

THE TWO QUEBEC INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUMS: POLITICAL STRATEGIES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Quebec is exceptional among all cases of nationalist movements in liberal democracies, as governments formed by the secessionist Parti Québécois (PQ) have organised two independence referendums (see Table 1). Thus, the Quebec case offers particularly fertile ground for examining how a secessionist party seeks to convince a majority of voters to support independence in a referendum campaign while a host of other actors (within the province, across the country, and around the world) make a case against secession.

The unique Quebec experience with two independence referendums reveals something important: each of the referendums had its own political dynamic, featuring its own set of secessionist strategies and counter-strategies as well as specific international contexts. Indeed, the political dynamics of the referendums of 1980 and 1995 were shaped by the preceding 15–20 year period. These “slices of history” informed how secessionist actors sought to prevail in each of the referendums.

The 1980 referendum: Emancipation and social democracy

The 1980 Quebec referendum came on the heels of a process of modernisation in the province known as the Quiet Revolution. Engineered by Quebec governments beginning in the 1960s, the Quiet Revolution featured, among other things, measures to improve the socioeconomic status of Francophones, rendered difficult by decades of mostly conservative politics and strong Church influence, and legislation to promote French language and culture at a time when English was the dominant language at the highest echelons of the province’s economy (McRoberts, 1993). The (Liberal) Quebec governments of the Quiet Revolution also argued that they shouldered the special burden of looking after the only mainly French-speaking society in North America and that, as a result, Quebec should enjoy extensive autonomy within the Canadian federation and be recognised as different within its constitutional framework. The PQ, formed in 1968, went a step further and argued that the full emancipation of Francophones required

Quebec to be a sovereign state. Its majority government in 1976 gave the secessionist party the opportunity to organise a referendum on independence.

The PQ deployed two main arguments during the 1980 referendum campaign, both very broad in nature and anchored into the developing Québécois nationalism that was pushing aside notions of French-Canadian solidarity (Balthazar, 2013).

The first argument was that a sovereign Quebec could fully emancipate Francophones. For the PQ, independence was a project for the province's Francophone majority, as it was argued that an independent state could best protect and promote its socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic interests. At that time, there was virtually no effort made to convince Anglophones and new immigrants, who were overwhelmingly in favour of Quebec remaining part of Canada, to support independence. Not only did the PQ judge that there was basically no chance to change the views of even a handful of members of these communities, but running a campaign centred on the notion of giving Francophone Quebecers "a country" was not widely viewed as a problematic idea. Hence, the cultural content of the campaign was very substantial. French, in all its dimensions, was central to the argument for independence, and singers, artists and poets were at the forefront of the "Yes" campaign.

The second broad argument made by the PQ was that independence could be used to create a fairer, more egalitarian society where the state would be used extensively to bridge the gap between rich and poor. The PQ was created as a social democratic party and, during its government years preceding the referendum (1976–1980), implemented many progressive measures, particularly in the labour market. Trade unions were close to the PQ and supportive of independence, which they saw as a way to improve the socioeconomic status of Francophones and to create a more labour-friendly environment. The PQ argued that Quebec independence would be used to create a different type of society, one inspired by the social democracies of Scandinavia (Béland and Lecours, 2008).

The PQ recognised the radical nature of its project, and sought to reassure Quebecers that they would have a chance to confirm their decision to become independent at a later stage. Indeed, the party adopted a so-called gradualist approach (*l'étapisme*) whereby it first sought Quebecers' support to discuss a "sovereignty-association" arrangement with Canada and would subsequently organise another referendum to ratify whatever "association" had been negotiated. The PQ opted to use the concept of "sovereignty" (rather than independence, which arguably sounded more like a rupture), and to couple it with the notion of a (primarily economic) association with Canada. These elements (*l'étapisme*, sovereignty-association) made for a "softer" question.¹

To counter these arguments, the federal government used a two-pronged strategy. First, then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau articulated a strong defence of Canada, emphasising that the country belonged to Quebecers as much as it did to other Canadians. For many Quebecers, especially older ones whose formative years pre-dated the Quiet Revolution and strongly identified as "French-Canadians", this was a powerful argument. Second, the federal government

1. The question was: "The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad – in other words, sovereignty – and at the same time to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; any change in political status resulting from these negotiations will only be implemented with popular approval through another referendum; on these terms, do you give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?"

predicted that independence would come with dire economic and financial consequences, and that Quebec would be a small, isolated, and poor sovereign state. The international context of the time gave these economic arguments some credibility. Indeed, at a time where economies were still (state) national, Quebec's trading was very much oriented towards the rest of Canada.

