

Nationalism and Ethnic Politics

Volume 12 Number 1
Spring 2006

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Nationalism and Ethnic Politics (ISSN: 1353-7113) is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December for a total of 4 issues per year by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 325 Chestnut Street, Suite 800, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Application to mail at Periodicals Postage Rates is pending at Philadelphia, PA and additional mailing offices.

US Postmaster: Please send address changes to *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* c/o Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, 325 Chestnut Street, Suite 800, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

Annual Subscription, Volume 12, 2006 Print ISSN - 1353-7113, Online ISSN - pending
Institutional subscribers: \$389 (US), £244 (UK). Personal subscribers: \$91 (US), £62 (UK). An institutional subscription to the print edition includes free access to the online edition for any number of concurrent users across a local area network.

Production and Advertising Office: 325 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Tel - 215-625-8900, Fax - 215-625-8563. Production Editor: Jessica Thorn.

Subscription offices: USA/North America: Taylor & Francis, LLC, 325 Chestnut Street, Suite 800, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Tel: 215-625-8900, Fax: 215-625-2940. UK/Europe: T & F Customer Services, Sheepen Place, Colchester, Co3 3LP, UK. Tel: +44 (0)-20-7017-5544 Fax: +44 (0)-20-7017-5198. For a complete guide to Taylor & Francis Group's journal and book publishing programs, visit our website: www.taylorandfrancis.com.

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March 2006

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FRANCOPHONE BILINGUALISM, INTER-GROUP CONTACT, AND OPPOSITION TO SOVEREIGNTY AMONG QUÉBEC FRANCOPHONES

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Using ecological inference methods and a dataset that combines results from the 1995 Québec referendum, the federal and provincial elections of 1997 and 1998, and data from the Canadian census, this article considers the relationship between the local linguistic environment and francophone support for Québec sovereignty. Outside of Montréal, we find that the linguistic composition of the population has little direct influence on support for sovereignty but that support for sovereignty declines as the proportion of francophones who know English rises. In Montréal, we find that support for sovereignty rises as the non-francophone portion of the population declines, but knowledge of a second language does not influence support for sovereignty.

The status of Québec within Canada has been at the centre of political debates in Québec throughout recent history, and language is a central element of this debate. A majority of francophone Quebecers supported sovereignty in the 1995 referendum, and pro-sovereignty parties won the 1997 federal and 1998 provincial elections. By contrast, non-francophones are overwhelmingly opposed to Québec's sovereignty. Preliminary research suggests that francophones living in areas with members of other linguistic groups (a way of defining contact) are less likely to support sovereignty than are francophones living in linguistically homogeneous areas.¹ This finding is consistent with the contact hypothesis.²

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The contact hypothesis suggests that contact among members of different groups leads to greater communication either through living side-by-side or by having the linguistic ability to communicate, and improves inter-group relations. Meaningful communication is not likely to take place, however, when members of different groups speak different languages and are unable to converse in the language of the other group. Of course, communication occurs even when people do not understand each other's language, but the level of contact is almost certainly higher as oral communication abilities rise. If communication decreases support for sovereignty, then support for sovereignty should be lowest in those areas with high levels of bilingualism because the barriers to inter-group communication are the lowest in such areas.³

This relationship may be more complicated, however, because the overall level of bilingualism in an area may be less important than the rates of bilingualism within different linguistic groups. Francophone bilingualism may indicate strong pressure toward linguistic assimilation, so contact theory may correspond with assimilation theory. Rather than signaling reduced inter-group conflict, francophone bilingualism would indicate linguistic conflict. Despite their numerical dominance, Québec francophones historically learned English in order to accommodate dominant anglophone economic interests. Learning English under economic duress may create resentment and lead to increased support for sovereignty, especially in those areas where francophones possess sufficient political resources to contest linguistic domination. In Québec, linguistic conflict centers on Montréal not just because of the presence of large numbers of non-francophones but also because the high level of urbanization facilitates communication among a politically skilled and educated francophone population. In short, the ability of francophones to communicate in English may imply either tighter links or greater conflict with non-francophones.

