs ont décrit toute une série d'exemples et de scénarios leur permettant d'éviter certains sujets – à commencer par la modification de leurs méthodes d'enseignement et des sujets abordés jusqu'à la réorientation de leur carrière de chercheur – afin d'échapper à d'éventuelles répercussions négatives. Si les professeurs de la « droite » sont ceux qui ressentent le plus le besoin de se censurer, cela ne signifie pas pour autant que l'autocensure n'est pas aussi un problème pour d'autres universitaires, y compris ceux de la « gauche ».

Les protections de la liberté académique dans les conventions collectives ne semblent pas suffisantes sur les campus. Ce qui est encore plus préoccupant, c'est que ces dispositions ne sont souvent pas aussi fortes – ou sont inexistantes – pour le personnel à temps partiel, qui constitue une part importante du corps enseignant dans la plupart des universités canadiennes. En outre, les dispositions des conventions collectives ne protègent souvent pas efficacement les professeurs contre les campagnes en ligne et les plaintes des étudiants ou du public.

Que pouvons-nous donc faire ? Nous recommandons plusieurs options, notamment : 1) la création d'une *loi sur la liberté académique*; 2) l'insistance à l'égard de la neutralité politique des universités dans leurs déclarations publiques, leurs pratiques d'embauche et leurs structures et règles organisationnelles; 3) l'élimination des tests de loyauté politique dans l'embauche, le financement de la recherche et d'autres décisions et organes liés aux ressources humaines; 4) l'adoption d'une loi empêchant les syndicats d'exercer une discrimination fondée sur la politique dans la défense de leurs membres et 5) la promotion générale d'une culture de la liberté académique

The debate

Over the last several years, a debate has emerged about whether universities in western democracies are in crisis because of serious threats to academic freedom and an absence of viewpoint diversity on campus.

On the one side, a growing chorus of academics, think tanks, and professional organizations has declared that universities across the western world, including Canada, have become political monocultures and are hostile to those who disagree with or want to debate the merits of contemporary “progressive” thought (Gertsman 2020; Heterodox Academy 2022). They look to the recent spate of “cancel culture” incidents, where online mobs, students, and even sometimes colleagues call for professors to be fired, and they see in these incidents a symbol of a larger problem (Acevedo 2022; Norris 2021). The Canadian Eric Kaufmann whose comparative research is perhaps the most comprehensive anywhere on these issues, argues that these cancellations are merely the tip of the iceberg of a wider culture in which political discrimination is rampant and academic freedom is threatened (Kaufmann 2021a). This hostile climate on campus leads to extensive self-censorship and even encourages students and young scholars to seek careers elsewhere (Shields and Dunn 2016). A recent Quebec government commission found strikingly high levels of self-censorship on campus from both professors and students (La Commission Scientifique 2021). These threats to academic freedom and political discrimination represent a genuine crisis because they prevent universities from carrying out their core mission to promote the search for truth and to foster rational and open inquiry (Haidt 2016).

On the other hand, this characterization of the university in crisis – and of academic freedom embattled – has not gone uncontested. In contrast to those who describe the current situation as an emergency, others claim that these are largely right-wing talking points in the “culture wars.” The victims of higher education cancel culture are not the tip of the iceberg revealing a significantly broader crisis but are instead cherry-picked anecdotal examples of people whose discriminatory behaviour is simply being called out. Cancel culture, in this version, is an example of individuals facing consequences for their bad actions. Those expressing concern over cancel culture are merely

resistant to social and political progress at best, and, at worse, defenders of racism, sexism, homophobia, and oppression.¹ Still others argue that the politically homogenous nature of the university should not matter. Whatever the political make-up of the professoriate, professors can be trusted not to bring their politics into the classroom and to teach and research in a fair and unbiased fashion. The real crisis in higher education, some other critics claim, is about the neoliberal takeover of higher education, underfunding, rising tuition fees, and precarious employment for many part-time faculty (Menzies 2020; Wesley 2021).

This is the debate – universities in crisis versus overblown conspiracy. Which version is backed up best by evidence?

Until now we have not been able to definitively assess whether Canadian universities are suffering from the same problems as universities elsewhere. Although we have had excellent comparative reports based on a limited amount of Canadian data, we simply have not had a dedicated, large enough dataset to tell us about these issues in Canada. The last large-scale study on professor voting behaviour dates to the beginning of the 2000s (Nakhaie and Adam 2008). Even then we did not have good survey data about professors' opinions on academic freedom, cancel culture, social justice, or their experiences of self-censorship.

This report fills this lacuna and provides robust and concrete evidence of the current situation at Canadian universities. Our report substantiates the claims of a serious crisis in higher education in this country. Canada does not stand out as an exception to the rule. Instead, Canadian universities are, like universities in the US and UK, political monoliths whose lack of viewpoint diversity contributes to serious problems on campus including a weakening of support for academic freedom, a hostile climate for those who disagree with left-leaning values, and significant levels of self-censorship.

The survey

The survey on which the results described in this report were drawn was conducted in the spring of 2022 and administered by Leger Opinion.² The survey aimed to understand how the general public and professors themselves think about the role of universities and university professors in Canada today in order to inform current debates around trust in institutions, expert knowledge, and higher education.

As a result, there were in fact two versions of the survey: one for professors and the other for the general public. As much as possible, the questions asked of respondents were identical. However, professors were asked some questions relating to their role at the university (e.g., academic rank) not

asked of the general public, and the wording of some questions was slightly modified so as to be more appropriate for the different groups.

In addition to questions relating to perceptions about the university, respondents were asked socio-demographic questions. For the general public, Leger used this information to develop weighting factors to ensure the sample was representative of the general population (more on the weighting factors below). Given the more limited information about the population of professors, weights were not developed for them.

The survey was first launched on February 9 and 10, 2022. The survey was paused and then relaunched from March 3 to 17, 2022. The analysis in this report is based on the data collected from March 3 to 17.

The survey was programmed and administered through Leger's online web survey system. General public respondents were from Leger's own panel of adult (18+) Canadians – the largest in Canada – and were contacted by email. Leger also contacted professors by email, though the authors of this report provided Leger with their email addresses. Research assistants collected the list of professor email addresses from university websites. We used uniRank to obtain the list of Canadian universities from which professor email addresses were sought; this helped to ensure comparability with previous studies (e.g. Kaufmann 2021) on related topics (uniRank 2022). Altogether the study used 26,218 valid email addresses.

Summary statistics

This section provides summary statistics for the characteristics of the survey respondents both for the general public and for professors. It also compares the characteristics with their corresponding populations. We begin with the general public.

General public sample

As mentioned above, Leger routinely weights their samples to reflect the characteristics of the Canadian population. As a result, some respondents will be given a larger weight than others according to the characteristics of the sample compared to the reference (Canadian) population. The weighting factor is multi-characteristic so that it takes into account age, gender, education, language, province of residence, and voting patterns.

Tables 1 and 2 provide the summary statistics of the characteristics Leger used to develop the weighting factors for both the sample and Canadian population. Altogether there were 1495 respondents in the public sample. The sample statistics shown are weighted. Statistics for the Canadian population for age,

TABLE 1: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR GENERAL PUBLIC SAMPLE (WEIGHTED) AND CANADIAN POPULATION FOR AGE, GENDER, EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE

Variable	Statistic	Sample	Total responses (weighted)	Population
Age	Mean	48.0	1492	47.2
Gender				
Female	Proportion	50%	1492	51%
Male	Proportion	49%	1492	49%
Non-binary	Proportion	1%	1,49	Unreported
Other	Proportion	0%	1492	Unreported
Education				
Elementary	Proportion	0%	1488	18%
High school	Proportion	31%	1488	26%
College	Proportion	41%	1488	29%
University certificate	Proportion	4%	1488	3%
Bachelor's	Proportion	17%	1488	16%
Master's	Proportion	5%	1488	7%
PhD	Proportion	1%	1488	1%
Language				
French	Proportion	21%	1492	21%
English	Proportion	63%	1492	56%
Other	Proportion	5%	1492	21%
French and other	Proportion	0%	1492	0%
English and other	Proportion	7%	1492	2%
Other and other	Proportion	1%	1492	0%
English and French	Proportion	3%	1492	0%

Source: Leger survey and authors' calculations.

gender, education, language and province of residence are all draw from Statistics Canada's 2016 census of the population (Statistics Canada Undated). Voting results for the Canadian population were calculated with data from Elections Canada (Elections Canada 2021).

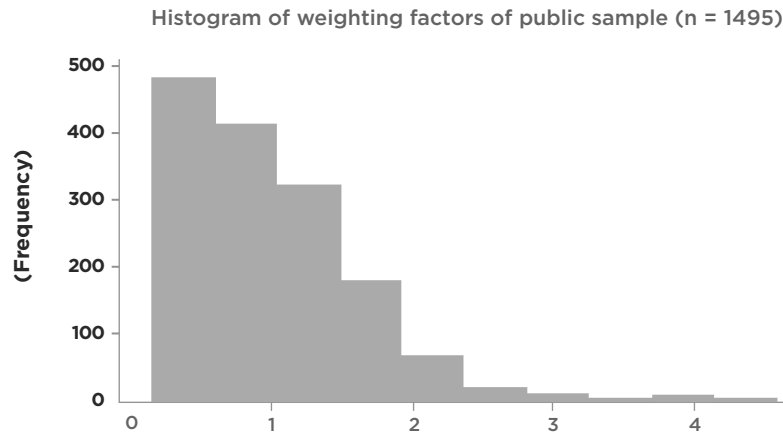
TABLE 2: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR GENERAL PUBLIC SAMPLE (WEIGHTED) AND CANADIAN POPULATION FOR PROVINCE OF RESIDENCE AND VOTING

Variable	Statistic	Sample	Total responses (weighted)	Population
Province				
British Columbia	Proportion	14%	1492	13%
Alberta	Proportion	11%	1492	12%
Saskatchewan	Proportion	3%	1492	3%
Manitoba	Proportion	4%	1492	4%
Ontario	Proportion	38%	1492	38%
Québec	Proportion	23%	1492	23%
New Brunswick	Proportion	2%	1492	2%
Nova Scotia	Proportion	3%	1492	3%
Prince Edward Island	Proportion	0%	1492	0%
Newfoundland and Labrador	Proportion	2%	1492	1%
Northwest Territories	Proportion	0%	1492	0%
Yukon	Proportion	0%	1492	0%
Nunavut	Proportion	0%	1492	0%
Voting				
Bloc Québécois	Proportion	7%	1263	8%
Consevative Party of Canada	Proportion	33%	1263	34%
Green	Proportion	5%	1263	2%
Liberal	Proportion	32%	1263	33%
NDP	Proportion	15%	1263	18%
Other	Proportion	3%	1263	1%
People's Party of Canada	Proportion	4%	1263	5%

Source: Leger survey and authors' calculations.

