# DECOLONIZING SPACE AND PLACE: SPECTRUMS OF SETTLER SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY IN CANADA

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Within the spirit of reconciliation is a principle of respecting Canada's Indigenous Peoples' right to sovereignty. What this means is highly contested, as there is some dispute as to the legal basis for any notion of sovereignty. Does it stem from the Royal Proclamation Act? Is it adequately defined in the British North America Act and later the Constitution of 1982? Is it covered by the Indian Act? Is it a notion, a concept, that somehow finds its way into some constitutional convention, or at least a principle that Canada's non-Indigenous leaders must respect? And then there are the differing notions of sovereignty among Canada's diverse Indigenous nations.

Legal scholars and advocates may debate such definitions. It is important to take some account of these disputes. However, leaving aside any attempt to arrive at some governmental or legal consensus on what is and what is not sovereignty, the purpose here is to examine how Indigenous sovereignty is understood among non-Indigenous Canadians, that is, Settlers. When asked to offer some response to the question of Indigenous sovereignty, what do Settlers say? Do they even think about it, at all? Are they supportive? Do their ideas of sovereignty comply with other, commonly held (and even jurisdictional) notions of sovereignty?

We offer some answers to those questions by examining the results of a survey of Canadians conducted in 2023. It is probable that given the absence of a single, unifying

consensus on the meaning of Indigenous sovereignty, non-Indigenous Canadians will likely also reflect different—even contradictory—viewpoints. And given that this topic is not currently salient, it is also probable that evidence will reveal an unengaged, and uninformed, public.

What is more interesting is that given the lack of salience on the issue of Indigenous sovereignty, Canada is gripped by a national discussion on its own question of sovereignty as United States President Donald Trump threatens annexation (see Deer, 2025). Within Canada, there are secessionist threats from the Prairie provinces, particularly Alberta, that have also ignited a greater discussion about the meaning of Indigenous sovereignty and the need to assert treaty rights (*Edmonton Journal*, 2025). And sovereignist rhetoric has resurfaced once again in Quebec in light of an apparent revitalized Parti Québécois. Canada's political leaders will likely eventually sort out the matter related to the United States, but clearly, there is also some context to explore sovereignty as it pertains to Canada's Indigenous People.

## Indigenous Sovereignty: An Essentially Contested Concept

Prior to European contact, Indigenous Peoples established sophisticated systems of government, justice, and dispute resolution, among other hallmark traits of sovereign and self-determining nations. The Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee), for instance, united distinct nations across vast territories stretching from present-day Quebec to southern Ontario and New York State. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Hurley & Wherrett, 1996) further affirms that Indigenous methods of self-government and law-making were well-organized and established prior to the arrival of European Settlers (see also Calder v. A.G.B.C. [1973] 3 S.C.R).

The resilience and adaptability of these legal orders are evident in contemporary contexts, as well. For example, Gordon Christie (2011) explores how Inuit sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic is expressed through both traditional governance mechanisms and modern political structures.

As most concepts in political science are, Indigenous sovereignty is an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956) with competing and complementary meanings. Clearly, there are likely differences in how Settlers and Indigenous Peoples understand sovereignty, with particular inferences for the latter, given approximately 500 years of colonial imposition in what is now Canada and everything that is associated with such an extraordinary political process. Land dispossession, domicide, violated treaties, a genocidal education system, family separation, forced sterilization, and lawfare have been some of the more common weapons deployed against Indigenous Peoples to create and uphold matrices of settler-colonial control (Basso & Perrella, 2026). None of these processes describe a system in which Indigenous Peoples have (1) power, (2) autonomy, or (3) territorial integrity.

### *International Dimensions*

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and created the conditions for the modern state to emerge in Europe. As part of the peace negotiations among

Protestant and Catholic states, the peace settlement included articles that dealt with each state party's control over its own religious and political affairs, peoples, and agents abroad, and created the conditions for what is now called "Westphalian sovereignty." That concept has two important dimensions: (1) political sovereignty (a political entity's control over its affairs), and (2) territorial integrity (the area over which the political entity's rule extends). Importantly, no one article in the Treaty of Westphalia established such political dictates, but the overall *meanings* of the articles ending the war were *interpreted by actors* as that two-part concept.

Westphalian sovereignty was an innovation, to be sure, as it made the emergence of the modern state possible and permissible in European affairs, and enshrined order as a key defining feature of politics among nations. Critically, it meant that a state's domestic affairs were in the purview of its own political processes alone, and that mutual recognition of the powers of governance among states made international relations work. All, however, was not well. While Westphalian sovereignty ensured relative order and peace in Europe, it exported European political ambitions worldwide, granting sovereignty as a principle and privilege reserved for Christian subjects of Europe, not all peoples of the world. Westphalian sovereignty ironically created possibilities for stable peace in Europe, but Europeans exported their visions of domination worldwide. Thus, European colonialism rests upon the sovereignty created in Europe. Regardless, Westphalian sovereignty is the most well-established vision for what it means to be "sovereign" and to have power—but it is not the only vision that matters, especially for Indigenous Peoples.

Internationally, the United Nations (UN) has been used as a site of state diplomacy and deliberative policymaking since its inception. As part of this UN system of sovereign states is the growth—explosive expansion, even—of human rights laws and norms. As part of the architecture of the modern human rights system, UN rights declarations, conventions, and treaties play a key role in establishing standards for all state parties to move towards. Importantly, as in 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, and in 2026, there is no state in the world that can confidently argue it respects *all* human rights laws and norms. This does not mean international rights standards should be thrown out with the bathwater, however, as they establish the baseline for how citizens and states interact with each other (because the rights system is uniquely state-centric, meaning the state is both the essential protector and principal violator of human rights).

A critical element of this system vis-à-vis Indigenous sovereignty was the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007). While initially intended as a legally binding convention to be passed during the first Indigenous decade at the UN (1995–2004), Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand ensured its delay and reduction into a declaration during the *second* UN decade (2005–2014) of Indigenous Peoples using processes of norm co-optation, blunting, and channelling (Corntassel, 2007). UNDRIP articles 26 to 28 deal with various aspects of Indigenous sovereignty, focussing on rights to traditional territories, use of such lands and resources, demands for state recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, calls for the creation of adjudication processes for land disputes, outlines for the

