

“Young sovereignists and attitudes about federalism”

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### **Abstract**

Attitudes about sovereignty among Quebec youth are well known, particularly in light of the movement’s appeal to idealistic values and as an affirmation of the Québécois identity. It is assumed that those who support sovereignty must hold some negative opinion about the federalist structure; after all, they do aspire to break away from Canada. But that has not been adequately validated. The paper explores attitudes about federalism by reporting results from a survey of Quebec youth (18 to 34 years old) conducted in early 2006. The paper shows that when asked to indicate federalism’s main disadvantage, respondents provided a wide range of answers with no structured or coherent pattern. The main reason for this attitudinal dispersion is a lack of need to consider attributes of federalism. This explains why the highest level of dispersion is found among: “strong” sovereignists, who associate sovereignty with idealistic objectives; francophones, for whom sovereignty is a semi-default position that requires little justification and little thought; and those least exposed to news media, who are least susceptible to any mainstreaming effects.

## **Introduction**

As noted by many, the level of civic engagement among citizens is extremely low, at least insofar as it pertains to political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Milner, 2002; Putnam, 2000). This is especially true of the youth, for whom the relevance of politics seems marginal, at best. While low levels of political knowledge and a generally incoherent structure of attitudes generally characterize today's youth, is this also true for causes about which the youth display a passionate zeal? There is some evidence to suggest that political engagement among the youth is high for issues such as the environment, social justice, and other post-material causes (Inglehart, 1977, 1990; see also: Haid, 2004; Henn et al., 2002; Norris, 2004; O'Toole et al., 2003; Parry et al., 1992). Is this true also of the sovereignty movement in Quebec?

Youth in Quebec are generally regarded as far more supportive of sovereignty compared to older residents of the province, and also as more prone to hold hard-line attitudes that are more supportive of complete political independence, as opposed to the more ambivalent and practical sovereignty-association. As noted by Drouilly (1997), the near victory of the YES side in the 1995 referendum was due in part to the youth. Support for sovereignty among the youth is very visible. A common sight on Quebec campuses is knapsacks that adorn the Fleur-de-lys and a pin that proudly espouses: "Ma génération est souverainiste." Clearly, sovereignty is a widely supported notion among the Quebec youth.

Therefore, is the sovereignty movement in Quebec an exception in terms of the degree to which its young militants hold coherent and structured attitudes? What attitudes do young Quebec sovereignists hold towards Canadian federalism? In particular, what do

they have *against* federalism? After all, if many of them are prepared to secede from Canada, there must be some established notion of what is wrong and intolerable with the Canadian federal regime.

As obvious as this question may appear, it has never actually been posed, at least not empirically. Blais and Nadeau's (1992) study of francophone Quebecers uncover some evidence that shows support for sovereignty as based more on a prospective hope of better times as opposed to negative evaluations of federalism. But even they state that their observations do not lead to any definitive conclusions. The purpose of our paper is to gain more understanding about this phenomenon of the Quebec-Canada issue, using data from a survey of Quebec youth conducted in early 2006. The survey contained an open-ended question that asked respondents to speak freely about what they regard to be the biggest disadvantage of Canadian federalism. As will be elaborated in this paper, the attitudinal orientation young Quebec sovereignists have about federalism is completely counterintuitive. Respondents volunteered a wide range of answers, which could mean one of two things: either they see federalism as so severely flawed that when asked to provide a reason, they are bound to cite many different things; or, young sovereignists have given insufficient thought to federalism, which would therefore lead to more randomness.

The evidence reported here leans towards the second interpretation. Young sovereignists, whom many portray as the vanguard of the sovereignty movement, lack consistency and structure in what they regard as the main disadvantage with federalism. This is particularly true of those who are less likely to have been exposed to a wider range of attributes about *both* sides of the issue, sovereignist and federalist. In contrast,

those who exhibit a more coherent and constrained set of reasons about what is wrong with federalism have been given more opportunities to *think about* federalism.

The plausibility for such a pattern is widely established. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) point out, three factors contribute to the acquisition of political knowledge: ability, motivation and opportunity. Of the three, motivation and opportunity are of particular interest here. Ability pertains to level of civic education, which, as Delli Carpini and Keeter point out, has fallen short in the last generation or so. Given the generational context of this factor, a study of the youth does not easily allow for the determination of how changes in public school pedagogy affect overall attitudes and understanding of something like federalism. Motivation and opportunity, however, can vary more widely among a group of youths. Some young sovereignists are more motivated to gain a better understanding of federalism, and some young sovereignists are exposed to greater opportunities for this type of learning. Overall, motivation and opportunity affect the level of awareness of federalism.

Environmental factors also explain the ability of people to formulate a coherent opinion. These include the “intensity” of the messages surrounding an issue and elite opinion (Zaller 1992). Therefore, a respondent’s answer to an open-ended question depends on whatever considerations are made salient. Respondents who are “tuned out” of the discourse would therefore exhibit more randomness, since the disengaged are less likely to hold organized views of such considerations.

