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A Great Realignment of Political Parties in Quebec

Maurice Pinard



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Maurice Pinard

Emeritus Professor, McGill University

Associate Researcher at the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC)

The realignment of political parties in Quebec, which for a year has been forecast by public opinion polls, is likely to be of a scope unmatched since the advent of the Parti Québécois. The two traditional parties, the Quebec Liberal Party and the Parti Québécois have been losing ground since February 2002. A third party, the Action Démocratique du Québec, only marginal before, has gradually gained support, first taking the lead and subsequently remaining close to the two other parties in terms of popular support. This realignment is related to a major depolarization of the voters on constitutional issues. Accordingly it is a pertinent subject of enquiry for anyone interested in Quebec's future within Canada.

CRIC's annual survey of October 2002, for its series *Portraits of Canada*, made it possible to present a first analysis of this phenomenon. According to the survey, 36% of Quebec voters, and 40% of Francophone voters said they intended to vote for the ADQ. The Liberals and the Parti Québécois received respectively 32% and 31% of voting intentions (23% and 36% from francophones).¹ The following analysis will bear only on francophones so that the conclusions may not be skewed by the very different views expressed by non-francophones.

There are many aspects to the political transformations in progress. One dimension seems fundamental: the fact that public opinion is depolarized on the issue of federalism versus sovereignty. There is also another important dimension, which has to do with the opposition between neo-liberalism and the values associated with the welfare state. There is also populism, made of disaffection or alienation, leading to calls for sweeping changes (though ones that are often poorly articulated). In addition, the great popularity of the new party's young leader has had a tremendous effect. Finally, in 2002 at least, all these factors coincided with a context that was very favourable to the defeat of the present government, namely a very high rate of dissatisfaction towards the government which constituted a significant trigger for change.

DEPOLARIZATION AND THE CONSTITUTION

Many people were surprised when our survey showed such a low rate of polarization along constitutional lines among francophone voters in Quebec. The following question was put to them: "Do you consider yourself to be mainly a federalist, mainly a sovereigntist, someone who is in between the two, or someone who is neither one nor the other?" Only 40% of francophones identified themselves as either federalists (19%) or sovereigntists (21%). In fact, a majority of 58% refused to be labelled, 29% saying they stood between the two, and an equal number saying they belonged to neither group. It was in vivid contrast with the constitutional views of the Quebec Liberal Party which is resolutely federalist and of the Parti Québécois which is resolutely sovereigntist.

In view of this contrast between public opinion and party positions, a further result is significant. The centrists who refused to be labelled were very critical of the firm positions of the two traditional parties. A strong majority among them thought the Liberals were "too federalist" (62%) and thought the PQ was "too sovereigntist" (70%). The corresponding proportions were much lower among those who identified themselves as federalists: only 30% of them thought the Liberal Party was too federalist. An equal proportion among those who identified as sovereigntist thought the Parti Québécois was too sovereigntist.²

The depolarization of a majority of francophone voters on the constitutional question could only be a condition that was very favourable to the growth of the Action Démocratique du Québec, as the party and its leader systematically refuse to associate with either of the two camps. Such a stand made it easier for Liberal or Péquiste supporters to join the ADQ than to join the party at the other extreme of the constitutional axis. Our data confirm the importance of this phenomenon.

¹ Since our survey, support for the ADQ has fallen and the PQ has become more popular. According to CROP's February survey, the PQ even finds itself in front. But despite these developments, the point to emphasize is that we are witnessing a very tight race among three parties, something that represents a major change on the Quebec political scene. But what interests us here are the underlying factors that have led to this change, rather than the monthly fluctuations in party support.

² It must be said, however, that a majority in all these groups considered that the ADQ was "too ambiguous on the constitutional question," the proportion even reaching 58% among those who rejected either the sovereigntist or federalist label.