right to redress, and the establishment of basic principles on free, prior, and informed consent (UNDRIP, 2007). However, the UNDRIP walks a fine line, and article 46 states, "nothing in this Declaration … [should be] construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states." Sovereignty is not interested in morality; it merely reflects the asymmetric power distributions of the past. While calls for Indigenous sovereignty may be supported in the UNDRIP, this support is half-hearted and reflects other partial measures that do little in the way of real action and decolonization (Basso & Perrella, 2026; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples and their nations will likely not result in a radical institutional paradigm shift, given the nature of sovereignty itself. For a constructivist scholar like Wendt (1999), a system of sovereign entities does result in anarchy, but what political entities do to navigate that anarchy is entirely up to them, as sovereignty is a negotiated discourse and political reality. Moreover, for Krasner (1999), sovereignty is nothing more than organized hypocrisy; it is the illusion of a stable system of political entities that fully enjoy Westphalian sovereignty. As it turns out, sovereignty is breached daily and is more a sleight of hand and *belief* in autonomy backed by power than it is a *reality*. This does not render sovereignty useless afterthought; rather, the negotiated nature of sovereignty and the principle that it rests on mutual recognition and respect are core defining international features of this concept. The meanings of this for Indigenous Peoples are legion. Mainly, though, Indigenous Peoples may not achieve full-blown independence as envisioned by Pontiac during his war against British rule (1763–1766), but they may achieve something more in line with the aspects of recognition and respect as defining components of sovereignty, as identified in the Royal Proclamation (1763).

*Decolonizing Sovereignties?*

Despite these paradoxes and barriers internationally, Indigenous sovereignty presents a concept that extends significantly beyond mere territorial claims, encompassing a rich spectrum of social, cultural, and political dimensions. Academic literature consistently emphasizes that Indigenous sovereignty is deeply rooted in the inherent rights, traditions, and governance systems of Indigenous nations. These systems predated colonial contact and have persisted despite the ongoing challenges of settler colonialism. As The Indigenous Foundation (Karim, 2023) notes, Indigenous sovereignty arises from traditional knowledge, spiritual practices, languages, social and legal systems, and political structures that are unique to each nation, tribe, or community. Importantly, this sovereignty is not granted by any state, including Canada, but is recognized as an intrinsic and inalienable right (Karim, 2023).

Harald Bauder and Rebecca Mueller (2021) argue sovereignty is something "claimed, asserted, and enacted by those who have the ability to do so" (p. 157) and recognize the dark core of Westphalian sovereignty upholding processes of settler colonialism. Paralleling Aaron John Spitzer's arguments (2019, p. 526), they note that Westphalian sovereignty and liberal democratic rule have effectively eliminated *Indigenous* sovereignty and placed Indigenous

Peoples within the variegated identity tapestries in Canada as another minority population. As such, Taiaiake Alfred sees that the "challenge for Indigenous peoples in building appropriate postcolonial governing systems is to disconnect the notion of sovereignty from its Western, legal roots and to transform it" (T. Alfred, 2005, p. 42).

Ultimately, the very notion of being sovereign rests on the principle of self-determination, which Jeff Corntassel and Cheryl Bryce define as "the unconditional freedom to live one's relational, place-based existence and practice healthy relationships" (2012, p. 152). This is backed up by Articles 3 and 4 of the UNDRIP:

> Art. 3: Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.
>
> Art. 4: Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

Reconciling the UNDRIP with Canadian law is like attempting to ram a large square peg through a small, circular hole. In 1973, *Calder et al. v. Attorney-General of British Columbia* established Indigenous title to lands *prior* to colonization, thereby justifying existing treaties, and necessitating new comprehensive land claims for unceded territories. *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997) provides a landmark departure, finding Indigenous title had never been extinguished by mere fact of existing colonial governance, thereby bolstering the need for comprehensive land claims processes. Despite this, as Borrows notes, the Supreme Court ironically demonstrated an "unreflecting acceptance of the Crown's assertion of sovereignty over Aboriginal peoples," which risks undermining S.35 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1999, p. 548). Subsequently, in *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia* (2014), the Supreme Court upheld Crown sovereignty over ceded lands, but also Indigenous rights to traditional practices on lands. Importantly, it also noted that the doctrine of *terra nullius* had never applied in Canada and never should be. What this means is there is a conflict between UNDRIP-aligned and Crown-aligned understandings of Indigenous sovereignty. The former focuses on the aspirations for what could be, and the latter on creating legal certainties (see Major & Stirbys, 2022) for Canada to function as a [Settler] liberal democratic, capitalist political entity.

For Joseph (2024), Indigenous sovereignty is fundamentally about relationships and the protection of the community, rather than being solely centered on territorial ownership. This broader understanding is crucial, as it starkly contrasts with Eurocentric interpretations of sovereignty, which often prioritize state authority and control over land and people (Bauder & Mueller, 2021; Vadi, 2020). In this distinct view, Indigenous sovereignty is conceptualized through an ontology of relationships to both land and community, wherein the recognition of inherent rights forms a foundational element, articulating a clear departure from the dominant narratives posited by non-Indigenous frameworks of governance. The Western, and arguably near-global non-Indigenous, conception of sovereignty typically implies a hierarchical structure

with a figurehead, such as a monarch or a top-ranking government official in a republic, representing the sovereign power. In stark contrast, such a hierarchical notion is far less common among Indigenous Peoples. If an ultimate sovereign entity exists in Indigenous cosmologies, it is often identified as the "Creator," which could be understood as God or Mother Earth (Borrows 2010; Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). Consequently, all individuals within this framework are considered equal before this ultimate sovereign and are expected to govern themselves accordingly. This contrasts sharply with the dominant global understanding of sovereignty, which is often akin to that of a nation-state, emphasizing control over a defined territory and its population, a concept largely stemming from the Treaty of Westphalia (Uddin 2023).

Building on Young's (1995) work, Blackburn identifies Indigenous Peoples' differentiated citizenship as "the legal entitlement of particular groups to different rights in addition to the individual rights common to all citizens of a polity" (2009, p. 66). A major struggle in this type of unique citizenship is the fight for *recognition* as deserving populations, something that should be honoured given Canada's unique treaty histories and realities. Using a human rights-based approach reflects unique and diverse Indigenous needs beyond national affiliation (Alcantara & Davidson, 2015; Borrows, 2017; McNeil, 2021), something Rebecca Major and Cynthia Stirbys would likely include among the strategies that "us[e] the master's institutional instruments to dismantle the master's goal of Indigenous-rights certainty" (2022, p. 367). On the latter: as human rights are a state-based practice of implementation and violation, the Canadian settler state may co-opt the movement for Indigenous rights to provide itself governance certainties which uphold the unequal, treaty-violating society (Corntassel, 2007).

However, achieving Indigenous sovereignty may not stem from focusing solely on human rights, as settler colonialism is an entrenched process. Neoliberalism (Stanley, 2016) and broader institutions associated with capitalist expansion (Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019) are associated with buttressing settler colonialism and ensuring Settler uses of land are the dominant form. Sovereignty, then, reflects facts on the ground, rather than a concern with morality. Even though Canada accepted UNDRIP, it did not fundamentally reorganize the entire system of domestic governance (Coates & Favel, 2016).

