

**The Evolution of Support for Sovereignty –
Myths and Realities**

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Claire Durand
Université de Montréal

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Claire Durand
Department of Sociology
Université de Montréal

Now that Bernard Landry has taken the helm of both the Parti Québécois and the Quebec government, promising at the same time to rekindle the sovereigntist flame, it appears appropriate to examine how voter intent in a possible future referendum on sovereignty has evolved since Lucien Bouchard's entrance onto Quebec's political stage during the 1995 referendum. This evolution forms the background for events both recent and future.

In the 1995 referendum campaign, polls were generally accurate in predicting voter intent when 75 percent of non-disclosers – i.e., those who reported that they did not know how they would vote and those who refused to divulge their intent – were attributed to the No side. Since then, the major polling firms have continued to collect data on public opinion, either on their own initiative or for sponsors, generally using the same question that was used during the referendum. This makes it possible to

analyze how voter intent in a possible future referendum has evolved since 1995.

The CROP polling firm has provided access to 14 of the polls it has taken since 1995 – three carried out during the referendum campaign, one per year from 1996 to 1998, six done in 1999 and polls taken in February and November 2000. With the exception of the first poll (which used a sample of 2000 people, 1769 of whom were francophones) all the surveys used a sample of approximately 1000 people, averaging 880 francophones. The data contained in these polls allow certain hypotheses concerning the evolution of voter intent to be tested. The data provided by the polls conducted during the referendum campaign and the reports available on the Web sites of Léger Marketing will also be used.

After examining the evolution of voter intent during the referendum campaign and since, among francophones and non francophones, particular attention will be given to certain hypotheses frequently mentioned in the media regarding the vote of francophones.

The evolution of voter intent during the 1995 referendum and since then

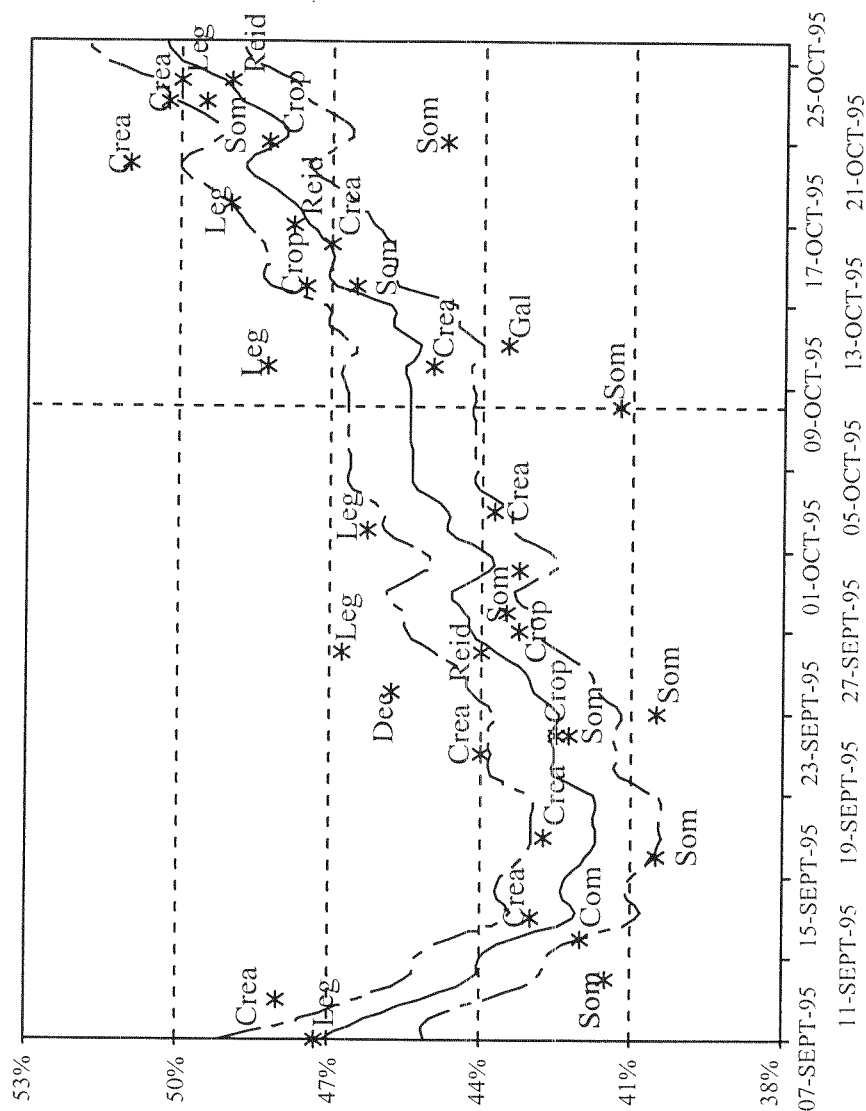
Over the course of the 1995 referendum campaign, polls generally showed an increase in support for the Yes side during the lead-up to the vote (Drouilly, 1997; Fox, Andersen and Dubonnet, 1999; Pinard, Bernier and Lemieux, 1997). Figure 1 shows the evolution of voter intent from September 7 to the referendum held on October 30, 1995, as measured by all the surveys conducted during the campaign. The 10 polls published in September 1995 showed the Yes vote at an average of 40.6 percent, while the average of the last four polls before the referendum was 44.3 percent. The CROP data are consistent with other published polls: the estimate of the Yes vote rose from 39 percent in the September 25th poll to 44.5 percent shortly before the referendum (October 23).