We face two major hurdles, however. Unlike how others have measured political knowledge, we have no way to determine whether respondents have answered the open-ended question “correctly.” We make no claim to know what is really wrong with

Canadian federalism. This makes it very difficult to distinguish those respondents who have a better or looser understanding of this concept. Second, we ask only one question that taps into knowledge of federalism. Therefore, we cannot construct an index of knowledge which we can use to distinguish respondents according to their level of sophistication.

We respond to these challenges as follows. First, we aggregate respondents into subgroups, some of which are expected to be more knowledgeable of federalism, some less. Second, we examine levels of knowledge with a measure of dispersion. As Converse (1964, 2000) points out, low levels of knowledge and high variance are related. If the information basis of an attitude is sufficiently developed, then respondents within a group should show lower levels of dispersion, which consequently can be interpreted to reflect coherence. This is particularly true if the information basis logically leads to the same conclusion. In the case of Canadian federalism, there may truly be many things wrong with it. But it is unlikely for those who have a more complete understanding of federalism's attributes to exhibit an equally high level of dispersion. A coherent argument against Canadian federalism would include a few elements that deserve criticism, at least among sovereignists. This is not to suggest sovereignists will all point to the exact same problem, but that the level of randomness should be *inversely* related to the level of awareness, or cognitive engagement. Lower levels of motivation and opportunity to learn about federalism should limit the information base of this concept, and consequently, criticisms oriented towards federalism should be less thought-out and more scattered.

The results presented in this paper show that indeed, knowledge may be related to awareness. The more a group of individuals is motivated or has been given the

opportunity to be engaged with *both* sides of this debate, the less random their views. This explains why the lowest level of coherence is found among: 1) those who are most likely to associate sovereignty with highly salient issues and are thus too introspective and least “tuned in” to the federalist perspective; 2) francophones, for whom sovereignty is a semi-default position which requires little thought; and 3) those least exposed to the media who are least susceptible to any elite consensus about the flaws of federalism. All these pertain to motivation and opportunity. Not all youths have the same amount of motivation to engage in this issue, and not all youths have the same amount of opportunities to learn.

However, no matter how Quebec youth is disaggregated, the results presented here show a very high level of dispersion overall. Indeed, variation is lower for some groups, and the main purpose of this article is to explain that, but in general, it would appear that young Quebecers do not give federalism a whole lot of attention. While sovereignty may be a more top-of-mind topic, federalism appears conspicuously absent as a salient consideration. As discussed in the next section, sovereignty support among Quebec youths tends to revolve around abstract ideas that are more likely tied to values and a sense of national identification rather than any aspects of governance. Therefore, the issue of federalism itself has not engaged Quebec youth much, at least not in any concrete fashion.

### **Measuring Attitudes about Federalism**

Much is known about the propensity of sovereignty support among young Quebecers. This is especially true of young francophone Quebecers, whose support for

sovereignty is consistently high, and often linked to their national identification as being Québécois (Blais and Nadeau, 1992; Martin and Nadeau, 2002; Pinard, 1997), as well as to post-material cultural values that lead them to question and challenge established authority, which in this case is the Canadian federal regime (Piroth, 2004). But what exactly do they know about the Canadian federation, and what don't they like about it? This is far less known, but nonetheless critical in gaining a more complete understanding of the formation of political attitudes regarding the perennial "Quebec question."

In order to measure the extent to which Quebec youth have a well formed idea of Canadian federalism and, in particular, a well formed idea of what is *wrong* about that institution, an open-ended question was included in a survey of Quebec youth. The survey, commissioned by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada and administered by Montreal-based polling firm CROP, was conducted between February 13 and March 6 of 2006. A total of 1212 individuals aged 18 to 34 were interviewed with a representative sample of the three linguistic groups: francophones (n=456), anglophones (n=378) and allophones (n=378). The open-ended question related to federalism is as follows: "Could you please tell me the one thing that causes you the greatest problem or bothers you the most with the present Canadian federal system?" Respondents were not provided with any possible answers, but were instead probed to supply their comments. These comments were captured by the interviewer, which were later assembled and coded into more coherent clusters.

The choice for an open-ended structure as opposed to a more traditional closed-ended structure is based on several reasons. First, from a methodological point of view, open-ended questions are no worse than the closed-ended format in achieving a main

objective of survey research: tapping attitudes. This is not always achieved with a more traditional closed-ended question, that is, a survey question with a multiple-choice list of answers. The closed-ended format has been known to cue the respondent and frame a particular answer, one that might not reflect the most salient attribute that the survey item sought to explore (Schuman and Scott, 1987; see also Zaller and Feldman, 1992). There has been some doubt expressed about the ability of open-ended questions in tapping salient as opposed to superficial considerations (see Lodge et al., 1989), but others have found the open format to work rather well (Geer 1988, 1991). Open-ended questions have also been found to yield high levels of reliability and validity. Krosnick (1999) cites work (Hurd, 1932; Remmers et al., 1923) that shows open-ended questions as being even *more* reliable and valid than closed-ended questions.