Indigenous sovereignty is a contested concept with various meanings to individuals, communities, and nations. For Glen Coulthard (2014), sovereignty is something that necessitates recognition—and the politics of recognition are fraught with power asymmetries and hypocrisy, which can paradoxically acknowledge Indigenous Peoples, nations, and problems and yet continue to repress (Basso & Perrella, 2026). Sovereignty can only be possible with Indigenous linguistic and cultural resurgence and revitalization as acts of decolonial resistance, for Alfred (G. R. Alfred, 2005). Leah Sarson (2022) focuses more on the interplays among many levels of governance and how Indigenous sovereignty must navigate fraught political paths in order to challenge colonial authority and achieve self-determination. Vadi (2020) advocates for the recognition of multiple legal orders operating within a broader framework of international law, thereby acknowledging the distinct and enduring nature of Indigenous governance and thus placing Indigenous and state sovereignty as parallel objectives. In a similar vein, Audra Simpson

(2008, 2020) acknowledges that Indigenous Peoples have been consistently subjected to state interference and that sovereignty as a concept privileges Canada with the ability to allow this inference and claim it as a matter of domestic politics.

*Non-Indigenous Perceptions of Indigenous Sovereignty*

Non-Indigenous Canadians have historically understood sovereignty through the lens of the Canadian state's legal and constitutional order. This perspective is rooted in the assertion of Crown sovereignty, which presumes the ultimate authority of the Canadian government over all lands and peoples within its borders. The Government of Canada's official principles recognize the need to reconcile the pre-existence of Indigenous Peoples and their rights with the assertion of Crown sovereignty, as mandated by section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and UNDRIP. However, this reconciliation is often framed as a process of integrating Indigenous self-government within the broader Canadian constitutional framework, rather than recognizing full, independent Indigenous sovereignty (Government of Canada, 2024).

Non-Indigenous Canadians' understanding of Indigenous sovereignty is often influenced by prevailing narratives and personal experiences. Many scholars note that, despite increasing awareness, misconceptions persist about what sovereignty means for Indigenous groups. For instance, Bauder and Mueller (2021) assert that there is often a conflation of Indigenous concepts of sovereignty with Western notions that overlook the cultural and social context of Indigenous practices. This misunderstanding often stems from historical representations and current media portrayals, contributing to stereotypes and misinterpretations.

Further, McCarty and Lee (2014) highlight the need for non-Indigenous educators and community members to confront these misconceptions through culturally sustaining pedagogies aimed at recognizing Indigenous sovereignty. This is echoed by Oskineegish and Desmoulins (2020), who outline how education can serve as a platform for advancing Indigenous sovereignty by tackling existing power imbalances and fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding. That said, education may only take reconciliation efforts so far (Basso & Perrella, 2026). Heather Nicol (2017) notes,

> There is a consistency in Canadian perceptions of Indigenous peoples' rights and governments. These have, historically, been understood to be subject to the exigencies of the state—that is, as subject to existing constitutional arrangements and national development goals. The state then facilitates spaces of indigenous autonomy through benevolent state practices, and in doing so sets limits for indigenous agency more broadly. Still, some critics suggest that it is not just Canada, but the scope of the UNDRIP in general, which is problematic. (p. 802)

Nicol continues, noting that UNDRIP "effectively recasts sovereignty as a rights-based, fungible, and shifting concept" in international relations, but that this is an awkward marriage with existing Canadian discourses and legal principles on Indigenous sovereignty that are deeply normative (2017, p. 810). White et al. (2015) expand on non-Indigenous perceptions of Indigenous sovereignty by focusing on the 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study and the 2012

Taking the Pulse survey mechanisms. From these resources, they find that Settlers view Indigenous self-government with outright hostility and "a potential source of resentment" (White et al., 2015, p. 291). The oppositional attitudes Settlers take vis-à-vis Indigenous sovereignty may poison their perceptions of other ameliorative reconciliation-oriented policies (White et al., 2015, p. 301). Few respondents believed "Aboriginal self-government is important to the future of Saskatchewan" (28% strongly disagreed, 26% somewhat disagreed, 33% somewhat agreed, and 13% strongly agreed) (White et al., 2015, p. 290). While self-government has been a cornerstone policy that various successive Canadian federal governments have paid lip service to, little has been done to achieve such aspirations.

**Data and Methods**

Given the contested nature of how "Indigenous sovereignty" is understood and given the likelihood that most Settlers have not given this idea much thought, there is no likely framework to suggest how non-Indigenous Canadians might perceive this idea. Consequently, we explore how Canadians understand Indigenous sovereignty through an open-ended survey question.

Analysis is based on an opt-in sample totalling 1,500 respondents, administered by Abacus Data from 4 to 8 May 2023. Among a battery of questions used to measure respondents' views about reconciliation, one specifically asked about the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Respondents were given the following prompt: "You may have heard Indigenous peoples want to be independent or sovereign nations. What do you think that means?" About half (n=882) provided some response. Of the remainder, 504 stated that they are unable to answer, or do not know how to answer, and about 100 left the response field blank.

We explore responses along several dimensions in order to develop a rough profile of how the concept of "Indigenous sovereignty" is understood. The first dimension codes for a general sense of support. Were the responses positive, negative, or neutral to the idea of Indigenous sovereignty? There is a fourth category— "None/Don't know"—for those responses that either did not clearly indicate any level of support or opposition or simply expressed an inability to respond.

The second dimension tracks any themes mentioned in the responses. These were coded into general categories as follows: 1) social, which includes mentions such as society, culture, unity/division, values, social services (e.g., education, health), nation, and "people"; 2) political, which includes references to government, taxes, laws (and law enforcement), infrastructure, boundaries, and processes (e.g., separation); 3) economic, which mainly pertains to financial support (funding, pensions), business development, employment, and resources; 4) land, which almost exclusively pertains to territory. There is a fifth category to account for responses that do not clearly state a theme.

The third dimension flags responses that reference or acknowledge colonialism. The acceptance or denial of coloniality within responses can demonstrate the kind of cognitive dissonance that can be attributed to settler colonial cultures and their particular brand of creative

adaptation and denial. Thus, self-inclusive and externalized responses can reflect respondents' relationship with their settler identity and colonial reality within the context of Indigenous sovereignty in the open-ended response (Avalos, 2021; Coulthard, 2014; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Woons, 2013). In some cases, the acknowledgement of colonialism is obvious, such as when respondents use the term "colonial," or refer to "their own lands." A less obvious term pertains to human-rights abuses, such as references to mistreatment, or a need for the Indigenous Peoples to be "free," suggesting that they are under colonial rule.