The figure shown on page 2 reflects the conclusions to which a number of authors (Fox

¹A first version of this article was published in *Le Devoir*, March 6, 2001. The article summarizes a number of analyses on the evolution of support for sovereignty. The results of the detailed statistical analyses and information about the methodology are available from the author.

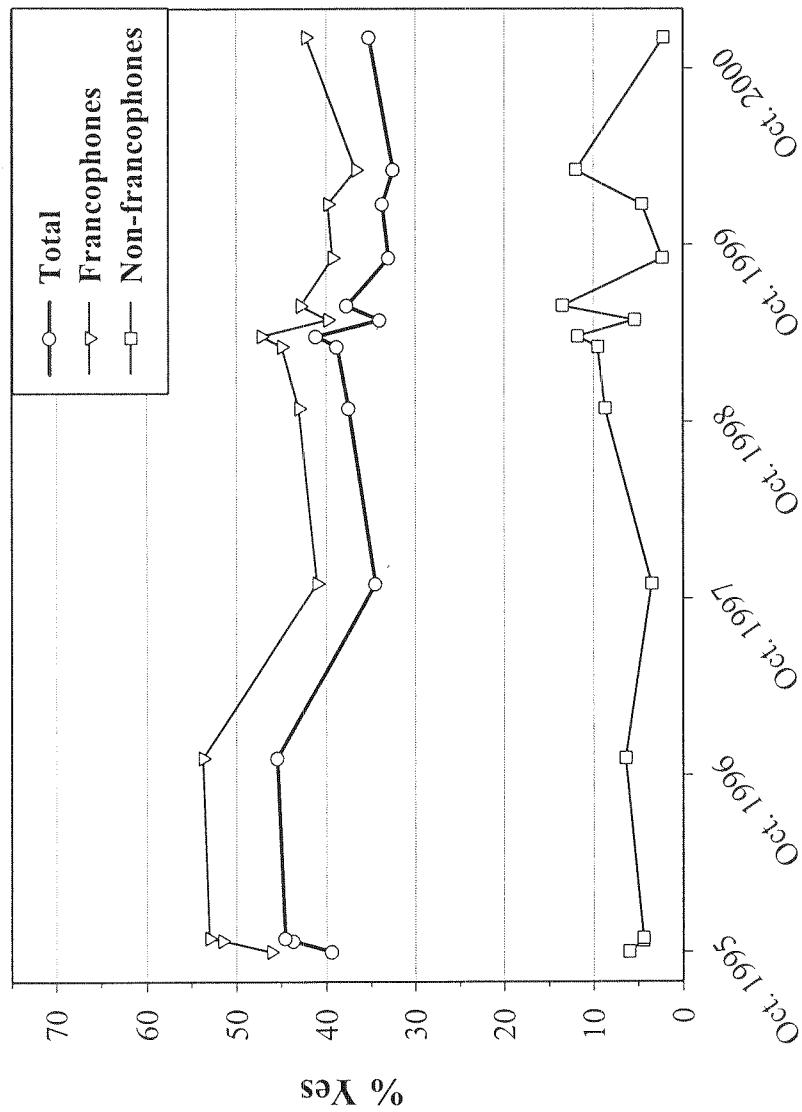
We wish to thank Marcel Fournier for his useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, Maurice Pinard and André Blais for their comments and for pointing us to previous studies and available data on the same topic. This study would not have been conducted without the help of CROP and Claude Gauthier, who made the surveys available. Michael Lemay helped with the databases and the analyses, and Sébastien Vachon conducted the first time series analyses of the survey data for the referendum campaign itself. The FCAR research fund contributed financially to the project.

