

Explainer: Quebec's quest and struggle for independence from Canada

History:

By 1700, longtime rivals Great Britain and France had both colonized large areas of North America. British victory in the French and Indian War in 1763 gave Britain possession of New France and its French-speaking population in Canada, which came to be centered in what is today the province of Quebec. After Canada became an independent nation in 1867, English speakers dominated cultural and political life. Many French-speaking Canadians came to believe that Quebec should separate from the rest of Canada and form its own nation.

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Flag of Quebec

1: The Quebecois Identity question:

The idea of Quebec sovereignty is based on a nationalist vision and interpretation of historical facts and sociological realities in Quebec, which attest to the existence of a Québécois people and a Quebec nation. On November 27, 2006, the House of Commons of Canada adopted, by 266 votes to 16, a motion recognizing that “Québécois form a nation within a united Canada”.

A majority in the House of Commons of Canada in 2006 approved a motion tabled by Prime Minister **Stephen Harper**, which stated that the Québécois are a nation within a “united Canada”. This statement, was, however, a compromise on the question of self-determination as Canada had already undergone a politically unstable and a violent phase, decades prior, to the statement made. What this statement did indicate was that the idea of Quebec being separate from the rest of Anglophone Canada is legitimate.



Canada

House passes motion recognizing Quebecois as nation

CBC News · Posted: Nov 27, 2006 7:49 AM EST | Last Updated: November 28, 2006

But how was it a “compromise”? It was a tokenish stance and one of the real purposes might be to show Quebec Independence as an extreme idea.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper had introduced the surprise motion on Nov. 22, raising the ante on a [Bloc Quebecois motion that sought to declare Quebecers a nation without reference to Canada.](#)

Bloc Québécois: A political Party devoted to Quebec nationalism

The Bloc Québécois is a federal political party in Canada devoted to Quebec nationalism and the promotion of Quebec sovereignty. The Bloc seeks to create the conditions necessary for the political secession of Quebec from Canada and campaigns exclusively within the province during federal elections.

- From the 1993 federal election until 2011, the Bloc was the largest party in Quebec and either the second- or third-largest party in the House of Commons through seven straight federal elections.
- It can be concluded that Quebec didn't decide Quebec's destiny but Canada did.

2: The Modern Quebec Sovereignty movement:

A: Background:

The goal of Quebec's sovereignist movement is to make Quebec an independent state.

- Despite the initial failures to hold referendums and subsequent failures of the referendums themselves, the popularity of a Quebec centric party indicates lack of popularity for Canadian government itself within Quebec. The movement became more popular over time.

Federal provincial tensions have always existed:

- The Québec government sought to stake out diplomatic ties independently.
- In 1961, it opened the Maisons du Québec in Paris, London and New York.
- However, when Québec signaled its intention to sign cultural and educational agreements with France, Ottawa intervened, asserting that there could be only one interlocutor with foreign countries.

B: The Parti Québécois (PQ) timeline: The popularity of pro-Quebec parties indicates that there is definitely an undercurrent in support of the sovereignty movement.

- Quebec's independence movement began with the Alliance Laurentienne in 1957. In 1960, groups like the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN) and Action socialiste pour l'indépendance du Québec (ASIQ) emerged, with the latter influencing the radical Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) in 1963. The RIN became a political party in 1964, followed by the Ralliement national (RN). In 1968, RN merged with the Mouvement souveraineté-association (formed in 1967) to form the **Parti Québécois (PQ)**, which won its first 7 seats in the 1970 election.
- In the 1976 election, the PQ won 71 seats — a majority in the National Assembly. With high voting turnouts, 41.4 percent of the electorate voted for the PQ.
- Sovereignty-association was proposed to the population of Quebec in the 1980 Quebec referendum. The proposal was rejected by 60 percent of the Quebec electorate.
 - ❖ Sovereignty-association (French: souveraineté-association) is the combination of two concepts:
 - I. The achievement of sovereignty for the Quebec state.
 - II. The creation of a political and economic association between this new independent state and Canada.
- The PQ returned to power in the 1981 election with a stronger majority than in 1976, obtaining 49.2 percent of the vote and winning 80 seats.