A fourth dimension pertains to the degree that the respondent places themselves in the answer. Self-inclusive and externalized responses reflect respondents' relational understandings of sovereignty. Although responses appear positive, negative, or neutral on the subject in sentiment, some responses contain this additional nuance that illuminates respondents' view of themselves within Indigenous sovereignty or as something separate from themselves. This nuance is relevant because it can demonstrate how respondents view and accept their role and identity within and perpetuated by coloniality and internal colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). If the answer contains the first-person pronoun "I," or the plural form "we," the responses are coded as referencing the "self." The absence of such terms, responses that contain terms such as "they," "their," "the government," or any other references to objects other than the respondent, personally, or the respondent's group, collectively, are coded as not referencing the "self."

A fifth dimension codes for time, whether the comment refers to the past, present, or future. Responses' temporal placement of Indigenous sovereignty can reveal several nuances in the participants' views. As previously noted, while the UNDRIP understanding of sovereignty places more emphasis on what Indigenous People can aspire to (i.e., the future), Canadian law is grounded more in the past, which is consistent with the country's colonial role. For example, placing Indigenous sovereignty within the past can reveal elements of colonial finality narratives contained in the response, placing in the present may reflect respondents' recognition of contemporary or pragmatic Indigenous struggle, and placing in the future may reflect aspirational or dismissive attitudes toward reconciliation (Barker, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012). It is relevant to collect temporal data in this case because it may illuminate how respondents conceptualize Indigenous sovereignty, whether that be static, as in the past, or evolving (Biersteker, 2013; Jackson, 2007; Schrijver, 1999).

Each dimension will be examined individually to identify some characteristics of major themes. However, we then explore whether any patterns emerge. In particular, are certain themes more prominent among those who support Indigenous sovereignty? Are other themes more likely to appear among those who express opposition to Indigenous sovereignty? Or do responses and any emergent themes show no pattern, and are they, thus, random thoughts? Any of these are possible. But, as noted, we do not have any a priori basis to suggest any one pattern over another.

**Results**

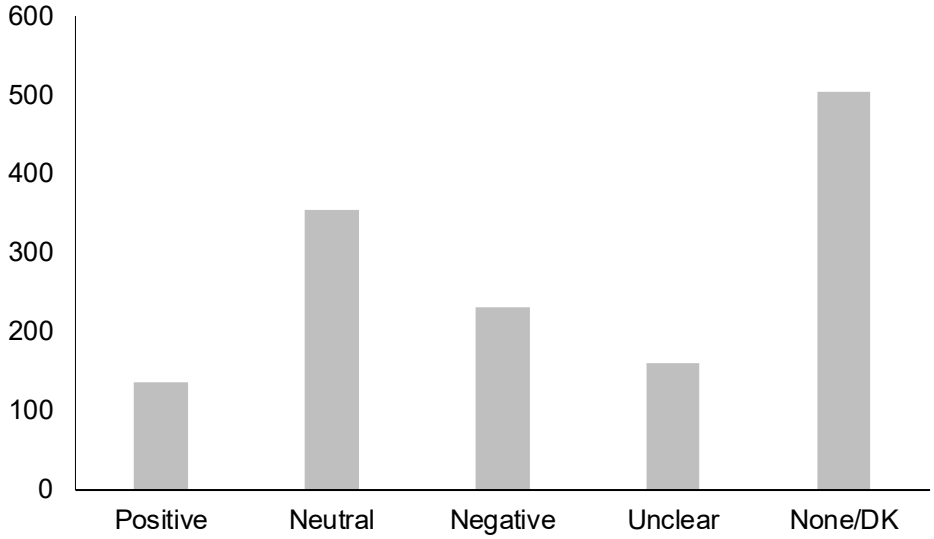
The open-ended question receives 1,386 entries; the remaining (114) answers are left blank. But among the entries, more than 500 indicate that they do not know how to respond, are not sufficiently aware of the matter to be able to respond, or, explicitly, prefer not to answer. Some find the question challenging, with one respondent stating, "This is not an easy answer." This leaves about 880 entries that reflect some thoughtful response to the question. The following is a review of the main findings, organized by the dimensions defined previously. Respondent excerpts appear here unedited, as they were entered by respondents.

*Dimension 1: Levels of Support*

Beginning with the first dimension, "level of support," 136 responses suggest support for Indigenous sovereignty, 231 express negative thoughts, and 354 are coded as "neutral" (see Figure 1). Within the positive statements, several patterns could be identified. The first appears as the respondent's explicit support, with statements such as "I agree," or "I support this." These responses do not contain any context for the respondent's sentiment, and they appear less often than the other positive statements.

**Figure 1**

*Level of Support*




Another pattern that appears has to do with the absence and presence of logics. Statements that do not contain logics are typically prefaced with "I don't know what it means, but …" These statements express positive sentiments but do not reflect respondents' particular

reason for their support or their understandings of and thought processes associated with Indigenous sovereignty.

> "I think it is reasonable but I don't know what it looks like."
>
> "Not sure what this means. There is too much yammering on this subject. If it means they are treated as local, provincial or federal governments, collect their own taxes and maintain their own utilities, education systems etc., then I am all for it."
>
> "Make their own law on their land, choose own education system and all of it. they think they are more competent to know what is good for them and on that i am sure they are wright."

Statements may contain references to or ideas about sovereignty in a Westphalian sense, but overall, these statements do not contain terms that reflect understandings of Indigenous sovereignty. This may indicate that respondents know nothing or very little about Indigenous sovereignty but are still willing to support it.

The presence of logics provides context for the respondent's support. No clear pattern emerges to link respondents' logics, but cumulatively speaking, many responses root their support in property rights, human rights, and legal entitlement.

> "It is imperative to acknowledge their rights like any landowner"
>
> "The right to make decisions regarding their lives without let or hinderance. In other words they should be given autonomy!"

These subjects may demonstrate how respondents define sovereignty and their relational understandings of it. Logics are absent more often than they are present in the positive statements, which may indicate, again, that respondents know very little about Indigenous sovereignty.

The most prevalent pattern amongst the positive statements can be described as support within limits, or support with a caveat. Statements such as this typically appear as "yes, but …," and the caveats typically relate to political or, more often, economic reasoning, which appears to be based on personal bias and harmful stereotypes regarding Indigenous tax-free status.

> "I agree with them having a sovereign nation, but they also have to have good governance, something we aren not getting from this communist loving federal Liberal government."
>
> "That would be fine if they are willing to pay taxes to support those plans."
>
> « si c'est pour qu'ils gèrent leur territoire avec des taxes et impôts je suis d'accord »

"Support within limits" is the most prevalent amongst the positive responses, which may demonstrate that support for Indigenous sovereignty exists, but it is limited due to ignorance and personal bias.

