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# Canadian Unity

WHERE DO THINGS STAND?



STÉPHANE DION    RUPAK CHATTOPADHYAY    DANIEL BÉLAND  
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**JACK JEDWAB**  
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## INTRODUCTION

# Questions of Unity: Secession, Clarity and Canada's Future

JACK JEDWAB

**Jack Jedwab** is President and CEO of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Canadian History from Concordia University. Prior to 1998, he served as executive director of the Quebec branch of the Canadian Jewish Congress. He is an author and contributor to academic publications, government reports and newspapers across the country in the fields of immigration, multiculturalism, diversity, human rights and official languages. Following three decades of wide-ranging research on public opinion and demographics, he is regularly consulted by media and government bodies alike for his expertise and insights on issues of import in the public sphere. He has taught and lectured at McGill University, the Université du Québec à Montréal and Concordia University, offering courses ranging from public policy to the history of immigration and minority groups, to sports in Canada.

This special edition of *Canadian Issues* examines the state of national unity at a moment when Canada is once again confronted by old questions in new forms.

The essays gathered here do not treat national unity as an abstract ideal or a settled achievement. Rather, they approach it as a living and contested condition, shaped by constitutional uncertainty, regional alienation, economic interdependence, Indigenous rights, shifting geopolitical pressures, and the challenge of sustaining a shared sense of belonging across a diverse federation. Taken together, the contributions serve to remind us that the unity question in Canada can no longer be understood through a single lens. Quebec sovereignty remains central to the story, but it now exists alongside renewed western separatism, debates over energy and economic nation-building, and a broader

uncertainty about whether Canadians still possess a common vocabulary for discussing the risks and consequences of political rupture.

The timing of this special edition gives these questions particular urgency. With a Quebec election in early October in which the prospect of a renewed referendum mandate may become a defining issue, and with Alberta holding a referendum later that month on whether to hold an eventual referendum on separation, the unity debate is no longer hypothetical or remote. It is entering the electoral and institutional arenas in ways that could test the resilience of Canadian federalism in real time. These developments make it essential to examine not only the arguments advanced by separatist movements, but also the assumptions, grievances, risks, and practical consequences that lie beneath them. This issue of *Canadian Issues* therefore arrives at a moment when Canadians may soon be asked, directly or indirectly, to confront the meaning of national unity, the limits of regional discontent, and the conditions under which the federation can continue to command allegiance across the country.

The opening essay by André Lecours and Daniel Béland situates the possibility of a third Quebec referendum within a political environment that is both familiar and profoundly changed. The authors begin from the renewed prominence of independence in Quebec politics, linked to the rise of the Parti Québécois in the polls and its commitment to hold a referendum if it wins a majority government. Yet their central contribution is to show that

any future referendum would unfold under conditions very different from those of 1995. The Clarity Act and Quebec's Bill 99 have created competing legal and political understandings of who controls the referendum process and what level of support would be sufficient to trigger negotiations. At the same time, the place of Indigenous peoples, the ideological divisions within Quebec's sovereigntist movement, the erosion of North American free-trade assumptions, the emergence of an aggressive American posture toward Canada, and the disruptive role of social media all complicate any simple return to the politics of the last referendum. Their essay establishes one of the central themes of the collection: separation is not merely a question of political will, but a process embedded in law, legitimacy, power, territory, economics, and international context.

Loleen Berdahl and Lisa Young then shift the focus westward, arguing that western separatism can no longer be dismissed as a marginal or symbolic expression of discontent. Their essay traces the long history of western alienation while emphasizing the more recent transformation of separatist sentiment in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Whereas Quebec separatism has traditionally been rooted in nationalism, language, and identity, western separatism is presented as arising from a different mix of grievances: resentment toward federal environmental policy, hostility to Ottawa, distrust of central Canadian power, and a populist worldview that divides society between virtuous provincial "people" and hostile external or elite forces. Their analysis of survey data shows that separatists are especially likely to view the federal government, Quebec, Ontario, environmentalists, immigrants, the United Nations, Indigenous communities, and scientists as enemies of the people, while seeing oil companies and farmers more favourably. This portrait connects western separatism not only to regional grievance, but also to contemporary right-wing populism and extractive politics. The essay thereby broadens the

unity debate from a Quebec-centred constitutional question to a wider crisis of trust, identity, and grievance within the federation.

