

Canada Watch

Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

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SECESSION DOES NOT SUIT THE MEDIAN VOTER

BY STÉPHANE DION

The notion of the "median voter," which the American economist Anthony Downs popularized at the end of the '50s, appears to be especially appropriate to the context of the Quebec referendum.

Downs's concept relies on two rather down-to-earth observations. First, he argues that, in most concrete situations, voters hold moderate and centrist views. This is true also in the centre of the political spectrum where one finds the undecided—those whose opinions are most likely to change.

Downs also observes that when a party runs in an election, it tones down its ideology in order to reach the average and undecided voters who play a pivotal role in the election. As a consequence, the policies of competing political parties often become almost interchangeable.

The first idea perfectly applies to the context of the Quebec referendum. The second

idea appears less suitable. Although many Quebec voters express their preference for a centrist solution, they are required to side with only one of two very distinct options: separating or not separating from Canada.

THE AVERAGE QUEBEC VOTER

Public opinion polls reveal that Quebecers are seduced by moderate options such as asymmetrical federalism, greater provincial rights, greater powers, and a distinct status for Quebec. For most of them, such moderate options sound more reassuring and fair than the constitutional status quo. Likewise, sovereignty association has always been more popular than outright independence or separation.

According to a February 1995 Crop-Environics-SRC-CBC survey, Quebecers are divided thus: 35 percent favour Quebec being granted greater powers, 33 percent choose sov-

ereignty association, 21 percent favour the status quo, and 7 percent opt for a sovereign and totally independent country. About two-thirds of voters want moderate solutions.

For this specific reason, Parizeau and Johnson have been under pressure to move toward median-voter opinion. Bouchard and Landry have convinced Parizeau to consider the

idea of a political and economic partnership with the rest of Canada and to unite with the "Parti de l'action démocratique." Under pressure from his advisers and the young Liberals, Johnson became the advocate for Quebec being granted a constitutional veto and the status of distinct society. At present, the sovereigntist leader

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FRAUD, SHAME, INJUSTICE

BY GUY LAFOREST

In the first few weeks of 1982, the federal government put into action the machinery that would eventually lead to the proclamation of the new constitution by Her Majesty, Elizabeth II. The Queen was formally invited. Buckingham Palace confirmed in early March that she would, indeed, come to Ottawa. That month, close to \$10 million was earmarked for an immense fanfare of publicity that would surround her visit, highlighting the dawning of a new era that was symbolized by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Nationalism, as Renan believed in the 19th century, and as Ramsay Cook recently restated, is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. Well, current Canadian nationalism must be really potent because a lot of people have forgotten a number of things in a very short period. How many Canadians, how many Charter patriots, applauding every time the editorialists of *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* trumpet their fiery brand of nationalism, remember that while these offi-

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THE SUPPORT FOR SOVEREIGNTY AMONG DECIDED VOTERS: THE PICTURE *from page 3*

to foresee a Yes victory in the referendum. However, the most important increase in Yes

support comes from voters over 65 and in the 35-to-44 age group. The Yes side also made

some gains among citizens who have personal incomes lower than \$15,000. The average

"yes" voter is a francophone male between 35 and 44 years old who lives outside the Quebec or Montreal regions, and who has an income of between \$45,000 and \$55,000. In all other categories, the No side is ahead.