With respect to age, the sample appears slightly older than Canada's adult population, although the census results include individuals age 16 and over in the age category 16-24, so this difference is not surprising. In terms of gender the sample and population proportions are almost the same. The proportion of men is exactly the same while there is a slightly smaller proportion of the sample that is female. These discrepancies are likely caused by rounding errors and the fact that the census only includes categories for

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE WEIGHTING FACTOR



Source: Leger survey and authors' calculations.

male and female, while our survey had a more granular definition of gender. When considering education, our sample is more highly educated than the Canadian population with no respondents having an education lower than high school and an over-representation of people with college degrees (41 percent in our sample compared to 18 percent for the population). With respect to language there is an over-representation of English speakers and an under-representation of non-English, non-French speakers.

In Table 2 we see that the proportion of residents of the different provinces and territories is almost exactly the same for the sample as it is for the Canadian population. Finally, the voting patterns of the sample matches Canadian voting patterns almost perfectly apart from a slight under-representation of NDP voters and an equivalent over-representation of Green voters in the sample.

Since the results presented for the general public rely on Leger-developed weights, it is worth examining the characteristics of the weights themselves. The mean of weights is 1 so that the sum of the factors matches the number of respondents, i.e., 1495. The minimum value for the weights is 0.15 with a maximum of 4.6. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the weighting factor.

Professor sample

As explained above, relatively little information was available for the population of professors in Canada so no weights were developed. As a result, Table 3 provides unweighted summary statistics for professors. It also shows the number of respondents responding to the questions, thereby enabling the statistics to be calculated. Altogether, the analysis uses data from 1043 professor respondents. The average age of the sample was 53.2 years. This

TABLE 3: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR SAMPLE OF PROFESSORS

Variable	Statistic	Mean	Profs	Total responses	Canada
Age	Mean	53.2		945	Not reported
Gender					
Female	Proportion	42%	426	1013	40%
Male	Proportion	49%	576	1013	60%
Non-binary	Proportion	1%	7	1013	Not reported
Other	Proportion	0%	4	1013	0%
Rank					
Assistant	Proportion	16%	168	1038	18%
Associate	Proportion	32%	330	1038	35%
Full	Proportion	35%	359	1038	41%
Other	Proportion	17%	181	1038	6%
Discipline					
Humanities	Proportion	30%	314	1030	Not reported
Social Sciences	Proportion	47%	481	1030	Not reported
STEM	Proportion	23%	235	1030	Not reported

Source: Statistics Canada 2021.

statistic is provided primarily for information since there are no population-level statistics for the age of professors. At the same time, there is some information available for professors from Statistics Canada. In particular, it is possible to obtain information on gender and academic rank based on Table 37-10-0077-01 (Statistics Canada 2021). As such, Table 3 shows that in the sample of professors, women are slightly over-represented compared to the population as a whole whereas men are slightly under-represented. The table also shows that the sample broadly reflects the distribution of rank across the population of professors, although the category “other” (i.e., those not assistant, associate, or full professors) is somewhat over-represented, making up 17 percent of the sample but only 6 percent of the population. Finally, and also without population values to compare with, 30 percent of the sample is made up of professors in the humanities with 47 percent and 23 percent from the social sciences and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, respectively.

The survey and this subsequent report was funded from a flexible funding opportunity grant from Heterodox Academy, but the survey development, questions, and administration were carried out entirely independently of Heterodox Academy.

The role of universities and professors

In the first instance, our survey sought to gather general information on what both the general public and professors themselves believe to be the role of universities in contemporary Canada. In many respects, professors and the public share a common vision of the role of universities – although they tend to rank what matters slightly differently. We asked respondents to “Rank the following in priority as to what you see as the purpose of higher education” and provided four options:

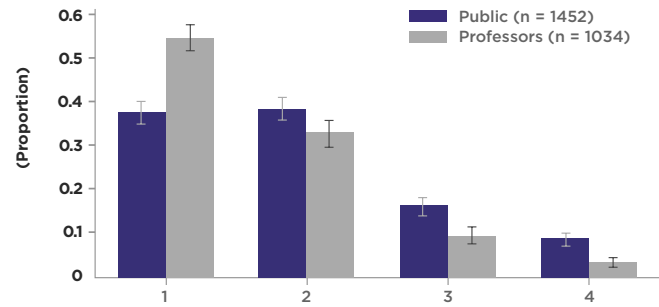
1. Educating students
2. Conducting research and creating knowledge
3. Working for social justice and progress
4. Preparing students for the workforce and to contribute to the economic prosperity of society

This was a ranking question, and so it should be emphasized that even if respondents ranked an option as their fourth we cannot say that they believed it to be unimportant, only that they ranked it below the others when forced to do so. The answers to these ranking questions can be found in Figure 2. (Bar graphs throughout the report, and where are appropriate, are shown with their 95 percent confidence intervals.) In one area professors and the public largely matched their rankings. Both groups believed “educating students” was a key priority – 87 percent of professors ranked this as either their first or second option and 75 percent of the public did so (though professors were more likely to choose this as the first option).

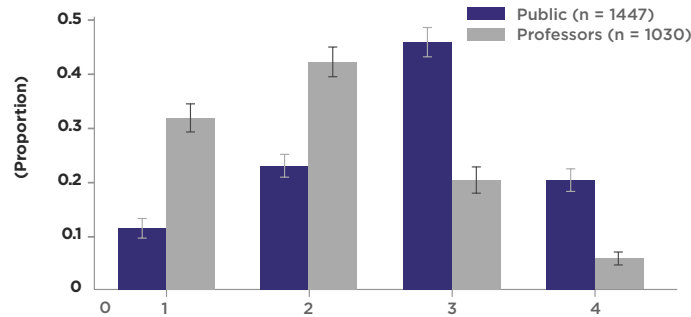
In other areas, though, differences emerge. The clearest difference relates to the role of preparing students for the workforce. For the public at large, this is the most important role of higher education. In the public sample, 50 percent ranked this as the top priority followed by another 29 percent who selected it second. This contrasts quite sharply with professors, where 76 percent ranked it as either third or fourth, with fourth being the most popular option. Again, this does not mean that faculty don’t believe it to be important at all – it merely represents a ranking amongst the four options. Another key difference here was in the role of research and creating knowledge; most faculty selected that option as either the first or second most important part of their job whereas the public was most likely to rank it third. On promoting social justice, the rankings of the public and professors were somewhat similar. The public most commonly ranked this as the least important part of higher education, as did 47 percent of professors. However, professors were much more likely to select this as the third option, ahead of preparing students for the workforce.

FIGURE 2: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

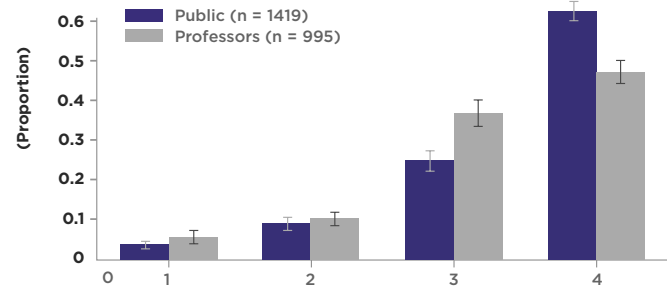
• Rank of **educating students** as purpose of higher education



• Rank of **research** as purpose of higher education



• Rank of **social justice** as purpose of higher education



• Rank of **workforce preparation** as purpose of higher education

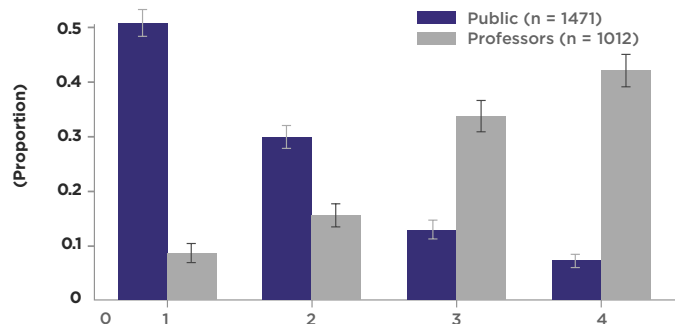


TABLE 4: MOST COMMON RANKING FOR EACH OPTION

Job of professor	Professor ranking	Public ranking
Change society	2 (53%, n = 988)	3 (56%, n = 1449)
Student career prospects	3 (67%, n = 1,002)	1 (45%, n = 1463)
Advance knowledge	1 (75%, n = 1,032)	1 (45%, n = 1470)

Source: Leger survey and authors' calculations.

These results were also born out by a related question where we asked respondents to rank options as to what they saw as the most important role of professors (as opposed to universities in general). Here the options were:

1. Teach and conduct research that aims to shape and change society
2. Teach and conduct research that aims to help students find good career prospects
3. Teach and conduct research that aims to advance knowledge of and improve our understanding of the world

Table 4 displays the most common rankings that respondents provided for each option.

The public's main view is that professors' primary role is to both improve students' career prospects and to advance knowledge (both tied for first at 45 percent). Professors overwhelmingly selected "advancing knowledge" as their top choice (75 percent). But in looking at the second and third order options, clear differences emerge as to the relative ranking between professors and the public. Whereas the public ranked improving student career prospects as their first choice (tied with advancing knowledge at 45 percent), 67 percent of professors ranked this as their third most important criteria. Professors also ranked changing society as a more important goal than did the public, with 53 percent selecting this option as a professor's second most important goal. The public's most common ranking was placing social change as the least important of the three.

Clearly, for the general public, universities play a key role in providing students with improved career prospects. While this is important for professors, those working within higher education tend to place a higher value on other matters including advancing knowledge, educating students, and changing society.

How does this relate to current debates about the crisis in the university, political homogeneity on campus, and self-censorship and cancel culture in universities? Based on these findings, professors ought to be significantly interested in ensuring viewpoint diversity within universities and presenting students with the best and most varied knowledge. These elements are fundamental to educating students and advancing knowledge. However, it is possible that the relative importance professors also place on social change could be putting cross-pressures on professors in their commitment to viewpoint diversity and academic freedom. The desire to achieve social and political goals with the aim of changing society could present obstacles to professors' willingness to be open to all points of view, including those of political opponents who might see social change differently. There are key protections within the university sector that should protect viewpoint diversity, the most important of which is academic freedom to which we turn next.