The contribution by Rupak Chattopadhyay offers a different but complementary perspective by returning to the economic foundations of Confederation itself. His essay argues that federations are not sustained by sentiment alone; they endure when they deliver shared prosperity, integrated markets, and mutual dependence. By recalling Confederation as an economic project built around railways, east-west trade, infrastructure, and national development, the essay places today's unity challenges within a longer historical pattern. For Chattopadhyay, energy infrastructure can play in the twenty-first century a role similar to that played by railways in the nineteenth: creating material links among regions, generating employment, strengthening fiscal capacity, and giving Canadians a renewed sense of shared purpose. Yet this vision is not nostalgic. It recognizes that modern nation-building must be cooperative, regionally sensitive, environmentally responsible, and grounded in Indigenous participation and ownership. In this sense, the essay connects national unity to the practical work of building corridors, grids, pipelines, export terminals, carbon-capture networks, and other forms of infrastructure that can transform regional diversity from a source of division into a source of collective strength.

My essay returns to Quebec separation by placing the question in the broader context of public opinion, process, and purpose. It argues that contemporary Quebecers and other Canadians recognize, to varying degrees, that separation would not be a simple unilateral act, but a complex process involving a clear question, a clear result, negotiations, constitutional constraints, and multiple actors. Yet the essay also shows that there remains deep ambiguity about how such a process would unfold and who would benefit from it. Sovereignty continues to have

its strongest appeal in relation to language and identity, particularly the protection of French in Quebec, but there is far less confidence that independence would produce economic benefits, international influence, or greater social harmony. The essay also points to the uneven perception of sovereignty's benefits, noting that many Quebecers do not believe English-speaking Quebecers or members of ethnic minorities would be better off in an independent Quebec. By linking these findings to the rise of Alberta separatism, the essay reinforces a key recurring theme that Canada faces more than one challenge to unity and the assumptions that shaped earlier debates may no longer be adequate to describe the scale or complexity of the risks.

The final essay, by Stéphane Dion, offers the most direct normative argument in defence of Canadian unity. Dion insists that Canada can and should be improved, but warns against presenting reforms as concessions necessary to appease separatists. To do so, he argues, is to accept the separatist premise that Canada is somehow inherently defective and must constantly prove its right to exist. His essay cautions that responding to threats of separation through special concessions can produce a destructive cycle: separatists interpret each concession as a step toward more autonomy, other regions resent preferential treatment, and the country as a whole comes to be seen as a site of endless bargaining rather than a shared democratic achievement. Dion's central claim is that secession must be described honestly as an extreme, difficult, uncertain, and deeply consequential rupture. It is not a routine policy option or a bargaining tactic, but a transformation that would affect citizenship, territory, rights, Indigenous peoples, minorities, and the future of democratic coexistence. His contribution closes the collection by insisting that the defence of unity requires not panic, appeasement, or denial, but clarity, confidence, and a renewed willingness to present Canada as a political community worth sustaining.

Across these essays, several common themes emerge. The first is the importance of clarity. Whether the subject is Quebec sovereignty, Alberta separatism, or the broader possibility of regional rupture, the contributors stress that Canadians must confront the practical, legal, territorial, economic, and social consequences of secession rather than allowing them to remain vague or romanticized. The second is the relationship between grievance and belonging. In Quebec, grievances are tied to language, identity, and self-determination; in the West, they are linked to alienation, energy, populism, and resentment toward federal authority. Yet in both cases, the essays show how political movements can transform dissatisfaction into claims against the legitimacy of the federation itself. The third theme is economic interdependence. Chattopadhyay's emphasis on energy-led nation-building, Berdahl and Young's analysis of western resentment, and Dion's warning against concessionary politics all point to the same underlying reality: Canada's unity depends not only on constitutional arrangements, but on whether citizens and regions believe they benefit from belonging to a shared national project.

A fourth theme is the changing international context. The United States appears throughout the collection not simply as Canada's neighbour, but as a destabilizing external force whose posture can reshape internal unity debates. The decline of free-trade assumptions, the possibility of foreign interference, and the prospect that American actors could exploit Canadian fragmentation give contemporary separatist politics a new geopolitical significance. A fifth theme is the centrality of Indigenous peoples and minority communities. Several essays make clear that any discussion of secession that ignores Indigenous rights, territorial claims, English-speaking Quebecers, ethnic minorities, or regional minorities is incomplete. National unity is not only a negotiation among governments or majorities; it also involves the rights and futures of communities that may be profoundly affected by decisions made in their name.

Ultimately, this special edition presents Canadian unity as both durable and vulnerable. It is durable because Canada remains a successful, democratic, prosperous, and deeply interconnected federation. It is vulnerable because the assumptions that sustain unity cannot be taken for granted. The essays do not offer a single prescription, nor do they reduce the challenge to one region, one grievance, or one constitutional dispute. Instead, they invite readers to see national unity as a multidimensional task: one that requires legal clarity, economic imagination, respect for regional diversity, meaningful inclusion of Indigenous peoples and minorities, resistance to foreign interference, and a confident articulation of the value of Canada itself. In doing so, the collection asks not only how Canada can prevent separation, but how it can renew the bonds of common purpose that make separation less imaginable in the first place.