One must first consider that the referendum vote intentions, so closely related to partisan preferences toward the Liberal Party and the Parti Québécois, did not play out so strongly as regards the ADQ. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, francophones who intended to vote Yes were almost as likely to vote ADQ (34%) as were No voters (44%). The situation was very different as regards the other two parties. Very few Yes voters preferred the Liberal Party, while many No voters (44%) did. The PQ's situation was the reverse. Yes voters preferred the Parti Québécois by a proportion of 58% while only 16% of No voters did so. However, this is only part of the story.

There is a paradox here. While a majority of francophones refused to be identified either as federalists or sovereigntists, almost all of them expressed their intention to vote either Yes (44%) or No (49%) in an anticipated referendum. Only 7% did not express a preference. From this, one can expect that these voters for the Yes and for the No are not all that firm in their intentions, and that most of those without firm intentions would be found among those who did not want to be labelled as federalists or as sovereigntists. Indeed, among the Yes voters who did not want to be identified as sovereigntists or federalists, 55% said that their voting intentions could change, while the corresponding proportion was only 16% among the Yes-voting sovereigntists. The pattern was the same among the No voters. Among the No voters rejecting any label, 39% said they might change their intention; the proportion among self-described federalists intending to vote No was 13%. In other words, the Yes and No voters who refused to be labelled were softer in their opinions than those who chose an identification.

It so happens that voters refusing either label were more favourable to the Action Démocratique (48%) than those who identified themselves as federalists (34%) or sovereigntists (26%). This effect is even more striking according to the data of Table 2. The data show that while only 25% of the Yes voters identifying as sovereigntists supported the ADQ, 43% of the "non-label" Yes voters favoured that party. Similarly among No voters who had identified themselves as federalists, only 34% supported the ADQ while 52% of the "non-label" No voters supported that party. Being a partisan of the Yes or the No had indeed some influence on the choice of the ADQ as a party to support. However, to be a Yes or No voter identifying oneself as a sovereigntist or a federalist versus one refusing to be identified as such had even greater influence on one's preference for that party. Those who refused the polarization around the constitutional question found in the ADQ a haven appropriate for their convictions. As this group constituted a majority, it was to the party's advantage.

This does not imply that the ADQ and its supporters have turned their backs on traditional Quebec nationalism. After all, the party was founded in the wake of the Charlottetown accord by a group of dissident Liberals who favoured a very highly

TABLE 1 PRO RATA VOTE INTENTIONS OF FRANCOPHONES IN QUEBEC, ACCORDING TO REFERENDUM VOTE INTENTIONS

	Would Vote YES	Would Vote NO	Unstated
% ADQ	34	44	53
% PLQ	6	39	23
% PQ	58	16	21
% Other Parties	2	1	3
(N)	(362)	(383)	(29)

TABLE 2 PRO RATA VOTE INTENTIONS OF FRANCOPHONES IN QUEBEC, ACCORDING TO REFERENDUM VOTE INTENTIONS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

	Would Vote YES and Sovereigntist Identification	Would Vote YES and Without Label	Would Vote NO and Federalist Identification	Would Vote NO and Without Label
% ADQ	25	43	34	52
% PLQ	-	11	60	25
% PQ	72	45	4	22
% Other Parties	3	1	1	1
(N)	(169)	(186)	(145)	(222)

decentralized form of federalism. Although the party has lost some of its radicalism on this particular issue, it still is strongly decentralist. Our data indicate that francophone voters who believed that future provincial governments should have more powers were clearly in the majority (65%). These voters were more likely to support the ADQ (43%) than were those who favoured the constitutional status quo (35%) or greater powers for the federal government (32%). Let us add that the Parti Québécois did as well as the ADQ among the first group of voters (42%), while the Quebec Liberal Party received only 13% of this nationalist vote. As regards traditional nationalism, the ADQ is still a middle of the road party, but closer to the PQ than it is to the Liberals. Again, the ADQ is found where the francophone majority stands.