Why academic freedom matters

Academic freedom has a long and venerated history of protecting unorthodox thinkers and contributing to the search for knowledge and truth. It is a truism to say that our conventional thinking almost always contains ideas that will be found later to have been wrong or wrongheaded. The trick is that, at each stage, we don't know *which* ideas these are. This truism also extends to unconventional and sometimes even seemingly threatening ideas that are both true and useful. Some of these ideas will later prove to be incredibly important and become part of our common sense. Again, we can't know ahead of time which unconventional ideas will prove useful.³

Academic freedom – and the related but different concept of free speech – is part of the way a liberal society remains open to diverse views, to scientific inquiry, and to self-correction (Mchangama 2022). Even if some ideas are not true or popular and will not become part of our common sense, the process of facing these ideas honestly helps to put our own knowledge on a more secure footing. This is why these concepts are so fundamentally important to higher education – the very sector that ought to concern itself, above all, with truth-seeking.

In the past, and in the present, academic freedom has protected minorities and those whom the majority would suppress. In Canada, the fight for academic freedom has meant supporting religious and political heretics, communists, critics of the British empire, and those who questioned the business of university life (Horn 1999). Today it protects outspoken voices on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on debates over gender identity, decolonization, racism, and social justice.

It is a key tool in a liberal society to protect the disadvantaged and a mechanism for correcting the illiberalism of repressive and conformist majorities. Shutting down speech, and labelling certain ideas as out-of-bounds are the tools of repressive societies and the bane of liberal cultures committed to liberty and freedom.

Why viewpoint diversity?

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

– John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

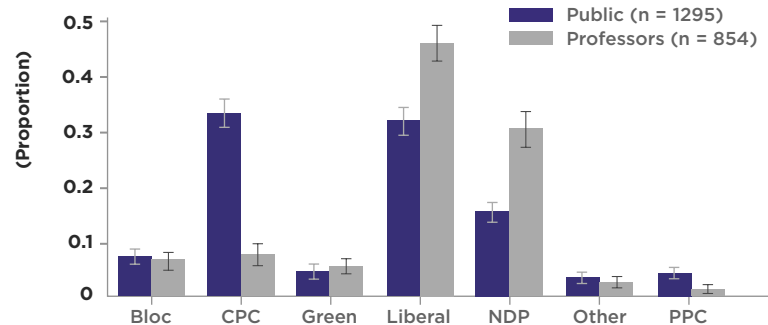
The corollary to academic freedom is ensuring that our higher education institutions are genuinely diverse organizations that contain a wide spectrum of viewpoints. Individual humans are subject to confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. Scholars are no exception. We are often unable or unwilling to correct our own biases. Instead, we rely on others to do this for us. This is the underlying principle behind practices such as blind peer-review by experts. We might overlook our own errors of interpretation or reasoning, so we need other experts with diverse perspectives to act as checks on our own limitations.⁴

This matters profoundly in higher education when scholars conduct research to provide truthful claims and to provide society with the best answers to what is socially useful and knowable. But in order for the system to work effectively, we need to avoid creating communities where everyone thinks alike, and where questioning the status quo is frowned upon. We instead need diverse groups of scholars with genuinely divergent viewpoints so that our knowledge claims and research are continuously tested (al-Gharbi 2018a).

Academic freedom and free speech allow viewpoint diversity to flourish. Where academic freedom is threatened, scholars with minority views will self-censor out of fear of repercussions, or leave higher education altogether. This is devastating to our universities and our societies. The best universities are diverse universities. And the protection of academic freedom to all in the university ensures that this viewpoint diversity isn't threatened.

On these grounds – on the importance of academic freedom and the way in which viewpoint diversity helps ensure that freedom – our survey shows that there are reasons to be worried about Canada's universities today.

FIGURE 3: HOW PROFESSORS AND THE PUBLIC VOTED IN THE 2021 FEDERAL ELECTION



Monoculture

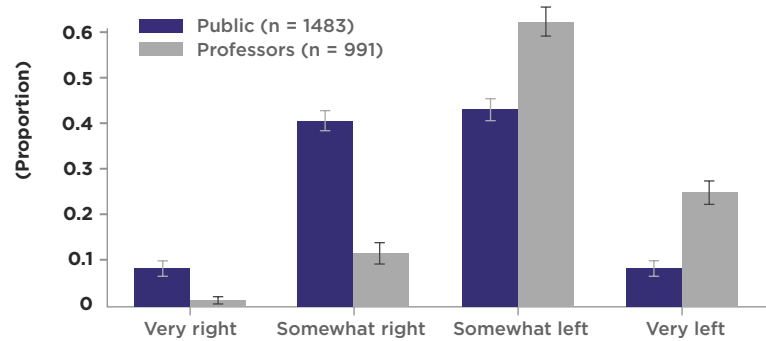
Our survey shows that Canadian universities are seriously deficient in viewpoint diversity and have instead become politically homogenous institutions. Professors vote overwhelmingly for parties of the left and they self-identify as left-leaning (Figure 3).

In the 2021 federal election, more than 76 percent of professors voted for the two main left-leaning parties – the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party. If you add supporters of the Green Party and the Bloc Québécois to these totals, both of which also attract disproportionately left-leaning voters, fully 87 percent of professors voted for parties on the left. The share of the professoriate supporting right-leaning parties is tiny: only 9 percent of professors voted for conservative parties (7.6 percent for the Conservative Party and 1.4 percent for the People’s Party). This compares to just under 39 percent of the general public who voted for right-leaning parties.

Share of vote in 2021 federal election – professors vs the public

The political skew becomes clearer when we clarify how professors self-identify (Figure 4). We asked respondents to identify their political views on a four-point scale (very left; somewhat left; somewhat right; very right). Almost 88 percent of professors at Canadian universities identified themselves as either “somewhat” or “very” left-leaning compared to only 12 percent who self-identify as right-leaning.

FIGURE 4: SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF POLITICAL VIEWS

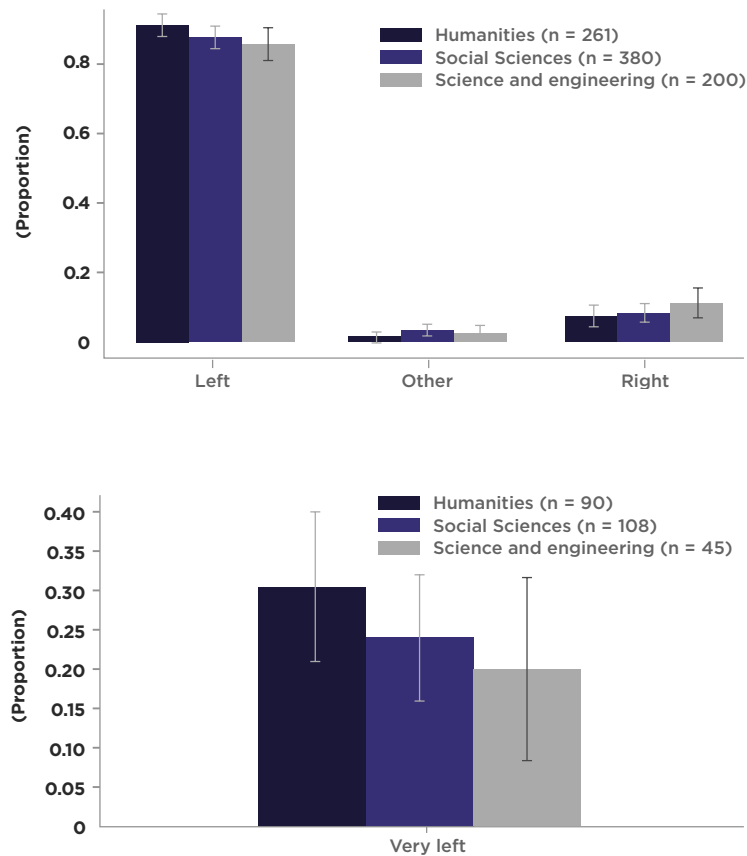


This is helpful in clarifying political voting behaviour, especially for parties that might seem to attract a variety of perspectives. The Liberal Party of Canada has traditionally been a centrist party that veers either to the left or right depending on the issue or era (Carty 2016). However, almost all professors who voted Liberal, when forced to choose if they themselves are on the left or right, see themselves on the left. Of the 393 professors who voted Liberal in our sample, fully 94 percent classify themselves as left-leaning.

Is this just a case of professors being similar to other professionals and knowledge workers? It could be argued that universities are naturally left-leaning institutions that simply attract those with certain political values based on other factors like level of education and personal interest. We don't have good Canadian data on this. However, a report comparing professors in Europe to other professionals found that, even taking these factors into account, universities were distinctly *more* homogenous than other professions. Professors are more left-leaning on almost all indicators than all other professional groups aside from artists (van de Werfhorst 2020).

Studies in other countries have suggested that some fields are more politically skewed than others – notably in the social sciences and humanities, with the sciences being slightly less politically skewed (Goodwin 2022; Langbert 2018; al-Gharbi 2018b). In Canada, the level of political conformity does not change dramatically depending on discipline, although there is a tendency for humanities and social studies scholars to select “very left” more than scholars in the sciences. However, overall, the sciences seem to be just as politically skewed as the social sciences and humanities (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: POLITICAL VIEWS OF PROFESSORS ACCORDING TO ACADEMIC FIELD



Is political skew increasing?

Studies in the UK and US have shown that political imbalance in universities has grown dramatically over the last several decades. In the United States, for example, universities were already left-leaning in the 1970s with a ratio of 3.5 registered Democrat professors for every registered Republican professor. However, in 2004, the ratio grew to 8:1 and then to 11.5:1 in 2015 (Langbert 2018). The political skew has only worsened during and since the Trump presidency (Goodwin 2022).

It seems as though political skew is increasing in Canadian universities but a lack of good data prevents us from seeing by how much. When John Porter was conducting his studies on the Canadian establishment in the 1950s and 1960s, he identified universities as part of the elite establishment and noted a tendency to support the status quo (Porter 2015, 493). However, by the 1990s, the first decade for which we have professor political voter information, Canadian professors were already skewed to the left.⁵

TABLE 5: PROPORTION OF VOTES (PERCENTAGE) TO EACH PARTY BY PROFESSORS IN THE 1993, 1997, 2000, AND 2021 CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS

Party	1993	1997	2000	2021
Liberals	41.5	46.5	41.9	42.9
Reform/PPC	2.4	3.8	5.1	1.3
Conservatives	10.9	7.3	5.7	7.1
Bloc Québécois	7.7	7.9	6.9	6.1
NDP	30.1	28.4	29	28.4
Other	2.7	2.1	5.9	7.4
No answer	4.7	4	5.4	6.9
Total	100	100	100	100
N	2721	2833	2608	1049
Did not vote	18	14.6	21.4	12.6

Source: For 1993, 1997 and 2000 Nakhaie et al. 2008.
For 2021, Elections Canada 2021.

As Table 5 shows, voting results for the 1993, 1997, and 2000 elections showed professors voting for the Liberal Party at rates of 41.5 percent, 46.5 percent and 41.0 percent. This is very similar to the 42.9 percent of the professorial vote the Liberals earned in the most recent election. Support for the NDP amongst professors was much higher than in the general population. While the NDP earned 6 percent, 11 percent and 8.5 percent of the popular vote in the 1990s, it earned the votes of 30.1 percent, 28.4 percent, and 29 percent of professors. The latest voting rate is similar, coming in at 28 percent in the 2021 federal election.