# Some Reflections on a Potential Third Referendum on Quebec

ANDRÉ LECOURS & DANIEL BÉLAND

**André Lecours** is Full Professor at the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa, former President of the Canadian Political Science Association, and member of the Royal Society of Canada. He also holds the Forum of Federations and University of Ottawa Research Chair on Comparative Federalism. His main research interests are nationalism and federalism. Among his most recent works are *Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy* (Oxford University Press, 2021) and the co-edited volume *Fiscal Federalism in Canada: Analysis, Evaluation, Prescription* (University of Toronto Press, 2023).

**Daniel Béland** is Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and James McGill Professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). A member of the Royal Society of Canada and editor of the journal *Policy & Society*, he specializes in federalism and public policy analysis. He has published more than 25 books and 220 articles in peer-reviewed journals. He has also been a visiting scholar at Harvard University, the European University Institute, Heidelberg University, the National University of Singapore, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, and the Woodrow Wilson Center, as well as a visiting professor at the University of Bremen, the University of Southern Denmark, the University of Helsinki, and Nagoya University.

Recently, independence has once again become a central issue in Quebec political debate because of the favorable position of the Parti Québécois (PQ) in opinion polls and the commitment by its leader, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, to hold a referendum by 2030 if his party succeeds in forming a majority government following the provincial election scheduled for October 5, 2026. If this scenario were to occur, it would be the third referendum on Quebec

independence, following those of 1980 and 1995, the latter ending in a very narrow victory for the “No” camp.

Since that second referendum, support for independence has experienced significant fluctuations, with marked increases in 1996, when Lucien Bouchard became premier, and in the mid-2000s following the sponsorship scandal. Conversely, other events, such as the 1998 ice storm, the PQ’s electoral defeat in 2014, or, more recently, Donald Trump’s return to the White House and the resulting trade war between Canada and the United States, have coincided with a decline in support for independence.

At the beginning of March 2026, according to a Léger poll, support for independence was slightly below the 30% mark, the lowest level measured in several decades. Two weeks earlier, an Angus Reid poll showed that only 15% of respondents firmly supported independence, with an additional 11% leaning toward that option. Furthermore, the idea of organizing a third referendum by 2030, proposed by Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, is itself unpopular. In this context, the Quebec Liberal Party and the Coalition Avenir Québec have an easy time denouncing the idea and placing opposition to holding a third independence referendum at the center of their electoral strategy against the PQ.

However, it is important to keep in mind the simple fact that certain more or less predictable events have long contributed to fluctuations in support for independence, in one direction or another. Thus, much like the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 or, fifteen years later, the

sponsorship scandal, the Supreme Court's decision concerning Bill 21 on state secularism and the use of the notwithstanding clause could suddenly increase support for independence. At the end of March 2026, the Supreme Court of Canada held hearings on a case concerning this law (English Montreal School Board, et al. v. Attorney General of Quebec, et al.), and a decision is expected later this year or, at the latest, in early 2027. The content and timing of this decision could have major electoral and political consequences, particularly in Quebec.

Beyond what might happen regarding this sword of Damocles, in the event of a referendum on Quebec independence in the coming years, at least six elements would make the political dynamics of such a referendum different from those of 1995.

The first element is the Clarity Act (2000). This law gives the House of Commons the prerogative to judge the clarity of both the referendum question and the result. In the event of a clear result in favor of secession arising from a question also deemed clear, the Government of Canada would have the responsibility to negotiate secession in accordance with democracy, federalism, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities. Quebec's National Assembly rejected the Clarity Act, adopting its own Act respecting the exercise of the fundamental rights and prerogatives of the Québec people and the Québec State (Bill 99, 2000), which stipulates that only the National Assembly may determine referendum rules and that the majority considered sufficient to trigger secession is 50% plus one.

To what extent would the House of Commons choose to invoke the Clarity Act? First, would it decide that the question lacked clarity if it strayed too far from wording such as "Do you want Quebec to become an independent state?" In recent years, the Quebec sovereigntist approach appears to have moved closer to a question dealing directly with independence, without reference to association or partnership with Canada, but it would be tempting for a

PQ government to opt for a vaguer question in order to maximize the chances of obtaining a majority. Second, would the House of Commons decide that the majority required to trigger the secession process should be greater than 50% plus one and, if so, what majority would it deem necessary? If the governments of Canada and Quebec were in conflict regarding the referendum question or the majority needed to lead to secession, the Government of Canada could choose not to participate in a referendum campaign and not to recognize the result, which could significantly change the dynamics of such a campaign and its aftermath.