C: The key figures of sovereignty and liberty:

- One of the key figures in the movement was **René Lévesque**. He formed Mouvement souveraineté-association after the Quebec Liberal Party refused to discuss Quebec sovereignty.
- **International support:** In June 1967, French president **Charles de Gaulle**, who had recently granted independence to Algeria, shouted "Vive le Québec libre!" during a speech from the balcony of Montreal's city hall during a state visit to Canada. In doing so, he deeply offended the federal government, and English Canadians felt he had demonstrated contempt for the sacrifice of Canadian soldiers who died on the battlefields of France in two world wars. The visit was cut short and de Gaulle left the country.



President Charles de Gaulle says 'Vive le Québec libre!' in 1967

D: The 1980 Referendum:

Referendum on the 1980 sovereignty-association proposal for Québec



Summary

The No option obtained a majority of 59.56%.

However, 40.46 per cent did say **yes**.

Question

The Government of Québec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Québec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad – in other words, sovereignty – and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; no change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be effected without approval by the people through another referendum; on these terms, do you give the Government of Québec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Québec and Canada?

Results and statistics from the May 20, 1980 referendum

Date of issue of the writ or order	April 15, 1980
Number of electoral divisions	110
Number of registered electors	4,367,584
Average number of registered electors per electoral division	39,705
Number of votes for the Yes option	1,485,851
Number of votes for the No option	2,187,991
Majority in favour of the No option	702,140
Number of valid ballots	3,673,842
Number of rejected ballots	65,012
Number of votes cast	3,738,854
Voter turnout	85.61%



Montreal

Quebec remembers 1st referendum

CBC News · Posted: May 20, 2010 3:36 PM EDT | Last Updated: May 21, 2010

After a heated campaign, 59.66 per cent of Quebec voters said No and **40.46 per cent said Yes.**

In conceding defeat, the charismatic Lévesque told disappointed supporters that "If I've understood correctly, you are telling me, 'Next time.'"



With his wife Corinne looking on, Premier René Lévesque tries to quiet the crowd in Montreal's Paul Sauvé Arena before conceding defeat on May 20, 1980, in the Quebec referendum. ((Canadian Press))

The first referendum under René Lévesque was not an immediate success but it did create a roadmap for what was to come.

Quebec — and Canada — would have to wait another 15 years for a second referendum vote, which came in 1995.

E: The 1995 referendum: A close call for the Canadian federation and a near success for Quebec's cause:

1995 referendum on Québec's accession to sovereignty



Summary

The No option obtained a majority of **50.58%**.

