

The Evolution of Voter Intent Since the 1995 Referendum— Myths and Realities.

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This article is a summary of a number of analyses on this subject. The results of the detailed statistical analyses and information about methodology are available from the author. Additional graphs are available on the Internet at: <http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/socio/durandc>.

Now that Bernard Landry has taken the helm of both the Parti Québécois and the Quebec government, promising at the same time to rekindle the separatist flame, it is perhaps appropriate to examine how voter intent in a possible future referendum on sovereignty has evolved since Lucien Bouchard's entrance onto Quebec's political stage during the 1995 referendum. This evolution forms the background for events both recent and future. However, it should be stated from the outset that this analysis will not deal with voter rationale, no data on this subject being available, rather with the change in voter intent and related socio-demographic characteristics. Particular attention will be given to certain assertions and hypotheses frequently mentioned in the media

In the 1995 referendum campaign, polls were generally accurate in predicting voter intent when 75 percent of non-disclosers were attributed to the No side. Since then, the major polling firms have continued to collect data on public opinion, either on their own initiative or for sponsors, generally using the same question that was used during the referendum, making it possible to analyze how voter intent in a possible future referendum has evolved since 1995.

The CROP polling firm has provided access to 14 of the polls it has taken since 1995—three carried out during the referendum campaign, one per year from 1996 to 1998, six done in 1999 and polls taken in February and November 2000. With the exception of the first poll (which used a sample of 2000 people, 1769 of whom were francophones) all the surveys used a sample of approximately 1000 people, averaging 880 francophones. The data contained in these polls allow certain hypotheses concerning the evolution of voter intent to be tested.

The evolution of voter intent since the 1995 referendum

Over the course of 1995 referendum campaign, polls generally showed an increase in support for

Moreover, analysts agree that the rise in the Yes vote had begun two weeks before Lucien Bouchard entered the campaign and that his takeover of the Yes forces did not affect this trend. Thus, to speak of a “Bouchard effect,” one must assume that the growth in Yes vote would have reached a plateau without his involvement in the campaign.

After the referendum, the Yes vote among francophones remained at the level it had reached on the eve of the referendum for at least a year. However, since 1997, it has stabilized at approximately pre-referendum levels, i.e., about 40 percent. This reduction in the Yes vote is concurrent with a rise in No support, which has gone from a low of 32 percent just before the referendum to an average of 44 percent since 1997. The Yes vote among non-francophones has remained stable at an average of 7.5 percent since 1996, with any variations attributable to random fluctuations caused by sample size.

The demographics hypothesis: young people are strongly separatist and remain so as they get older

Many theories regarding the evolution of voter intent have been put forward over the years. One in particular has been around for a long time: since young people support Quebec sovereignty more strongly than older people, demographic change (i.e., the arrival of young people into the voting population and the “departure” of older voters) will eventually and inevitably bring about a Yes majority. This theory assumes that once people decide to vote Yes, they never change their minds. If this hypothesis is correct, separatist support should increase among the various age groups with the arrival of young voters and the departure of older ones. However, it is difficult to test this theory with the data available for this study because on one hand they only cover five years, and on the other, information on exact age—and not simply age groups—is not available. The theory was thus tested taking these restrictions into account and only among francophones, the sample size among non-francophones being too small to examine evolution according to age group.

The age groups were rearranged in such a way as to provide large enough sample sizes to study the evolution of voter intent. Graph 2 shows that among francophones younger than 35, the Yes vote slid from a peak of 60 percent on the eve of the referendum to an average of less than 50 percent since 1997, about the same as it was at the start of the referendum campaign. In the 35–54 age group, the Yes vote declined from 55 percent to an average of around 40 percent since 1999. These two groups do not show significant differences in voter intent. However, among francophones 55 and older, the Yes vote has remained stable at slightly below 30 percent. Unlike

increased longevity and immigration, the proportion of this group in the population is continually declining.

The “intellectual” hypothesis: an increase in level of education favours sovereignty because sovereignists are more educated

It has been suggested that education is an important factor in determining voter intent in referendums, the intelligentsia being thought of as solely Parti Québécois supporters, especially with respect to sovereignty. The analyses for all francophones show that there is no difference in voter intent between those with a university education and those with between seven and 15 years of education. Only the group with fewer than seven years of education stands out, with support for the Yes side at barely half that of the other groups. However, this situation could be attributable to age given the strong correlation between education level and age.