The second reason why the open-ended format was chosen was because this approach breaks new ground in our understanding of attitudes among Quebec youth. To our knowledge, Quebec youth (or the whole Quebec electorate) has never really been asked to express views about federalism, at least insofar as pointing out its flaws. If indeed they wish for Quebec to split from Canada, then they should have some notion of what is flawed with Canadian federalism. What might these flaws be? And are answers to such a question related to attributes about the respondent? As noted by Haddock and Zanna (1998), such an objective is appropriately met with the use of open-ended questions.

Third, and most importantly, an open-ended question can explore the suspicion that federalism is not a widely discussed concept within the very same circles where one would find concretized notions of sovereignty. The suspicion is gleaned from the



literature related to sovereignty support among Quebec youth, which suggests that attitudes about Canada and about Quebec are distinct (Blais and Nadeau, 1992; Martinez, 1997). Support for sovereignty is, in many ways, disconnected from support for federalism. Indeed, some evidence shows young Quebec sovereignists do not even have concrete views about Quebec sovereignty (Martin and Nadeau, 2002; Pinard, 1997), rendering the idea as no more than an affirmation of identification as Québécois. Nonetheless, the working assumption here is that there are organizing considerations that lead one to express (or justify) support for sovereignty. Do *some* of these considerations include attitudes about federalism? Comments gathered from the open-ended question suggest that sovereignists do not include considerations about federalism as part of their support for sovereignty. Furthermore, an intricate analysis of these comments suggests that the more deeply one is integrated within the sovereignist side of the debate, the less one thinks about federalism.

Open-ended questions have one distinct disadvantage, however: cost. Respondent replies are not easily coded into neat categories, but must be manually processed, which can only be performed after some appropriate classification system has been determined. The entire process can be cumbersome, and prone to error. But the logistical convenience (and financial savings) of closed-ended questions can fail in their ultimate objective of tapping into attitudes and thoughts. This is particularly true of issues characterized by diverse views and considerations which cannot easily be packaged into a few multiple-choice categorical responses.

In order to deal with this problem, respondent replies must be coded according to a classification system that should be exhaustive, coherent, and interpretable, without

being too cumbersome. One approach that achieves these objectives is to sort respondents' answers into the five categories of political objects defined by Easton (1965, 1975; see also Norris, 1999). The political objects range from the most specific (political actors, such as particular leaders and politicians) to the most diffuse (such as the concept of "Canada" as a community). The varied responses to the open-ended question were coded as identifying a disadvantage related to any one of these categories:

- 1- Political actors
- 2- Institutions
- 3- Performance
- 4- Regime principles
- 5- Community

This categorization does not arbitrarily assign responses to any particular "subject." Given the variety of different answers provided by respondents, it is easier to allocate comments according to any of these five general categories of political support as opposed to sorting them by themes contained in the comments. It is plausible to formulate a list of more than 20 different "disadvantages" with federalism, such as economic weakness, fiscal imbalance, vulnerability of linguistic rights, problems with immigration, inefficiency, corruption, incompatible values, centralization of power, etc. But this format also requires to create a (possibly large) "other" category to contain replies that do not fit into any one of the defined categories. Instead, the Eastonian five-category format regroups the comments according to more general orientations related to

political support. Respondents who, for example, regard immigration policies to have failed, believe that the federal government has done too little to alleviate poverty, or see the environment as becoming more polluted are all pointing to the same problem: federalism has failed to deliver good performance.

Another potential problem with categorizing answers according to “subject” is its effect on variability. If, as stated above, at least 20 different “disadvantages” can be identified, then the most likely scenario is that there will be a handful of responses in each of these numerous categories. On the whole, this would suggest an extremely high random distribution of responses. Furthermore, this makes it difficult to compare two groups that might have slight differences in distributions. The five-category format selected here minimizes the problem of “thin cells,” all the while providing some comprehensible structure to the comments.

Table 1 shows a frequency distribution of responses among sovereigntist youths, with the responses regrouped according to the five categories of political objects.<sup>1</sup> As is clear, there are two dominant categories, institutions and performance, with community in third place. The dominance of institutions and performance is not a surprise. Despite efforts to avoid structuring the question in any way that may bias a respondent, a question about “Canadian federalism” may be more prone to stimulate considerations about the workings of federalism (i.e., institutions and performance) as opposed to other considerations. Consequently, respondents will be more likely to provide a comment about federalism as it is structured and what it produces.

Table 1: What is wrong with federalism?

Category of answer	N	
Actors	33	6%
Institutions	178	32%
Regime performance	189	34%
Regime principles	23	4%
Community	137	24%
Total	561	

It is important to point out that the types of comments found within any one category are themselves diverse. In other words, there also exists *within-group variance*. This diversity suggests that the open-ended question did what it was designed to do: tap into considerations that are not framed by the question. Within each category, there is enough diversity to suggest that respondents were volunteering free-flowing thoughts. Here is a sample:

*Category 1: Political actors*

By far, corruption and the Gomery Inquiry surface as main complaints related to political leaders. Respondents provided comments such as “la corruption,” “les commandites,” “too many opportunities for corruption,” and “la corruption des élites.” It should be pointed out that the survey was conducted shortly after the Conservative victory in the federal general election of January 2006, an election that focused a great deal of attention on the sponsorship scandal of the previous Liberal government. Nonetheless, the fact that only six percent of respondents cited political actors as the main problem with federalism is further testament that the results of this open-ended question were not overly biased by any temporal factors. In other words, the open-ended

question successfully tapped attitudes about federalism independent of people's reactions to a news story that was particularly salient.