SUPPORT FOR SOVEREIGNTY AMONG DECIDED VOTERS

	SOM Mar. 30–Apr. 5/95 N=1006	SOM Sept. 8–12/95 N=1003	Gains (+) and Losses (–) for the Yes side
Total	32 (46)*	37 (45)*	+ 5
Francophones	38 (41)	43 (38)	+ 5
Anglophones/Allophones	6 (70)	11 (70)	+ 5
Montreal	31 (45)	33 (47)	+ 1
Quebec	40 (38)	39 (45)	+ 1
Others	32 (48)	42 (41)	+ 10
18–24	44 (46)	45 (48)	+ 1
25–34	37 (45)	36 (46)	– 1
35–44	32 (44)	46 (38)	+ 14
45–54	31 (48)	34 (44)	+ 3
55–64	31 (42)	27 (52)	– 4
65+	15 (52)	32 (46)	+ 17
Men	38 (44)	44 (42)	+ 6
Women	26 (48)	31 (46)	+ 5
\$0–\$15,000	29 (46)	41 (42)	+ 12
\$15,000–\$25,000	40 (42)	39 (47)	+ 1
\$25,000–\$35,000	33 (52)	36 (52)	+ 3
\$35,000–\$45,000	44 (44)	43 (48)	– 1
\$45,000–\$55,000	36 (47)	45 (42)	+ 9
\$55,000+	31 (59)	40 (45)	+ 9

*All bracketed figures reflect negative responses

QUESTION: In response to the question, "Are you in favour of the law adopted by the National Assembly declaring the sovereignty of Quebec?" Would you vote "yes" or would you vote "no"?

As we enter the referendum campaign, it is difficult to forecast precisely the results on October 30. Francophone attitudes toward both the Parti libéral du Québec and its constitutional position and the Yes side leadership remain factors that can mobilize different segments of the electorate. However, if circumstances do not change substantially from the current situation, a Yes victory is not foreseeable. At the same time, the outcome of the referendum is somewhat unpredictable given possible swing voters, the behaviour of undecided voters, and the strategy of both sides during the referendum campaign.

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talks about partnership, while the federalist leader talks about a constitutional renewal. In sum, we are back to the idea of an independent Quebec in a united Canada—the median voter's dream!

In fact, even though the two leaders are holding more moderate views, they are still far from meeting the median-voter ideal. For Parizeau, sovereignty will take place whether or not the partnership offer is accepted. There will not be a second referendum to vote on the results of his negotiation with

Canada. As for Johnson, a veto for Quebec and the status of distinct society are not sine qua non conditions for Quebec to remain in Canada. Johnson commits himself only to demand a veto right or a distinct society clause in the legal framework of the constitution. He does not claim that these demands will be fulfilled.

REALISM VERSUS MEDIAN-VOTER INTERESTS

It is likely that many individuals get involved in politics more by conviction than by elector-

alism and the pursuit of power. This is the case with many militants who believe in the party platform and without whom it is very difficult to win an election. Having convictions is highly valued. Politicians who are too influenced by public opinion polls appear to have few convictions and to be interested only in holding on to power; they lose votes for that reason. Skillful politicians know that they should not appear to be sacrificing their convictions in order to gain the median-voter support.

From that point of view, the ideological convictions of politicians weaken the influence of the median voters. Parizeau is a convinced sovereigntist who will never accept sovereignty to be contingent on Ottawa accepting the partnership offer. If he approved—as he might—the idea of a second referendum following the negotiations with Canada, Parizeau's credibility would be shaken because he has in the past harshly criticized that option, arguing that Canada will not seriously negotiate until a decisive referendum

takes place. On the other hand, if Johnson, an eager federalist, threatened to separate from Canada in the event of a constitutional impasse, he would not sound credible.

Let us explore another aspect that appeals to the median voter. Usually, the more average a proposal is, the more realistic it is—and the more likely it is to be adopted. Any party should keep in mind that it must offer realistic solutions if it wants to be, and remain, in power.

In some cases, however, a moderate proposal may not be realistic or credible, even though it may be the most popular. This unusual situation applies to the context of the Quebec referendum. A "yes" vote would more likely mean complete sovereignty rather than sovereignty based on association or partnership. A "no" vote, however, would not likely result in constitutional changes that would give more autonomy to Quebec.