THE IMPACT OF NEO-LIBERALISM

If the ADQ benefited from its centrist position on constitutional issues, how did it fare with its neo-liberal platform, which squarely puts the party on the right on socio-economic issues? It must be said at the start that the issues raised by political parties do not always affect the vote as much as is generally believed. But when the issues are salient and voters clearly see differences between the various parties, then such issues can have a considerable impact. The effect is particularly noticeable with voters who switch their allegiance to a new party. The ADQ's neo-liberal platform seeks to reduce the role of the state in favour of private enterprise, encourages competition and personal initiative, and reduce the scope of the welfare state. These positions touch on a number of important issues where the ADQ clearly stands apart from the other parties. This should influence voters in the choice of that party, which is exactly what has been happening.

Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following proposal : "Having a smaller role for the government of Quebec and a bigger role for private enterprise". Opinions were evenly divided: 45% of francophone respondents agreed while 49% disagreed, and the rest were undecided. However, respondents who agreed were much more inclined to support the ADQ (47%) than were those who disagreed (32%).

Differences in support were larger on concrete and specific issues arising out of the ADQ's political program. Given the increase in health care costs, one question asked whether "governments should significantly increase their spending on healthcare", whether they should "limit the availability of some treatments or medications", or whether they should "allow the private sector to provide some healthcare services to those people who can afford to pay for them". The third option, which the ADQ supports, was approved in 2002 by a majority of francophones (51%). In 2001, only 40% had been in favour, which already shows the extent of the ADQ's influence on public opinion. This year, only 36% supported an increase in spending and 10% supported limitations on the availability of services.

As shown in table 3, the ADQ received much greater support (52%) from respondents who wanted greater recourse to private enterprise than from the other two categories of respondents (approximately 27%). The Liberals, who call for more spending, had their best showing (26%) among those who favoured this option. Strangely enough, it was among these who favoured limitations on health services that the Parti Québécois received the largest support (51%). The ADQ's program also contains another neo-liberal proposal, the implementation of a flat tax. But this does not receive large voter support. Only 36% of francophones were in favour while 60% were against. The measure's lack of popularity did not have much negative effect on the ADQ's support. Unlike the proposed reform of the health care system, the flat tax measure is probably less salient among the voters and does not therefore exert much impact on the ADQ's vote. Our survey shows that the ADQ had the support of 44% of those who favoured the idea of the flat tax, little more than among those who were opposed to it (37%).

TABLE 3 PRO RATA VOTE INTENTIONS OF FRANCOPHONES IN QUEBEC, ACCORDING TO PREFERRED HEALTHCARE REFORMS

	Increase Spending	Limit Services	Rely on Private Sector
% ADQ	26	28	52
% PLQ	26	21	20
% PQ	45	51	27
% Other Parties	2	-	1
(N)	(279)	(79)	(400)

Generally, the ADQ benefits from the traditional economic conservatism of a majority of francophone voters. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following proposition: “Most people who don’t get ahead should not blame the system, they only have themselves to blame”. Almost two-thirds of the francophones interviewed (63%) said they agreed while 35% disagreed. But while among those who agreed, 43% supported the ADQ; among those who disagreed only 34% did so. Conversely, the most conservative gave the Parti Québécois less support (32%) than the others (42%). These attitudes hardly affected the Liberals.