### *Category 2: Political institutions*

This is one of the largest categories, with one-third of young sovereignists indicating a flaw with the federal institution. However, there is no agreement as to what that flaw might be. Interestingly, only two respondents explicitly pointed to the fact that Quebec did not endorse the 1982 constitution. This is surprisingly low, given that the main thrust of the sovereignty movement is directly related to a failure to secure Quebec's acceptance of the constitution. But no other issue emerged anywhere near what might be regarded as a dominant theme. Centralisation and rigidity were also cited. Some cite redundancies of overlapping responsibilities, as shown by the following comments:

- “les deux paliers de gouvernement qui s’empiètent”
- “dédoublément des dépenses”
- “lack of coordination between provinces”

### *Category 3: Performance*

This is one of the most varied categories, and the largest. Comments within this category relate to conditions (economic, environmental, social) and to performance in a concrete policy area. But that is about as far as coherence goes within this grouping. Respondents cite a whole range of complaints of underperformance by the federal government, without there being any one dominant theme. For example, 29 percent state that Quebec is not receiving its fair share. Related to this issue is the fiscal imbalance,

which accounts for 17 percent of mentions within this category. Another 10 percent relates to the federal government not doing enough to protect the French language. Other concrete mentions include the following:

- “Nafta”
- “l’assimilation et l’immigration”
- “coûte trop cher pour trop peu de services”
- “the fact that they think of privatising healthcare”
- “le système de santé, l’état des routes”
- “lack of protection of aboriginal rights”
- “manque de subvention auprès des jeunes”
- “l’économie à la baisse”
- “smoking is illegal”

Notice that some of these complaints have nothing at all to do with the federal government, such as road conditions, smoking bans, and healthcare, matters that fall under provincial jurisdiction – further evidence of a rather incoherent set of views of federalism.

#### *Category 4: Regime principles*

This is a more diffuse category that contains complaints related to the “rules” of democratic governance. For example, some respondents point to the electoral system or the lack of referenda as a reflection of a democratic deficit. But other complaints are more abstract, citing ideological and cultural divisions as the main flaws with federalism:

- “politique canadienne ne favorise pas assez le Québec (plus à gauche)”
- “système économique qui ne représente pas les valeurs québécoises”

#### *Category 5: Community*

One would expect that sovereignists would have a clear idea as to why Canada as a country is simply not compatible with Quebec. On this, there may be some consensus. The bulk of comments within this category, more than two-thirds, point to “too many” differences between Canada and Quebec, and that Quebec is not adequately understood. Related to these comments are others that cite a “lack of respect for Quebec” from the rest of Canada and cultural differences between English and French. A handful of comments also cite Canada’s geographical size:

- “le pays est trop grand pour que chacun y trouve son compte”
- “c’est trop gros à gérer”
- “la grandeur géographique du pays”
- “l’organisation est tellement trop grande que cela devient dur de la gérer”

It should be pointed out that complaints regarding Canada’s ideological differences are not the same as cultural duality. Someone who cites “ideological differences” is making an appeal to decision-making criteria, or a set of principles that guide policy. It is for this reason why such comments were assigned to Category 4 instead of 5. But, as is evident, sometimes a respondent’s comment is vague and ambiguous. But for the most part, they were clear enough to avoid categorization errors.<sup>2</sup>

One final remark about the coding: not all comments were included. Some were about subjects that cannot easily be assigned to any one of these five categories, at least insofar as they pertain to Canadian federalism. For example, one respondent stated “globalization” as the complaint. This one-word comment is not informative enough to determine if the respondent had a complaint about economic conditions (performance), unfair free trade agreements (rules), the rise of international bodies that curtail state sovereignty (institutions), or alienation (potentially related to community). Luckily, there were very few excluded comments. Most were assigned to an appropriate category.

### **Comparing Groups**

The key hypothesis being tested here is that a group of sovereignists is more likely to point to similar disadvantages of Canada the more it is engaged in the debate. The manner in which this is examined is through a measure of dispersion. However, given that the responses were regrouped into five categories, there are not too many measures of dispersion applicable to this sort of scale. The Index of Qualitative Variation (*IQV*) has been used to evaluate the “scatter” of responses across the five general categories. *IQV* provides a score anywhere from 0, which indicates that respondents *all* gave one type of answer, to 1, which indicates that responses are equally divided among the different categories (Healey, 2005).<sup>3</sup> In terms of interpreting the *IQV* in the analysis presented here, high scores suggest looser coherence, while low scores suggest coherence.

