

Forty Years of Public Opinion on Bilingualism in Canada¹

A Research Note Prepared by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC)

1. Public Support for Bilingualism Has Increased

Public support for bilingualism in Canada fell in the early 1990s at the time of the economic recession and the national unity crisis unleashed by the failure of the Charlottetown Accord and the subsequent election of a separatist government in Quebec. Since then, support has increased. Today, support is roughly as high as it has been at any point since the late 1970s. This is true on all regions of the country, including the West.

As a principle, then, bilingualism appears to be as relevant to Canadians today as it was a generation ago. In fact, it is notable that younger Canadians are more likely to support bilingualism than their older counterparts, which again suggests that the principle has not lost any of its currency.

Question: Can support for bilingualism be expected to remain stable over time, regardless of external events, or will it likely fall, as it did in the early 1990s, in the event of the onset of an economic recession or an acrimonious debate over national unity? Can support for bilingualism be expected to rise further in the absence of such events, or has it reached its peak?

2. Certain Aspects of Bilingualism Attract Much Higher Support than Others

Support for bilingualism varies tremendously according to the precise wording of the question that is asked. As a general rule, the more the meaning of bilingualism is defined in the question, the more support it will attract. For instance, a very high number of Canadians support the right of Francophones outside of Quebec to have

¹ The following summary is based on an analysis of public opinion data from a variety of sources collected by Andrew Parkin (CRIC) and André Turcotte (Carleton University). Some of this data was presented at the conference on "The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism: 40 Years Later," hosted by the Association for Canadian Studies, May 24th and May 25th 2003, Montreal.

their children educated in French, and the right of citizens to receive federal government services in the official language of their choice. More vaguely worded notions, such as the idea of “bilingualism for all of Canada,” attract much lower levels of support.

Furthermore, support for the policy of bilingualism is not matched by support for putting more government effort and resources into promoting it. Anglophone Canadians are much more likely to say the government is doing too much to advance bilingualism than to say that it is not doing enough. To say that Canadians support bilingualism is not to say that they think it should be a spending priority.

Question: To what extent is the public’s sense that the government should not prioritize the promotion of bilingualism an impediment to realizing the government’s policy objectives in this area?

3. Support for Official Bilingualism is not Matched by Interest in Learning French

Seventy percent of Canadians living outside of Quebec think it is important to preserve English and French as the official languages of Canada, but only 56% think it is important that their children learn to speak French. And in turn, the number of those who say it is important that their children learn French is much higher than the actual rate of bilingualism among young Anglophones. Thus the support for bilingualism as a policy is not being translated into commitment to the practice of bilingualism at the level of individual citizens.

Moreover, there is some evidence that, while support for the policy of official bilingualism remains as high as ever, the importance attached to learning French has fallen over time. (The picture is not clear because identical questions have not been asked consistently over time. This conclusion is based on a comparison of questions asked in the 1960s and similar but not identical questions asked in the 2000s.)

Some argue that the interest in learning French is declining because there is growing interest among Anglophones in speaking a second language other than French. This may be true for some, but there remains a significant minority of Anglophones who do not believe that learning any language other than English is necessary. This is important, for it suggests that the key issue is not whether Anglophones will choose to learn French or another language, but whether they will choose to learn any second language at all.

In this context, it is interesting to note that many Americans, and especially many young Americans, express an interest in learning Spanish. In Canada, 62% of non-Francophones, living outside Quebec, aged 18-34, say it is important for their children to learn French; but the number of non-Hispanics Americans, aged 18-34, who say it is important for their children to learn Spanish is not far behind (55%), and in some regions is much higher (i.e. in the Western states it is 70%). If Canadian Anglophones do not renew their interest in learning a second language, they may to their surprise find

themselves at a disadvantage to Americans in terms of language skills and thus ease of movement within the global economy.

Question: Is interest in learning a second language in fact declining in Canada, and if so, why? What factors are most important in motivating Anglophone Canadians to learn a second language?

4. Bilingualism, and Language Issues More Generally, Divide the Linguistic Communities

Anglophones and Francophones do not see eye to eye on bilingualism or on language issues more generally. For instance, they have opposing views on whether we have gone too far in pushing bilingualism and on whether the French language is threatened in Quebec. Inside Quebec, the two linguistic communities have opposing views on whether Anglophones or Francophones are favoured in the workplace – and views on this question have not changed significantly since the 1970s. This does not negate the fact that Anglophones are generally supportive of bilingualism and have become more supportive over time. However, it does underscore the fact that the politics of bilingualism remain potentially divisive.

It should be emphasized that Allophones are more supportive of bilingualism than Anglophones – for example, they are more likely than Anglophones to say they support the policy of official bilingualism, and to believe that bilingualism is important to Canadian identity. Furthermore, Canadians who support multiculturalism also tend to support bilingualism, indicating that the policies are perceived as being linked rather than in competition with one another.

These findings cast doubt on the assertion that is sometimes advanced that the growing ethnic diversity of the country might lead to declining support for bilingualism over time. Bilingualism is perceived as being an aspect of Canada's commitment to diversity, which is arguably an important reason why it remains important to many Canadians, including immigrants and Allophones.

Question: Why has the gap between Anglophones and Francophones on language issues not narrowed significantly over the years, despite the changes made in federal and provincial language policies, and the gains made by Francophone communities both inside and outside Quebec?

5. The Gender Gap

There are important age and gender differences among Anglophones in terms of their support for bilingualism. Young Canadians are more supportive than their older counterparts, and women are more supportive than men.

It is especially important to note that young women in Canada (those between the ages of 18 to 30) are the most supportive of bilingualism, and much more supportive than men of the same age. Young women are much more likely than young men to say that it is important for their children to learn French. Half of all young women say that bilingualism makes them very proud to be Canadian, compared with only one third of young men (these figures refer to Anglophones outside Quebec). The reason for the significant difference of opinion between young women and young men has not been fully explored or explained.

Question: What explains the difference of opinion about bilingualism between young women and young men? What connections are there between these attitudes and the actual propensity of each of the two groups to learn French? What are the implications of this gender gap for the politics of promoting bilingualism?

General Recommendations

- Information regarding the state of public opinion on bilingualism should be more widely circulated so as to dispel certain myths that remain prevalent (e.g. that support for bilingualism is falling, or that multiculturalism and bilingualism represent conflicting rather than mutually reinforcing visions).
- Research should be directed towards explaining the discontinuity between relatively high levels of support among Anglophones for the policy of bilingualism and less extensive support for learning a second language (or between the sense that bilingualism is important to the Canadian political community, and the lesser sense that it is important to individual Canadian citizens). Given that most Canadians say that the official bilingualism policy is important, the strategic focus should be placed not on promoting official bilingualism as a policy, but on raising the awareness of the importance of bilingualism at the individual level – that is to say the importance of being able to speak more than one language. It is not clear why, in the context both of growing diversity in the country and of globalization more generally, a significant number of Canadians does not think it important to learn a second language.
- Research should be directed towards explaining why young men and women have contrasting views on bilingualism and the importance of speaking a second language, and the implications of this for family decisions regarding the education of children.