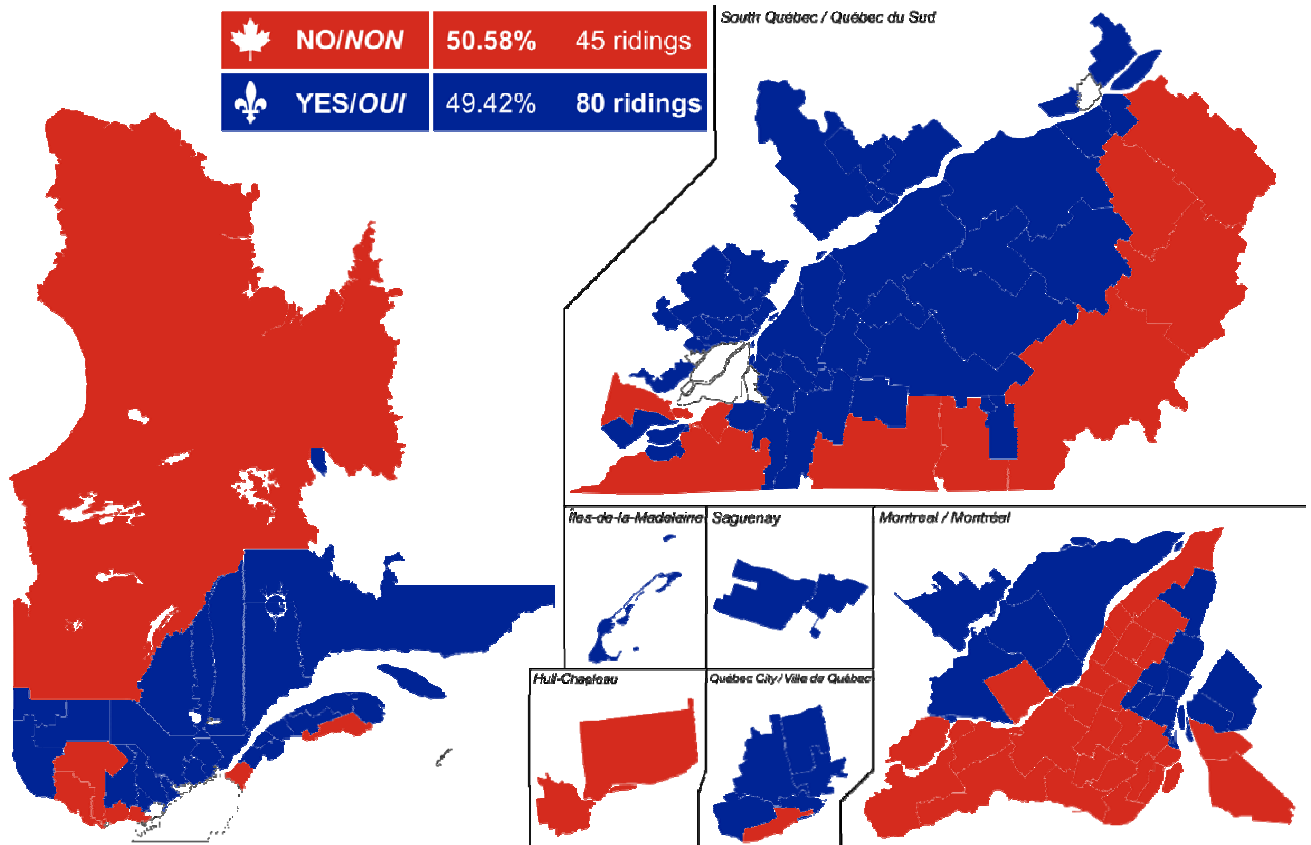
Question

Do you agree that Québec should become sovereign, after having formally offered Canada a new economic and political partnership under the bill respecting the future of Québec and the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?

Results and statistics from the October 30, 1995 referendum

Date of issue of the writ of referendum or order	October 1, 1995
Number of electoral divisions	125
Number of registered electors	5,087,009
Average number of registered electors per electoral division	40,696
Number of votes for the Yes option	2,308,360
Number of votes for the No option	2,362,648
Majority in favour of the No vote	54,288
Number of valid ballots	4,671,008
Number of rejected ballots	86,501
Number of votes cast	4,757,509
Voter turnout	93.52 %





Yes = Vote for independence: Sourced from Wikimedia Commons and Reddit. Author verified to ensure legitimacy.

User:DrRandomFactor

Credit: [From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository](#)

F: Comparing Referendums:

- 1980 vs 1995: More and more people wanted Quebec to forge its own destiny.

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Voter turnout	85.61%	93.52 %

Greater turnout as well as slimmer “majority” for the no vote. In terms of absolute net figures, from 702,140 people wanting to stay with Canadian federation, only 54,288 could retain that belief by 1995.

3: October Crisis and the Trudeau Dictatorship

Political compromises pushed certain elements towards violence to achieve independence of Quebec:

A: Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ):

- The Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) was founded in March 1963 by two Quebecers, **Raymond Villeneuve** and **Gabriel Hudon**, and a Belgian, **Georges Schoeters**, who had fought with the resistance during the Second World War.

