



The 1995 Quebec Referendum: Where are We 25 Years Later?

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October 30 marks the 25th anniversary of Quebec's second referendum on sovereignty. Had 27,145 Quebecers voted "yes" instead of "no," an irreversible chain of events would have been triggered that likely would have spelled the end of Confederation. Those pretending that today's Canada is more divided than ever need to give their heads a shake and remember how narrow that margin was. It was our collective near-death experience.

Twenty-five years later, we are breathing a little easier. The Bloc Québécois may have bounced back in the 2019 federal election to become the third-largest party in parliament, but in Quebec itself, the provincial Parti Québécois is further from government than at any time since its founding in the late 1960s. There is no third referendum on the horizon.

Sure, we're still arguing about Ottawa's intrusions in Quebec's provincial jurisdictions, and still wondering why some leaders from outside Quebec who aspire to national leadership don't speak French better than they do. But, for the time being, we can debate these issues long into the evening without wondering whether the country will still be around the next morning.

For this tranquility, we have young Quebecers to thank – specifically, the millennials, who were too young to vote in the 1995 referendum, and their Gen-Z colleagues, who are just now becoming adults. It's not because these younger citizens collectively re-read the 1982 constitution and decided it isn't so bad after all. It's because their values, identities and approach to politics have evolved, and as a result, they have become more like their age peers in the rest of the country than any previous generation in the country's history.

The generational change is evident first in terms how younger, French-speaking Quebecers choose to identify themselves. They are more likely than their parents or grandparents to be comfortable calling themselves Canadian as well as *Québécois*. Quebec as a province and French as a language each remain part of their personal sense of identity, but less so than for older generations. And they are less annoyed by expressions of Canadian pride, such as the celebration of Canada Day (any excuse for a holiday) or the playing of "O Canada."

This does not mean that, among younger Quebecers, maple leaf tattoos are just as popular as the *fleur-de-lys* (although admittedly, our polling didn't ask about that). But it does mean that,

over time, Canadians living inside and outside the province of Quebec have grown more, not less, alike in some of the ways in which they express their identities. There is growing comfort with multiple and nuanced identities right across the country.

When it comes to views on government, the changes are even more striking. Overall, in terms of their approach to the federation, Quebecers still stand out as distinct: they are much more likely than other Canadians to favour a transfer of powers from Ottawa to the provinces, and are twice as likely to see their provincial government, rather than the federal or their municipal government, as the best representative of their interests.

Underneath that familiar pattern, however, is a startling gulf between older and younger generations in Quebec: millennials are much less favourable to a shift of powers toward the province than are baby boomers in the province, and they are half as likely as boomers to say the provincial government best represents their interests.

But make no mistake: this does not mean that younger Quebec francophones are more likely than their parents to look to Ottawa for leadership. Rather, they're disinclined to look to government at all. Among Quebec francophones, millennials are twice as likely as baby boomers to say that no government best represents their interests, or to offer no opinion.

There are similar generation gaps in Quebec on questions about whether the federal or provincial government is more trusted to make the right decisions in specific policy areas. Francophone Quebecers age 55 and over are twice as likely to trust the provincial government more on health care than are francophone Quebecers between the ages of 18 and 39; the same holds true on the question of which level of government to trust to manage immigration and refugee settlement.

And the curious result of these changes is that the younger generations inside and outside the province are becoming more similar in outlook over time. Among those age 55 and older, there is a 38-point difference between francophone Quebecers and their counterparts in the rest of Canada in the proportion saying their provincial government best represents their interests. Among those under the age of 40, this difference has been reduced to an insignificant two points. Similarly, among those age 55 and older, Quebecers are twice as likely as other Canadians to want a shift of power from Ottawa to the provinces. But views of those under the age of 40 are very similar across the country.

Then there is the issue of religion and its role in public life – the famous principle of *laïcité* that is seen as one of the current pillars of Quebec's distinctiveness. On the importance of religion itself, the views of Quebecers and other Canadians are not that far apart: in both parts of the country, few feel that religion is that important to their personal sense of identity, and most disagree that we would be better off if more people attended religious services on a more regular basis. But differences do appear on the specific question of whether governments should limit the ability of bureaucrats, teachers or nurses to wear religious symbols when serving the public: most French-speaking Quebecers like the idea; most other Canadians do not. We have different views of liberal pluralism.

But the idea that there is a consensus on this issue within Quebec is misplaced. Older Quebecers overwhelmingly favour a ban on public servants displaying religious symbols, but views among younger Quebecers lean against it. And so, once again, the views of younger francophone Quebecers on this question resemble those of their counterparts in the rest of Canada, in stark contrast to the large gap separating those age 55 and older in the two parts of the country.

In short, there are clear generational differences in Quebec between the baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, on the eve of the Quiet Revolution, and subsequent generations, specifically the millennials and Gen Z (both groups born after 1980), who mostly came of age after the 1995 referendum on sovereignty. And the net result is that younger francophone Quebecers and their counterparts in the rest of Canada are much more like each other, in terms of how they see the world and their place within it, than their parents or grandparents were.

Has this generational change saved Canada forever? Let's not be too triumphant. Younger Quebecers may be much less focused on the Quebec state than the generations that came before them. But they are by no means committed federalists. And faced with any new threat – such as a weakening of Canada's commitment to official bilingualism, to take one example – they would no doubt mobilize to defend their collective interests.

The fact remains that on many fronts, the differences between the outlook of young adults in different parts of Canada on a wide range of values, identities and issues have never been as small as they are today. Our historically weak transnational ties have been quietly growing stronger, largely under the surface of our collective political debates. If you're glad the country is no longer teetering on the edge of the abyss, as it was 25 years ago, we have young Quebecers, and socio-cultural changes they ushered in, to thank.

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