In the international politics of Quebec independence, there are two significant actors: France, historically and culturally the most meaningful external state for the province, and the superpower neighbour, the United States. In the 1960s, France expressed support for Quebec independence, as demonstrated by General de Gaulle's "*Vive le Québec libre!*" pronouncement on the balcony of Montreal's city hall in 1967. Although such enthusiasm had tempered under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, there remained enough sympathy for the PQ's project in the French government to have France develop a specific formula to designate the country's position towards secessionist politics in Quebec: *non-ingérence, non-indifférence* (non-meddling, non-indifference) (Bastien, 1999). This stood in sharp contrast to the United States, which took an unambiguous position in favour of a united Canada. In fact, the idea of independence was really badly received in the United States where the socio-democratic ideology of the secessionist movement led some to suggest independence would transform the province into a "Cuba North," an unwelcome proposition in a United States still in the middle of the Cold War. Moreover, despite PQ premier René Lévesque's attempt to compare its project to the American War of Independence when speaking to an American audience, secessionist politics brought up references to the Civil War instead. Although the impact of international factors on the 1980 referendum is impossible to assess with any precision, it was most likely marginal. Not only did the French and American positions conform to the expectations of the actors involved in the referendum but, as the gradualist approach of the PQ meant that the first vote did not immediately entail a declaration of independence, there was no urgent need to actively seek support for recognition.

The 1995 referendum: A backlash against failed constitutional negotiations

The second referendum on Quebec independence was the product of a very different political dynamic to the first. By the mid-1990s, Francophone Quebecers by and large no longer felt like they required "emancipation" or "liberation". Language legislation had helped to both strengthen the position of French and further the socioeconomic status of Francophones. Although the PQ still presented itself as social democratic, the party appeared much more business-friendly than before. The nature of nationalist mobilisation in Quebec had changed but arguably reached new heights in the early 1990s when constitutional negotiations aiming at meeting the demands of Quebec governments (after a new constitution act was adopted in 1982 without its consent) ultimately failed (Laforest, 1995).

These failed negotiations constituted the essence of the argument of the "yes" camp in 1995. Independence was best, according to "yes" side leaders, because Quebec's minimal conditions for a constitutional accord

(including, most importantly, recognition of its distinctiveness) had been too much for the rest of Canada to accept. These leaders deployed a narrative of exhaustion, similar to that of present-day Catalonia (Basta, forthcoming), which stated that Quebec governments had tried everything to make it work within Canada but to no avail, and that in these circumstances independence was the only option. The constitutional odyssey of the 1980s and early 1990s was presented as a rejection of Quebec by Canada. Its main actors were vilified and/or presented as traitors (for example, then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, himself a Quebecker). The leaders of the “yes” side remained vague about what independence would mean, only arguing that with a “yes” anything would be possible.

Like in 1980, the “yes” side spoke of sovereignty rather than independence, and stated there would be an offer of economic and political partnership (never specifically defined) made to Canada once Quebeckers had voted for secession. By the early 1990s, there was also a secessionist party operating at the federal level (the Bloc Québécois, BQ), and a small nationalist party in the Quebec party system (Action démocratique du Québec, ADQ) that chose to support independence. The PQ referenced this multi-party support in the question, which was, just like in 1980, of the “soft” variety.²

For its part, the federal government seemed content to keep a low profile for the longest time, believing that a “yes” vote was impossible. There was virtually no appeal to the Canadian identity of Quebeckers, something which prominent federalists in the province later said had been a major mistake (Hébert and Lapierre, 2014). Arguments about the economic and financial risks of secession were less effective than they had been in 1980. The free-trade agreement with the United States, of which the PQ had been supportive in part for strategic reasons, had made the Quebec economy less dependent on the rest of Canada (Martin, 1995). When the “yes” side picked up steam late in the campaign (after charismatic BQ leader Lucien Bouchard was given a bigger role in the campaign – evidence of the importance of agency in these events), the federal government responded with last minute promises that were met with derision. The “no” camp barely hung on, winning 50.6% of the vote.