Several patterns emerge from the negative statements, which is a cesspool at best. First, many respondents share economic reasoning for their opposition to Indigenous sovereignty, and this, again, relates mostly to tax status. These responses share similar language to that highlighted in "support within limits," meaning that these negative responses are also hinged upon ignorance and stereotypes.

> "Nothing they are drunks"
>
> "WE would still be providing medical, financial, and social services, much like we are doing in the Nation of Quebec. Let's cut the special group concept altogether, and try to work collectively for the benefit of all Canadians."
>
> "Over the years, the Indians have not wanted to amalgamate with Canadians in this day and age it's time that they decided whether there are Indians, and rule them selves on their own land or Canadians and we all join together to make things better And pay equal taxes instead of everything on their side free while we are still supporting them"

Economic reasoning is not the only kind to be tainted by white supremacy. Some statements are explicitly racist in their statements, while others highlight reasons associated with Canadian identity and the idea that "we are all Canadians." Respondents who share this reasoning often equate Indigenous sovereignty with minority rights or an identity politics issue.

> « Je suis absolument contre c'est comme si les NewYorkais décidaient de faire de leur ville un pays ou les Acadiens des Maritimes de faire la même chose. Nous sommes au Canada ils semblent l'oublier. Même mon épouse qui est Métis est contre ce projet. »
>
> "It means they will not be subject to Canadian law to the same degree as other Canadians. I believe that all Canadians should be treated equally. You cannot have special interest groups receive preferential treatment. This only increases feelings of prejudice and resentment. Its like favouring one child over another."

Also, statements that relate their reasoning to identity typically compare or equate Indigenous sovereignty to Quebec's and Alberta's separatist movements. This is a notable pattern because it exposes respondents' relational understanding of Indigenous sovereignty within the unique Canadian lexicon, meaning that understandings of sovereignty are deeply connected to Quebec's separatism. Because many respondents associate, compare, or relate Indigenous sovereignty claims to separatism, it may indicate that sovereignty has a specific meaning in Canada and that altering that meaning may be a threat Canadian identity.

Neutral statements share similar patterns with both the positive and negative statements. Moreover, neutral statements share no sentiment but do reflect respondents' relational understandings of Indigenous sovereignty. Some respondents accurately describe sovereignty in its Westphalian terms, while others relate Indigenous sovereignty to several topics, including environment, politics, and separatism. Also, many respondents highlight modern Indigenous struggle in their answer.

> "The power/authority to make decisions over all aspects of their lives on their designated land and to be treated as equals in their relations with other governments."
>
> "They want to be separate from the people who have harmed them for centuries"
>
> "Self determination is an inalienable human right."
>
> "I am not sure – I assume it means that they want their land via treaty to be considered separate from the rest of canada so that they cannot be affected by plans like contructing on their land and have more protections?"

> « En gros, je crois qu'ils veulent être reconnus comme étant un peuple qui peut se gérer seul, sans avoir de président ou de partie politique qui les contrôle. Qu'ils puissent vivent également et comme cela leur semble. »

A notable element within these statements is that most neutral sentiments are not influenced by the Canadian lexicon or white supremacy in the way that they are in the subsequent (i.e., the next set of "dimensions".) Neutral statements, instead, provide evidence of how respondents place Indigenous sovereignty within their own context, such as environmental or human rights concerns. This may indicate that respondents have thought about Indigenous sovereignty but may not understand the full scope of the issue.

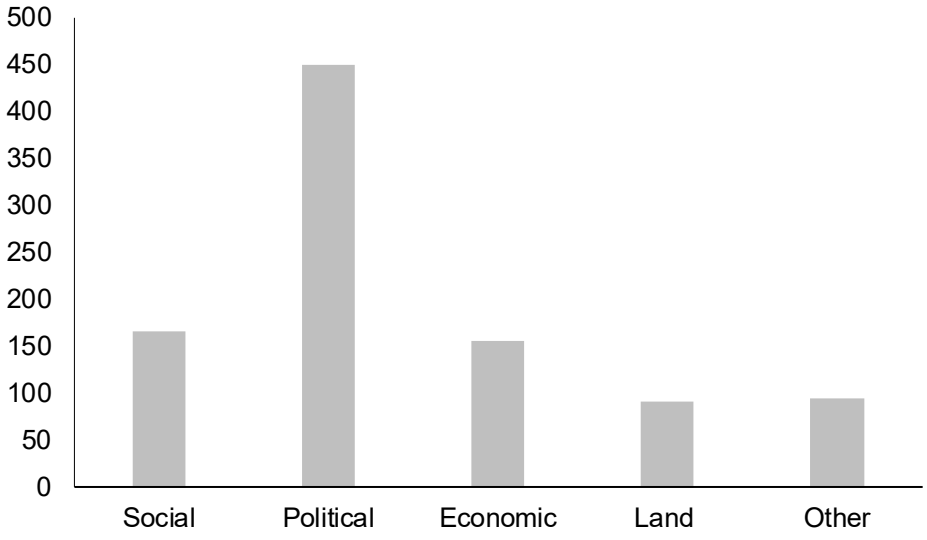
Another 161 responses are too vague or simply unclear, such as "No," "Yes," "Nothing," "Great," "De quelle souveraineté on parle." Some are more elaborate, but still unclear on how they should be interpreted, such as, "Like Quebec for the French Quebecers ?," "Leur accord est primordial," "I feel that residential schools were just as bad," "I prefer not to say because it makes me seem like a bad person."

*Dimension 2: Themes*

The second dimension identifies any themes evident in the responses. Of the 995 responses that contain some theme, the most common is "political," found in 449 entries (see Figure 2). A distant second is "social," which appears in 166 entries, with "economic" themes close behind at 155 entries.

**Figure 2**

*Themes*




"A nation to nation relationship within Canada."

> "BULLSHIT!!! ANOUTHER QUEBQUA SITUATION ... MORE HARM THAN GOOD."
> "They want to be able to deal with provincial and federal governments as a peer."
> "They should be allowed to a certain degree to establish at least their own local community judiciary and legal systems and their own 'rule of law' in such territories"
> "I'm afraid I don't know but I do know I support them having power over their own communities. Who wants Trudeau running them? He hasn't even prioritized clean water and adequate schooling or medical facilities"
> « Je n'ai pas entendu cela. Mais ca ne me surprend pas. Meme le Quebec et les Provinces Centrales (Je ne me souviens pas le ou lesquelles) Veulent se separer du Canada! Personnelement, je ne les comprend pas. Nous sommes toujours plus fort, tous ensembles! »

Political entries can be categorized into three groups. First, many respondents suggest a two-state solution, in which a nation-to-nation relationship should be built. Second, other respondents highlight Liberal government leadership. Statements that include this reference typically paint Liberal leadership in a bad light, but for different reasons. Some respondents attribute the modern Indigenous struggle to Liberal leadership, while others express dissatisfaction with Trudeau, specifically. The third group relates to separatism and is the most common association within the political theme. Many respondents, again, equate Indigenous sovereignty to Quebec's or Alberta's separatist movements.