- The FLQ was a militant Quebec independence movement that used terrorism to try and achieve an independent and socialist Quebec. FLQ members — or **felquistes** — were responsible for more than 200 bombings and dozens of robberies between 1963 and 1970 that left six people dead.
- One of the most symbolic attacks was bombing at the **Montreal Stock Exchange**.
- Their actions culminated in the kidnapping of British trade commissioner **James Cross** and the kidnapping and subsequent murder of Quebec cabinet minister **Pierre Laporte**, in what became known as the October Crisis.



Lt- FLQ flag, Rt- Two FLQ supporters in Ottawa (Credit: Mohammad 1011).



One of the most spectacular actions of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) involved the explosion of a bomb at the Montréal Stock Exchange in 1969. The photos show the damage caused by the explosion outdoors and inside the building. *La Presse*, February 4th, 1969, p. 7.

(courtesy Canadian Museum of History)

B:October Crisis and War Measures Act:

- I. **The FLQ split:**In the fall of 1969, the remaining FLQ movement split into two distinct Montreal-based cells. The South Shore Gang became the **Chénier cell**. The other one was **Liberation Cell**.

II. The Prelude to October Crisis:

- On 5th October 1970, British trade Commissioner James Cross was kidnapped from his home in Montreal.
- In exchange for the release of Cross, the cell issued seven demands, including \$500,000, the release of 23 FLQ “political prisoners,” the broadcast and publication of the FLQ manifesto and a safe passage.
- The cell gave the government 24 hours to comply with their demands. The government rejected the ultimatum but indicated that it was ready to negotiate.
- On 10th October, two masked members of the Chénier cell kidnapped Quebec Minister of Labour and Immigration Pierre Laporte while he was playing with his nephew on his front lawn in Saint-Lambert.

- Laporte was found dead in the trunk of a car on 17 October, a week after he had been kidnapped. He was strangled.

The escalation of FLQ activities prompted Quebec premier Robert Bourassa — newly elected in April — to ask **Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau** to intervene.

Trudeau, in turn, deployed the Armed Forces in Quebec and Ottawa and invoked the War Measures Act (on Oct 16) — the first and only time it has ever been used in a domestic crisis in Canada.

C: Pierre Trudeau's Harsh Measures and Harsher Words:

Pierre Trudeau's language wasn't diplomatic at all. His was a language of escalation.

In one exchange with CBC reporter Tim Rafe, Trudeau appeared to double down on his decision:

Reporter: "Sir what is it with all these men with guns around here?"

Trudeau: " There's a lot of bleeding hearts around who don't like to see people with helmets and guns. All I can say is 'go ahead and bleed' but it's more important to keep law and order in this society than to be worried about weak-kneed people who don't like the looks of..."

Reporter: "At what cost? How far would you go? To what extent?"

Trudeau: "Well, just watch me."



In October 1970, the Quebec government requested the assistance of the Canadian Armed Forces to help protect politicians and important buildings during the October Crisis. Pictured here, children watching soldiers (The Gazette and National Archives of Canada, PA-129833)



A policeman searches a woman in Montréal during the October Crisis in Québec in 1970. THE CANADIAN PRESS

The War Measures Act:

- The War Measures Act, which suspended basic civil rights and liberties, allowed police searches and arrests without warrants, and prolonged detentions without charges and without the right to see a lawyer. It was the first time in Canadian history the Act was used during peacetime.
- Across Canada — but most of all in Québec — hundreds were arrested, denied legal counsel and ultimately released, often without any explanation.
- Many people were arrested for up to 21 days without any actual charges being placed.
- Police conducted more than 3,000 searches and detained 497 people; 435 were later released without the laying or hearing of charges, and 62 were charged.

Prominent figures were arrested:

- That morning the police arrested 405 people including Quebec singer Pauline Julien.
- Julien's partner, journalist Gérald Godin, was also arrested.
- "Why was I in jail?" said Godin. "If only they had questioned me, I might have had an inkling. What had I said? What had I written or published?"
- Julien and Godin were in custody for 8 days for no apparent reason.

Quebec singer Pauline Julien:



A still from the film *Pauline Julien, Intimate and Political*.