By contrast, if non-francophones can communicate in French, this could suggest that the status of French within Québec is increasingly secure and undermines the argument that political sovereignty is necessary to ensure that the French language continues to thrive in Québec. Learning French requires non-francophones to accommodate francophone linguistic

preferences, so it may provide direct evidence to francophones of the decline of the cultural division of labor and, more generally, of the cultural and political dominance of francophones in Québec. On the other hand, francophones may view non-francophone bilingualism as a success of the sovereignty movement and be encouraged to pursue sovereignty. It may also suggest that non-francophones will be less likely to leave Québec if sovereignty is achieved, reducing the negative impact of sovereignty on the Québec economy.

In this article, we consider the linguistic environment and its impact on support for sovereignty in greater detail. Specifically, we will examine the impact that neighborhood linguistic mix and bilingualism among members of different groups has on francophone support for sovereignty.

Data and Methodology

To explore these issues, we use a dataset that matches demographic information from the 1996 Census with election results from the 1995 Québec referendum, the 1997 Canadian federal election, and the 1998 Québec provincial election. Using EI, a method of ecological inference discussed at greater length elsewhere,⁴ we have estimated with confidence intervals the actual share of votes cast for sovereignty in the 1995 referendum, and for pro-sovereignty parties in the 1997 federal election and the 1998 provincial election—the Bloc Québécois (BQ) in the 1997 election, and the Parti Québécois (PQ) in the 1998 vote—by francophone Quebecers for 2,577 geographical sub-units of Québec.⁵

The units of analysis have been divided into ten regions: three CMAs, four regions collectively named the Hinterland, and three regions, collectively named the Periphery. The CMAs are defined by the Census Bureau. The Montréal CMA includes the islands of Montréal, Laval, and the immediate surrounding suburbs. This region, by itself, contains almost 47% of the province's population. Similarly, the Québec City CMA consists of Québec City and its immediate surrounding suburbs, and the Hull-Gatineau CMA includes the cities of Hull and Gatineau and their surrounding suburbs. The Hinterland is divided into four regions depending on its proximity to these three metropolitan areas.



Hinterland-Outaouais is the region around Hull-Gatineau, extending north from the Ottawa River. Hinterland-Montréal includes the region south of Montréal to the United States border and the area north of Montréal to the Laurentians. Hinterland-Québec includes areas immediately surrounding the provincial capital both north and south of the St. Lawrence River. Finally, Hinterland-Other includes the region between Québec and Montréal that does not fall clearly within the sphere of influence of either city. This region extends from the border with the United States through the Eastern Townships and north of the St. Lawrence River. It includes the cities of Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivières, and Shawinigan. The Periphery is divided into three regions. Abitibi/Ungava extends from the upper Ottawa Valley north to the Hudson Bay and west through the far northern reaches of Quebec. Periphery-Saguenay/Lac-Saint-Jean/Côte Nord includes the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, home of the Chicoutimi-Jonquière CMA, and extends east through the region north of the St. Lawrence River. Finally, Periphery-Gaspésie consists of the sparsely populated Gaspé Peninsula and the Iles-de-la-Madelaine.

Although some non-sovereignists vote for the PQ and the BQ and some sovereignists vote for other parties, we use “support for sovereignty” to refer to support for the pro-sovereignty position in each of the three elections in order to avoid more cumbersome phraseology. The high number of units not only increases certainty about our conclusions but makes it possible to examine the impact of linguistic context at a smaller level. One might expect linguistic context of a voter’s neighborhood and the immediately surrounding area to have the strongest impact on voting behavior.

