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2019 Survey of Canadians

Official Bilingualism at 50

Are we taking full advantage
of Canada's linguistic duality?

BY ANDREW PARKIN

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2019 Survey of Canadians

Six leading organizations from across the country have come together to conduct one of the country's largest and more comprehensive studies of public opinion about the Canadian federation. The survey of 5,732 Canadians provides a unique window into the attitudes and priorities of Canadians in all 13 provinces and territories, as well as an oversample of Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit). Many of the questions included on the survey were drawn from previous national surveys stretching back to the 1980s, providing a valuable basis for understanding how public opinion has changed (or not) over time.

More about this project at: mowatcentre.ca/2019_survey_of_canadians/

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The first Official Languages Act, enacted in 1969, recognized the equal status of English and French throughout the federal administration. Its primary goal was to ensure that Canadian citizens had access to federal services in the official language of their choice.

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/language_rights/act

Official bilingualism

Fifty years after the passage of the Official Languages Act, more than eight in ten Canadians support the policy of official bilingualism. Eighty-two per cent of Canadians support Canada having two official languages, meaning that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak (either English or French), while 18 per cent are opposed.

Support has also remained stable over time. In 2001, a similar proportion of Canadians (83 per cent) supported the policy.

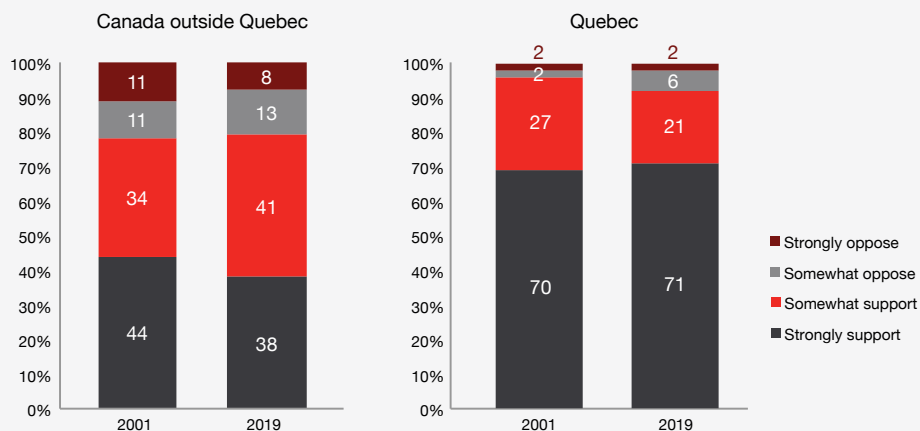
Outside Quebec, 79 per cent currently support Canada having two official languages, while 21 per cent are opposed. Support ranges from a high of 94 per cent in Prince Edward Island to a low of 70 per cent in Alberta.

Across Canada as a whole, 78 per cent of anglophones support the policy, as do 84 per cent of allophones and 93 per cent of francophones. Eight in ten (82 per cent) immigrants also support the policy of official bilingualism. Support is just as high (83 per cent) among those who identify as Indigenous.

Younger and older Canadians are equally supportive of the policy of official bilingualism for Canada.

FIGURE 1

Support for official bilingualism



Q: Canada currently has two official languages – English and French. This means that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose this policy?

Learning a second language

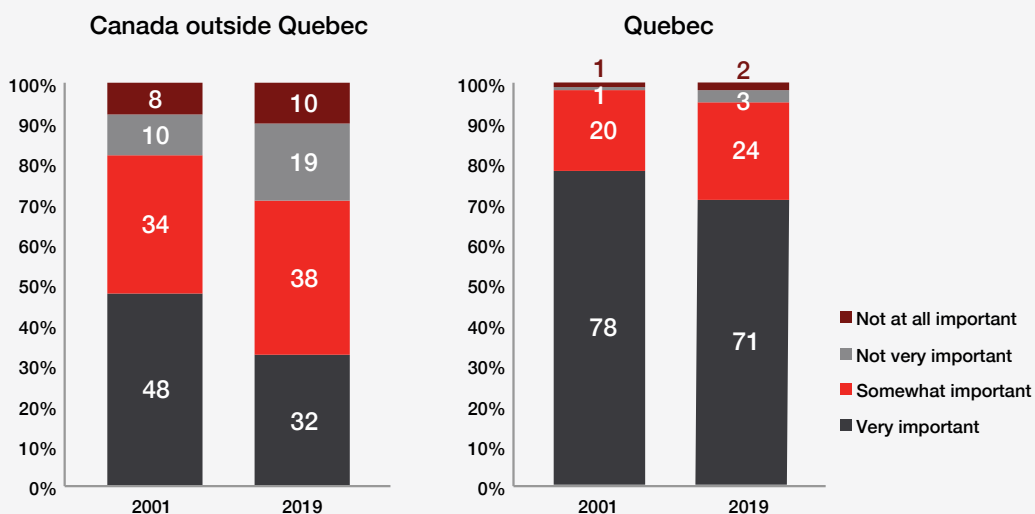
A majority of Canadians also think it is important that the next generation of Canadians learn to speak more than one language. More than three in four (77 per cent) say that it is important to them that their children (if they had any) learn to speak a second language. Almost all Quebecers (95 per cent) say that it is important that their children learn to speak a second language, as do 71 per cent of Canadians living outside of Quebec.