Graph 1: Evolution of voter intent measured by the polls conducted during the 1995 referendum campaign with 75% of non disclosers attributed to the No side



Note: The data are taken from Pinard et al. (1997). Some of the SOM surveys are private, unpublished surveys. The series are constructed using the daily average of the weighted estimates of vote intentions, evenly distributed over the days where the surveys were conducted. Marks indicate the mid-point of the field period of each survey. When only one survey was conducted on a given day, data were replaced by interpolation. The vertical dotted line represents the nomination of Lucien Bouchard as chief negotiator. (Com: Compas; Crea: Créatec; Dec: Décima; Gal: Gallup; Leg: Léger)

Figure 2: Evolution of voter intent for sovereignty since 1995 according to language groups



et al., 1999; Drouilly, 1997; Durand, Blais and Vachon, unpublished) came: Voter intent for the Yes side increased steadily throughout the campaign. Moreover, most analysts² agree that the rise in the Yes vote had begun two weeks before Lucien Bouchard entered the campaign and that his takeover of the Yes forces did not affect this trend. Thus, to speak of a “Bouchard effect,” one must assume that the growth in Yes vote would have reached a plateau without his involvement in the campaign.

Figure 2, shows the evolution of voter intent for the Yes side since the referendum campaign according to language groups as estimated by the CROP polls (see page 4). During the campaign, the Yes vote went from 45 percent to 54 percent among francophones. After the referendum, the Yes vote remained at the level it had reached on the eve of the referendum for at least a year. However, since 1997, it has stabilized at approximately pre-referendum levels, i.e., about 40 percent. This reduction in the Yes vote is concurrent with a rise in No support, which has gone from a low of 32 percent just before the referendum to an average of 44 percent since 1997 (data not shown).

Among non-francophones, voter intent for the Yes side remained stable during the referendum campaign, averaging about 7 percent. Since 1996, it has remained at an average of 7.5 percent, with any variations attributable to random fluctuations caused by sample size.

²Fox *et al.* (1999) as well as Pinard *et al.* (1997) show that Léger and Léger’s estimates of the Yes vote at that time were consistently and significantly higher than those of other firms. Pinard *et al.* maintain that when the Léger and Léger surveys are excluded from the analyses, a Bouchard effect appears likely. In our analysis, the Léger and Léger polls are included but the series are interpolated when only one poll was conducted on a given day.

A number of hypotheses or “theories” have been put forward by researchers over the years to either explain support for sovereignty or predict its evolution.

- The “demographics” hypothesis states that older people, less favourable to sovereignty, eventually die and are replaced by younger people, who are more favourable to sovereignty and who remain so as they get older. Therefore, support for sovereignty will automatically reach a majority.
- The “Intellectual” hypothesis states that since people with more education tend to be more favourable to sovereignty, an increase in the level of schooling of the population will help raise support for sovereignty to a majority.
- The “halo effect” hypothesis states that support for sovereignty is related to satisfaction with the government. Support for sovereignty increases with support for governmental policies.
- The “gender effect” hypothesis states that the difference in support for sovereignty between men and women is due essentially to women’s position in society. Social evolution in the role and status of women will eventually do away with gender-related differences.
- A recent theory is the “custodian group” hypothesis (Gagné and Langlois, 2001). It postulates that a social group consisting of francophones younger than 55 years old, in the working population or students, who earn more than \$20,000 per year, carries the “national project” on its shoulders. The fact that this group has reduced its support for the Yes side in recent years accounts for the overall decline in support for sovereignty and is due to conjectural factors. This group’s drop in support is likely to be short lived and overall support for sovereignty will return to its previous higher level.

Let us now examine each of these hypotheses and see which ones can be confirmed by analyses. Since it has been shown that evolution in support for sovereignty occurs mostly among francophones, and since the number of non-francophones is insufficient to make further divisions, only the data for francophones will be analysed.

The “demographics” hypothesis

The demographics hypothesis has been around for quite a long time; it states that since young people support Quebec sovereignty more strongly than older people, demographic change (i.e., the arrival of young people into the voting population and the “departure” of older voters) will eventually and inevitably bring about a Yes majority. This theory assumes that once people decide to vote Yes, they do not change their minds over time. If this hypothesis is correct, support for sovereignty should increase among the various age groups with the arrival of young voters and the departure of older ones. However, it is difficult to test this theory with the data available for this study because on one hand they only cover five years, and on the other, information on exact age – and not simply age groups – is not available. The theory was thus tested taking these restrictions into account and only among francophones, as previously stated.

The age groups were rearranged in such a way as to provide large enough sample sizes to study the evolution of voter intent. Figure 3 on page 6 shows that among francophones younger than 35, the Yes vote slid from a peak of 60 percent on the eve of the referendum to an average of less than 50 percent since 1997, about the same as it was at the start of the referendum campaign. In the 35-54 age group, the Yes vote has declined from 55 percent to an average of around 40 percent since 1999. These two groups do not show significant differences in voter intent. However, among francophones 55 and older, the Yes vote has remained stable at slightly below 30 percent, variations being

mostly attributable to random fluctuations caused by sample size. Unlike the under-55 age groups, voter intent in this age group did not change during the referendum campaign.

