

Is the Independence Issue Back on the Agenda in Quebec?

Written by Éric Bélanger and Chris Chhim

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ÉRIC BÉLANGER AND CHRIS CHHIM, OCT 21 2012

Quebec's recent provincial election on 4 September 2012 saw the return of the Parti Québécois (PQ) to power after being in opposition for nine years. How can one make sense of Quebecers' decision to elect a political party advocating national sovereignty to the province of Quebec and the eventual separation of Quebec from the rest of Canada? After the 1995 referendum on Quebec's sovereignty, does the return of a PQ government mean that the issue of independence is back on the agenda? A brief exploration tracking Quebec public opinion on this matter will allow for a more grounded interpretation of the 2012 election results.

Nationalism in Quebec

Nationalist sentiment has been expressed clearly at certain times in Quebec history. At the beginning of the 19th century, the nationalist movement found a large amount of support during the Patriot Rebellions of 1837-38. These armed uprisings stemmed from the British administration's refusal to give certain democratic rights to Lower Canada (roughly corresponding to present-day Quebec), as demanded by certain representatives of the Patriot Party. While demands for a responsible government were at the heart of the conflict, some members of the Patriot Party wanted to make Lower Canada into an independent republic. This dream was crushed shortly afterward, but came back in full force during the Quiet Revolution and during both referenda held over the future of Quebec.

The re-emergence of the independence movement in the aftermath of the political and administrative reforms that took place in Quebec during the 1960s – known as the Quiet Revolution – had its roots in the socioeconomic disparities of the time. French-Canadians were living in economic conditions that were largely inferior to those of the English-speaking minority, who were the province's economic elite. Unable to access higher paying jobs or occupy management positions, French-Canadians were relegated (at least symbolically) to an inferior position in Canadian society. In turn, these ethnic grievances fed popular support for the idea of political independence, from which René Lévesque's Parti Québécois was created in 1968.

Two other key moments for the Quebec sovereignty movement were the 1980 and 1995 referenda on the accession of Quebec to the status of a sovereign state. While the first referendum was lost by the sovereignists with only 40.4% of voters endorsing their project, the second was much tighter; in 1995, 49.4% of Quebecers supported the proposition of "sovereignty-partnership" with the rest of Canada. According to political scientist Guy Laforest, it is possible to see these two referenda as modern-day "democratic rebellions", an idea that sees these events as an extension of the conflict that started more than a century ago with the Patriots' armed rebellions.[1]

Support for Sovereignty Today

What can be said about today's support for Quebec sovereignty? We will concentrate on the two questions most commonly asked by polling firms to answer this question.[2] The first makes an explicit reference to Quebec's "sovereignty". This question has been asked since 1988 in a variety of ways depending on the polling firm, but the most common wording is the following: "If a referendum were to take place today on Quebec's sovereignty, would you vote for or against it?"

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Looking at annual averages from 1988 to 2010, we see how support for sovereignty can be influenced by the political context. While support for sovereignty stood at 32% in 1988, it doubled over the next two years, reaching a high of 66% in 1990. This was the year in which the tensions around the adoption of the Meech Lake Accord were at their highest. Simply put, in 1990, around two-thirds of Quebecers said they were favourable to the sovereignty project. However, this support gradually declined over the next five years, to 45% in 1995, which was when Quebec's second referendum took place. After a slight rebound after the referendum (49% support in 1996), the sovereignty option continued its slow decline until 2005, when the sponsorship scandal involving the Liberal Party of Canada broke. While support for sovereignty then bounced back up to 49%, it did not last long and after a short while fell back to 40%. Thus, two external shocks can explain, at least in part, the rises in support for sovereignty: the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and the sponsorship scandal. Since then, one can see a slow decline in support, while still remaining overall stable, with approximately two Quebecers out of five being favourable to the sovereignty project.

The second question often asked to Quebecers makes reference to the idea of making Quebec into a "country". The typical wording of this question reads as follows: "If a referendum were to take place today that asked if you would like for Quebec to become a sovereign country, would you vote 'yes' or would you vote 'no'?" Similar questions making reference to the notion of a "country" have been asked as early as 1970, when support for the idea of Quebec as a country was only at 13%. However, support reached 35% in 1979, one year before Quebec's first referendum, before falling to 17% in 1985 during a phase of post-referendum demobilisation. Support for the idea of making Quebec into a country sharply rose to 61% in 1990, before rapidly falling to 40%. The annual data indicate that support for making Quebec into a country has essentially been stable over the past two decades (39% as of 2010).

The overall figures for both survey questions follow similar trends, with support for Quebec becoming a "country" being slightly lower than that for "sovereignty". This suggests that Quebecers may be more hesitant to accept the notion of complete political and economic independence for Quebec.

A "Post-Sovereignist" Era?