However, another question worth asking is what effect has better access to a university education had on voter intent; do francophones educated since the Quiet Revolution react the same way as older voters? The data illustrates a very interesting phenomenon: taking all the polls together, for the 35-and-older age group, most of whom were born before 1965 (bearing in mind that the age groups change each year depending on year of birth), a university or equivalent education is not systematically linked to a greater tendency to vote Yes. However, among the under-35 age group—who were born after the Quiet Revolution and who were generally not old enough to vote in the 1980 referendum—those with 16 or more years of education are less likely to vote Yes than those with less education. Unfortunately, given the small size of the various sub-groups, it is impossible to determine if there has been any change in this statistic since 1995.

In short, a university education does not play the same role it did before the Quiet Revolution. Indeed, it has had the opposite effect. While this group of young people is certainly hearing the sovereignist message, it is less convincing to them.

The “halo effect” hypothesis: voter intent in a sovereignty referendum is linked to satisfaction with the Bouchard government

Some people, including members of the Parti Québécois, have put forward the hypothesis that voter intent in a sovereignty referendum is linked to satisfaction with the Bouchard government. In other words, the struggle for a zero deficit and cuts to health and education budgets have had a negative effect on Yes support because the sovereignist vote is related to satisfaction with the government. The data collected do not allow this theory to be confirmed. As measured by CROP

10 percent below that of men—is due to their different roles in society (for example, the higher proportion of retirees and homemakers among women). Would the absence of this difference between working men and women lead to an increase in the Yes vote over time? The data do not completely support this hypothesis. On one hand, women generally have a higher tendency than men to be non-disclosers with respect to voter intent. On the other hand, the gender difference is from 7 to 9 percent depending on age group, and from 5 to 9 percent depending on income group. It varies from 6 to 18 percent between surveys.

Employment also has an effect but not the one hypothesised. Working women—whether at full- or part-time jobs—and retired women are less likely to say they’ll vote Yes. However, among francophone students, there is no difference in voter intent between men and women.² Thus, women are generally less likely to say they will vote Yes, even if the evolution of their voter intent has followed the same curve as that of men in the same age groups. The reasons for this situation have yet to be explained.

The “custodian” hypothesis: francophones younger than 55 earning more than \$20,000 annually, whether employed or students, vote differently than others

One cannot study the factors involved in voter intent in a sovereignty referendum without examining the theory proposed by Gilles Gagné and Simon Langlois in March 2000 in *Le Devoir*. In a few words, they argue, very relevantly, that the variables should be examined as a group rather than individually. They developed a “typology” based on a combination of characteristics (language, employment, age and income) and maintained that only one segment of the population—francophones younger than 55 who earn more than \$20,000 annually, whether employed or students—had shown a decrease in support for the Yes side in a possible future sovereignty referendum, and that this decline was attributable to factors related to the policies of the Bouchard government.

This theory highlights the fact that not everyone reacted in the same way to the referendum campaign, making it doubly important to test this hypothesis with a second group of data. The present study recreated the same groupings and carried out the analyses required to verify the existence of statistically significant differences in voter intent. Unfortunately, however, polls done during the campaign could not be examined because the data on the necessary characteristics were not available. The primary difference between the analyses proposed by Gagné and Langlois and the age-group analysis in this study is in the division of francophones younger than 55 into subgroups of employed/more fortunate and unemployed/less fortunate. Thus, it is this latter analysis that is presented below.

sample sizes. Indeed, certain polls put Yes support among the unemployed at the same level or higher than that of the employed.

Thus, the data do support the existence of a “custodian” group; however, this group is instead associated with a large segment of the population made up of francophones 55 and younger, among whom the employed (50 percent of the population) seem to be slightly more in favour of sovereignty than the unemployed (10 percent of the population).

Conclusion

The data presented support certain unavoidable conclusions. On one hand, after the referendum campaign, voter intent in a possible future sovereignty referendum has remained relatively stable, at least since 1997. On the other hand, among francophones, age is the primary factor in voter intent in a referendum, and in particular, as voters move closer to retirement, voter intent changes and solidifies such that it is unaffected, even temporarily, by political events or campaigns. Opinions would seem to be equally solidified among non-francophones. It is impossible to determine whether another referendum campaign would have the same effect among those younger than 55 because every campaign is different. However, it is conceivable that a different kind of debate will be required to sway groups such as young students and women.

1. These are, however, correlations between proportions and one cannot be certain that the same conclusions can be drawn at the individual voter level. The CROP survey data agree with Léger Marketing data, which are available on that firm’s Web site. The only difference between the two firms is that Léger polls tend to estimate the Yes vote higher and the non-disclosers lower than do the CROP polls.

2. However, these results disagree with a poll taken among students from the Université de Montréal just prior to the referendum by Blais, Martin and Nadeau.