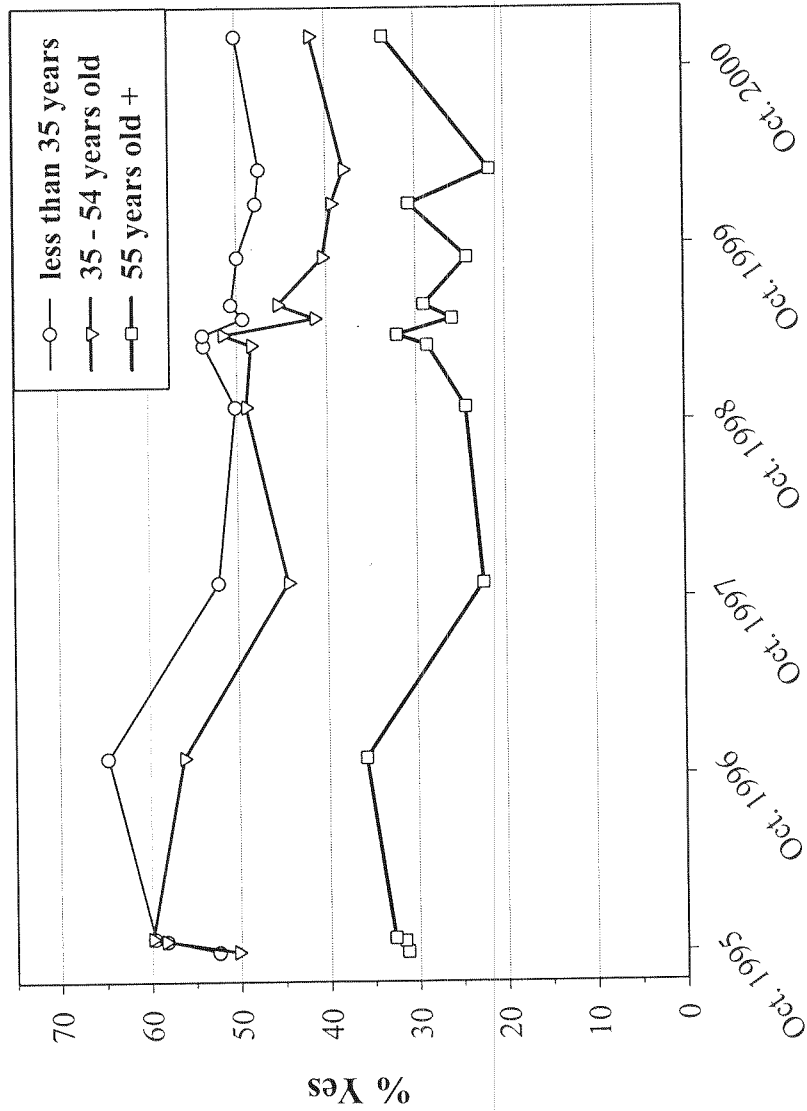
To sum up, on one hand, the Yes vote in 2000 was the same or slightly lower among all age groups as its level at the beginning of the 1995 referendum campaign and has hardly moved since 1997. The arrival of young voters and the departure of older ones has not affected this situation. Furthermore, the referendum campaign influenced only francophones younger than 55. In 1996, this group made up 60 percent of the total population. However, given the age pyramid, increased longevity and immigration, the proportion of this group in the population is continually declining.