The next most common theme is "social," found in 166 entries. The most common statement within the social theme has to do with Canadian identity. Many respondents highlight Indigenous sovereignty as a major loss to Canadian culture, as Indigenous People and their contributions to it are intrinsic to the Canadian identity. Statements like "We are all Canadians" and those that share that sentiment describe Indigenous sovereignty as a threat to their identity and Canadian nationhood.

> "It means breaking up the country on a social level"
> « Je crois que c'est leur droit, il ont été forcé de s'intégrer »
> « Je crois que les peuples autochtones font partis du Canada et de tout ce qui l'entoure. Je crois donc que les peuples autochtones devraient y rester car ils font tout de même partis de notre histoire malgré le fait que cette histoire n'a pas toujours été très belle. Il suffit juste de les accepter d'avantage »
> "I think we are a small country and we should all stick together"
> "I understand how they feel but to lose them would be such a loss to our country. Their culture, and then French culture, represent the true Canadian identity. I believe it means they wish to self govern."

A small minority within the social theme also highlight cultural assimilation. Statements that include this kind of language emphasize Indigenous self-determination and distinct cultural differences between the Canadian and Indigenous identities. Respondents who acknowledge cultural assimilation and Indigenous cultural differences do not include such a sentiment in their

statements, which is interesting to note, as it may indicate that respondents have thought about Indigenous sovereignty but do not understand the full scope of the issue.

Almost as frequent are entries that contain an "economic" theme. The economic theme appears to be, again, informed by personal bias and harmful stereotypes regarding Indigenous tax-free status. Most statements within this theme assume Indigenous nations and peoples are not in the financial position to support themselves under the current system, and thus, will not be able to afford sovereignty. However, there is also the assumption that Indigenous Peoples receive too much federal funding provided by the Canadian taxpayer. With these two assumptions working in tandem, statements such as these are worthy of discussion as they demonstrate a paradox within respondents' relational understanding of Indigenous sovereignty.

> « si ill veulent être indépendants , on arrête de quémander toujours de l'argent aux Canadiens. »
>
> "That would be fine if they are willing to pay taxes to support those plans."
>
> "Why not, provided they pay their own way and figure out how to make a go of it on their own, just like all other societies have."
>
> "Will they have money to run the country"
>
> "If they want to be sovereign, they can manage their own money and Canada should not be giving them as much money as it does."
>
> "take away all givt funding ... every dollar ... no fire trucks ... no police at any kind close them off and treat them as uncivil ."
>
> "The Indigenous population have received millions of dollars of Canadian tax payer dollars. No amount of monetary compensation appears to make a difference. How many years are we expected to pay for many generations beyond residential school survivors?"

Such statements often reflect a contradictory attitude: on one hand, expressing the belief that significant financial resources are allocated to Indigenous Peoples, while on other, perpetuating the stereotype that all Indigenous communities remain impoverished. This kind of dissonance is consistent throughout responses that include an economic theme.

The "land" theme, curiously, is evident in 91 entries. Given that land is closely tied to Indigenous sovereignty, it is remarkable that this theme appears infrequently.

> "They want to make decision without outsiders influence or participation when it comes to land usage?
>
> "dont go fucking the rest of their land if they dont want you too moron"
>
> "That they want their land to be returned"
>
> "It is a long overdue wish. In fact they should be the ones driving the politics and political process in Canada not descendants of expropriators who believe they are not chronic squatters on Native land. I strongly support their desire."
>
> « Avoir leur propre territoire »
>
> "Fine, give them a block of land somewhere in a more undeveloped area like the Territories or a northern area of provinces. They stay there and create their own society, no more welfare and government handouts."

> "It means that colonialist empires such as Britain and France have no right to claim any legal justification of 'crown property.' The entirety of Canada is home on native land."
>
> "Self explanatory – not our land so we should get consent when doing things on their land"

When statements do include elements associated with land, respondents relate Indigenous sovereignty to land return or land back, environmental concerns, such as climate change, and property rights. Statements within this theme typically share positive sentiments regarding Indigenous sovereignty and position land return as a current and pragmatic political issue. This may indicate that using the framework of land back or land return, respondents may be more receptive to or understanding of Indigenous sovereignty through that specific lens. However, some respondents do include negative sentiments toward Indigenous sovereignty by citing feasibility concerns for land return. This may indicate that, again, respondents may not know much about Indigenous sovereignty or land return and may rely on stereotypes, personal bias, or misinformation in building their stance on the subject.

Finally, there are 94 entries that contain an assortment of other themes that do not neatly fit into any single category. Some of the entries question the feasibility of Indigenous sovereignty, as indicated by the following excerpts:

> « ca compliquerait les choses alors qu'aujourd'hui rien n'est simple »
>
> "I don't see how that could possibly work"

Some of the "other" responses are supportive, but don't go much beyond expressing such a sentiment:

> "They want to live freely and independently and they wanna get treated right"
>
> « Avec tout ce qu'on leur a fait, je les comprends de vouloir se séparer de nous »
>
> "self determination is an inalienable human right."

Others show an opposing sentiment, but, again, do not provide much in terms of context or reasoning.

> "No, they are part of Canada and should just accept the reality!"
>
> "I have no idea why they would want that. It's outrageous."

*Dimension 3: Acknowledgement of Colonialism*

The third dimension examines any references to colonialism. In total, 283 entries do indicate some acknowledgment of Canada's colonial relationship with the Indigenous Peoples, but far more, 497, do not. Some entries that acknowledge colonialism reference sovereignty as enabling the Indigenous Peoples to live by their customs, or at least not to be obliged to follow any imposed Settler traditions:

> "They want to live by their traditions."
>
> "They want to be their own independant nation away from british culture to have their own."
>
> "Meaning the have there own government,culture and way of living there lives"

> "I do understand concept of respect for traditional tribal and community groups,, but from a practical standpoint, aren't we forcing a white man's world and political structure on the indigenous people we have subsumed. They have to deal with the white power structures within the rules of our system? If so, can reconciliation ever be fully genuine?"
> "The concept of 'nation' is different for Indigenous peoples compared to those of European ancestry. I'm not sure that I fully understand what the concept means to Indigenous peoples. To me, true independence would mean that Indigenous communities would become responsible for all the services currently provided by the various levels of government in Canada. I do not think that is the Indigenous concept."

Most entries that acknowledge colonialism reference political authority and governance. These kinds of responses acknowledge colonial order to a degree or at least recognize contemporary Indigenous struggle. This kind of intersectional and/or multifaceted approach towards Indigenous sovereignty is rare within the dataset. Additionally, because most statements are self-inclusive, it may indicate that those who approach Indigenous sovereignty as a multifaceted issue, in a temporal sense, may be more likely to support Indigenous sovereignty.