“Ms. Julien saw independence as a natural evolutionary step for Quebec. She was an early supporter of the Parti Québécois, and sang at a 1968 benefit concert for imprisoned members of the Front de libération du Québec.”

English Canada was dumbfounded by this charismatic Québécoise performer who rejected Canada.

D: Human Rights Abuses under the War Measures Act:

- Due process was put on hold. For the first week behind bars, detainees weren't able to consult lawyers, seek bail, request information as to why they'd been confined, or challenge their confinement in court. Many were denied contact with the outside world; to their loved ones, it was as if they'd disappeared.
- The average detainee spent seven days confined, but others were jailed for more than three months, and according to sociologist Christopher Hewitt, some reported being physically abused or beaten during their arrests or interrogations. The War Measures Act did not explicitly give police the right to abuse prisoners, but it did hugely increase their discretionary powers. Abuse was a predictable outcome.



At left, prime minister Pierre Trudeau speaks with reporters Peter Reilly and Tim Ralphe on Oct. 13, the exchange where, when asked how far he would go against the FLQ, Mr. Trudeau said 'just watch me.' Five days later, at left, protesters denounce the War Measures Act as a step too far.

4: The Fault-line:

Language factor and perspective on identity

In Québec, French is the mother tongue of around 7.3 million people. This means that almost 80 percent of the population are Canadian French speakers. (As of 2021)

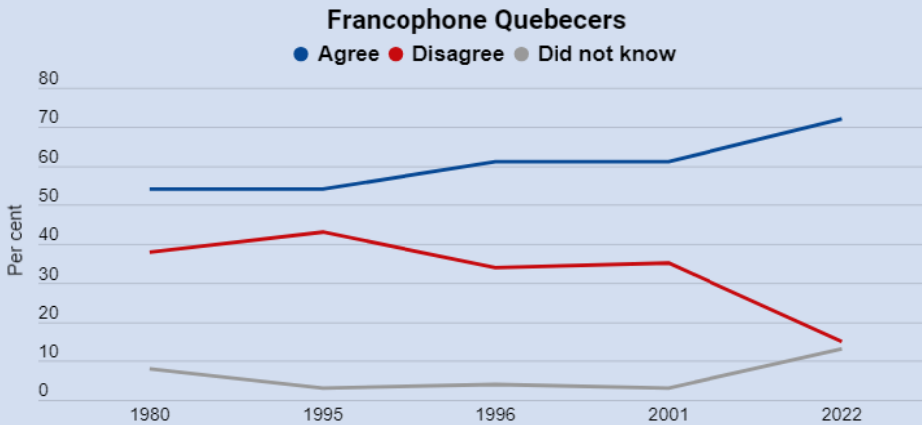
- ❖ Like elsewhere in the world, the 1960s were marked by a taste for emancipation, leading to the Quiet Revolution, which paved the way for a decade of debates on the predominant role of the French language.
- ❖ In 1965, for instance, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism noted that "Canada, without being fully conscious of the fact, is passing through the greatest crisis in its history. The source of the crisis lies in the Province of Quebec." French Canadian nationalism, which was becoming more and more Québécois in nature, was exacerbated by this crisis. The number of separatist groups increased.
- ❖ In 1976, the Parti Québécois, led by René Lévesque, was swept to power and made French the official language of Québec.

Do the Anglophones look down on French speakers?

- I. When French-speaking Quebecers were asked whether English-speaking Canadians consider them to be inferior, 54 per cent felt this was the case in the 1980 and 1995 referendum years. This proportion rose to 61 per cent in 1996 following the failure of the second referendum on sovereignty, and remained at the same level in 2001.

By early 2022, this proportion had reached the highest level yet: almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of French-speaking Quebecers think English Canadians consider them inferior.