The “Intellectual” hypothesis

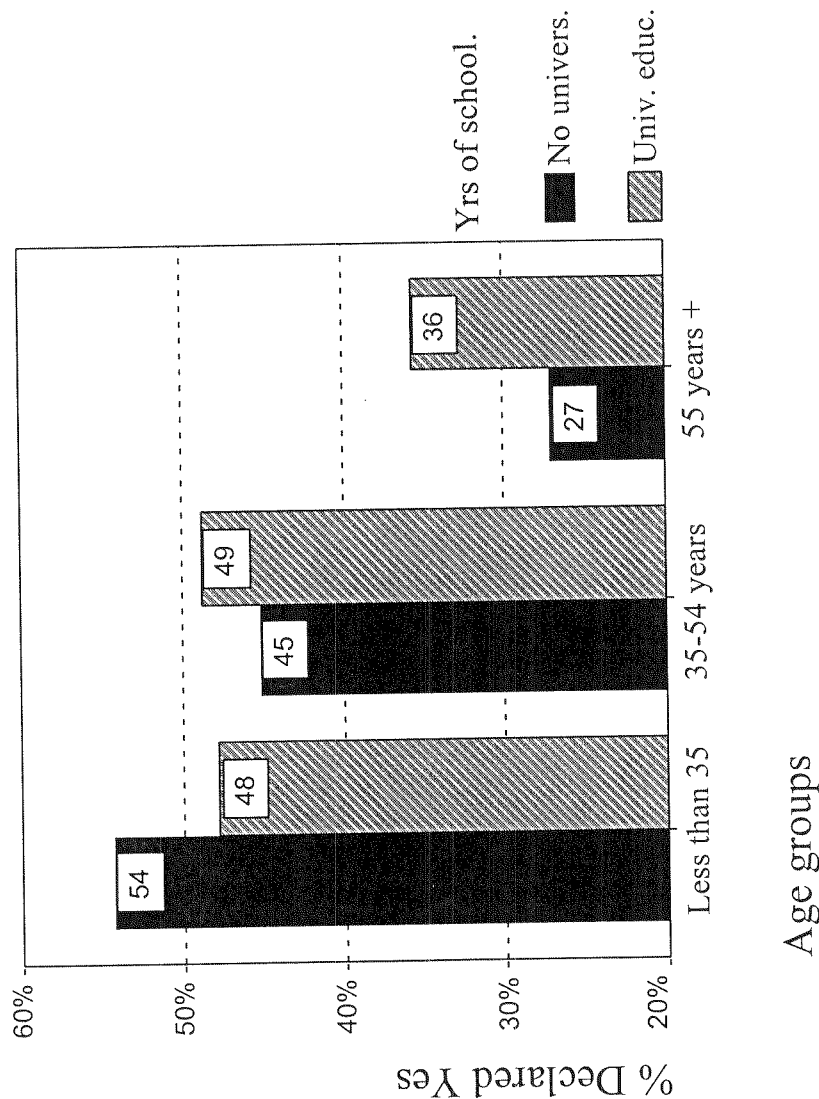
It has been suggested (see for example, Pinard *et al.*, 1997; Cloutier *et al.*, 1992) that education is an important factor in determining voter intent in referendums, the intelligentsia being thought of as a stronghold for Parti Québécois support, especially with respect to sovereignty. The analyses for all francophones show that there is no difference in voter intent between those with a university education and those with between seven and 15 years of education. Only the group with less than seven years of education stands out, with support for the Yes side at barely half that of the other groups. However, this situation could be attributed to age given the concentration of the group with less than seven years of education in the 55 and older age group.

However, another question worth asking is what effect has better access to a university education had on voter intent; have francophones educated since the Quiet Revolution reacted the same way as older voters? The data illustrates an interesting phenomenon: Figure 4 on page 7 shows that, taking all the polls together, in the 55 and up age group (who were generally born before 1945), a

Figure 3: Evolution of voter intent for sovereignty among Francophones according to age



Graph 4. Declared Intent to Vote Yes according to Age and Education among Francophones



Crop surveys, weighted, grouped, 1995-2000

university or equivalent education is linked to a greater tendency to vote Yes – bearing in mind that the age groups change each year depending on year of birth. In the 35-54 age group, there is no significant difference according to education level. However, among the under-35 age group – who were born after the Quiet Revolution and who were generally not old enough to vote in the 1980 referendum – those with 16 or more years of education are less likely to vote Yes than those with less education. Unfortunately, given the small size of the various sub-groups, it is impossible to determine if there has been any change in this statistic since 1995. Data from the mega-survey of 10,000 respondents conducted by the Council for Canadian Unity in January 1995 show the same trend: this finding was already true before the referendum.

In short, a university education does not play the same role it did before the Quiet Revolution nor did it do so during the 1995 referendum. Indeed, it seems to have had the opposite effect. While this group of educated young people is certainly hearing the sovereignist message, the message is less convincing to them.

The “halo effect” hypothesis

Some people, including members of the Parti Québécois, have put forward the hypothesis that voter intent in a sovereignty referendum is linked to satisfaction with the Bouchard government. In other words, the struggle for a zero deficit and cuts to health and education budgets have had a negative effect on Yes support because the sovereignist vote is related to satisfaction with the government. The data collected do not allow this theory to be confirmed. As measured by the 14 CROP surveys conducted since 1997, the correlation between the ratio of people intending to vote Yes and the ratio of people very or somewhat satisfied with the Bouchard government is positive ($r=0.33$) but not significant even when using a unilateral test ($p=0.12$). The relationship

with voting No is essentially nil ($r=0.03$).³ Figure 5 shows the evolution of both measurements since 1998 (see page 9).

The “gender effect” hypothesis

It is conceivable that the lower support for sovereignty among francophone women – on average 10 points below that of men – is due to their different roles in society (for example, the higher proportion of retirees and homemakers among women). The overall difference between men and women could be due, for example, to the higher proportion of women among older people.