Entries that do not acknowledge colonialism reference economic and social themes and contain mostly negative sentiment.

> "I think it means they'd like to become self governing in a particular region of Canada, along with funding and revenue-raising streams to support the independent nation. Something like the above would work in very few regions; In general, I disagree with creating Aboriginal-ruled regions in just anywhere in Canada, because I think that could be divisive. How can dividing Canadians between Aboriginals and everyone else create unity? It would create disunity which, I assume, is nobody's goal. The focus should be on working together with all citizens to bring about positive change. Shortchanging one group could easily create animosity and could lead to a worsening of the relationship. How about providing opportunities for Aboriginals in conjunction with others to impact/govern certain regions of Canada?"
> "It is SO difficult to do this because indigenous people cannot decide upon who represents them and therefore do not have the means to make such decisions on behalf of whole units of indigenous peoples. I personally think it would be a disaster which would result in greater poverty and inequity for indigenous peoples."

Entries that do not acknowledge colonialism appear to be informed by the same attitudes and logic within the economic theme, which are based in personal bias, white supremacy, and ignorance. As there is no regard for contemporary and pragmatic Indigenous struggle, respondents who do not acknowledge colonialism rely on assumptions based on bias. This may indicate that respondents possess limited knowledge of Indigenous sovereignty and tend to interpret Indigenous issues through the lens of their perceived personal connection, which is often framed in terms of indirect financial relationships facilitated by taxation.

*Dimension 4: Placement of Self*

The fourth dimension shows that for the most part, respondents are not situating themselves within their answers. Out of 715 responses, only 121 contain some reference to the first-person. The vast majority, 594, make no such reference.

Self-inclusive responses are present across all sentiments and theme types, but there is no clear way to link self-inclusive responses to form a general pattern. However, the low frequency of these responses is notable. Because self-inclusive responses contribute to a small minority within the dataset, it may indicate that respondents may not consider themselves part of the colonial reality.

> "THAT THEY DONT WANT OR NEED ANY GOVERNMENT HELP AND IF THAT'S THE CASE, PERHAPS WE SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THAT"
>
> « non, ils sont des canadiens comme nous tous. sans aucune discrimination. »
>
> "… I think it means they desire autonomy … and I do not feel some reservations are capable of exercising this … I do believe some reservations have chiefs/elders living in opulence – while their people live in slum environments … therefore – funding from the governments – both federal and provincial is being misused … for this reason – reservations like this need to be regularly inspected – with recommendations that are addressed … some reservations are not located where employment is accessible … so – move the reservation to where there is employment … or combine successful reservations with unsuccessful reservations – to obtain successes … it is just not advisable to keep enabling the Indigenous – as some of them are – 'their own worst enemy' …"
>
> « sérieusement je m'en fou qu'ils deviennent independant mais apres ils s'arrange seul je crois qu'ils ont plus a gagner en restant avec nous surtout que trudeau leur octroi presque que tout leur demandes »
>
> "It means that they are taking the country back 300 years & the rest of us are on the outside looking in. This has to end."

Additionally, self-inclusive respondents sometimes maintain an "us versus them" mentality. This mentality is present amongst some positive and most negative self-inclusive statements, whereas in neutral and most positive self-inclusive statements, some respondents position themselves as an actor or active stakeholder in Indigenous sovereignty. Because self-inclusive responses include all sentiment types, it is difficult to determine whether self-inclusive respondents do or do not acknowledge colonial reality or position themselves as actors in maintaining colonial order.

Self-externalized responses, or statements that do not include the self, are also present across all of the sentiment and theme types. Some self-externalized statements partially describe an element of Indigenous sovereignty, citing references to land return and culture and language preservation. This is notable to a degree because it does establish respondents' relational understandings of Indigenous sovereignty but shows that they are still defining those elements as separate from themselves. This may indicate that respondents may not identify themselves as actors within Indigenous sovereignty, which suggests complicity within the colonial reality.

Other self-externalized responses demonstrate an "us versus them" mentality explicitly, which may indicate that respondents' personal bias and ignorance compels their opposition to Indigenous political challenges and sovereignty claims.

> "I don't see how that's possible since reservations receive $$ from the government and if they want to be a true sovereign nation then all indigenous would have to as all live on reservation"
>
> "They want to destroy Canada."
>
> « Ils veulent suivre les règles qui diffèrent de tout le monde pour être plus indépendants »
>
> "They want a sovereign nation but want someone else to pay for it & accept all blame if something goes wrong"
>
> "They want to govern themselves and to hell with what Canada wants."
>
> « ils ont besoin des canadiens »
>
> « Pouvoir promouvoir leur culture, leurs intérêts. »

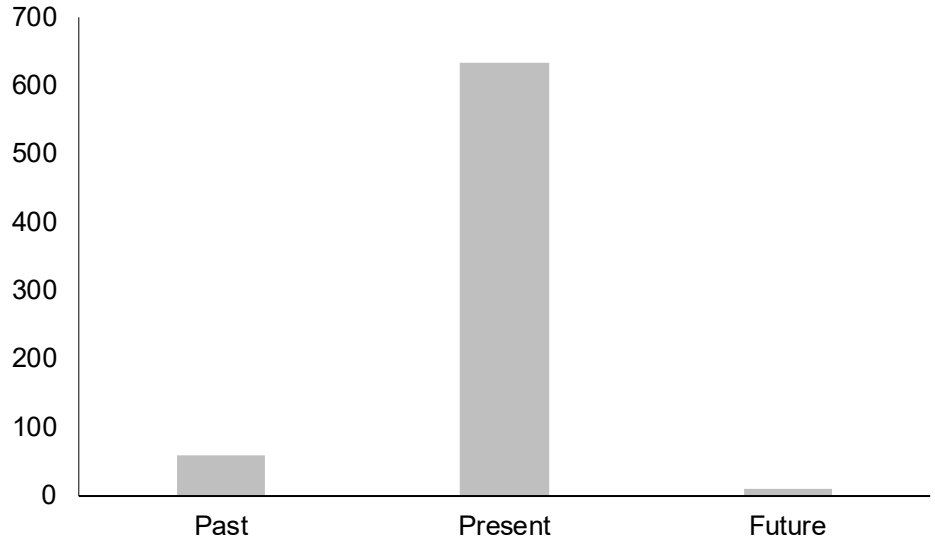
While the majority of statements fall into the self-externalized category, it does not necessarily mean that many people do not understand Indigenous sovereignty. Rather, it does demonstrate that most people do not consider themselves as actors in and benefactors of the colonial order, which may suggest that coloniality has deeply impacted the Canadian lexicon and self-perception of the Settler. This kind of cognitive dissonance caused by creative adaptation and denial that was previously discussed could be worthy of further exploration, as it would be interesting to expand on whether or not Canadians position themselves as actors and members of colonial reality.