The *IQV* was used to compare different groups of young sovereignists. In order to identify sovereignists, two different sovereignty questions were asked. The first repeated



the 1995 referendum question: “If a referendum were held today on the same question that was asked in 1995, that is, sovereignty with an offer of partnership with the rest of Canada, would you vote YES or would you vote NO?” The second question is a “harder” version: “If a referendum were held today asking ‘Do you want Quebec to assume the status of a country?’, would you vote YES or would you vote NO?”<sup>4</sup> Only comments from sovereigntist respondents were examined. Federalist respondents (defined as those who answered NO to both versions of the sovereignty question) were excluded because it is not overly obvious how to interpret their views about federalism’s flaws.

The *IQV* for respondents who indicated they would vote YES for the softer and harder questions is .88 and .87, respectively. Two observations can be made about this result. First, the high *IQV* suggests that young Quebec sovereigntists are not in agreement as to what is wrong with federalism. There may be some dominant themes, but overall the high dispersion suggests that respondents have not given federalism much thought.

An alternative interpretation might be that the wide variety of responses simply reflects a perception that there are *many* things wrong with federalism, so that a variety of answers are given when sovereigntist respondents are prompted to list a complaint. However, such an interpretation would only be revealed in a distribution that was more evenly spread out, yielding an *IQV* much closer to 1; .88 is still quite some distance away from 1. Also, if indeed there are many things wrong with federalism, then one would find the same level of variation across segments. As will be shown, segments that are expected to be more engaged with the debate reveal more coherence, not less. So there may indeed be many things wrong with federalism, but those who have had a greater opportunity to engage in this discussion tend to cite from a narrower range.

The second observation is that the two *IQV* values are virtually identical. There does not appear to be a great deal of difference in attitudes about federalism among the “softer” and “harder” sovereignists. Therefore, a sovereignist here will be defined as a respondent who answered YES to *either* version of the question.<sup>5</sup>

In order to explore variations among sovereignists’ views of federalism, the sample was disaggregated three ways. The first explores attitudes that tap the strength of support for sovereignty and highlights the lack of a link between the strength of support for sovereignty and views about the disadvantages of federalism. The second examines sovereignists along linguistic lines, with the result suggesting the existence of different “political habitats” that contextualizes one’s need to think about federalism. The third dimension looks at media exposure to show how attitude dispersion reflects one’s attentiveness to news. In all cases, differences in *IQV* conform to expectations.

### *Strength of Sovereignty Support*

Sovereignty support among the youth is often pegged to an affirmation of national identity and to idealistic notions. Federalism has almost nothing to do with this mode of thinking. So, the more idealistic and nationalistic attributes are salient among a group of sovereignists, the less they should think about federalism. Furthermore, sovereignty is not a burning issue among Quebec youth. Even when it is somewhat salient, the youth do not hold clear ideas about a sovereign Quebec. According to Martinez (1997), sovereignty support among Quebec’s youth, particularly among francophones, is related to identification with the collective consciousness of being Quebecois more than an actual *rejection* of being Canadian. Issues other than sovereignty rank higher in salience, as

pointed out by Piroth (2004: 40): “Although younger Quebecers may support the idea of a sovereign Quebec in the abstract, this issue may not be a high priority for younger Quebecers, who may be more interested in issues such as globalization and the environment” (see also Authier et al., 2005).

But what if globalization and the environment were examined as the main themes of sovereignty? Should not that render considerations of sovereignty more concrete and salient? Furthermore, shouldn't a conception of sovereignty as the means through which Quebec can advance a more progressive environmental and economic agenda lead to a more clear idea about what is flawed with federalism? If indeed this is the case, then one should also find a more firm connection between support for sovereignty and considerations about federalism's flaws. At the very least, they should indicate that federalism gets in Quebec's way of dealing with the environment and globalization.

In order to evaluate this prospect, a test was conducted based on survey items that asked respondents if they agreed with the following statements about a future sovereign Quebec: 1) “A sovereign Quebec would be able to deal effectively with globalization;” and 2) “A sovereign Quebec would be more effective in protecting the environment than it can under the present federal system.” The answer format was structured as a four-point Likert-scale: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Replies were recoded into a 0-to-1 scale, with 0 indicating “strongly disagree” and 1 indicating “strongly agree.” Both variables were combined into an additive index,<sup>6</sup> which was then collapsed into three categories; low, medium and high. This index is deemed to reflect one's convictions about sovereignty: the more one agrees with the statements, the more

one is convinced about the merits of sovereignty. The index correlates strongly with support for sovereignty ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ).

However, sovereignists who are most likely to agree with the statements show the lowest levels of coherence. As shown in Table 2, the more one agrees with the statements, the more one exhibits *higher* levels of dispersion. Therefore, one’s attitudes about sovereignty are dissociated from one’s attitudes about federalism, even when salient attributes are used to measure one’s support for sovereignty. Not only is a high level of dispersion found among sovereignists in general, but the more one thinks about the positive attributes of sovereignty, the less one thinks about the negative attributes of federalism. This suggests that integration within the sovereignty movement and conviction of its merits has more to do with becoming integrated into a community of like-minded individuals who may not necessarily be aware (or need to be aware) of federalism’s main faults.