Figure 6 on page 10 shows the evolution of voter intent among francophones according to gender and age. Women are generally less likely to say they will vote Yes than men. However, the evolution of their voter intent has generally followed the same curve as that of men in the same age groups. This is particularly true among the 55-and-older groups, where women's support for sovereignty is consistently about 10 points less than men's. However, among the group that is younger than 55, the situation is less clear cut. Women are indeed generally less favourable to sovereignty, the difference reaching 15 percentage points in the survey conducted in 1996; but two surveys conducted in the spring of 1999 (February and May) do not show any significant difference between the two groups. However, when the data is grouped into three periods, 1995, 1996-1998 and 1999-2000, to increase sample size and examine whether an

³These are, however, correlations between proportions and one cannot be certain that the same conclusions can be drawn at the individual voter level. The CROP survey data agree with Léger Marketing data, which are available on that firm's Web site. The only difference between the two firms is that Léger polls tend to estimate the Yes vote higher and the non-disclosers lower than do the CROP polls.

Figure 5: Evolution of voter intent for sovereignty and satisfaction with the Bouchard government
(from 1997 to 2000)

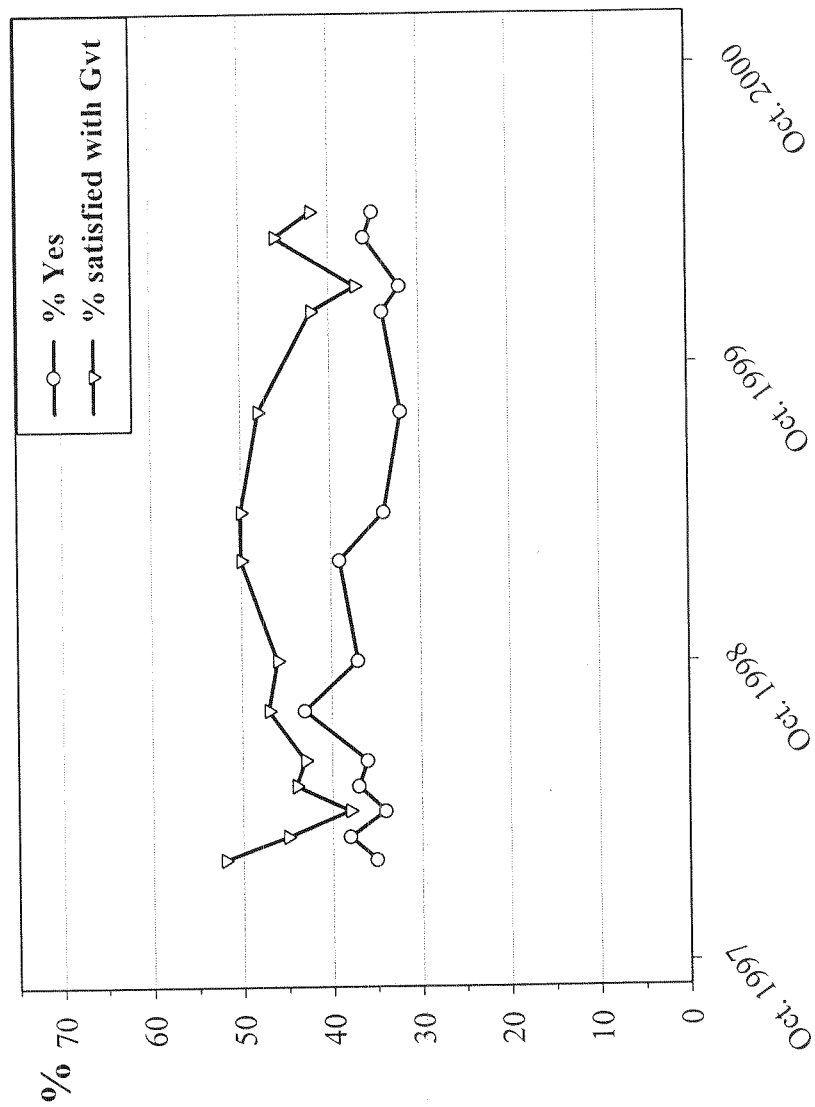
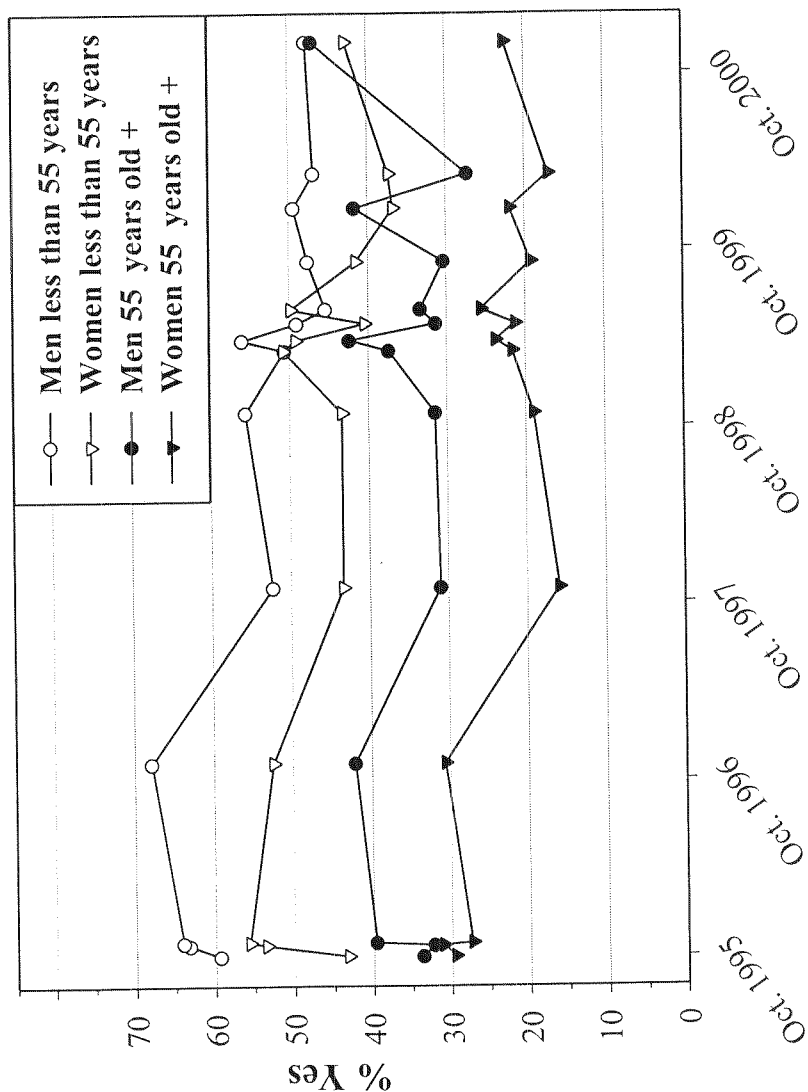