The second element is the Indigenous question. In the context of the 1995 referendum, this issue occupied a marginal place. Indigenous leaders had mostly indicated that their peoples wished to remain within Canada and maintain their relationship with the Crown. This position appeared to represent only a minor problem for the PQ, which insisted on Quebec's territorial integrity. Yet the PQ's secessionist position creates a clear paradox regarding Indigenous peoples: if Quebec's right to self-determination takes precedence over Canadian territorial integrity, why would Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination not take precedence over Quebec's territorial integrity? Both political discussion and the state of the law concerning Indigenous peoples, not only in Canada but internationally, have changed considerably since 1995, making it difficult for the PQ to avoid the contradiction its project creates regarding self-determination and territorial integrity.

A third element distinguishing the situation of 1995 from today is the greater ideological and political division within Quebec. In 1995, it was easy to build "Yes" and "No" camps, at least within Quebec's political sphere. More specifically, supporters of independence were grouped essentially within the PQ, and relations with the other (small) party then supporting independence (the Action démocratique du Québec, ADQ) were not bad. Left- and right-wing sovereigntists agreed to set aside their

ideological differences and unite to achieve their common goal. Today, in the context of major political and ideological differences between the PQ and Québec solidaire (QS), characterized by divergent positions on issues such as immigration and secularism, unity within a “Yes” camp would represent a significant challenge.

A fourth element is free trade. In 1995, North America was in a political and ideological free-trade context. The PQ’s political discourse regarding the economic consequences of independence was strongly oriented toward the idea that the Quebec economy was becoming less dependent on the market represented by the rest of Canada because of growing trade flows with the United States. Thus, the PQ could seemingly credibly argue that, regardless of Canada’s reaction to Quebec secession, there would remain a key market that would stay accessible: the American market. In the context of the United States abandoning the principles, if not the structures, of North American free trade, this type of argument would be much more difficult to make. The fact that the PQ now appears to advocate for an independent Quebec adopting its own currency may be the result of recognizing the political and economic changes in North America initiated by Trump’s second presidency.

That presidency represents a fifth element that would give an entirely new dynamic to a third referendum on Quebec independence. Considering Trump’s remarks about Canada potentially becoming the 51st state of the United States, it seems likely that, if such a third referendum were held within the next three years, President Trump might see it as an opportunity to break up Canada and annex at least part of its territory. Even if the referendum took place after the end of Trump’s second presidency, it is possible that his successor would remain within the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. In that case, such a leader could see a potential Quebec secession as an opportunity to deploy, or increase, American power vis-à-vis its northern neighbors.

Finally, the last element that would make the dynamics of a third referendum on Quebec independence different from those of 1995 is social media. First, their use lends itself particularly well to foreign interference. Second, the referendum debate would likely take place partly through these platforms, with all the unpredictability that would entail.

# Western Separatism and the Future of Canadian Unity

LOLEEN BERDAHL & LISA YOUNG

Dr. Loleen Berdahl, Professor of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan, and Dr. Lisa Young, Professor of Political Science, University of Calgary, are co-investigators on a SSHRC-funded study of populism in Alberta and Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup>

Separatist impulses, rhetoric, and movements have long challenged Canadian national unity. While the ink was drying on the 1867 British North America Act, Nova Scotians elected Anti-Confederate MLAs and MPs and sought to repeal the colony's endorsement of Confederation.<sup>2</sup> 'Western separatism' – the secession of Alberta, possibly along with the succession of Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and/or Manitoba – had flashpoints of rhetoric and at times modest political organization since the mid-1930s.<sup>3</sup> From the 1960s to the 1990s, Quebec separatism was a dominant force in Canadian federal politics, with separatist provincial and federal political parties and two referendums on Quebec secession.

While Quebec separatism has presented a real threat to the unity of Canada, western separatism has regularly been dismissed as a fringe movement. In contrast to the robust Quebec nationalism movement, western separatism has

had lower levels of public support and political party mobilization. Based on long-standing grievances about federal policy and politics, commonly referred to as 'western alienation',<sup>4</sup> western separatism is often seen as a political tactic within a competitive federal system rather than a legitimate desire for self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

However, recent dynamics have transformed western separatism into a true concern. The primary focus has been in Alberta, but sentiments are also present in Saskatchewan. The re-election of the Justin Trudeau Liberal government in 2019 spawned the "Wexit" movement in both provinces. Although the movement waned during the pandemic, the extended period of federal-provincial policy conflict centered on federal policies intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions exacerbated conflict between conservative governments in the two provinces and the federal Liberal government. This prompted a series of defiant intergovernmental relations behaviours by the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments,<sup>6</sup> reinforcing provincial narratives questioning the value of Canadian federalism.