Table 2: Strength of sovereignty support

Category of answer	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Actors	6	26%	7	3%	21	8%
Institutions	6	26%	76	33%	88	32%
Regime performance	10	43%	75	33%	86	31%
Regime principles	0	0%	5	2%	14	5%
Community	1	4%	64	28%	65	24%
N	23		227		274	
<i>IQV</i>	.84		.87		.92	

Reflective of the high *IQV* is the lack of any dominant direction. Respondents at the “high” end show an extremely high level of dispersion, suggesting rather strongly that

considerations of federalism become more random as one becomes more cognitively engaged with sovereignty. This is strong evidence that federalism and all its attributes fail to achieve salience among this group. Curiously, those at the low end point to regime performance as the main flaw with federalism.

These initial findings suggest strongly that considerations about the flaws of federalism are not necessarily linked with support for sovereignty. But this need not be the case. As will be shown in the next section, which focuses on linguistic groups, some young sovereignists may feel more compelled to think about federalism compared to other sovereignists. Consequently, they exhibit greater coherence.

### *Linguistic Groups*

When examining sovereignist youth according to linguistic groups, the least consistent set of complaints about federalism is found among francophones. As shown in Table 3, anglophone sovereignists yield an *IQV* of .68, followed by allophones at .82, with francophones showing the most dispersion, at .90. This corresponds somewhat to support for sovereignty, with the highest support found among francophones (66 percent), followed by allophones (38 percent), with anglophones in last place (15 percent).

These results may seem surprising, but there is a very logical explanation as to why a less coherent understanding of federalism's drawbacks is found precisely among francophones, those most likely to support sovereignty. The "political habitat" of francophones is less likely embroiled in the Quebec-Canada issue; therefore, the semi-default view of supporting sovereignty may not need much justification, and

consequently, much thought. Individuals within this context are less motivated to acquire information about federalism, and therefore more likely to exhibit randomness when asked to cite its main problems.

Table 3: Attitudes about federalism, linguistic groups

Category of answer	Francophone		Anglophone		Allophone	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Actors	33	6%	0	0%	1	3%
Institutions	168	32%	6	60%	5	17%
Regime performance	174	33%	3	30%	11	38%
Regime principles	23	4%	0	0%	0	0%
Community	124	24%	1	10%	12	41%
N	522		10		29	
<i>IQV</i>	.90		.68		.82	

In contrast, the political habitat of anglophones is more hostile to sovereignty, particularly in light of the language cleavage that is often associated with the sovereignty movement. This explains the low number of young anglophones who identify themselves as sovereignist. Support for sovereignty in this context is considered counter-cultural. Therefore, a sovereignist anglophone has to make darn sure about taking such a controversial opinion, and this requires a higher level of cognitive alertness.

Allophones find themselves somewhere in the middle of this debate. Traditionally, the popular image of immigrants is that they are opposed to sovereignty, a point made infamous by former Quebec Premier Jacques Parizeau and his “money and ethnic votes” comment in the wake of his referendum loss in 1995. However, the reality is quite different, especially among those who are relatively recent to Quebec and who are not likely to have experienced the same divisive language conflicts that characterized

Quebec politics during the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, given that many new immigrants in Quebec come from French speaking countries, some of which have a history of struggle for self determination, the idea of a sovereign Quebec (especially one that seems void of violence) is not something they would naturally greet with much resistance. Also, because of Quebec's French language laws, many young allophones have been educated in French schools, and thus have French friends and are socialized within mainstream Quebecois society (see Beaulieu, 2003). It is therefore not a large leap of faith for some of them to feel naturally inclined to support sovereignty, and it is not a surprise that many of them would do so without giving it much thought. However, in contrast to francophones, it is not automatic for allophones to jump on the sovereignty bandwagon (Meintel, 2005). The more ambivalent position of allophones is not only reflected in their mid-range support for sovereignty, but also in their mid-range level of dispersion regarding attitudes about federalism's defects.

Table 3 also shows no dominant category among francophones. Categories 2 and 3 are virtually tied, with Category 5 not far behind. But 41 percent of comments from sovereignist allophones pertain to Category 5. Clearly, they do not feel that they belong to Canada citing differences ("trop de différences") or alienation ("Québec pas compris") as key disadvantages to Canadian federalism. This is an important observation, considering that many allophone respondents are either immigrants or children of immigrants.

Although the analysis here focuses on sovereignist respondents, there is one interesting observation that deserves mention. Federalist francophones scored an *IQV* of .76, a rather low value that highlights the relevance of context. Although federalists are

not rare among francophones, a francophone who is a federalist might need to be more cognitively alert compared to a francophone sovereignist for the same reasons that apply to a sovereignist anglophone. Extra cognitive alertness and engagement is required to justify a political position that may be deemed controversial. For the same reason, anglophone federalists need not be as cognitively alert, which explains why they as a group yield an *IQV* of .84, much higher than their sovereignist counterparts. This further substantiates the assertion that high *IQV* scores cannot easily be interpreted to be a reflection of the many flaws of federalism. If federalist anglophones and sovereignist francophones both yield high scores, it is because they both inhabit similar contexts.