These voting numbers might make it seem as if the university’s political skew has remained constant. However, there is evidence to suggest that university professors have actually skewed increasingly leftwards in recent years. The reason for this is that while the proportion of professors voting Liberal has remained constant, the Liberal Party itself has moved to the left. The Liberal Party is distinctly more left-leaning today than it was in the 1990s. At that time, the Liberal Party was a centrist and even centre-right party that identified with fighting the deficit and fiscal conservatism. On controversial social issues like abortion, it contained a variety of perspectives and remained open to

different points of view. Today, the Liberal Party much more clearly presents itself as a party of the cultural left, and in the 2021 election ran a campaign that positioned itself to the left, battling with the New Democratic Party to enlarge its voting base (Maher 2021).

As the Liberal Party has moved leftward, its share of the popular vote has decreased. In the 1990s the party earned shares of the popular vote in the high 30s and low 40s. This roughly matched the Liberal share of the professor vote. However, in 2021, running on a much more left-leaning platform, the Liberal Party earned only 32 percent of the popular vote compared to almost 43 percent support amongst professors.

Therefore, although the Canadian data is more complicated and less clear than in the United States and the UK, it seems clear that there has been something of a leftward shift in the professoriate since the 1990s.

It is also possible that our survey under-represents the level of homogeneity amongst university professors because some very left-leaning professors opted out of the survey. We think this may be the case since after emailed invitations began to be sent out to respondents, we became aware of a series of online campaigns meant to prevent potential respondents from completing the survey.⁶ This took the form of at least two Facebook posts, several Twitter threads, and an online article on a website devoted to academic historians. All of these were written by left-leaning scholars and they suggested that our survey was a political act by right-leaning scholars. In one case, the Facebook thread was quite explicit in attempting to not only prevent respondents from completing the survey but also in encouraging them to contact our university Research Offices and President in order to have the survey shut down completely. While we cannot quantify the effects of these campaigns, it is certainly likely (based on the online comments in response to these threads) that these campaigns prevented at least some very left-leaning professors from responding to the survey, thus resulting in an under-representation of the already quite skewed trend in our sample. We received no indication of right-leaning professors opting out of the survey.

Why is homogeneity a problem?

Why does it matter that universities are politically homogenous? One might think that universities could still function effectively despite this lack of viewpoint diversity. Surely professionals can teach and research effectively despite their politics? In many fields like engineering or biochemistry, the political perspectives of the professoriate could be seen as irrelevant. And in other areas that we can trust professors to teach and research effectively in an unbiased fashion.

However, what we know about social psychology makes this optimism seem naïve at best. Organizations filled with like-minded individuals often fall prey to some of the most dangerous forms of conformity.⁷ They are likely to make significant errors precisely because they are not operating with a diverse array of information, and the sameness of those within the organization leads to overconfidence on the part of some whose views are shared by the majority, and self-censorship on the part of those who might be inclined to disagree. It is both ironic and distressing that this level of conformity could be spreading in universities – the very places that are supposed to be bastions of free thought and open inquiry.

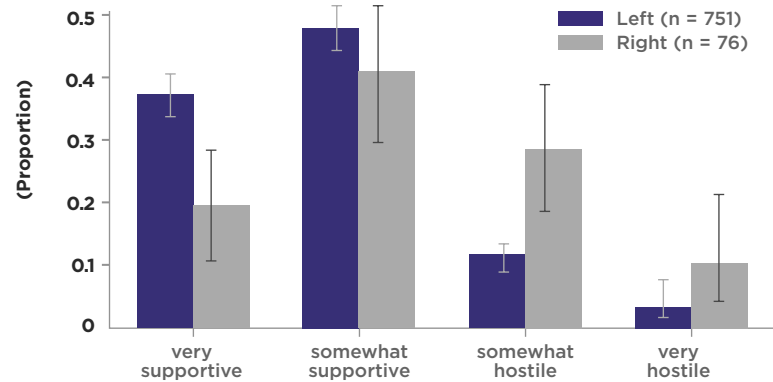
What's more, homogenous organizations like universities can be contributing to what the Harvard behavioural economist Cass Sunstein (2019) calls “group polarization.” This is the process whereby deliberation in like-minded groups leads to each individual coming out of the deliberation with an even more radical conclusion than that with which they entered. Sunstein points out how this process works in jury trials and even in deliberation amongst groups of judges. When these groups share similar perspectives, they end up making decisions that are even more radical than the median view of the average juror or judge entering the process. For example, when all jurors in a deliberation enter the discussion inclined to deliver a harsh sentence (and without there being jurors present who might offer different perspectives) juries will end up recommending a harsher punishment even than what most jurors had initially intended to recommend.

Two factors seem to cause this. First, deliberators might enter a process with some doubts. But upon hearing mostly (or entirely) arguments that support their original perspective, their confidence grows and they are more likely to be even more certain than when they began. Experiments show that it matters significantly if there are even one or a small number of individuals who offer a different perspective, or bring new and unknown information to the deliberation. Secondly, group polarization also occurs because individuals who differ from the main group view will stay silent – they will self-censor – even if they have useful true information that could change the group's decision. This leads to what Sunstein calls “reputational cascades” where bad decisions are made because individuals withhold information from the group out of fear of reputational loss.

In order to protect themselves from conformity, group polarization, and reputational cascades, organizations like universities need to encourage truth-seeking on the part of the group. And they need to ensure that there are genuinely diverse viewpoints. They need to structure incentives so that individuals are rewarded for speaking openly and without fear of censorship or reputational damage when they differ from the majority.

Universities have, over the centuries and especially in the second half of the 20th century in Canada, developed processes to foster good intellectual decision-

FIGURE 6: DEPARTMENTAL CLIMATE



making – protection for academic freedom and a genuine commitment to open inquiry. However, our report shows that there are reasons to think that the political homogeneity on campus is now creating a hostile climate that risks group polarization and conformity. On a host of issues, the politically acceptable range of policies, the Overton window, of what is acceptable to research and teach – without fear of reputation damage – is narrowing significantly.

Hostile climate?

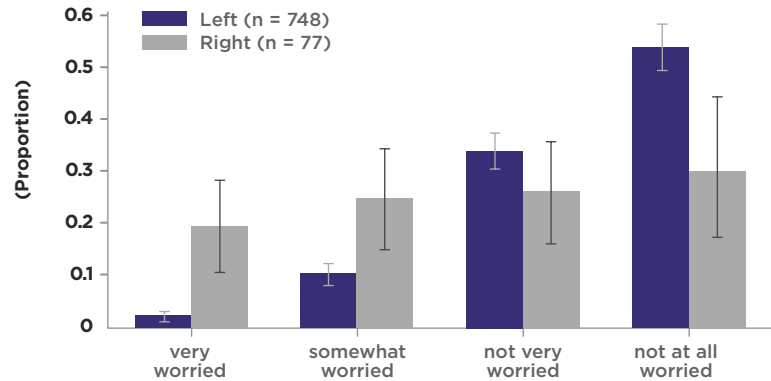
The politically unbalanced demography of the campus leads to a climate that is hostile to those with minority political viewpoints. In some respects, it might seem as if there is no problem. Most professors on campus feel that their department offers a welcome environment. But, as soon as we break down these answers by political orientation (Figure 6), the scene changes.

We asked professors, “Do you feel that there is a **supportive or hostile climate** towards people with your beliefs in your department?” The options were “very supportive; somewhat supportive; somewhat hostile; very hostile.” Left-leaning professors – that is, the majority of professors – largely report a supportive climate. Only 14 percent of left-leaning professors felt that they worked in a hostile work environment. However, this number rose to 40 percent for right-leaning professors. Perhaps most significantly, only 20 percent of right-leaning professors report a very supportive environment.

To what extent does a fear of political censorship or cancel culture underlie this hostile climate on campus? We asked several questions that all began with the same premise. This was: “To what extent are you **WORRIED about losing your job, having your reputation damaged, facing major adversity or**

FIGURE 7: PROFESSOR FEAR OF NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS IF THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS WERE TO BECOME KNOWN

• Professors: if **political opinions** became known



missing out on professional opportunities because...” and then we offered professors various scenarios to test the extent of their worry.

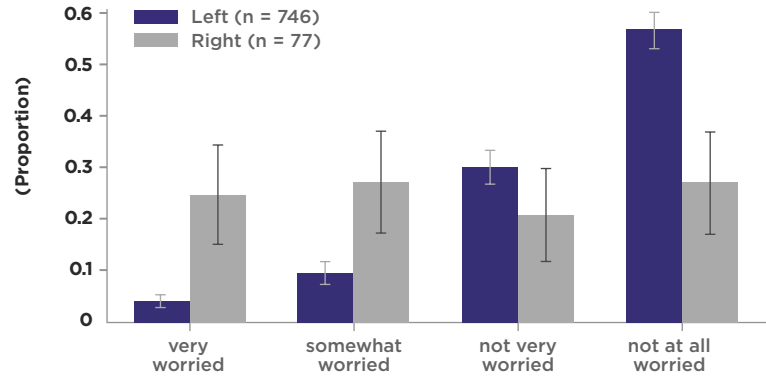
One of the reasons why it might seem that cancel culture is not an issue in universities – and one reason why we find some professors showing skepticism towards the concept – is that most professors are left-leaning and they are not especially worried that their own political viewpoints will create difficulty for them in this politically homogenous environment. For example, when we asked if professors would be worried if their political opinions became known, almost 88 percent of left-leaning professors were either not very worried or not worried at all. However, when we look to the right-leaning political minority, the situation changes considerably. On the right, almost half – 44 percent – were somewhat or very worried about facing negative consequences if colleagues, students, or others on campus learn of their political opinions (Figure 7). This scenario didn’t even involve professors discussing these ideas in the classroom or research. It merely measured self-reported fear of one’s politics becoming public knowledge.

It’s reasonable to assume that this finding has some bearing on debates over cancel culture. To most professors who find themselves in the political majority on campus and who are not worried about having their political opinions known, cancel culture is clearly not a major fear (at least not as related to their political beliefs). However, this is not the case for the political minority on campus.