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Insight Development Grant 430-2024-00068.

<sup>2</sup> Colin D. Howell, "Repeal Movement," The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 11, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Baird, "Western Separatist Movements in Canadian History," Canadian History Ehx, October 30, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Loleen Berdahl. The Persistence of Western Alienation, Essay no. 9 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Béland and André Lecours, "Nationalism, Regionalism, and Strategic Learning in Federal Systems: Drawing on the Quebec Model in Alberta," American Review of Canadian Studies 53, no. 2 (2023): 156–171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2023.2195259>

<sup>6</sup> Berdahl, Loleen, Lisa Young and Bianca Jamal. "Defiance: has Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Shifting Dynamics of Canadian Federalism." American Review of Canadian Studies 55 (2025): 155 - 169.

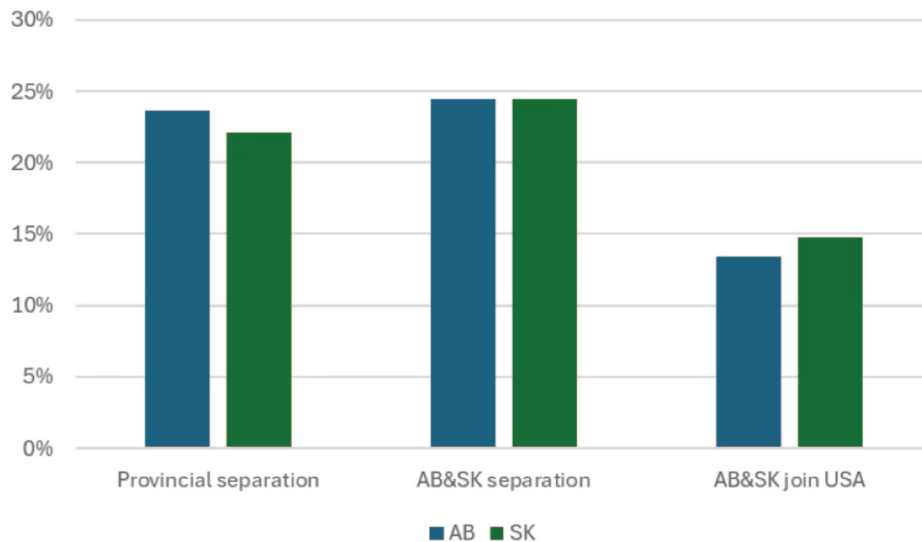


Figure 1: Support for Separation (September 2025)<sup>7</sup>

The re-election of a federal Liberal government in 2025 sparked further talk of separation. As Figure 1 demonstrates, support for separation in the two provinces is similar, and support for the two provinces separating together is slightly higher than for the provinces seceding independently.

Although rates of public support for separation are similar in the two provinces, only Alberta is anticipated to put the question to a public vote. Premier Smith of Alberta have been unwilling to take a strong position opposing separation, and has acted to facilitate a referendum by lowering the threshold for citizen-initiated referenda in the province and removing a requirement that the Chief Electoral Officer refer any potentially unconstitutional

referendum question to the courts.<sup>8</sup> The separatist group “Stay Free Alberta” has reportedly collected the signatures required under the Alberta Citizen Initiative Act to trigger a referendum<sup>9</sup>. The Saskatchewan threat, to the extent that one exists, lies in the actions of Alberta, as a positive Alberta referendum potentially mobilizes a Saskatchewan separatist Pandora’s box.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. “Separatists” are those respondents who ranked the idea of Alberta and Saskatchewan together separating from Canada as a 5, 6 or 7 on a 7 point scale. Non-separatists are those who ranked this at 1, 2, 3 or 4. Bars indicate means.

<sup>8</sup> Elections Alberta, “Citizen Initiative” <https://www.elections.ab.ca/recall-initiative/initiative/>; accessed April 22 2026. Saskatchewan’s Referendum and Plebiscite Act, last updated in 2024, allows for petitions for plebiscites, with a 15% of electors being the minimum threshold to trigger a plebiscite.