Figure 6: Evolution of voter intent for sovereignty among Francophones according to age and gender



evolution has indeed occurred, the patterns of differences according to gender are persistent.

The differentiation of social roles according to gender could also explain differences. Occupation has indeed had an effect but not the one hypothesised. Working women – whether at full- or part-time jobs – and retired women are less likely to say they will vote Yes. Only among students does the difference in voter intent between men and women disappear.⁴ When the grouped data is used, the results show the same patterns of differences according to gender and occupation over time.

Other researchers have had ambiguous results. Nadeau (1992) found a significant difference according to gender in 1990 but the difference disappeared when other socio-demographic variables were controlled. Cloutier *et al.* (1992) found a difference in 1990 but no difference in 1991. In the CROP surveys, the difference between the two groups varied from 6 to 18 percent but was not present in all occupational or age groups for all surveys.

The “custodian group” hypothesis

One recent hypothesis on the evolution of support for sovereignty was first proposed by Gilles Gagné and Simon Langlois in March 2000 in *Le Devoir*. In a few words, they argue, relevantly, that the variables should be examined as a group rather than individually. They developed a “typology” based on a combination of characteristics⁵ (language, occupation, age and income). They maintain that

⁴ These results disagree with a poll taken among students from the Université de Montréal just prior to the referendum (Blais, Martin and Nadeau, 1995).