It is interesting to note that while ADQ supporters tend to be right wing on neo-liberal or conservative economic issues, this does not apply to traditional social values. Reacting to the proposition that “our society would be better off if people attended church or other religious services more regularly”, 39% of francophone respondents said they agreed while a majority of 58% disagreed. It so happens that on this question the ADQ found greater support among those who were least inclined to value church attendance (43%) than among those who were more conservative in this respect (36%). The Liberals did better among conservative elements (30%), while they had only 18% support among the least inclined to value church services. The ADQ’s support indeed followed the same pattern as the Parti Québécois’. But in the latter case, the differences were small: the PQ received 34% of voting intentions from the most conservative while it received 37% of voting intentions from the least conservative. In other words, the Liberals’ supporters were more traditionalist than either the ADQ’s or the Parti québécois’.³

THE EFFECTS OF POLITICAL DISAFFECTION

New political parties and movements tend to be the first beneficiaries of disaffection for political elites, traditional parties, and political institutions in general. The more pronounced the alienation, the more new parties benefit. Political alienation is actually very high in Western countries, and it is even increasing. It runs high all across Canada, and this includes francophone Quebec. Thus, 62% of francophones said they have little confidence (41%) in political leaders, or no confidence at all (21%). Similarly, 76% said they would give them a low or a very low rating for honesty and ethical standards. Eighty percent of respondents agreed with the statement that most political leaders do not tell the truth and do not keep their promises. Finally, 67% answered positively when asked if traditional political parties were more disconnected than before from the concerns of the average voter.

Each one of these measures of political alienation is an equally important predictor of support for the ADQ. Table 4 shows the relationship between confidence in political leaders and support for the various parties.

We can see that 45% of those who had little confidence in political leaders said they supported the ADQ, whereas the corresponding proportion among the others was only 31%. Inversely, support for the Liberals and especially for the Parti Québécois was higher among those who had confidence in political leaders. Once again, voters who expressed their disaffection with politics constituted a majority and it is within this majority that the ADQ got its largest support.

³ Because attitudes on this question are closely related to age, we tested to see if the relationship between those attitudes and party support held once we controlled for age. For the ADQ, we found that the relationship did not hold in the case of those aged 55 years and more, but was stronger among persons 35 years and less. The opposite is the case with the Liberals, where the relationship becomes stronger with age. Curiously, the Parti Québécois does better with traditionalists who are young (though they are not very numerous), but not so well with older traditionalists.

TABLE 4 PRO RATA VOTE INTENTIONS OF FRANCOPHONES IN QUEBEC, ACCORDING TO DISAFFECTION FROM POLITICAL LEADERS

	A Great Deal or Some Confidence	Not Very Much or No Confidence At All
% ADQ	31	45
% PLQ	26	21
% PQ	42	32
% Other Parties	1	2
(N)	(282)	(484)

RELATIVE UNPOPULARITY OF THE LEADERS OF THE TWO TRADITIONAL PARTIES

In addition to the disaffection from political leaders in general, there are also important differences as regards the relative popularity of party leaders in Quebec. The popularity of PQ Leader Bernard Landry and particularly that of Liberal leader Jean Charest was below that of ADQ leader Mario Dumont last October. Among Francophone respondents, 56% said that they had a great deal of confidence or some confidence in Mario Dumont. The corresponding ratings for Bernard Landry and Jean Charest were 44% and 24% respectively. Of these leaders, Mario Dumont was the most popular among his own supporters, and he even inspired confidence to more than 40% of the supporters of competing parties. Dumont's two opponents could never reach such levels of popularity among the supporters of other parties. Everything indicates that the popularity of the ADQ's young leader has contributed a great deal to the rise of his own party.

GROWING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PARTI QUÉBÉCOIS GOVERNMENT

Obviously, the rise of the ADQ until December cannot be explained solely on the basis of the presumably stable factors that we have been looking at. We would be surprised if the constitutional depolarization and the political disaffection we have described had emerged suddenly and independently from the rise of the ADQ. And, if the preference given to the private sector for health care increased in 2002, as we saw, we believe this is more the result of the rise of the ADQ than its cause. Since we cannot logically explain this sudden popularity of the ADQ by means of factors that were relatively stable before this popularity appeared, we must look elsewhere for the factors that have triggered the ADQ's success. In our view the triggering factor behind the ADQ's success is the growing dissatisfaction with the government of the Parti Québécois. We do not have any data on this situation in our CRIC survey. However, CROP gathers data practically every month on this question and this is what we shall use now, but for the whole population independently of language.