It should be noted that the fact that few non-francophones in the sample identify themselves as sovereignist may cast some doubt as to the representativeness of the reported attitudes concerning federalism. But if one accepts these numbers as valid, then they confirm the general hypothesis: sovereignists who must make an effort to justify their views (or at least think more about them) generally coalesce along the same complaints about federalism. The lower level of support for sovereignty within English and ethnic communities compels sovereignists within these groups to develop sophisticated arguments to back-up their position, while francophone sovereignists need not give their position as much thought. At least this is what the data presented here suggest.

### *Media Exposure*

By now the media should be regarded as a fundamental feature in opinion formation. Two effects are particularly relevant here. First, exposure to the media can



lead to a “mainstreaming” effect (Gerbner et al., 1980; Zaller 1992), whereby exposure to elite opinion (particularly elite consensus) regarding an issue leads to a convergence of opinion. For example, the religious cleavage is less prominent in Canadian voting behaviour among those most exposed to the media, where one would find a more secular message (Mendelsohn and Nadeau, 1997). Therefore, views among sovereignists who are more exposed to the media should increasingly resemble each other, and should increasingly reflect the elite consensus about the flaws of federalism. Second, exposure to news media provides greater opportunities to learn about politics in general, which includes coverage of federalism. Therefore, those exposed to the media are given greater opportunities to become aware of federalism and its faults compared to those less exposed. In either case, those most exposed to the media should exhibit less randomness and more coherence.

Two measures of media exposure were examined to test the effect of the media. The first asked respondents to indicate the number of days per week they read a newspaper. Answers ranged from 0 to 7, which were then converted to a 0-to-1 scale. The second question asked about daily television news consumption, with the following possible categorical answers, all pertaining to minutes: none, 1-29, 30-59, 60-89, 90-119, 120-149, 150-189, 190-219, 220 and more. Similar to the newspaper question, answers were converted to a 0-to-1 scale.<sup>7</sup> The values for both variables were then cut into three categories: low (scores 0 to .33), medium (.34 to .66) and high (.67 to 1).

The pattern shown in Tables 4 and 5 confirms expectations. Higher levels of newspaper and television exposure lead to less variation. It is a modest relationship, but noticeable, and the pattern is consistent with the elite-consensus theory. At the lower

levels of exposure, comments tend to be split almost evenly between Categories 2 (“institutions”) and 3 (“regime performance”). But towards the higher end, “regime performance” emerges as a more dominant theme, accounting for 40 percent of comments from respondents who are highly exposed to newspapers, and 39 percent of comments from those whose television news exposure is in the “medium” range.<sup>8</sup>

Table 4: Newspaper exposure

Category of answer	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Actors	20	9%	4	3%	10	4%
Institutions	74	35%	24	20%	76	34%
Regime performance	61	29%	39	32%	90	40%
Regime principles	7	3%	11	9%	5	2%
Community	50	24%	43	36%	44	20%
N	212		121		225	
<i>IQV</i>	.91		.90		.86	

Table 5: Television exposure

Category of answer	Low		Medium		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Actors	28	7%	5	3%	1	9%
Institutions	125	32%	53	33%	0	0%
Regime performance	122	31%	62	39%	4	36%
Regime principles	18	5%	5	3%	0	0%
Community	95	24%	36	22%	6	55%
N	388		161		11	
<i>IQV</i>	.91		.86		.70	

One question that remains is whether, indeed, the elites of the sovereignist movement do predominantly cite performance as federalism’s main disadvantage. Although this is a question that exceeds the parameters of this paper, a quick glance at the

Parti Québécois' 2005 policy document entitled *Un projet de pays* reveals some clues. Given that the PQ is the most prominent political actor of the sovereignty movement, its pronouncements may be taken as a proxy of an "elite consensus." And in fact, its justification for sovereignty often hinges on complaints about how federalism underfunds Quebec's ability to deliver good governance, particularly as it pertains to education, research and development, the environment, and other policy sectors. Now, it may be considered obvious to find a policy-oriented critique of federalism in a policy-oriented document, but the PQ's program was intended as more than just a set of policies. *Un projet de pays* contains a detailed blueprint of how Quebec is to attain sovereignty, as well as the principles and values that its future constitution will enshrine. But references to Canadian federalism focus more on performance issues rather than values and ideals.