*Dimension 5: Time*

The final dimension explores time. Out of 680 responses that contain a time element, most (634) appear to refer to the present (see Figure 3). A small number, 58, point to the past, and astoundingly, only 9 point to the future. Within this distribution there are 20 that contain references to two temporal periods: 17 that reference both the past and the present, 2 that reference the present and the future, 1 that references the past and the future, and 1 that references all three.

**Figure 3**

*References to Time*




Responses that refer to the present are across all theme and sentiment types. Statements that include references to the present typically cite feasibility and economic concerns regarding Indigenous sovereignty, with both positive and negative sentiments.

> "They don't want the Canadian government to involve themselves in their laws. They want to police themselves"
>
> "They should never have sovereignty over any place in Canada. Good luck being independent when they rely so heavily on government funding and not having to pay taxes etc."

Those who describe their notion of sovereignty or the elements of it, such as most neutral responses, usually contain some notion of Westphalian sovereignty, as well. Overall, most respondents who position Indigenous sovereignty in the present do not acknowledge it as a current political issue, but, rather, a desire that can be rooted in contemporary identity politics.

Respondents who place Indigenous sovereignty in the past contain negative sentiment, but mention multiple themes within their statements, such as land return, social identity, and economics.

> "Enough catering has been done. First Nations need to move forward and stop dwelling on past injustices. trying to be like Quebec. Again war and lands conquered have bad effects on the people previously there. You lost, it's history, let's move on"
>
> "I'm for increasing indigenous say in the running of their lands even sovereignty. However, these lands have also become home to many others and to reverse all that could be as bad an injustice. Non-indiginous populations should be free of divestment without compensation if at all. Too much time has passed."

> "If this is the way they want to go then let them, however they should have to do for themselves, no more hand outs because of the way they where treated in the past or anything else they can come up with."
> « Je pense que les peuples autochtones veulent obtenir plus d'autonomie que par le passé. »
> « Je crois que les peuples autochtones font partis du Canada et de tout ce qui l'entoure. Je crois donc que les peuples autochtones devraient y rester car ils font tout de même partis de notre histoire malgré le fait que cette histoire n'a pas toujours été très belle. Il suffit juste de les accepter d'avantage »
> "If wants and wishes were silver and gold, we would all be rich, so I've been told. A long time ago, they became conquered peoples. Are they suggesting that Mayan decent peoples get the Amazon back? or that Hungary should cede its land to the Magyars? Or that white men in Australia give back all their lands? Get real and get on with it. Noone is better or worse but throwing back to the Dark Ages all over the world will not fix a thing."

Those who position Indigenous sovereignty in the past typically equate Indigenous groups to a conquered people. Respondents also suggest that Indigenous Peoples should "just get over it" or "it is a thing of the past." These kinds of responses explicitly deny colonial reality while also acknowledging the historical colonial process. This may indicate that respondents do not acknowledge modern Indigenous struggle and the colonial power asymmetries that exist today.

The few respondents who place Indigenous sovereignty in the future typically share negative or neutral sentiments and are self-externalized. Negative statements include feasibility concerns, while neutral responses mention economic and political formation. Like most neutral statements, elements of Westphalian sovereignty are described.

> "to have control of their culture, and system of justice. They would have control over all affairs affecting indigenous people living on treaty lands. In short, and self-governing territory within the Canadian government"
> "It will be complicated with all Indigenous tributes who are in Canada."
> "They won't survive because sooner or later canadians will tell them to use their independence to take care of themselves and I'm not sure they have the ability to do that"
> "I think this is opposite to the natural trend where countries and borders become insignificant as it is recognized that there is one humanity that has many flavours that will live in harmony"

Few respondents acknowledge multiple temporal elements, highlighting the past, present, and future. These responses usually contain positive sentiment and fall into the land, political, and social themes. Statements are typically self-inclusive as well.

> "It mean that they want to govern themselves. I would rather see them not only be included in our government affairs, but to be side by side. The only way to not only correct the past is be join both parties. Include indigenous people not only in their communities but in national affiairs as well."

> « On emprunte un territoire, cest bien le restant de payer pour les pots cassés. Le passé ne se change pas, par contre l'avenir est devant nous et il n'est jamais trop tard pour se racheter. Aussi bien commencer maintenant »

These kinds of responses acknowledge colonial order to a degree or at least recognize contemporary Indigenous struggle. This kind of intersectional and/or multifaceted approach towards Indigenous sovereignty is rare within the dataset. Additionally, because most statements are self-inclusive, it may indicate that those who approach Indigenous sovereignty as a multifaceted issue, in a temporal sense, may be more likely to support Indigenous sovereignty.

**Conclusion**

Some general conclusions can be drawn from the above initial examination. First, most respondents do not display much thought on the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Out of 1,500 respondents, no more than half express ideas that can be coded along our defined dimensions. Second, of those who do express some ideas, most appear neutral on the topic, and appear to understand Indigenous sovereignty as a political concept. Curiously, most respondents also do not attach notions of colonialism to the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Nor do they appear to situate themselves within their responses. All this points to cognitive separation. They may have an opinion, they may have heard something, but in reality, the question's topic is very distant from the respondent's reality. And the replies given here generally reflect that distance.

The reasons for this distance can vary, and offer some possible directions for further inquiry. First, it is probable that respondents lack knowledge. It is widely established that most people do not possess in-depth knowledge on matters of public affairs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Fournier, 2002), in general, which then yields a "non-attitude" (Converse, 1964, 1970, 2000; Neuman, 1986). It is not unknown for individuals to have opinions, even strong opinions, regardless of their level of knowledge about the related subject matter (e.g., Perrella & Bélanger, 2009).

Relatedly, this lack of knowledge may be a result of lack of media attention to matters related to Indigenous governance. Since the media is a main source of information, it is probable that if Indigenous sovereignty ranks low in the "media agenda," it consequently ranks low in terms of what people consider to be important issues (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The exception here may be in times of heightened media attention during protest actions, such as during the Oka Crisis (e.g., Grenier, 1994; Wilkes et al., 2010). As noted by Zaller (1992), the more "intense" a media story, the greater the awareness it elicits. But one would hope that engagement with Indigenous issues will occur without the need of sensational and dramatic (and possibly negative) media attention. If Settlers become more aware of—and more interested in—the history of colonialism and the damage Canada has caused to the Indigenous Peoples, it is plausible that this will lead to a more complete understanding of Indigenous sovereignty, from the perspective of the Indigenous, and from a place of seeking justice.

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