There seems to be stagnation with little progression when it comes to Quebecers' support for sovereignty, especially since the beginning of the 2000s (with the exception of the sponsorship scandal in 2004-2005). This stagnation is indicative of a long-term trend away from the national question. While many Quebecers still claim to be sovereignist when asked by polling firms, such an affirmation seems to reveal a form of automatism, or worse yet, be devoid of meaning. Some voters, while resolutely sovereignist, want to put their efforts into priorities and projects other than that of sovereignty, at least for a little while. Other voters seem to want to outright reject the old labels of "federalist" and "sovereignist". In addition, there has been much hesitation, particularly with regard to the sovereignty project's economic viability over the medium- and long-term. Old ethnic grievances that fed support for sovereignty have for the most part disappeared with the huge political and economic advances made in the province. Even worries over the future of the French language, while still very present, have been largely softened with the adoption of more strict language laws.[3] Furthermore, since the mid-2000s, Quebec-Canada relations have eased to a point where serious political conflicts are largely absent. Quebecers now seem to be demobilized toward the national question, similar to how they were during the 1980s.

On the basis of similar observations, journalist Alain Dubuc has called the current period a "post-sovereignist" era.[4] Former PQ cabinet minister and head of the newly-created Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), François Legault makes the same observation when he promises a moratorium on the national question for at least ten years. According to these observers of Quebec political life, today's Quebecers are ready to tackle issues more "important" (for the moment) than attaining political independence. While it is still too early to say if these individuals are correct, it would also be hazardous to conclude that the national question no longer is of any importance.

Does the election of a PQ government last September contradict Dubuc's notion of a "post-sovereignist" era in Quebec? Can we see the 2012 election results as reflecting rising sovereignist sentiment among the population? The fact that the PQ's vote share has actually decreased since last provincial election (from 35% in 2008 down to 32%), combined with the relatively low public support of sovereignty, may be seen as evidence to infer that the return of the

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PQ should not be seen as a reflection of rising sovereignty support among Quebecers. Campaign polls released by CROP have actually shown a decline in sovereignty support during the campaign period, as the possibility of a PQ victory became more and more real. At the start of the campaign, support for sovereignty stood at 36%, only slightly lower than in the years before. Three weeks later, it had decreased to 28%.

In addition to these long-term trends, the key to understanding the PQ's minority government may lay in short-term issues. When the election was called, incumbent Liberal premier Jean Charest had been in power for nine tumultuous years. The months preceding the election saw student strikes, protests over proposed tuition fee hikes, and charges of corruption against the Liberal government, making for a tightly-contested election campaign with no clear frontrunner. Although other political parties such as the Coalition Avenir Québec and Québec Solidaire may have benefited from this anti-Charest sentiment, it is likely that some portion of the PQ gains may have come from this backlash.

An Unresolved Question

Even if one can consider the 1995 referendum as the end of a chapter in Canada's constitutional odyssey, and even if Quebec sovereignty is currently not the vibrant force that it used to be, the larger question of Quebec's place in the Canadian federation remains unresolved. Although some federalists outside of Quebec may consider the question of the province's political future to be settled, other important grievances stemming from a collection of political and historical events remain unaddressed. Some of the most prominent examples are the repatriation of the *Constitution Act, 1982* without the consent of Quebec, the *Reference re: Secession of Quebec* (1998), and the *Clarity Act* (2000).

Another issue of concern is that since 1995 the rest of Canada appears to be moving away from Quebec. By leaving less space for Quebec within the Canadian federation, distancing itself from the province's interests, or by adopting more right-wing values under a Conservative majority government, the rest of the country could very well end up alienating the Quebec population. In this scenario, while the election of a PQ government amid sluggish support for sovereignty could not be seen as reflecting a collective will among Quebecers to separate from Canada, it could be a harbinger of heightened tensions with Ottawa as a PQ premier tries to stir up support for the sovereignty option. Renewed friction and antagonism on both sides, combined with a PQ premier and Conservative prime minister[5], could potentially open the door to the return of the sovereigntist movement and the resurgence of nationalist sentiment in Quebec.

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[1] Guy Laforest, "One never knows... Sait-on jamais?", in Michael Murphy, ed., *Quebec and Canada in the New Century: New Dynamics, New Opportunities* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), pp. 53-81.

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[2] For more information about these data and for a more detailed analysis of them, see Éric Bélanger and Chris Chhim, "Le sentiment nationaliste et identitaire des Québécois" in Stéphan Gervais, Christopher Kirkey, and Jarrett Rudy, eds., *Questions québécoises* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, forthcoming).

[3] On these points, see Matthew Mendelsohn, "Rational Choice and Socio-Psychological Explanation for Opinion on Quebec Sovereignty", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 2003, pp. 511-537.

[4] Alain Dubuc, *À mes amis souverainistes* (Montreal: Les Éditions Voix Parallèles, 2008).

[5] On the effects of such a combination on the ebb and flow of sovereignty support, see Emmanuelle Richez and Marc André Bodet, "Fear and Disappointment: Explaining the Persistence of Support for Quebec Secession", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 2012, pp. 77-93.