<sup>9</sup> Fakiha Baig, “Alberta separatists say they’ve already collected enough signatures for referendum,” CBC News March 31, 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-separatists-referendum-signatures-9.7149138> At time of writing, it remains possible that a court injunction may impede the referendum. Jason Markusoff, “First Nations’ court challenge may block Alberta separatism itself, not just petition drive,” CBC News April 11, 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/analysis-alberta-separation-indigenous-treaty-rights-court-9.7160026>

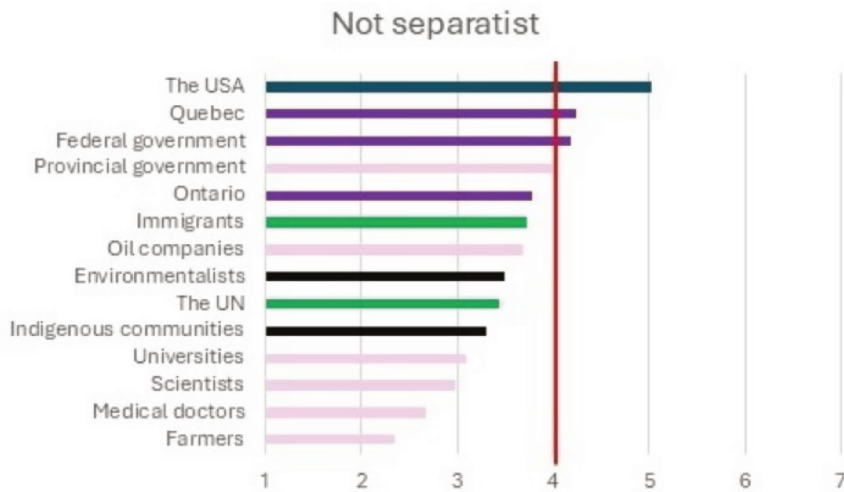
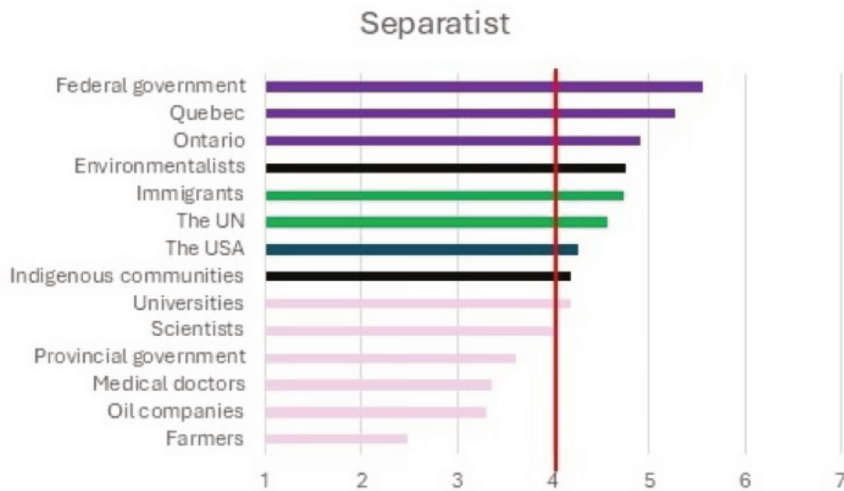


Figure 2: Friends/Enemies by Separatism<sup>10</sup>

The apparent openness of the Trump administration to the prospect of Alberta’s separation also makes Alberta separatism a pressing concern. Separatist movements gain credibility when they can point to states that might recognize or otherwise facilitate secession. Leaders of the Alberta movement have reported positive reception on visits to the American capital<sup>11</sup>. In addition, there is considerable risk of foreign interference in provincial political discussions.<sup>12</sup>

To better understand separatists’ worldviews, we analyzed data from the September 2025 Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. The survey asked respondents to rate various organizations and entities on a scale from 1 (friend of) to 7 (enemy of) in relation to the people of Alberta/Saskatchewan. This question is grounded in an understanding of populism as a construction of a virtuous “people” in moral conflict with a self-interested elite. Responses to the question shed light on participants’ conceptions of who is allied with and who is in conflict with “the people.” Contrasting the worldviews expressed by

<sup>10</sup> Source: Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. “Separatists” are those respondents who ranked the idea of Alberta and Saskatchewan together separating from Canada as a 5, 6 or 7 on a 7 point scale. Non-separatists are those who ranked this at 1, 2, 3 or 4. Bars indicate means.

<sup>11</sup> Evan Dyer, “U.S. interest in Alberta separatism raises red flags over what might come next” CBC News 5 February 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/alberta-separatism-trump-administration-9.7068999>

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Lennox, “Can Alberta Protect Its Secession Vote from Trump?” The Walrus, April 14, 2026.

separatists and non-separatists demonstrates the challenges to Canadian unity embedded not only in the rise of separatism but also in the attitudes of non-separatists in these two provinces.