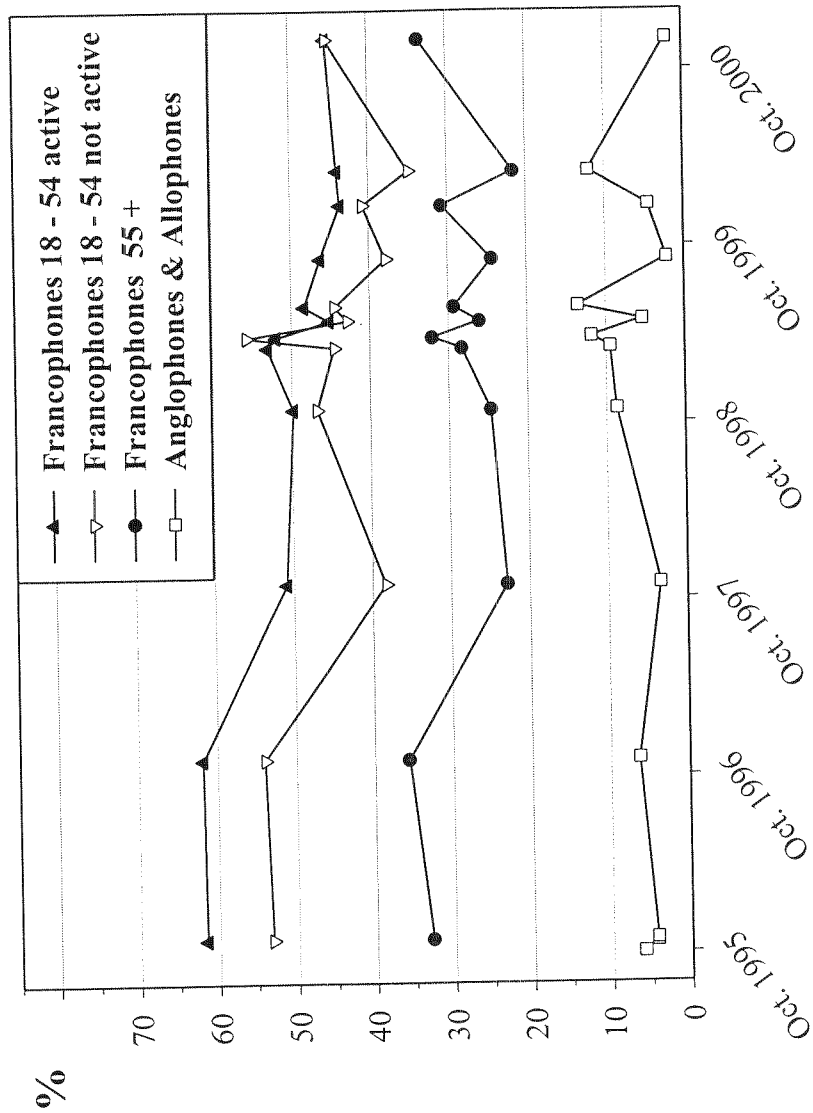
⁵ See Gagné and Langlois, 2000 for a detailed description of the “typology” of six types based on a combination of answers to four variables: age, occupation, income and language. The “typology” was first presented in *Le Devoir* (March 14, 2000) and in *Policy Options* (June 2000).

only one segment of the population, Type I, made up of francophones younger than 55, in the working population or students, who earn more than \$20,000 annually, have shown a decrease in support for the Yes side in a possible future sovereignty referendum, while the other types have either maintained or increased their support for sovereignty during the same period. They hypothesize that the decline among Type I may be temporary and due to factors related to the policies of the Bouchard government.

This theory highlights the fact that not everyone reacted in the same way to the referendum campaign, making it doubly important to test the hypothesis with a second group of data. This study recreated the same groupings and carried out the analyses required to verify the existence of statistically significant differences in voter intent. Unfortunately, however, polls done during the referendum campaign could not be examined because data on the necessary characteristics were not available. The primary difference between the analyses proposed by Gagné and Langlois and the age-group analysis of this study is in the division of francophones younger than 55 into subgroups of working/more fortunate (Type I) and inactive/less fortunate (Type II). The estimates for the francophones 55 years and older (types III & IV of the original typology) and for the non-francophones (types V & VI) are presented for the purposes of comparison.

Figure 7 on page 12 shows that, according to CROP data, Yes support among active francophones younger than 55 – the “custodians” of sovereignty – has declined from 62 percent on the eve of the 1995 referendum to about 42 percent since the end of 1999. Among the Type II group – inactive francophones younger than 55 (a much smaller group) – Yes support ranged from a high of 53 percent in 1995-96 to a low of 35 percent. As with the Léger Marketing polls used by Gagné and Langlois, support for sovereignty was generally lower among the inactive, but none of the 12

Figure 7: Evolution of voter intent for sovereignty according to four types proposed by Gagné and Langlois



surveys showed a significant difference between the two groups of francophones and this, even when the 1999 polls are grouped into two periods to obtain larger sample sizes or when all the surveys are grouped into three periods (1995, 1996-1998, 1999-2000). Indeed, certain polls put Yes support among the inactive at the same level or higher than that of the active.

Thus, in a way, the data do support the existence of a "custodian" group; however, this group is instead associated with a large segment of the population made up of francophones 55 and younger, 60 percent of the Quebec population.

Conclusion

The data presented support certain unavoidable conclusions. On one hand, after the referendum campaign, voter intent in a possible future sovereignty referendum has remained relatively stable, at least since 1997. On the other hand, among francophones, age is the primary factor in voter intent in a referendum, and in particular, as voters move closer to retirement, voter intent changes and solidifies such that it is unaffected, even temporarily, by political events or campaigns. Opinions would seem to be equally solidified among non-francophones. It is impossible to determine whether another referendum campaign would have the same effect among those younger than 55 because every campaign is different. However, it is conceivable that a different kind of debate would be required to sway groups such as young students and women.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, the graphs show that it may be hazardous to draw definitive conclusions based on a single survey. When a number of surveys are examined, the margin of error inherent to survey methodology becomes more apparent.

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