

THE QUEBEC REFERENDUM: FROM POLLS TO BALLOTS

BY EDOUARD CLOUTIER

In order to begin to understand the meaning of the Quebec referendum, one must grasp, first, the way in which vote intentions moved during the campaign and, second, the way in which vote intentions translated into actual votes.

The table shows the results of all polls conducted and published in the course of the official campaign. If we exclude the

period following the last day in which polling was done (October 26), four significant events marked the campaign, according to most observers.

THE FOUR TURNING POINTS

- September 24: Claude Garcia, CEO of the Standard Life Insurance Co., and a key official of the No committee, declared in a well-

publicized speech that the No must not only win the vote, but crush the Yes side. A very loud uproar followed this pronouncement.

- October 3: Laurent Beaudoin, CEO of Bombardier, and a key spokesperson for the No committee, announced that following a majority "yes" vote, he would have to consider moving some of his business out of Quebec, a statement that also produced a strong reaction on the Yes side.
- October 7: Lucien Bouchard was officially named by Jacques Parizeau as the chief

negotiator for Quebec in the talks to be held with Canada after a "yes" vote.

- October 17: Paul Martin, the federal minister of finance, said that one million jobs could be jeopardized if the Yes side won the referendum.

Unfortunately, the time between the second and the third events (October 3-7) is too short to isolate, for analytical purposes, the specific effect of each event. In fact, the only poll conducted during that period was by Léger et Léger and it overlapped both events. We

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VOTE INTENTIONS OF QUEBEC ELECTORS FOR THE OCTOBER 30, 1995, REFERENDUM

| Fieldmark Period | Polling Firm/Sponsor | Sample Size | Yes (%) | No (%) | Others* (%) | Source |
|------------------|---|-------------|---------|--------|-------------|--|
| Sept. 7-8 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal | 959 | 44 | 43 | 13 | Journal de Montreal, Sept. 9 |
| Sept. 8-12 | SOM/Le Soleil/Radio-Québec | 1,003 | 37 | 45 | 18 | Le Soleil, Sept. 15 |
| Sept. 11-14 | Compas Inc./The Financial Post | 500 | 36 | 40 | 24 | The Financial Post, Sept. 23 |
| Sept. 15-19 | Créatec/Comité du Non | 1,004 | 39 | 47 | 14 | Le Devoir, Sept. 23-24 |
| Sept. 19-25 | SOM, Environics/Le Devoir, Le Droit, Radio-Canada, Le Soleil, The Gazette | 1,820 | 39 | 48 | 13 | Le Devoir, Oct. 3 /Richard Nadeau |
| Sept. 20-25 | CROP-TVA/La Presse, The Toronto Star | 2,020 | 39 | 47 | 14 | La Presse, Sept. 30 |
| Sept. 23-25 | Decima Research | 750 | 40 | 42 | 18 | Le Devoir, Sept. 29 |
| Sept. 25-27 | Angus Reid Group | 1,000 | 41 | 45 | 14 | Dow Jones News, Sept. 29/Richard Nadeau |
| Sept. 25-28 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal, The Globe and Mail | 1,006 | 44 | 45 | 11 | Journal de Montréal, Sept. 30 |
| Sept. 25-29 | Parti Québécois | 1,369 | 44 | 46 | 10 | La Presse, Oct. 2/Richard Nadeau |
| Oct. 1-4 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal, The Globe and Mail | 1,015 | 43 | 44 | 13 | Journal de Montréal, Oct. 6 |
| Oct. 3-9 | Parti québécois | 1,285 | 45 | 42 | 13 | Le Devoir, Oct. 6 |
| Oct. 8-12 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal, The Globe and Mail | 1,002 | 45 | 42 | 13 | Journal de Montréal, Oct. 14/ The Globe and Mail, Oct. 14 |
| Oct. 9-12 | Créatec/Comité du non | 635 | 43 | 49 | 8 | La Presse, Oct. 13/Créatec Le Devoir, Oct. 13 |
| Oct. 10-12 | Gallup/Radio-Québec, CFCF TV | 1,013 | 39 | 43 | 18 | La Presse, Oct. 14 |
| Oct. 13-16 | SOM/Le Soleil, The Gazette | 981 | 43 | 43 | 14 | The Gazette, Oct. 17 |
| Oct. 13-16 | CROP/La Presse, The Toronto Star | 1,151 | 44 | 43 | 13 | La Presse, Oct. 18 |
| Oct. 16-18 | Angus Reid Group/Wood Gundy, CIBC | 1,012 | 45 | 44 | 11 | La Presse, Oct. 20 |
| Oct. 16-20 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal, The Globe and Mail | 1,005 | 46 | 42 | 12 | Journal de Montréal, Oct. 21 |
| Oct. 19-23 | CROP/TVA, La Presse, The Toronto Star | 1,072 | 45 | 42 | 13 | La Presse, Oct. 26 |
| Oct. 22-25 | SOM/Le Soleil, Radio-Québec, The Gazette, CFCF | 1,115 | 46 | 40 | 14 | Le Soleil, Oct. 27 |
| Oct. 23-25 | Angus Reid Group | 1,029 | 44 | 40 | 16 | Le Devoir, Oct. 27 |
| Oct. 23-26 | Léger et Léger/Journal de Montréal, The Globe and Mail | 1,003 | 47 | 41 | 12 | Journal de Montréal, Oct. 28 |

*Includes undecided, refusals, and abstentions.