Figure 2 shows that separatists are more inclined to perceive many “enemies of the people,” just as one might expect of adherents to a populist movement. For nine of the 14 entities, the mean score was above the neutral position (four on the seven-point scale); only the provincial government, doctors, oil companies, and farmers were perceived as “friends.”

Separatists’ perceptions of enmity reflect traditional western alienation, with the federal government, Quebec and Ontario as the greatest enemies of the people of their province. As Figure 3 illustrates, separatists are more likely to perceive the federal government as an enemy than the United States – a striking finding given the Trump government’s approach to Canada-US relations. In contrast, non-separatists were more likely to perceive both as neither friend nor enemy, or see the US as a greater threat.

Policy disputes with Ottawa over GHG emissions have driven the current wave of regional resentment, so it is not surprising to see that separatists see environmentalists as enemies of the people. Taken together with separatists’ views of Indigenous communities and scientists as enemies, albeit at a lower rate, this speaks to the role of extractive populism in animating support for secession. The separatist view of oil companies as friends of the people is further evidence of this.

Finally, the separatist perception that immigrants and the United Nations are enemies of the people of the two provinces suggests that the secessionist movement is grounded to some extent in contemporary right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States, which are characterized by their antipathy toward immigration and international organizations.

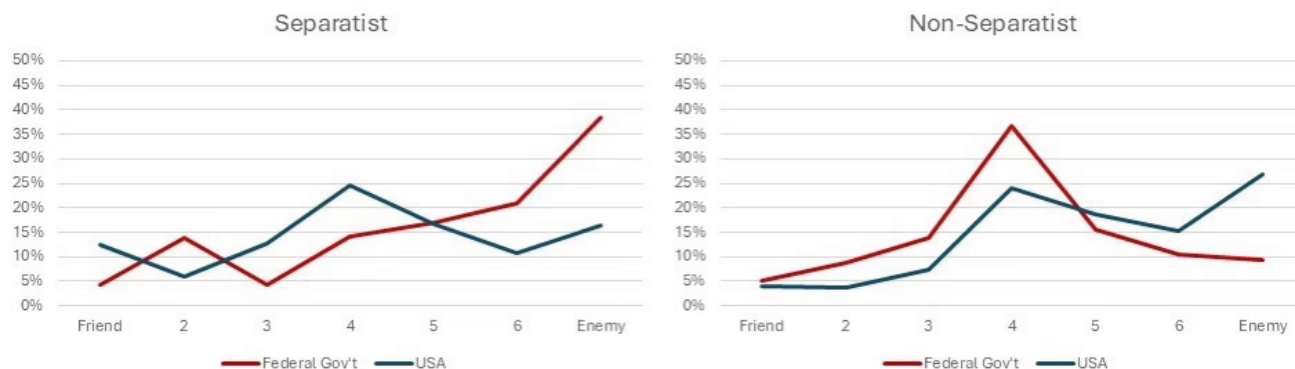


Figure 3: Evaluation of the Federal Government and USA (Friend or Enemy) by Separatism

Comparing the worldviews of separatists and non-separatists, it is clear that traditional western alienation is present for both groups. It is the other sets of perceived enemies – including environmentalists, immigrants, the United Nations, and Indigenous communities – that signal the right-wing populist worldview infusing the separatist movement. Because of this, separatists’ populist worldview is likely to insulate them from efforts to address their grievances.

While separatists are unlikely to change their positions based on appeals to national unity, there is opportunity to address the ambivalence of non-separatist residents of the two provinces toward the federal government. We have three main recommendations.

**Focus on the American threat.**

The emergence of the United States as a potential threat to Canada creates an opportunity for federalists to make both an emotional and pragmatic appeal to residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan. As Figure 3 demonstrates, non-separatists in these provinces are inclined to express ambivalence toward the federal government, but to perceive the United States as a threat. Articulation of a Canadian nationalism defined in opposition to an American threat has the potential to shift ambivalent westerners to see the federal government as a positive force. Of particular note, the threat of American efforts to influence an Alberta separatism referendum has the potential to galvanize public opinion. The idea that secession is only the first step toward becoming American might be a powerful argument. Even among supporters of separatism, the idea of joining the United States is substantially less popular than the notion of independence (see Figure 1).