Francophones (95 per cent) and allophones (91 per cent) are more likely than anglophones to say that it is important that their children learn to speak a second language; but seven in ten (69 per cent) anglophones also think this is important.

The proportion of Canadians who say that it is important that their children learn to speak a second language has declined slightly over time: in 2001, 86 per cent of Canadians said this was important, compared with 77 per cent in 2019. The decline is steeper outside of Quebec (falling from 82 per cent to 70 per cent), and among anglophones (falling from 82 per cent to 69 per cent).

FIGURE 2

Important that children learn second language?

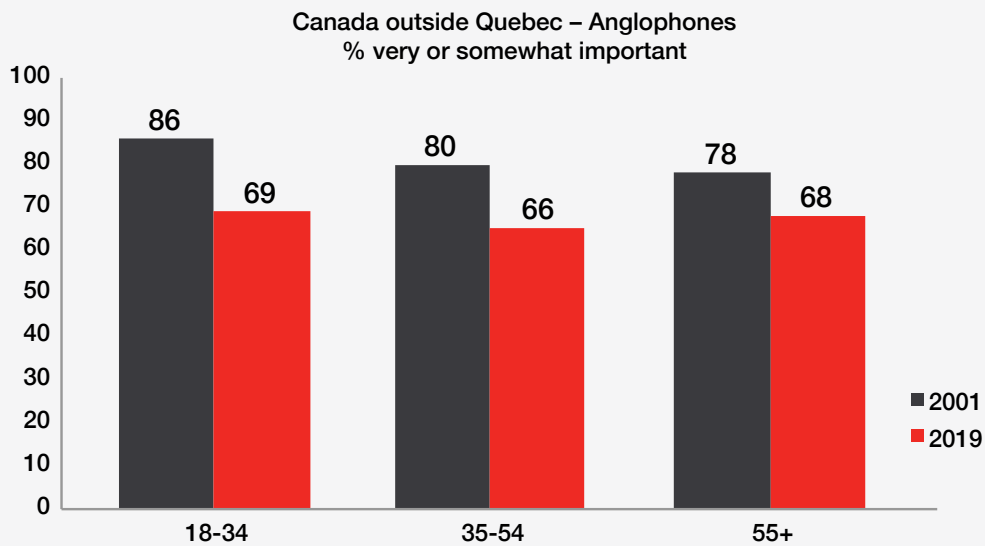


Q: How important to you is it that your children (if you had some) learn to speak a second language?

The decline is also steeper among younger Canadians. Whereas younger Canadians previously were more likely than older Canadians to say that it is important that their children learn to speak a second language, this is no longer the case. Among anglophones living outside of Quebec who are between the ages of 18 and 34, 69 per cent now think it is (or will be) important that their children learn to speak a second language, compared with 86 per cent in 2001.

FIGURE 3

Important that children learn second language?



Q: How important to you is it that your children (if you had some) learn to speak a second language?