“English Canadians often tend to see French Canadians as inferior to them” (1980-2022)

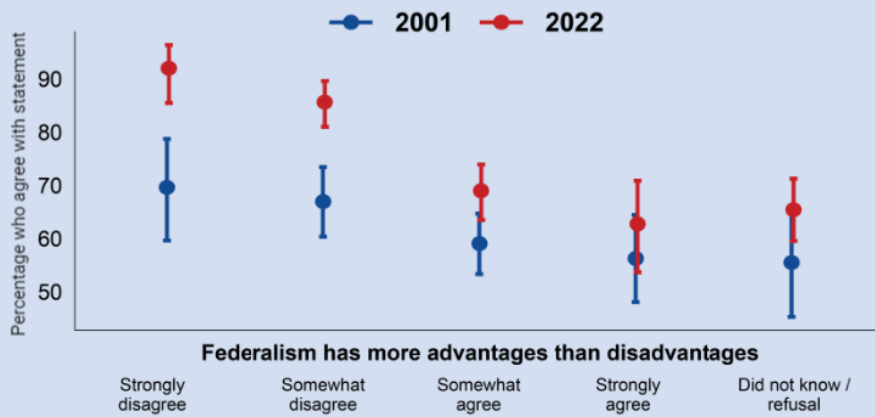


Source: Confederation of Tomorrow 2022, CRIC 2001, Maurice Pinard 1980-1995.

POLICY
OPTIONS
POLITIQUES

- II. the likelihood of agreeing with the idea that English Canadians view French Canadians as inferior increased between 2001 and 2022 in the context of federalism debate.

“English Canadians often tend to see French Canadians as inferior to them”
Predicted probabilities of agreement by opinion on federalism



Note: Dots represent the average predicted probabilities of agreeing with the statement by education level. The bars represent the 95 per cent confidence intervals. The probabilities and their confidence intervals are based on two logistic regressions, one per year.
Source: Authors' model.

5: The Return of Separatism:

A: The funny irony: A lookback into a 2012 incident:

- Back in 2012, Pierre Trudeau's 40-year-old son, **Justin Trudeau**, who was now a Liberal member of Parliament, said in an interview with the French-language service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corp that he'd back Quebec separatism if the country moves too "far right".
- "I always say, if at a certain point I thought that Canada was really the Canada of Stephen Harper [the PM at that time] - that we were going against abortion, and we were going against gay marriage and we were going backwards in 10,000 different ways - maybe I would think about wanting to make Quebec a country," he said.

B: What Quebec sees:

- Many in Quebec quietly await a third referendum. However, they have found a voice in certain politicians.
- According to a September 2024 report, the Parti Québécois (PQ) found itself ahead in polls and its charismatic young leader, **Paul St-Pierre Plamondon**, promised to hold a referendum on sovereignty if elected.

C: What Canada stands to lose:

- Quebec accounts for about a fifth of Canada's GDP, and its economy is deeply integrated with the rest of the country. In 2019, its interprovincial exports totaled \$77.8 billion, while its imports from other provinces were \$86.2 billion.
- Separation would disrupt these ties, causing economic turmoil on both sides of any new border.
- The Canadian dollar could also come under pressure, as the British pound did after the Brexit vote.



Parti Québécois Leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon speaks at the opening of the Parti Québécois national council meeting, in Drummondville, Que., on April 13. PHOTO BY JACQUES BOISSINOT/THE CANADIAN PRESS