We should point out that every Quebec government since 1970 has completed a second term, but each time with a high level of dissatisfaction, which then led to electoral defeat. The PQ government now stands at the end of its second mandate and, as previous governments experienced, it has aroused a high level of dissatisfaction.⁴ Since the election of 1998 up to January 2002, the average rate of dissatisfaction has fluctuated between 44% and 52%. Between September 2001 and January 2002, this rate stood at 45%. It rose however to an average of 58% between February and November 2002. Now, it was precisely in February 2002 that the ADQ began its spectacular growth. According to CROP's surveys, support for the ADQ grew steadily and quickly. It stood at 15% of voting intentions (after the redistribution of undecided voters on a pro rata basis) between the election of 1998 and January 2002, but it reached a level of 38% between May and November 2002.

⁴ This was the case, at least, up until January of 2003. One of the most striking findings of the most recent CROP survey, undertaken in February 2003, is the very large jump in satisfaction with the PQ government, which moved over the course of one month from 36% to 47%. This is the highest degree of satisfaction registered for this government in a year, and it reflects the gains made by the PQ in voter support.

To show the impact of this high level of dissatisfaction on the ADQ's support, let us simply mention that according to the CROP survey of October 2002, almost half of Quebec's dissatisfied voters (47%, after the redistribution of undecided voters on a pro rata basis) said they intended to vote for the ADQ while only 20% of those who were satisfied expressed the same intention.

It must be said that, in all likelihood, charges of favouritism levelled at the Parti Québécois in preceding weeks had a lot to do with the growing dissatisfaction displayed from February 2002 onwards. The accusations had to do with lobbying activities, which involved ministers and party organizers. The whole affair led to the resignation of one minister and that of the party's general director. There followed four surprising by-election victories for the ADQ among the seven held in April and June 2002. As a result of these victories, many new supporters embraced the party, according to public opinion polls, until ADQ support reached a peak of 43% in June, according to a CROP poll of that month.

WHY NOT THE QUEBEC LIBERAL PARTY?

One may wonder why the Liberals who constituted the official opposition, and who were to start with much more popular than was the ADQ, were unable to take advantage of the Parti Québécois' setbacks. To be sure, the Liberals, from 2001 to this day, were almost always running ahead of the Parti Québécois. Between October 2001 and January 2002, this lead had even reached, on average, eight percentage points (after the redistribution of undecided voters on a pro rata basis), and has prevailed most of the time since then. However, beginning in February 2002, both the Liberals and the Parti Québécois started to lose ground to the Action Démocratique.

We have already mentioned indirectly several factors explaining why the Liberals failed to take advantage of their position. One of the most important is certainly the constitutional polarization which has prevailed for more than thirty years between the Liberals and the Parti Québécois. It has always prevented easy passage of supporters from one of these parties to the other. But the centrist position of the ADQ along this axis cannot but facilitate the passage to that party. For example, a CROP survey in August 2002 for *La Presse* showed that the second choice of those who intended to vote Liberal went in a proportion of 74% to the ADQ but only 12% to the Parti Québécois. The second choice for supporters of the Parti Québécois was 64% in favour of the ADQ and only 21% for the Liberal Party.

The unpopularity of the Liberal leader Jean Charest among francophones is a second factor hindering a transfer of support to his party. Moreover, in 2001 and particularly at the beginning of 2002, the Liberal government in Ottawa was facing accusations of favouritism and conflict of interest, mostly concerning sponsorship contracts. This situation created an atmosphere of scandals that might have had a negative influence for the provincial Liberals, as many voters do not make any difference between the two wings of the party. Finally, the disaffection for politicians and traditional parties could hardly have helped the Quebec Liberal Party.