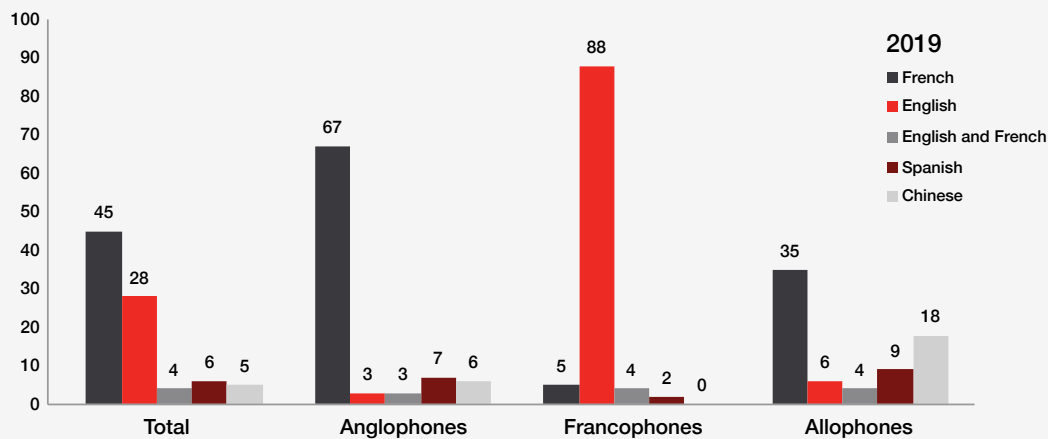
Those with a university degree are more likely to say it is important that their children learn to speak a second language than those who attained a high school or college diploma. It is notable, however, that even among those with a university degree, the proportion saying it is important that their children learn a second language has declined since 2001. Looking at anglophones outside of Quebec, the drop is 15 points (from 77 per cent to 62 per cent) among those with a high school diploma or some high school education, 15 points among those with a college diploma (from 82 per cent to 67 per cent), and nine points among those with a university degree (from 87 per cent to 78 per cent).

Which second language?

Those who think it is important that their children learn to speak a second language were asked which second language in particular they thought their children should learn. Canada's two official languages remain the preferred choice of second language: 45 per cent of Canadians who want their children to learn a second language say that it should be French, 28 per cent say it should be English, and four per cent say it should be both. Other languages mentioned include Spanish (6 per cent) and Chinese (5 per cent).

FIGURE 4

Which second language should your children learn?



Q: Which second language in particular do you think is important for your children to learn?

*Asked to those who say it is very or somewhat important that their children learn a second language.

English and French speaking Canadians overwhelmingly opt for the other official language as the preferred second language for their children. Nine in ten (92 per cent) francophones who want their children to learn a second language say that it should be English (or both English and French); in the case of anglophones wanting their children to learn a second language, 70 per cent say it should be French (or both English and French).

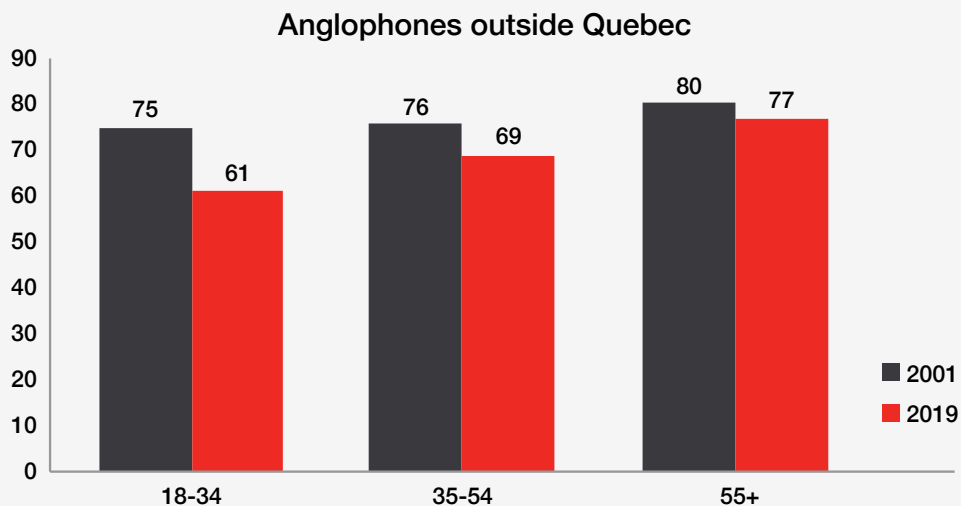
Many allophones also focus on one or the other of Canada's official languages, with 35 per cent of those who want their children to learn a second language saying that it should be French, six per cent saying it should be English, and an additional four per cent saying it should be both English and French. However, an important proportion of allophones also choose non-official languages, including 18 per cent saying it should be a Chinese language, and an additional 10 per cent saying simply that it should be the language of their family's background.

A majority (54 per cent) of immigrants outside of Quebec who say it is important for their children to learn a second language also select French as the specific language that their children should learn.

French is the first choice of second language in all of the provinces outside of Quebec, ranging from 87 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador to 50 per cent in Alberta.

FIGURE 5

French as most important second language



Q: Which second language in particular do you think is important for your children to learn?