While surveys have other advantages, it is usually not possible to use them to estimate support in small subsections of the area surveyed due to an insufficient number of respondents. The results here should also be more accurate than previous studies of Québec politics that applied methods of ecological inference because our dataset contains vastly more units of analysis. First, we will estimate francophone support for sovereignty in each of our units. Then, using weighted least squares regression models, we will focus on how contextual factors influence the level of support for sovereignty among francophones.

Estimates of Francophone Support for Sovereignty

The dependent variable in our analyses is francophone support for sovereignty or sovereigntist parties (Yes votes in 1995, BQ votes in 1997, and PQ votes in 1998). We assume that Yes votes cast in the 1995 referendum was the most direct test of support for sovereignty. Although votes cast for the BQ in 1997 and the PQ in 1998 are not necessarily motivated by support for Québec's sovereignty (many other issues motivate voters in elections), there were strong correlations between Yes votes in the 1995 referendum and BQ in 1997 and the PQ in 1998 (.88 and .83, respectively). Comparison of the analysis of results of the 1995 referendum with those of 1997 and 1998 election results would allow us to confirm hypothesis about the nature of the main social forces that are shaping Québec's politics.

We have defined francophones in terms of the language a person speaks at home rather than by a person's "mother tongue."⁶ Table 1 shows our EI estimates for francophone support for sovereignty in the three elections. Our estimates of francophone support for sovereignty are very similar to those of other researchers who have used ecological data and fall squarely within the range suggested by surveys.⁷ Although province-wide results are interesting, EI provides individual estimates of francophone support for sovereignty for each of the 2,577 units that form the basis of our analyses in this article.

Explaining Support for Sovereignty: Contact versus Threat

We begin by testing two competing hypotheses: (1) the contact hypothesis, which holds that "more contact between individuals

TABLE 1 EI Estimates of Vote for Sovereignty in 1995 and Sovereigntist Parties in 1997 and 1998 by Linguistic Group

	Francophones	Non-Francophones
1995	58.9 (.01)	0.77 (.08)
1997	46.1 (.03)	0.75 (.16)
1998	50.6 (.08)	0.95 (.46)

Note: EI estimates; standard errors in parentheses.

belonging to antagonistic social groups tends to undermine negative stereotypes and reduce prejudice, thus improving inter-group relations by making people more willing to deal with each other as equals"⁸ and (2) the threat hypothesis, which holds that members of a group will perceive themselves more politically (and socially and economically) threatened as members of another group become more numerous. Applied to the Québec case, these theories suggest two diametrically opposed hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: As the proportion of non-francophones in an area or unit of analysis increases, support for sovereignty among francophones decreases.

Hypothesis 2: As the proportion of non-francophones in an area or unit of analysis increases, support for sovereignty among francophones increases.

When we consider these hypotheses at the smallest possible level of analysis, our 2,577 units, there is empirical support for Hypothesis 1: the contact hypothesis. There are statistically significant correlations between the percentage of francophones in a unit and the EI-estimated francophone vote for sovereignty in each of the three elections. In 1995, the correlation is .51; in 1997, the correlation is .46; and in 1998, the correlation is .52 (Weighted Pearson's Correlation. Unless otherwise noted, all reported correlations are significant at $p < .01$, two-tailed test). Thus, francophones living in linguistically mixed areas are less likely to support sovereignty than are those francophones living in a mostly French-speaking area. As Drouilly found in his aggregate analysis, these relatively modest correlations, however, hide a much stronger relationship within the Montréal CMA.⁹ In the Montréal CMA, where the larger percentage of non-francophones is concentrated, the correlations between the percentage of francophones in a unit and the EI-estimated francophone vote for sovereignty in 1995, 1997, and 1998 are .73, .79, and .72, respectively.

However, if we examine these hypotheses at the regional level (see Table 2), the picture is decidedly mixed. On one hand, the 98% francophone Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region is consistently the region that is most supportive of sovereignty, and the Full-Gatineau CMA and the surrounding Outaouais region, with their large concentration of non-francophones, are the regions that are least supportive of sovereignty. On the other hand, francophones