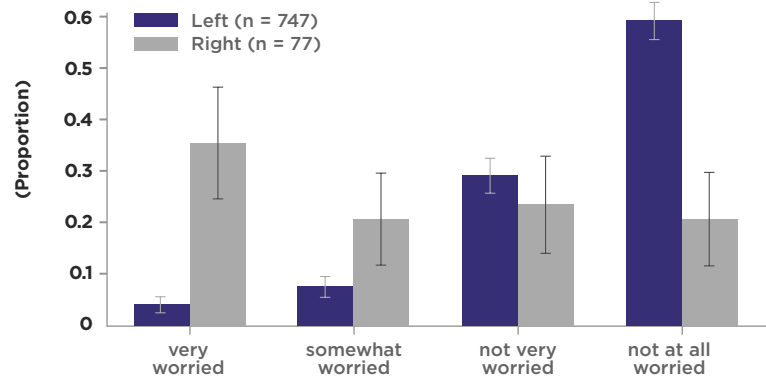
When we focus our questions on specific political issues in more detail, we see more evidence of a hostile climate on campus for political minorities. We considered several scenarios (Figure 8), asking the same question as above but asking professors if they feared consequences:

FIGURE 8: PROFESSOR FEAR OF NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS IF OPINIONS ON VARIOUS TOPICS WERE KNOWN

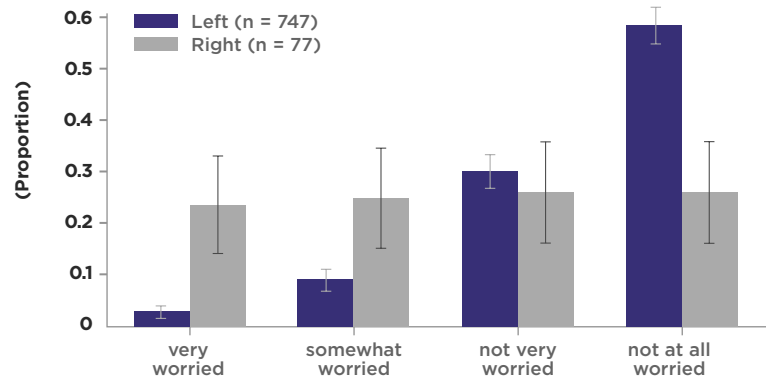
- Professors: if **your opinions about EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion)** became known



- Professors: if **your opinions about gender** became known



- Professors: if **your opinions about social justice** became known



- if your **opinions about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)** became known
- if your **opinions about gender and gender identity** became known
- if your **opinions about social justice** became known

In each of these variations, we found that half of right-leaning professors were either somewhat worried or very worried about suffering significant negative personal or professional consequences merely for having others know their opinions on these topics. The number ranged from 48 percent worry for EDI, to 48 percent worry for social justice, and reached a peak of 56 percent worry for gender identity. This latter finding is born up by other studies that find that gender-critical feminists often bear the brunt of intense political discrimination on campus. The departure of Kathleen Stock from the University of Sussex is, in this instance, the tip of the iceberg under which lies serious problems (Stock 2021). Kaufmann’s study found that 72 percent of Canadian professors would not be comfortable even eating a meal with someone who questioned the right of trans women to access a women’s shelter (Kaufmann 2021b). Our report found cases of feminist scholars who now, in order to avoid public shaming and possible devastating professional consequences, no longer even teach in their area of expertise.

Below are the comments of several of our respondents who pointed to gender identity as a key area of worry:

- “Topics related to human sexuality and gender are policed in such a way that it is better to just find other areas to research.”
- “The debate about gender identity, and the undermining of women’s rights is something that people are very reluctant to discuss and air in academic discussions. Our students are much more willing to discuss and entertain this issue than faculty – many of the latter insist on ‘no debate.’”
- “I used to publish papers on issues of sexuality and gender identity, but I no longer write or speak publicly about them. I’ve seen what’s happened to other professors elsewhere (e.g., Kathleen Stock, Rebecca Tuvel) who have done so.”

This level of fear and this much evidence of a hostile climate related to these issues on campus should raise a red flag about the extent to which universities can effectively discuss and debate these political issues. In each case, the dominant progressive understanding of these issues has undergone significant change in the recent past, often within the last five to 10 years.

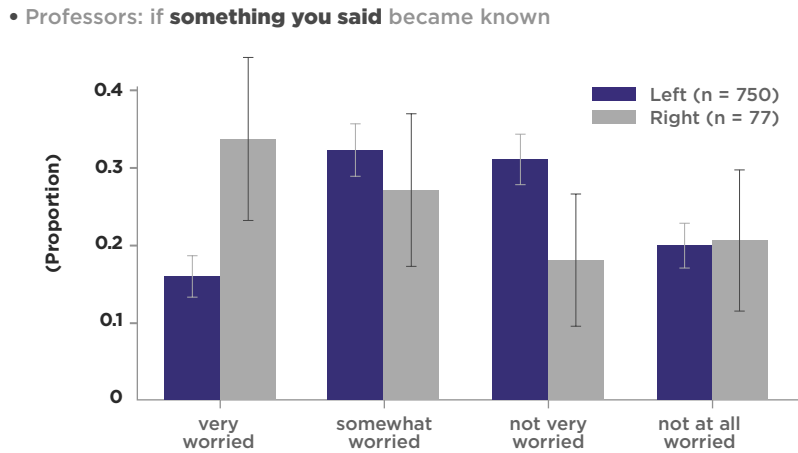
If we take the issue of EDI as an example, we can see how homogeneity of opinion and self-censorship seriously diminishes the quality of our understanding of a topic. In recent years critical race theory proponents have challenged an older model that fought against racial and other forms of discrimination by focusing on equal opportunity and a “blind” notion of justice, emphasizing that all individuals should be treated equally.⁸ EDI proponents now often posit that a better model is one that focuses on systemic discrimination, and one in which the intent of a perpetrator is seen as irrelevant to the definition of discrimination. This model also often expands what counts as discrimination and focuses on new concepts like microaggressions and cultural appropriation.⁹

This represents a significant shift in talking about how to combat discrimination and what counts as discrimination. There are thoughtful and intelligent proponents of both perspectives and yet academic discussion in Canada largely shuts out perspectives that don’t adopt the more recent and radical EDI viewpoints. If we only take the prominent case of anti-black discrimination in the United States as an example, we can find a host of critics of the now-dominant EDI approach – including amongst well-known African American thinkers such as Wilfred Reilly, Coleman Hughes, Glenn Loury, Roland Fryer, and John McWhorter.¹⁰ McWhorter has written a recent bestselling critique of the EDI approach, arguing that these new perspectives operate more like a religion than a typical academic discourse (McWhorter 2021). Each of these thinkers provides robust, compelling, and fascinating perspectives. And yet our survey suggests that almost half of right-leaning professors, even if they agreed with these critics, would be afraid if their colleagues learned their true positions. This doesn’t even go as far as having professors assign readings by these academics or engage in open debate in their research or teaching.

This issue showed up a number of times in comments from our respondents:

- “I am deeply skeptical about the philosophical quality or political value of EDI policies, e.g. One can find individual colleagues – even some with some seniority – who have similar hesitations, but as soon as there are more than a few people in the room, *a fortiori* larger gatherings of decision-making bodies, it is not only impossible to speak openly, it is impossible to ask basic questions of definition. Across many topics, one has to bite one’s tongue...”
- “Often researchers in my area are engaged in EDI-type research. They behave more as activists and less as scientists. I often censor my disapproval of their approach.”
- “It is not possible to challenge things like imposing EDI policies in all areas of academia. It is not possible to even debate these things without fear of reprisal.”

FIGURE 9: PROFESSOR FEAR OF NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS IF SOMEONE MISUNDERSTOOD SOMETHING THEY SAID, ETC.



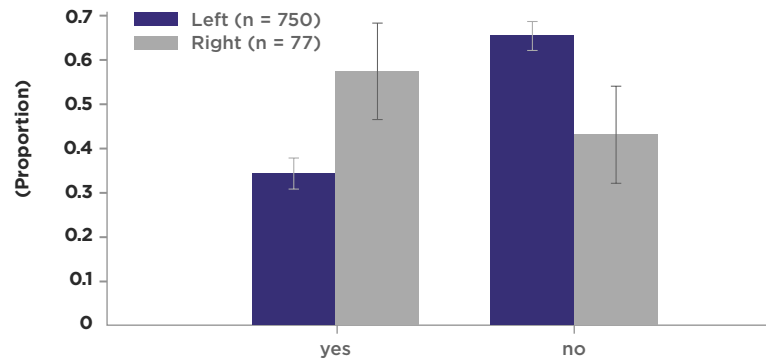
This is a classic instance of what Cass Sunstein calls a reputational cascade (Sunstein 2019, 68-70). Fearful of reputational harm, scholars self-censor and therefore rob their students and their colleagues of the ability to grapple with a fuller and more robust debate on a topic than is now presented. In Canadian universities, discussions of EDI – and a host of other controversial topics – are neutered. This occurs precisely because scholars with divergent viewpoints fear reputational and serious career consequences from offering different perspectives.

Effective group decision-making – and intellectual thought – requires that all participants reveal what they know and how they feel about the issues involved. Yet a fear of reputational harm can propel individuals to hide their actual preferences and knowledge. Not wanting to suffer damage to their reputation, they will self-censor. This ultimately leads to a worse outcome for the group as it robs the group of information both about facts only known to certain people and also of the real preferences of those in the group.

Amongst right-leaning professors, the level of perceived hostility to their ideas and views creates a fertile climate for this kind of reputational cascade to take place. Not wanting to be singled out for wrong-think, political minority professors (including possibly left-leaning professors who also might have slightly different opinions on these sensitive topics, especially gender-critical feminists) will instead self-censor. The result is an anemic intellectual debate robbed of different viewpoints that could help all involved better understand key social issues.

While our study draws attention most dramatically to those with divergent political viewpoints, there is also evidence that a wider group of scholars in

FIGURE 10: WHETHER PROFESSORS HAVE REFRAINED FROM AIRING VIEWS, AVOIDED PURSUING OR PUBLISHING RESEARCH, ETC.



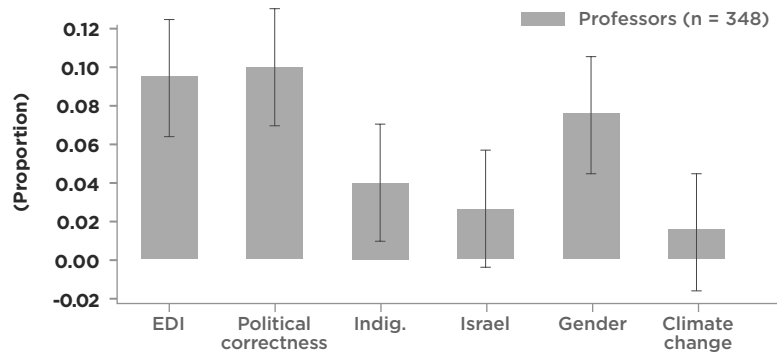
the university are worried about cancel culture in a more generic fashion. In one instance, we offered a more general scenario, asking “To which extent are you **WORRIED about losing your job, having your reputation damaged, facing major adversity or missing out on professional opportunities** because someone misunderstands something you have said or done, takes it out of context, or posts something from your past online?” When we pose the question in this open-ended fashion, and not tied to any specific political issue, we find a relatively high level of anxiety among many academics. Only one in five professors are “not at all worried” about this issue. Moreover, while right-leaning professors are the most worried, almost half of left-leaning professors are either somewhat or very worried (Figure 9).