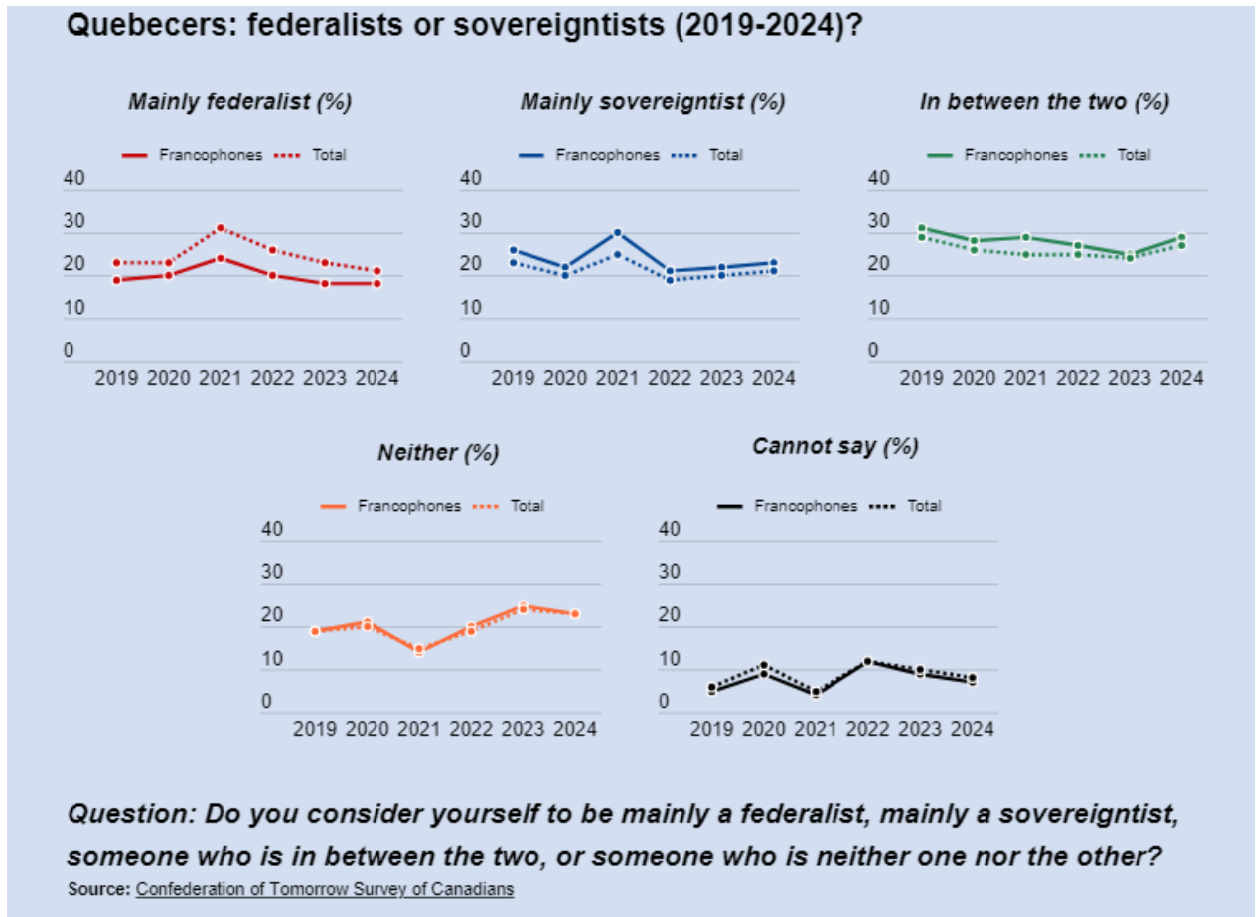
D: Pierre Plamondon says a third referendum is coming:

- “One thing is certain,” stated Parti Québécois Leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon. “Our moment will arrive sooner than we think, meaning not at some long-term idealized date, but in a few years — before the end of the decade. We will indeed experience a third referendum.”
- He speaks often and loudly about the act of separation itself, even musing about creating a standing army and printing a Québécois currency.
- It’s a marked difference from many PQ leaders before him, who often avoided speaking about the issue for fear of alienating voters.

E: What do the surveys say?

- In 2024, in a Confederation of Tomorrow survey (sourced from policypoptions.irpp.org), only 23 per cent of respondents described themselves as mainly a sovereigntist – which is more than those who said they were mainly a federalist or pro Canada (18 per cent).

- Even if one may describe the pro separatist sentiment as relatively low, pro Canada sentiment is not impressive either.
- It is not wrong to interpret that those who cannot say and those who are in neither camps may not have any issue with Quebec's separation from Canada.



- In conclusion, irrespective of whatever scenario prevails, Canada and federalism lacks strong popularity.

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