Also, it is plausible to expect newspaper coverage of Canadian federalism to focus on performance. Unlike most other categories, performance is likely to vary quickly over a short period of time and would therefore be more prone to generate news. Issues related to "community" or "principles" do not as easily produce newsworthy items, and are thus not as likely to be featured in media coverage. On the other hand, it is plausible to find media coverage of federalism in the early part of 2006 to be dominated about political actors, particularly those involved in the sponsorship scandal. Yet, as reported throughout this paper, political actors did not emerge as a dominant category of complaints of Canada's federalism.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

We started this inquiry by asking what young Quebec sovereignists identify as the basic flaw with Canadian federalism, and how well structured these views actually were. Our analysis relied on empirical data from a recent survey of Quebec youth that was partly designed to explore these questions. Data from the survey has enabled us to deepen our understanding of opinion formation leading to support for Quebec sovereignty among the province's youth.

Our results showed that attitudes toward federalism among young Quebec sovereignists are highly dispersed. Young sovereignists, as a group, appear unable to point to a clearly delineated set of flaws pertaining to Canadian federalism. The findings also indicate that the main reasons for this attitudinal dispersion is a lack of need to consider attributes of federalism and removal from the issue. This explains why the highest levels of dispersion are found among: 1) “strong” sovereignists, who associate sovereignty with idealistic objectives such as resistance to globalization and protection of the environment; 2) francophones, for whom sovereignty is a semi-default position that requires little justification and little thought; and 3) those least exposed to news media, who are least susceptible to any mainstreaming effects.

These results point directly to the crucial role of youth political socialization in opinion formation. Not being exposed to a variety of information, arguments and viewpoints, and growing up in a political habitat where a majority of people already adheres to one particular opinion, appear to be conditions that lead the youth to form an opinion that is not necessarily based on a clear assessment of the pros and cons of each side of a political debate. Susceptibility to such opinion formation shortcuts becomes

even more important in the context of Quebec's ongoing national debate, given the fact that young Quebec francophones are typically presented at school with a one-sided (i.e., pro-decolonization and pro-emancipation) view of Quebec's historical and political development (Létourneau and Moisan, 2004). These theoretical considerations also become more salient when one realizes the extent to which the sovereigntist elite sometimes attempts to directly contribute to Quebec youth's opinion formation. A case in point is the recent controversy over the publication, by the Conseil de la souveraineté du Québec (2006), of a textbook aimed at teaching the potential advantages of sovereignty to francophone kids in elementary schools (Pratte, 2006). Unless one actively engages in the debate and seeks out information that may be at dissonance from the mainstream view (which may vary according to context), then one is not likely to engage in any independent thought processes that may lead to a more objective and, consequently, a more coherent understanding of something like federalism and its flaws.

But this is not an issue that is unique to Quebec or to Quebec youth. As noted at the beginning of this paper, for the most part, people (and especially the youth) lack awareness of political issues. What is perhaps unique in the Quebec case is the fact that a lack of awareness also manifests itself among those who appear to regard the issue of sovereignty with a great deal of passion. Not only does this confirm the notion that a coherent understanding of an issue need not depend on emotional involvement, it may also suggest that federalists and sovereigntists in Quebec live in different communication worlds, with one's messages unheard by the other. As noted by Zaller (1992), one variable of opinion change is the intensity of a message. If contact was more frequent, that is, if federalist and sovereigntist views intermingled more, then the more engaged

discourse would raise the information level, some of which may reach the youth. The lack of political interest among the youth is one barrier to awareness, but the failure of one's side messages reaching the other side could be another.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This paper looks at sovereigntist respondents only (see the next section for our operationalization of sovereignty support). Also, all data used in this paper are weighted to render a more accurate representation of Quebec society, as per the respondent's linguistic group. Similar results are obtained with unweighted data, although in some cases this produces low cell counts.

<sup>2</sup> We verified our coding's reliability by hiring a second trained coder who separately coded all the answers to the open-ended question, without any knowledge of the first coder's results. Intercoder reliability was high, with Cohen's kappa = .754. In a meta-analysis of 200 published articles reporting intercoder reliability test results, Lombard et al. (2002: 599) find that the mean minimum accepted reliability level is .75.

<sup>3</sup> The formula for IQV is as follows: 
$$IQV = [k(N^2 - \sum_{k=1}^k f^2)] / [N^2(k-1)]$$
 where  $k$  is the number of categories (five in this case);  $N$  is the number of cases; and  $f$  is the frequency within each category (Healey, 2005: 98).

<sup>4</sup> In both cases, undecided respondents and those who refused to provide a valid answer were given the follow-up question, "Even if you haven't yet made up your mind, if a referendum were held today on this issue, would you be inclined to vote YES or to vote NO?"

<sup>5</sup> A respondent who answered YES to one question while failing to provide a valid answer on the other is still considered a sovereigntist.

<sup>6</sup> The index yields an alpha of .55. Two other questions were also asked in the series: "A sovereign Quebec would be better equipped than at present to protect the French

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language;” and, “In a sovereign Quebec there would be more tensions between the majority and minority groups such as cultural communities and Aboriginal peoples.” The addition of these items produces a much less reliable index, so they were excluded.

<sup>7</sup> One may compute an index of media exposure by adding together the values of the two items. However, the wisdom of such an additive index can be questionable here because of the virtually nil correlation found here between the two items.

<sup>8</sup> The “high” range for television news coverage is not being considered for analysis because of its low sample size.