Source: Le Group de recherche sur la mobilité de l'opinion publique et le Service de recherche et de documentation, Département de science politique, Université de Montréal.

tant that they should be proceeded with despite their risk to national unity.

Even if some modest constitutional or administrative restructuring of the Canadian federation is achieved in the next year or so, this is not likely to persuade Quebec secessionists to abandon their project. If the PQ government survives the next Quebec election and begins to organize a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty, the government of Canada must not duplicate its performance in the recent referendum and chicken out of stating clearly the matters that will have to be negotiated in the event of a win for the Yes side. These matters include the collective rights of the national minorities in Quebec whose clearly expressed will is to remain in Canada. In taking this position, Ottawa must make it clear that there will be no non-negotiable issues — including the territorial boundaries of a sovereign Quebec.

SOME SOBERING ADVICE

Such a position will give Quebec voters a better sense of the issues with which they will have to deal in the event of a referendum win by the sovereigntists. No doubt, such a tough stand will increase the tensions associated with another referendum campaign. But it should have the sobering effect of enabling Quebecers to recognize that they are as far from being capable of acting as a sovereign people as are Canadians.

In these circumstances, the most prudent policy for Canadians is one of strict constitutional abeyance — at least on the big issues that divide us. But asking our constitutional agitators and junkies to be prudent is like urging smokers to switch to chewing gum. ♦

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are, thus, forced to consider these two events as having occurred simultaneously, which leaves us with three breaking points that separate the campaign into four periods.

For these four periods, the average percentage of "yes"-vote and "no"-vote intentions are as follows:

| | Yes | No |
|--|---------|----|
| | percent | |
| Before Garcia | 39 | 45 |
| Between Garcia and Beaudoin-Bouchard | 43 | 45 |
| Between Beaudoin-Bouchard and Martin | 43 | 44 |
| After Martin | 46 | 41 |

THE BOUCHARD FACTOR AND THE FINAL VOTE

Contrary to what most analysts have said, it is not obvious that the promotion of Bouchard to the de facto leadership of the Yes side made the difference, providing the impetus for the surge of "yes" votes. Rather, the Yes side appears to have made significant progress *before* Bouchard became the chief spokesperson for the Yes campaign, such progress coinciding with the strong reaction to Garcia's "crush" statement. Furthermore, the arrival of Bouchard seems to have made little difference in voting intentions as a simple comparison between scores in the second and third periods readily indicates. On the other hand, *after* Martin's "one million jobs" pronouncement, the "yes" votes jumped three points and the "no" votes dropped three points, thus creating a significant five-point spread favouring the Yes side.

Consequently, it can be argued that Bouchard's arrival was not the turning point in the campaign but, rather, that the campaign tides were associated with adverse popular reactions

to statements made by business spokespersons.

What about the great discrepancy between the scores — 46-percent Yes to 41-percent No — of the fourth period ending October 26, and the actual ballot results of 49.4 percent for the Yes and 50.6 percent for the No?

Informed opinion explains it by allocating the "undecided" in voting intentions by a ratio of 3 to 1 in favour of the No side. Although such an allocation ratio does, in fact, correspond to what appears to have happened in the last few elections and the referendum in Quebec, I tend to find this procedure somewhat unsatisfactory in this instance.

Theoretically speaking, last-minute deciders are best conceived of as "swinging with the swing." For this to happen, there must be a detectable momentum toward a given side in the last days preceding an election. We know for a fact that such was the case in the last two Quebec elections of 1989 and 1994 and in the referendum of 1992, opinion movements being detected in favour of both the Liberal Party as well as the Charlottetown Accord.

THE YES MOMENTUM: THE FINAL PUSH

Our polling numbers of the 1995 campaign definitively indicate a momentum in favour of the Yes option up until October 26, the Thursday preceding the vote. Events of the final few days before the referendum must, therefore, be taken into account to understand how vote intentions translated into a majority for the No side. More specifically, one thinks of the televised address to the nation by Prime Minister Chrétien on Wednesday night, followed by Lucien Bouchard's reply and the rally for the Yes held at the Verdun arena. Fi-

nally, the huge rally at Place du Canada on Friday by people from all over Canada cannot but have had an impact.

The incredible 93.48 percent turnout of eligible voters on referendum day offers another clue in the explanation of the final results. In a system where voting is not mandatory, such a turnout is a product of a set of extraordinary circumstances. In the present case, the fact that the issue was much more dramatic than in 1980 or 1992 and that everyone expected the final results to be extremely close certainly contributed to the exceptional turnout score. But these two factors are not quite sufficient to explain the turnout. When nearly every voter physically capable of voting actually does so, it must be the case that both sides have mobilized their maximum potential support. Both sides were thus riding a momentum on October 30, the Yes momentum finding its long-winded source in a reaction to business arguments against Quebec sovereignty, and the No momentum in a final desperate sprint to save Canada. ♦

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