Self-censorship

Following on our findings about the political homogeneity of Canadian universities and the relatively high levels of fear about a hostile climate amongst political minorities, our results also show significant evidence of self-censorship in the academy. Although it is most pronounced for right-leaning professors, self-censorship is a problem for a significant minority of all professors.

We asked professors: “Have you **refrained from airing views in teaching or academic discussions**, or avoided pursuing or publishing research, out of fear of possible consequences to your career from doing so?” Amongst right-leaning professors, fully 57 percent have self-censored out of fear of negative consequences. And just over one third – 34 percent – of left-leaning professors have done the same (Figure 10).

FIGURE 11: ISSUES ABOUT WHICH RESPONDENTS HAVE REFRAINED FROM AIRING THEIR VIEWS



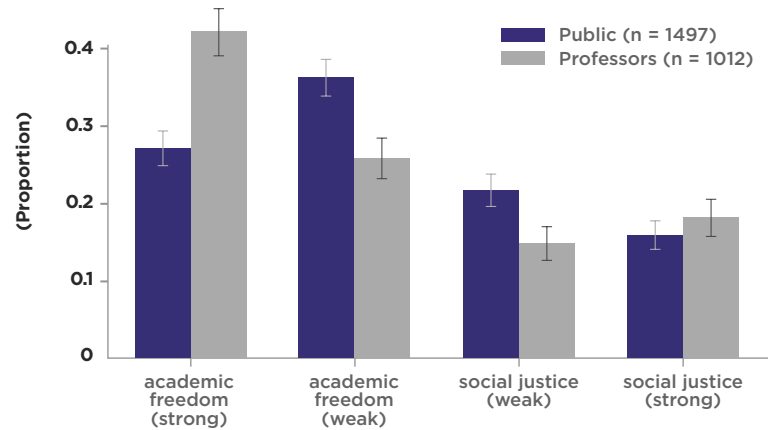
Our study replicates other work that has used smaller Canadian samples. Matthew Goodwin’s recent report found that 44 percent of Canadian academics reported that they felt the need to self-censor their political views on campus – and that the proportion on the right who felt that way is significantly higher (Goodwin 2022, 1). Quebec’s recent Cloutier Commission found that 60 percent of faculty were self-censoring in that province and 35 percent avoided teaching certain topics (La Commission Scientifique 2021). These findings lay behind the Quebec government’s recent move to further bolster and protect academic freedom in that province. Kaufmann’s comparative study of the US, the UK, and Canada found that more than half of right-leaning professors in North America felt the need to self-censor in teaching and research (Kaufmann 2021b).

Professors provided a range of examples and scenarios in which they have kept silent on topics while teaching or in academic discussions. In some cases, they change the way they teach, avoiding certain topics altogether, even topics for which they have research expertise. They provided examples of changing their research career in order to avoid possible negative repercussions. The most common topics mentioned including issues around EDI, political correctness, and gender identity. But other issues emerged as well including Indigenous issues, climate change (especially at Alberta universities), and the Israel/Palestinian conflict (with professors fearing reputation attacks from those who support either side of this conflict). The answers to this question (Figure 11) show that although at the moment it is largely right-leaning professors who most often feel the need to self-censor, this does not mean that self-censorship isn’t also an issue for some other scholars including those on the left.

The comments about self-censorship in our survey were plentiful and they speak volumes about the high strain this creates for faculty:

- “There are specific subjects I won’t talk or write about for fear of retribution by my colleagues or the university itself.”
- “My program and my dept has an explicit commitment to social justice without offering any definition of that concept. I routinely keep my views about social justice – which for me relate most closely to providing an accessible, superior, rigorous education for all, regardless of station in life – to myself for fear of being ostracized by colleagues.”
- “There is a constant need to bite one’s tongue both in the classroom, and in research. It addresses a recognition of Overton’s window that limits what can be discussed and how it must be discussed within social and institutional realities.”
- “Constantly. So much anxiety among my colleagues that even historical libertarians or conservatives pretend to be staunch leftists.”
- “I’m careful not to express in the classroom or with many of my colleagues political points of view that are generally seen as unacceptable by my discipline and some students.”
- “I would never express my views publicly, as I am very critical of the seemingly narrow version of what it means to be ‘progressive’ and I feel that anyone who espouses views that stray from the orthodoxy now has to be flushed out. There is an extreme intolerance of the idea that there are ‘other’ ways to view the world. I was never ‘conservative’ but now would be viewed as such.”
- “I have avoided mentioning certain perspectives because I perceive that some in my department view some kinds of historical research as automatically antithetical to social justice agendas. I do not believe the two to be inconsistent, and I worry that there is a narrowing of acceptable academic inquiry and discourse.”

FIGURE 12: WHAT WOULD YOU PRIORITIZE?



Academic freedom

The safeguard against both self-censorship and viewpoint diversity is supposed to be academic freedom. This is the principle that scholars should be free to research and investigate scientific and social issues based only on their curiosity and where the information leads them. No topic should be closed off from examination in the search for truth. In Canada, most full-time professors are part of either a union or faculty association. Almost all collective agreements have academic freedom clauses. This ought to provide robust protection, especially when it comes to protection against infringements on academic freedom from university employers (Robinson 2019).

The good news from our survey is that there is overall widespread support for academic freedom amongst Canadian professors. Even when we asked a question posing a scenario where a professor’s research conflicted with “social justice goals,” 68 percent of professors said they would prioritize academic freedom (Figure 12). This is even stronger than the commitment to academic freedom in the general population.

There are, though, reasons to believe that academic freedom protections in collective agreements don’t sufficiently protect academic freedom on campus today. Most importantly, the academic freedom provisions are often not as strong – or are nonexistent – for part-time staff who make up a significant portion of the teaching component at most Canadian universities. In our self-censorship question, we had a number of responses from those who claimed they weren’t free to teach and research because of their precarious academic employment – either teaching part-time in positions that need to be renewed each term/year or who worked in junior positions and depended on the goodwill of more senior colleagues for promotion and tenure.¹¹

One respondent explained that “As an adjunct without tenure, I am cognizant of the fact that every contract could be my last. Thus, I strive to avoid controversial content or opinions in my teaching. There is no due process to end my career, the university only needs to let my 3-month contract lapse and not be renewed, so any misconstrued or misinterpreted statement could be highly problematic for me.” Another was more blunt: “I’m not tenured – I’m at risk until I am!”

These protections also don’t apply to students. They don’t protect student’s speech or research in classes. A recent classroom expression survey done with students at Canadian universities found high levels of self-censorship and fear about openly expressing opinions from students. This survey found clear differences between English-speaking and French-speaking students in Canada, with English speaking students the most fearful – 61 percent of English-speaking students surveyed reported having self-censored (Drapeau et al. 2022). Even where universities promote free speech on campus, students often find themselves possibly at the mercy of administrators enforcing student codes of conduct, many of which contain clauses regarding maintaining “safe” spaces on campus, and couched in a way that could deem many ideas “harmful.”¹²

On the other hand, the collective agreement provisions also often don’t effectively protect faculty from online campaigns or complaints from students – especially when these are weaponized by claiming “harm” and invoking other university policies that focus on issues such as EDI, Indigenization, or well-being. These alternate policies can be used to claim that academic freedom for faculty ought not exist in certain circumstances. This is the cross-pressure that Kaufmann noted in his study of academic freedom (2021b). It pushes administrators and colleagues who are ostensibly committed to academic freedom to violate the freedom of faculty to teach and research freely. It is also why insisting that universities have free speech or academic freedom policies won’t, in themselves, be sufficient to protect academic freedom. If administrators can weaponize ideas of harm and safety – often contained in other policies – then this can effectively neuter academic freedom statements.

Who does not support academic freedom?

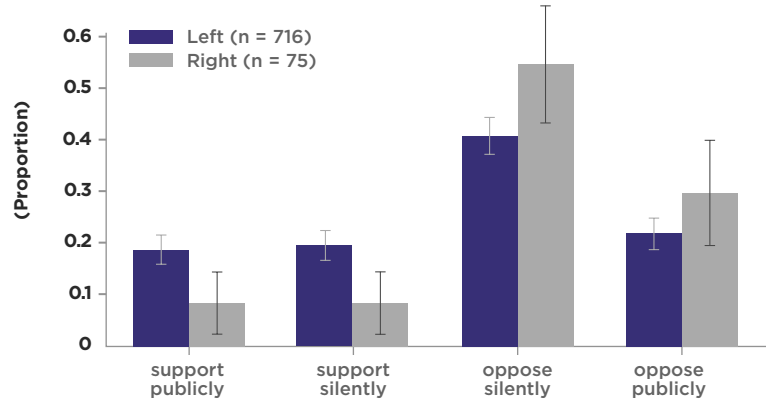
There is a sizeable minority of professors who would prioritize social justice over academic freedom. In our survey question that specifically asked professors to choose, in a generic situation, between academic freedom and social justice, 32 percent of faculty chose social justice. This backs up what other studies have found including those by Kaufman and Goodwin (Kaufmann 2021b; Goodwin 2022, 2). Most professors support academic freedom. But a significant minority do not – especially when academic freedom conflicts with the professors’ other political and moral values. This minority – who either don’t support academic freedom, or only support it in limited contexts – seems to be behind much of the fear about the hostile climate on campus for those with political minority viewpoints.

Some of the comments elicited by our survey show the thinking involved amongst those faculty who are cross-pressured to override academic freedom. These academics argue that certain types of people – white cis-gendered men most notably – have benefited from privilege historically and therefore should be willing to keep silent on certain issues:

- “While I support academic freedom, it does not include supporting outdated/racist/anti-EDI ideas. As a person who had an identity of multiple intersections of privilege, I must be aware how much that privilege impacts my views, what I can even think about to research.”
- “Being a white heterosexual male no longer entitles you to voice any or all of your concerns, including ones about academic freedom, and this is certainly a good thing (even though it does occasionally impede me from airing my views on equality, efficacy, freedom, quality of research). I do not regret that in some areas of the world, including mine, the time has come to tip the scales in the opposite direction. In fact I am proud of it and I will continue to contribute to this ‘new world order.’”
- “I do think academic freedom is very, very important and should be protected, but I think researchers need to think about the implications for their work and prioritize work with a social justice angle.”

A key feature of this perspective is the way it assumes a clear and steady definition of what is harmful and offensive. The professors here who value social justice over academic freedom do not seem to concede that there can be differences of opinion about whether certain speech is offensive, or that the intention of the speaker should matter. They call for a self-reflexive silencing on the part of those with certain identity characteristics and political viewpoints.