Being realistic appears to be incompatible with being in tune with median-voter opinion. Federalists criticize Parizeau's offer of partnership as weak and unrealistic. They argue that it is hard to believe

- that Quebeckers would enjoy 50 percent of the decision-making powers, even though they represent only 25 percent of the Canadian population;
- that Canada would accept a country one-third its size being granted a veto over economic policy changes;
- that a consultative parliament and a council of ministers with no legislative power would effectively replace the important institutional mechanism that gives Quebeckers and Canadians the high level of economic integration they currently enjoy; and

- that Canada would allow eight million Quebeckers to remain Canadian citizens without being taxpayers.

Sovereignists, of course, argue that Johnson's constitutional proposals will not get the agreement and consent of all provinces when the next constitutional talks are held—providing they are held.

In fact, whether a party tries to be in tune with the median voters or to offer a realistic and clear position, its credibility and attraction suffer.

THE RELATIVE STRENGTHS OF THE TWO CAMPS

I have so far assumed that the strategic positions of the Yes and No forces are symmetrical in every aspect. However, they have two differences—the first giving the Yes side an advantage, the second difference (which is more decisive) giving the lead to the No forces.

The Yes side is well served by the fact that the moderate federalist position appears even less realistic than the moderate sovereignist position. Indeed, even if the offer on partnership is likely to be rejected, one may reasonably think that a negotiation would result in "something" aimed at reducing the costs of secession. However, the federalist position suffers from past constitutional failures: Victoria, the 1982 constitutional settlement without Quebec's support, and the failure of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords. It is hard to believe that a new round of negotiations would be successful in the medium term.

Federalists have an advantage because most Quebeckers prefer the status quo to separation. According to the Crop-Environics survey cited above, 51 percent of Quebeckers considered "the status quo still preferable to sovereignty." Al-

though many Quebeckers wish for constitutional changes, they are still not ready to separate from Canada. Numerous surveys show that the constitutional issue is not a priority for Quebeckers. Sovereignists will not score any more points on that front even if they hammer federalists with the "shame" of the 1982 constitutional agreement, the "rejection" of the Meech Lake accord, the constitutional "impasse," and other "iron collars."

It seems to be the wrong time to hold a referendum on sovereignty. Only 30 percent of Quebeckers are true separatists, ready to opt for sovereignty without economic association with Canada.

Federalists can expect more success by targeting the weakness of the offer on partnership. The Crop-Environics survey reveals that Parizeau's support would drop to 27 percent if the voters were "fairly sure that the rest of Canada would not maintain an economic association with a sovereign Quebec." It is fair to think, then, that the result of the referendum largely depends on whether Quebeckers consider the partnership option to be realistic.

A PREDICTION

Political science is not a hard science and does not allow for exact predictions; other colleagues have very different points of view on these matters. However, I do predict that the Yes forces will be seriously de-

feated. They may get between 38 and 42 percent of the votes.

To reiterate, support for Parizeau depends on whether the voters think that a partnership with the rest of Canada is feasible. Quebeckers are more and more likely to doubt this option, which could lead to the Yes forces losing. Dumont might, in the course of the campaign, decide to announce a second referendum in order to regain median-voter support. As for Parizeau, he might have to defend sovereignty as such and renounce the offer on partnership. Bouchard's charisma would not make a difference.

If the polls gave an advantage to the Yes forces, divisions would also occur in the No circles. In a last attempt to gain median-voter support, Johnson might give a constitutional ultimatum to the rest of Canada and the premier. However, this scenario is very unlikely, considering current public opinion.

It seems to be the wrong time to hold a referendum on sovereignty. Only 30 percent of Quebeckers are true separatists, ready to opt for sovereignty without economic association with Canada. The Yes forces will have to wait until most Quebeckers have firmly decided to renounce their Canadian identity as well as Quebec's economic integration in Canada, and to accept dealing with Canada as they would with any other country.

This article was completed at the end of August 1995. It is up to the readers to judge the accuracy of my interpretation of the median-voter impact versus the importance of conviction and realism. ♦

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