Conclusion

It is clear that the political realignment we are now seeing in Quebec has deep roots in important dimensions of francophone public opinion in Quebec. The two-party system now seems to be evolving, at least in the short term, into a relatively well balanced three-party system such as Quebec has never seen before.

The question is the durability of the new system. Will the three-party system last or will we soon see one of the three parties become marginal. If so, which one?⁵ At the limit, will we see a repeat of the historical pattern wherein a new nationalist party arises every thirty-five years to replace the previous one, leading each time to a restoration of our classic two-party system? Could history repeat itself a third time? In any event, it is not unlikely that these transformations will have dramatic consequences for the Canadian political system. The study of these changes remain a critical task.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

CRIC's annual *Portraits of Canada* survey was conducted by CROP. A sample of 1,014 adults were interviewed by telephone in Quebec between September 27 and October 16. The results of a survey of this size have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%, 19 times out of 20. Another component of the survey was undertaken in the other nine provinces by the Environics Research Group, and had a sample size of 2,939. An analysis of the results relating to issues other than the ones covered in this paper was published in CRIC Paper # 8, which is available on the CRIC website at www.cric.ca.

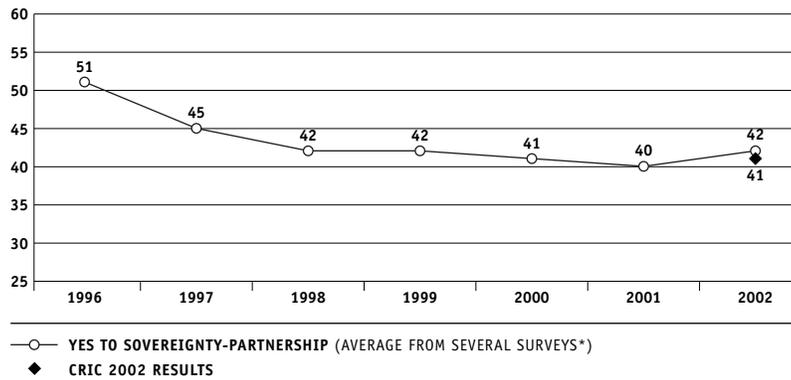
⁵ During 2002, some commentators thought that the PQ might disappear, predicting that it would win only a handful of seats in the next election. Today, in the wake of the most recent surveys, we hear talk of a PQ victory. The only thing that is clear at this time is that nothing is yet decided.

Appendix

Additional Results from *Portraits of Canada 2002*

FIGURE 1 SUPPORT FOR SOVEREIGNTY-PARTNERSHIP (1996-2002)
(QUEBEC RESPONDENTS ONLY) (DECIDED VOTERS, WITH UNDECIDED
REDISTRIBUTED ON A PRO RATA BASIS)

If a referendum were held today on the same question as that asked in 1995, that is, sovereignty with an offer of partnership with the rest of Canada, would you vote YES or would you vote NO?



*Surveys from CROP. Number of surveys for each year: 1996 = 9; 1997 = 5; 1998 = 13; 1999 = 8; 2000 = 10; 2001 = 13; 2002 = 10.

FIGURE 2 WILL QUEBEC BECOME AN INDEPENDENT COUNTRY?
(1998-2002)
(QUEBEC RESPONDENTS ONLY)

Do you think Quebec will probably become an independent country one day, or do you think it will probably stay in Canada?

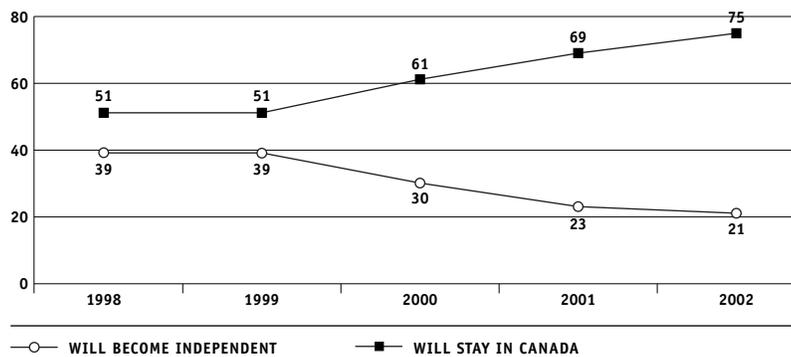


FIGURE 3 SOVEREIGNTY: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS PASSED?

Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: "Quebec sovereignty is an idea whose time has passed"?

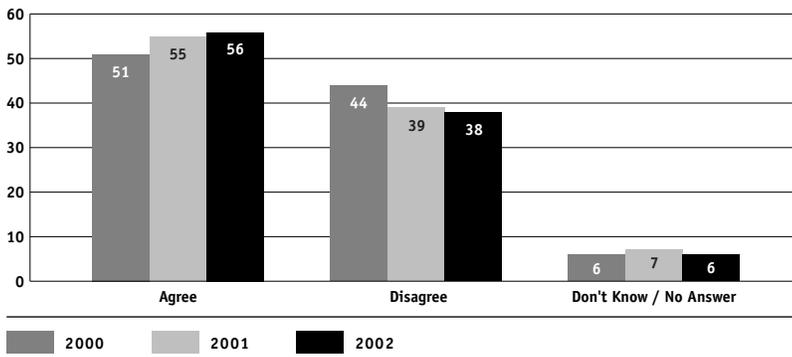


FIGURE 4 FEDERALISTS AND SOVEREIGNTISTS OR NOT? (QUEBEC RESPONDENTS ONLY)

Do you consider yourself to be mainly a federalist, mainly a sovereigntist, someone who is in between the two, or someone who is neither one nor the other?

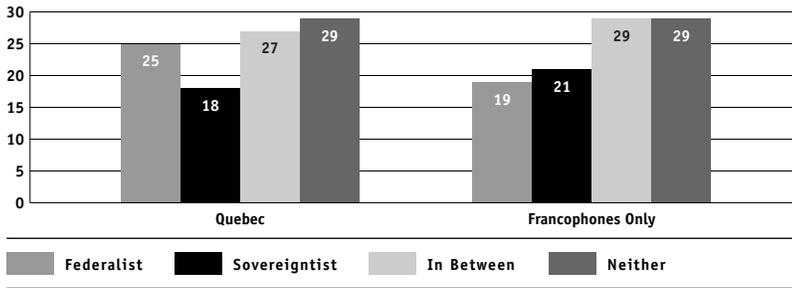
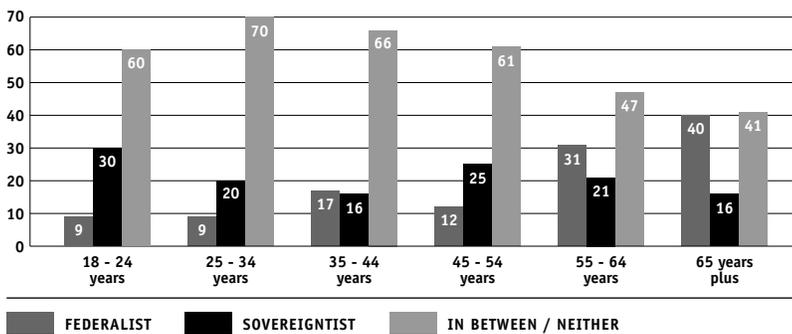


FIGURE 5 FEDERALISTS AND SOVEREIGNTISTS OR NOT? BY AGE GROUP (QUEBEC RESPONDENTS ONLY)

Do you consider yourself to be mainly a federalist, mainly a sovereigntist, someone who is in between the two, or someone who is neither one nor the other?



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Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC)
2000 McGill College Avenue
Suite 250
Montréal, Quebec H3A 3H3
1 800 363-0963
Fax: (514) 843-4590
www.cric.ca