FIGURE 13: PROFESSOR RESPONSE TO A PETITION SANCTIONING ANOTHER PROFESSOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH “QUESTIONING THAT RACIAL INJUSTICE IS A SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM IN CANADA”



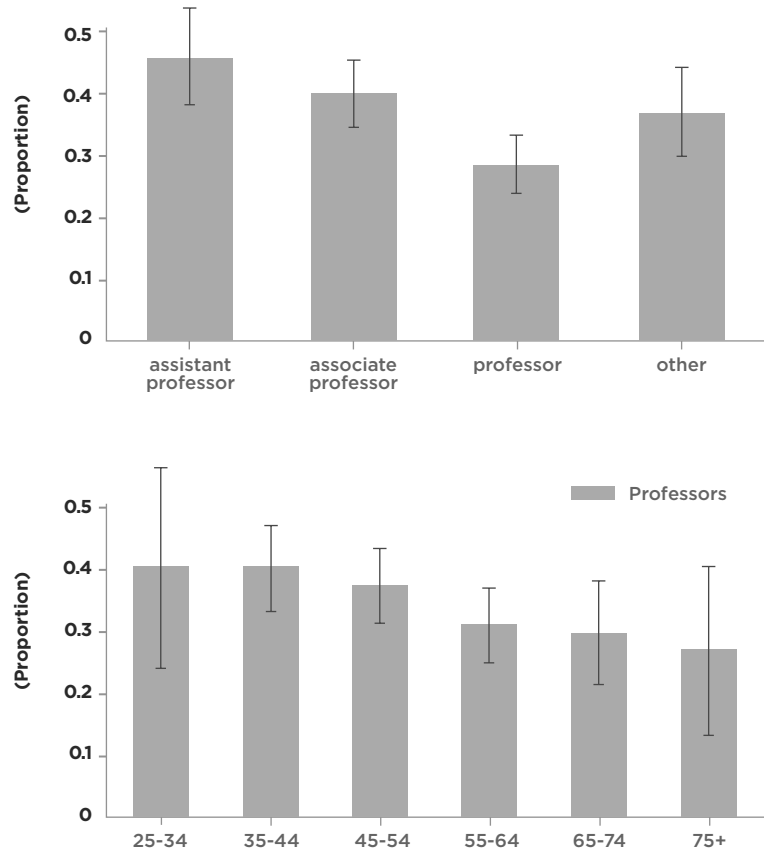
Collective agreement provisions likely won't effectively protect against infringements on academic freedom that come from these colleagues. Unions exist to protect employees against the actions of employers. However, if professors are worried about reputation or other consequences coming from other faculty, union membership often offers little to no protection. This is the “soft authoritarianism” noted in Kaufmann’s study – the way in which some faculty can and will discriminate against unpopular views in a myriad of hard-to-detect ways in reviewing research, promotion, or simply through social and professional ostracism.

When we move from a generic question to one involving specifics, the support for social justice over academic freedom increases. We asked respondents what they would do “If a university professor did research that questioned the idea that racial injustice is a significant problem in modern Canada and students petitioned to silence them.” The options ranged from supporting the petition to silence the professors publicly or privately, or opposing the petition publicly or privately (Figure 13).

While, again, a majority of professors would oppose the petition to silence the professor, there is a sizeable minority of professors, especially left-leaning, who would support the “cancellation” of the professor. In this case, 38 percent of left-leaning professors would not support academic freedom.

What accounts for this support for social justice over academic freedom? What other factors predict this outcome? When we break down the answers to this last question (Figure 14), two factors stand out – age and sex. Fully 46 percent of assistant professors supported students attempting to “cancel” the professor.

FIGURE 14: SUPPORT FOR A PETITION BY RANK AND AGE



This compares to only 28 percent support amongst full professors. As age increases, support for cancellation amongst the professoriate tends to decrease.

Sex is also a confounding variable. Support for the students’ petition to silence the professor in the above scenario was highest amongst women. Just over 45 percent of female professors reported that they would support “cancelling” the professor compared to only 23 percent of male professors. Although the numbers are very small (and confidence intervals wide), those who selected “non-binary” and “other” also supported cancellation at rates similar to or higher than women (Figure 15).

When we ask professors to state their opinion on the acceptability of political discrimination, the vast majority report that this kind of discrimination is not appropriate. This response to an open question, of course, can hide more complicated and hidden preferences that one might not be willing to specify on a survey. In his own analysis where he conducted hidden preference

FIGURE 15: SUPPORT FOR PETITION BY GENDER

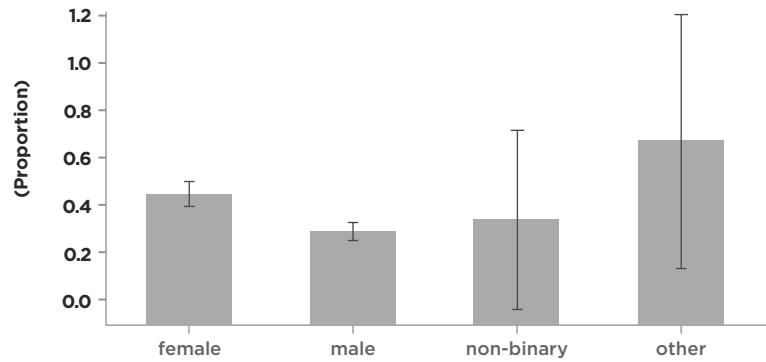
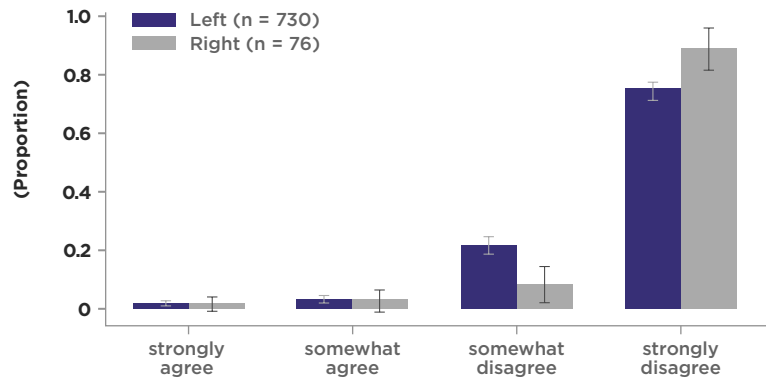
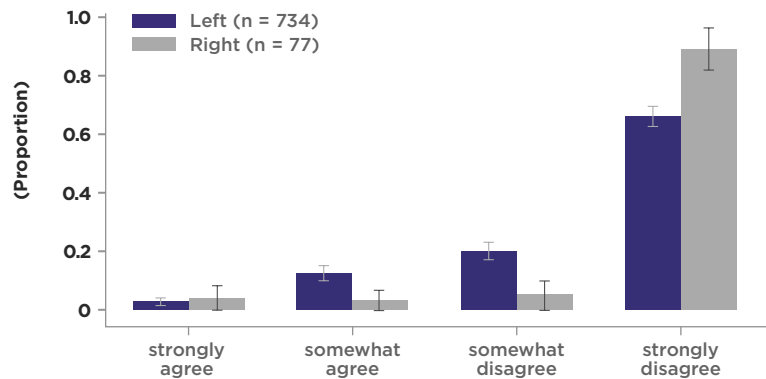


FIGURE 16: ACCEPTABILITY OF POLITICAL DISCRIMINATION IN HIRING

• Professors: acceptable to rate a candidate on the **left** lower



• Professors: acceptable to rate a candidate on the **right** lower



experiments, Kaufmann found quite high levels of tolerance for political discrimination amongst the professoriate (Kaufmann 2021b). While we did not conduct this kind of hidden-preference experiment, it is notable that even in an open survey, professors changed their opinion on the acceptability of political discrimination depending on the viewpoint targeted. That is, only a tiny minority (5 percent of left-leaning professors, and 4 percent of right-leaning professors) think it is acceptable to discriminate against left-leaning candidates in a job search. However, when we switched the target to a right-leaning candidate, the number of left-leaning professors who believe political discrimination is acceptable rises to 14 percent (Figure 16).

Who are the academic freedom champions?

While there is a minority of illiberal professors who consistently choose other political goals over academic freedom, there also appears to be a group of professors who are academic freedom champions. We looked to see which professors prioritized academic freedom over social justice in the generic question and who also opposed the student petition to silence the professor. We found a large group of professors who consistently prioritized academic freedom.

Who are these professors? While the somewhat smaller number of respondents concerned widens confidence intervals, similar patterns appear to be present (although inverted) as with the illiberal minority. As such, rank appears to influence of who will be an academic freedom champion. Fully 48 percent of full professors fall into this category compared to only 39 percent of assistant professors. Not surprisingly, age appears to be significant as well. Only 28 percent of the youngest professors (aged 25-34) prioritize academic freedom; this rises to over 46 percent for all age categories from age 45 and up (and 69 percent of those aged 75 and up) (Figure 17).

The political minority on campus – right-leaning professors – overwhelmingly support academic freedom. Over 80 percent of right-leaning professors fit into our academic freedom champion category. This compares to 44 percent of those who identify on the left. This fits with what one would expect. Majority positions in a situation of relative power have less to gain from allowing open debate, and much more to gain from stifling dissent. Still, the fact that there are so few right-leaning professors means that, overall, the majority of those who champion academic freedom on campus are on the left, as Figure 18 demonstrates.

While academic discipline again does not seem to be a factor, sex is significantly correlated with support for academic freedom (Figure 19). Over 56 percent of male professors prioritize academic freedom compared to only 31 percent of female professors.