*Asked to those who say it is very or somewhat important that their children learn a second

French is the first choice of second language in all of the provinces outside of Quebec, ranging from 90 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador to 52 per cent in Alberta. French is also the top choice in Yukon, but in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, a plurality of those who want their children to learn a second language mention an Indigenous language. In Nunavut, 45 per cent say specifically that this second language should be Inuktituk.

The preference for French as a second language has declined slightly since 2001. Outside Quebec, among those who say it is important for their children to learn a second language, the proportion saying that this language should be French has declined from 75 per cent to 65 per cent; similarly, among anglophones, the proportion choosing French has declined from 77 per cent to 70 per cent.

The decline is steepest among those under the age of 35. In 2001, among anglophones outside Quebec between the ages of 18 and 34 who said it would be important for their children to learn a second language, 75 per cent said this language should be French; in 2019, the proportion is 61 per cent. The proportion selecting a non-official language has risen from 24 per cent to 37 per cent.

How Ontarians view bilingualism

- In Ontario, 81 per cent support Canada having two official languages, meaning that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak (either English or French).
- 75 per cent say it is very or somewhat important to them that their children (if they had any) learn to speak a second language. In 2001, the proportion was 85 per cent.
- 74 per cent of Ontario anglophones between the ages of 18 and 34 say it is important that their children learn to speak a second language, compared with 68 per cent of 35 to 54 year-olds, and 73 per cent of those aged 55 and older. The proportion of anglophone 18-34 year-olds saying it is important that their children learn to speak a second language has declined 15 percentage points since 2001.
- Of those Ontarians who say it is important that their children learn to speak a second language, 66 per cent say this language should be French and an additional four per cent say it should be both French and English. Seven per cent say it should be Spanish and six per cent say it should be a Chinese language. Among anglophones in the province, 72 per cent see French as the most important second language (plus four per cent say it should be both French and English); among allophones, the proportion is 41 per cent (plus three per cent say it should be both French and English).
- While most younger Ontario anglophones think that French is the most important second language for children to learn, they are also more likely than older Ontario anglophones to select a non-official language. Among anglophones between the ages of 18 and 34, 66 per cent select French, and 28 per cent select a non-official language (an additional five per cent say it could be any language). Among their counterparts age 55 and older, 84 per cent select French and 11 per cent select a non-official language (and three per cent say it could be any language).

Taking advantage of Canada's linguistic duality and the resources available to promote the learning of French as a second language remains the best way to ensure that younger Canadians acquire the language skills that they will need to succeed, not only in the Canadian context, but in an increasingly interconnected and knowledge-intensive world.

Reflection

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act, support for bilingualism remains strong. Not only do eight in ten Canadians support Canada having two official languages, meaning that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak, but almost as many think it is important for their children to be bilingual as well. And Canada's two official languages remain the preferred choice of second language for those who want their children to be bilingual.

While support for the policy of official bilingualism remains stable, there has been a modest decline in the proportion of anglophones outside of Quebec who select French as the preferred second language for their children. French remains the choice of the majority, but a growing proportion select a non-official language.

There is a more striking decline, however, in the proportion who think it is important that their children learn to speak any second language at all. Despite the attention being paid to globalization, the knowledge economy, the importance of skills related to communication and collaboration, and Canada's growing diversity, younger English-speaking Canadians in particular are becoming less and not more likely to say it is important for them to raise children who are able to speak more than their own language (though a majority still say that it is).

The anniversary of the Official Languages Act could offer a starting point to renew the discussion in Canada of the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism. Having two official languages, English- and French-language public institutions, and strength in minority and second language education ought to give Canadians an edge. Taking advantage of Canada's linguistic duality and the resources available to promote the learning of French as a second language remains the best way to ensure that younger Canadians acquire the language skills that they will need to succeed, not only in the Canadian context, but in an increasingly interconnected and knowledge-intensive world.

About the survey

The Confederation of Tomorrow 2019 survey was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Mowat Centre, the Canada West Foundation, the Centre D'Analyse Politique - Constitution et Fédéralisme, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. The survey was conducted online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories) with a representative sample of 5,732 Canadians (ages 18 and over) between December 14, 2018 and January 16, 2019. Data from 2001 is from the Portraits of Canada survey conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC). The categories of anglophone, francophone and allophone are based on the language which is spoken most often at home. To allow for a fairer comparison between the 2001 survey, conducted by telephone, and the 2019 survey, conducted online, the “don't know” responses (which are generally higher in online surveys) were removed.