The position of international actors seemed to have had little effect on the campaign, although the new international context might have helped the “yes” side. Unsurprisingly, the United States took a position against Quebec independence. However, in the post-Cold War era, characterised by the liberalisation of trade, there was no reference to “Cuba North” coming from the American government, and independence did not seem to imply isolation and poverty. The French government stuck to its non-meddling, non-indifference formula, stating that it would accompany Quebec on whichever path it chose. This seemed to be neutral enough for the Canadian government, but “yes” side leaders took it to mean that France would recognise Quebec as an independent state following a declaration of independence. In fact, then PQ premier Jacques Parizeau was extremely active in seeking support for a unilateral declaration of independence that would follow a “yes” win (an exercise dubbed “*le grand jeu*”). After his visit to Paris in January 1995, Parizeau was convinced that France would immediately recognise Quebec after the PQ government proclaimed its independence following a “yes” win; that other French-speaking countries would then

2. The question was: “Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?”

do the same; and that the United States, faced with what the premier foresaw at that point as being a *fait accompli* and not wanting to be too far behind France in recognising a new country in North America, would follow suit (Ici Radio-Canada, no date). This being said, there was no sense during the campaign that the prospects of recognition were affecting Quebecers' choice, most supporters of independence taking it for granted that it would materialise after a referendum win.

Conclusion

The story of the Quebec referendums shows that secessionist and counter-secessionist strategies are contextual: they are inseparable from the political dynamics of the previous decade or so. Still, there is some agency involved in these strategies, and the Quebec case may present some lessons for both secessionists and their political adversaries elsewhere. For secessionists, the greater support for independence in the second Quebec referendum suggests that focusing the argument on the state's refusal to acknowledge, symbolically and institutionally, the existence of an internal nation maybe a more fruitful strategy (certainly one around which more people can rally) than attaching to independence some grand social project (with which many can find various faults). For counter-secessionists, the Quebec referendums recall the importance of actively speaking to the merits of the country and the history of the internal nation within it as a way to counter the narratives of rejection, dysfunction, and exhaustion mobilised by supporters of independence.

The Quebec experience does not contain real insight on gaining international recognition for independence against the wishes of the state since both of the referendums failed to produce a majority for the "yes" side. The PQ always felt it had a secret weapon because of Quebec's so-called privileged relationship with France, but the exact response of the French government following a "yes" win remains unknown. In all likelihood, international recognition of Quebec independence would have greatly hinged on the reaction of the federal government. Although the federal government campaigned against independence in both referendums, thereby informally accepting its legitimacy, a short "yes" vote would have posed quite the dilemma.

A third referendum on independence is extremely unlikely in the short to medium term as support for secession is at its lowest point in decades. Indeed, contrary to the expectations long held by secessionists, young Quebecers (18–34 years old) cannot be counted on to support independence today, and even within the generation that carried the project beginning in the 1970s support for secession is below 40% (see Table 2). Moreover, both the domestic and international contexts are presently less conducive to Quebec independence than they were in 1995. Domestically, the enactment of the so-called clarity legislation in 1999 (following a reference of the Supreme Court of Canada on secession) gives the federal government oversight on the referendum question and the majority required for a "yes" win (although this is challenged by Quebec). Internationally, French governments have been less supportive of Quebec self-determination in recent years, while the increased complexity of issues such as border control means the United States government might be even more pro-Canadian unity than before.

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| Table 1. Results of the Quebec independence referendums | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| | 1980 Referendum | 1995 Referendum |
| Yes | 40.44% | 49.42% |
| No | 59.56% | 40.58% |
| Turnout | 85.61% | 93.52% |

Source: CROP 2015

| Table 2. Contemporary support for Quebec independence | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-----|-----------------|-------|
| Answer to the question: "If today there was a referendum on the following question: 'Do you want Quebec to be an independent country?' would you vote yes or no?" | | | | | | |
| | Age | | | | Maternal Tongue | |
| | Total | 18-34 | 35-44 | 55+ | French | Other |
| Yes | 36% | 30% | 38% | 39% | 43% | 12% |
| No | 64% | 70% | 62% | 61% | 57% | 88% |

Source: CROP 2015