FIGURE 17: CHARACTERISTICS OF “ACADEMIC FREEDOM CHAMPIONS”

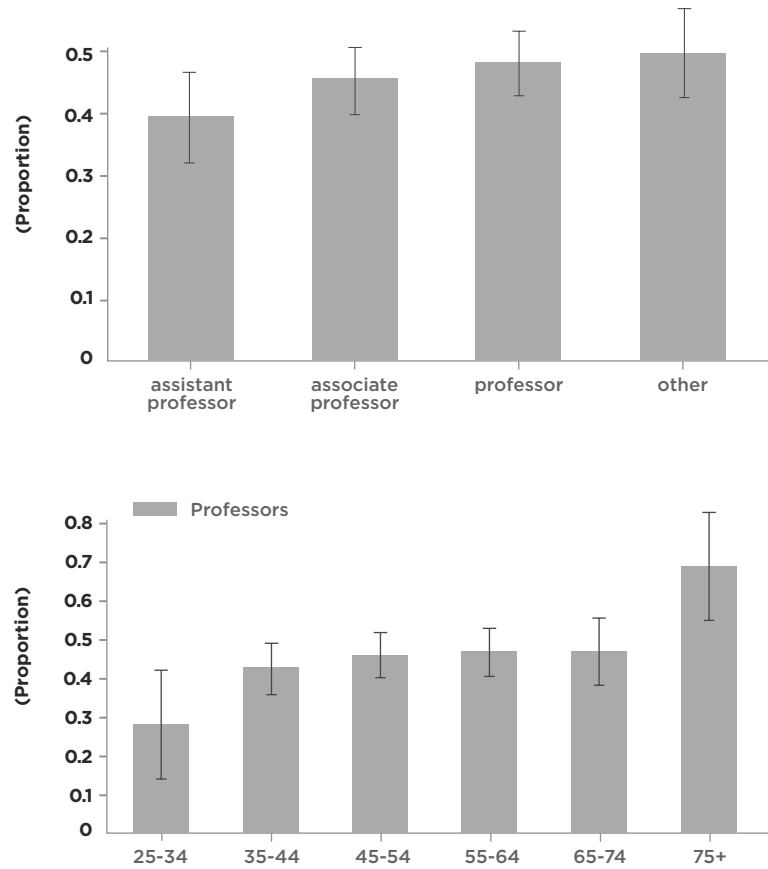


FIGURE 18: ACADEMIC FREEDOM CHAMPIONS ACCORDING TO POLITICAL VIEWS

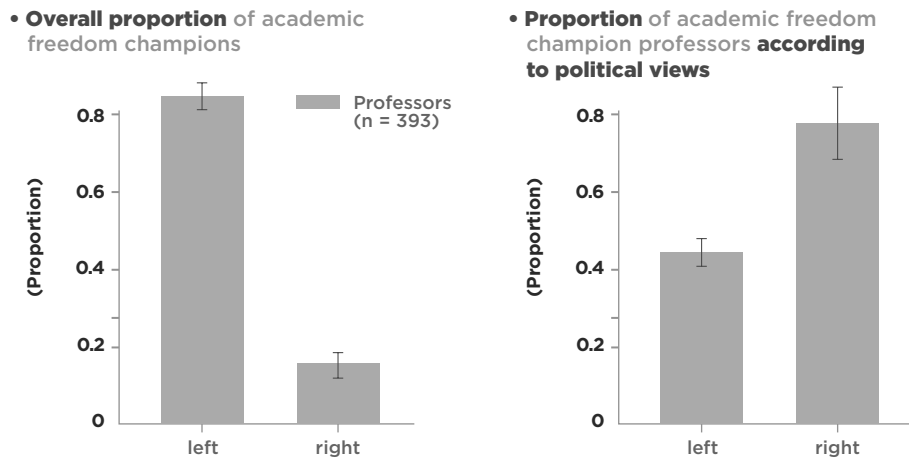
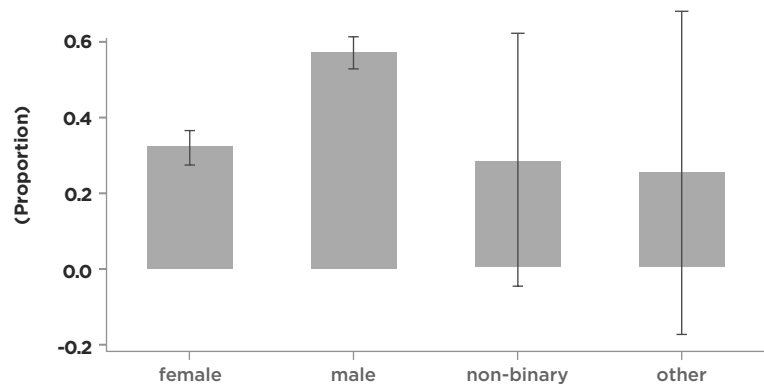


FIGURE 19: ACADEMIC FREEDOM CHAMPIONS BY GENDER



What can be done?

Our survey backs up the findings of international reports and comparative studies that argue there is a serious crisis in the university right now. Canadian universities are political monocultures vastly over-representing the perspectives of those on the left. This demographic reality brings with it disturbing implications for the ability of universities to continue to act as bastions of open inquiry and rational thought in modern Canada. Large sections of political minorities on campus view universities as hostile to their point of view. They respond by self-censoring at alarmingly high rates. The effect this has on public debate is profound. Exactly at the moment when polarization is such a pressing problem in the wider society, our universities are showing themselves to be part of the problem when they ought to be part of the solution.

Deliberation in homogenous organizations like universities can lead to even greater polarization precisely because there aren't divergent voices to offer counter perspectives, or bring to light useful information that might otherwise be overlooked. We need to trust that universities are places where different perspectives can be aired openly and collegially, fostering the highest quality debate on pressing issues. Instead, professors who don't adhere to a narrow reading of left-leaning views on social issues remain silent, fearful of being punished for wrong-think.

The main purpose of this survey was to provide more robust evidence about whether Canadian universities were in crisis along the lines of what is occurring in other countries. Our report largely reinforces these international surveys and backs up the position that Canadian universities are homogenous monocultures where academic freedom is under threat.

With this evidence before us, it might be useful to ask what steps could be taken to help diversify Canadian universities, protect against self-censorship and bolster academic freedom.

What, then, can be done?

Below we recommend several options that can be followed at the provincial level to enshrine political neutrality and academic freedom in the running of universities, and in the research funding agencies at the national level. There are also procedures and practices that universities can independently follow. However, given the political skew within the universities, it is highly likely that reform will have to come from outside.

1. Creation of an *Academic Freedom Act*

- Provinces should pass legislation making academic freedom central to the higher education system.
- This could work in a similar fashion to the Canada Health Act, which enunciates key principles under which universal health care operates in the country, but in this case would focus on academic freedom. This kind of Act would ensure local autonomy of individual institutions but would insist that, in order to receive provincial funding, universities and colleges would need to abide by the fundamental principles under the Act. Ideally these would be short and clear.
- It also needs to be made certain that academic freedom is a core principle that cannot be abrogated by other policy commitments (and weaponized ideas of harm and safety).
- This could build on the UK model of the “Academic Freedom Champion,” which empowers an official office to ensure universities are protecting academic freedom across the jurisdiction.

2. Institutional neutrality

- Universities need to remain politically neutral institutions in their public statements, hiring practices, and organizational structure and rules. In order for political minority faculty to feel safe from censorship and negative repercussions, faculty need to be certain that the institutional structure of the institution is not taking sides.
- This would include ensuring that universities themselves refrain from making partisan political statements or making political statements about controversial social issues, especially where it is possible that faculty research might not back up the stated

position. How could a professor feel free to openly inquire into a topic on which their institution has already taken a firm position?

3. Eliminate political loyalty tests from hiring, research funding, and other human resource decisions and bodies

- Eliminate additional elements to hiring that are not relevant to the job of being a professor and that act as political loyalty tests.
- This would include eliminating what is now becoming the common practice of requiring EDI/diversity statements in hiring/research funding applications. These statements insist on a narrow and ideologically specific way of understanding discrimination and currently act to weed out candidates with different perspectives and are forms of compelled speech.
- This should also include reviewing job advertisements and other applications to ensure that criteria are neutral and don't introduce forms of systemic political discrimination into the process. For instance, it has become common to advertise for positions in "critical" approaches to various topics. Given how such scholarship defines "critical" – relating to a radical left-leaning interpretation of various topics – it is in practice impossible for this kind of advertisement not to introduce political discrimination into the university. All job advertisements and similar calls for applications should be reviewed to avoid political/viewpoint discrimination.

4. Legislate that unions cannot discriminate based on politics in the defence of their members

- At present faculty are dependent upon their faculty associations to defend them in the face of attacks on their academic freedom. There is a danger that some faculty associations might not be willing to provide this defence – or at least not as strenuously as duty should require – where the member in question is advocating political beliefs that are unconventional.
- Legislation could make it clear to labour unions and faculty associations that they can not politically discriminate against members, which would thus also make it easier for union members to bring suits against faculty associations if they fail to provide adequate representation.

5. Promote a culture of academic freedom

- Universities should do more to promote knowledge of the importance of academic freedom on campus. This should involve

educating new students and faculty on the history and importance of academic freedom, and the protections it offers.

- Emphasis should be placed on the virtue of being exposed to different points of view, engaging with difficult ideas, and curious and compassionate listening and discussion.

About the authors



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Endnotes

- 1 For examples of these perspectives see Ives and Haque 2022; Siddique 2021; Estrada 2021; Jaschik 2011.
- 2 Further information about the polling company that was used in this paper's survey can be found here: <https://www.legeropinion.com/en/about/>
- 3 The classic statement on these issues related to free speech (not academic freedom *per se*) is Mill (1859).
- 4 On these issues in general, see Kahneman 2013.
- 5 Voting information on professors from the 1993, 1997, and 2000 elections is drawn from Nakhaie and Adam 2008.
- 6 The Facebook threads are private though we retained screen captures of the original posts and subsequent comments. See also Dubinsky and Perry 2022.
- 7 The discussion that follows draws on the concepts of group polarization, conformity, and “reputational cascades” outlined in Sunstein 2019.
- 8 For an introductory survey of Critical Race Theory which touches on these various points see Delgado and Stefancic 2017.
- 9 For a study which places these developments into patterns of modern cultural change see Campbell and Manning 2018. For an analytical and quantitative explanation of the rise of concepts of harm in our moral culture, see Haslam et al. 2020.
- 10 For just some of the most direct work from these African American intellectuals which challenges EDI and critical race theory approaches, see Reilly 2019; Hughes 2020; Loury 2003; and Fryer 2019.

- 11 Although this issue was raised by a number of our respondents, the public discussion of viewpoint diversity has been strikingly absent from discussions of “precarity” in Canadian universities and isn’t mentioned at all in the recently published *Prekarious Historical Instructors Manifesto* (2020).
- 12 This conflict between university policies was at the centre over fights about academic freedom in the 1990s – speech codes in particular – and Frank Furedi has been a persistent commentator on these trends. See Furedi 2017.

constructive *important* *forward-thinking*
excellent *high-quality* *insightful*
active

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT MLI

The Right Honourable Paul Martin

I want to congratulate the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** for 10 years of excellent service to Canada. The Institute's commitment to public policy innovation has put them on the cutting edge of many of the country's most pressing policy debates. The Institute works in a persistent and constructive way to present new and insightful ideas about how to best achieve Canada's potential and to produce a better and more just country. Canada is better for the forward-thinking, research-based perspectives that the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** brings to our most critical issues.

The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

The Honourable Irwin Cotler

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

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The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has produced countless works of scholarship that solve today's problems with the wisdom of our political ancestors. If we listen to the **Institute's** advice, we can fulfill Laurier's dream of a country where freedom is its nationality.

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