**Address irritants.**

Supporting the Alberta and Saskatchewan economies – and being seen by the public to be doing so – is critical. This involves addressing policy irritants that emerged under the Trudeau government – something that the Carney government is already doing – and carefully avoiding creating new ones. Equalization has long been a source of resentment in Alberta and, to a lesser extent, Saskatchewan. In our survey, 47% of Alberta respondents indicated they thought the current equalization system was unfair to their province and another 27% were neutral; for Saskatchewan respondents, the figures were 45% and 32%, respectively. Equalization is foundational to contemporary Canadian governance and tends to be poorly understood. A citizens’ assembly tasked with examining the system and recommending changes, if warranted, might offer a mechanism to increase public understanding and confidence in the system.

**Strengthen the case for the Canadian federation.** Strengthening the case for federation requires a strong articulation of Canadian values – both in contrast to and independent of American values - and deliberate efforts to foster connections across the country. It requires bolstering Canadian identity, building citizen connections, and supporting Canadian cultural

content. It requires increasing the federal presence in provinces through dedicated offices such as PrairiesCan and decentralizing more civil service positions from the Ottawa/Gatineau national capital region to locations across Canada (including Alberta and Saskatchewan<sup>13</sup>). It requires advancing credential recognition and mutual internal trade recognition to support internal trade and interprovincial/territorial economic integration, and strengthening east-west-north infrastructure and economic relationships. It requires strengthening intergovernmental connections through ministerial councils, joint cabinet meetings, first ministers' conferences, and other mechanisms that support regular dialogue and trust-building amongst government leaders.

Alberta and Saskatchewan have benefited from federalism. Fiscally, both provinces have been recipients of equalization payments since the federal program was established in 1957 and are recipients of federal transfer payments through other programs. Economically, both provinces benefit from labour mobility, international trade, and immigration. Socially, both provinces benefit from strong interpersonal and familial ties from coast to coast to coast, shared liberal democratic values, and concurrent and complementary national and provincial identities<sup>14</sup>.

A united Canada has a strong case to make for itself, and it is a case worth making. While the arguments and actions might not sway dedicated separatists, there is an audience for them among the majority of residents of the two provinces who are concerned by the threat posed by the United States but uncertain of the federal government's commitment to the region.

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<sup>13</sup> Loleen Berdahl, "Is it time to move Ottawa out of Ottawa?" *The Conversation Canada*, May 24, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See Lisa Young, Bianca Jamal and Loleen Berdahl, "Regionalism in Canada" in Jared Wesley and JP Lewis (eds), *Small Worlds: Politics and Elections in the Canadian Provinces and Territories*, 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2026, 279-298.

# Energy, Federalism, and the Economic Foundations of Future Canadian Unity

RUPAK CHATTOPADHYAY

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Federations are not sustained by sentiment alone. At their core, they are economic arrangements—built on shared prosperity, integrated markets, and mutual dependence. Canada’s history illustrates this reality with unusual clarity. Confederation in 1867 was not merely a political compromise among British North American colonies; it was an economic solution to urgent, structural challenges. Today, as Canada confronts renewed stresses on its federal framework, the same lesson applies. Energized nationbuilding—grounded in cooperation, infrastructure, and shared benefit—offers a pathway to renew unity, prosperity, and national purpose in an increasingly unstable world.

## **Confederation as an Economic Project**

The origins of Canada lie in economic necessity. The repeal of the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States in 1866 threatened colonial exports and exposed the vulnerability of north-south trade relationships. Colonial governments were burdened by mounting debts, while geography created its own constraints: inland producers

needed dependable access to icefree Atlantic ports, and the colonies required secure trade routes that did not depend on U.S. goodwill. Political union was, in essence, an economic survival strategy.

Leaders such as John A. Macdonald and GeorgeÉtienne Cartier grasped this clearly. Confederation promised an east-west commercial axis that would bind disparate regions together, protective tariffs to foster domestic industry, and the federal assumption of certain debts to stabilize provincial finances. Above all, it promised infrastructure. Railways were not an afterthought but the central instrument of national integration. The Intercolonial Railway and later the Canadian Pacific Railway stitched together markets, enabled troop movement, facilitated settlement, and laid the foundation for a national economy.

This economic logic persisted well beyond 1867. The National Policy, western settlement, postwar highway construction, and the TransCanada Highway all reflected the same insight: federations endure when economic integration reinforces political unity. Yet embedded within Confederation was a permanent tension—between national coordination and regional autonomy—that continues to shape Canadian federalism.

## **Federalism, Resources, and Enduring Tension**

Canadian federalism assigns strong powers to the provinces, particularly over natural resources, while reserving authority over interprovincial trade, transportation, and major infrastructure for the federal

government. This balance has been both a source of resilience and recurring conflict. Provinces retained ownership and control of resources, a principle reinforced over time and entrenched in Section 92A of the Constitution Act. At the same time, Ottawa retained responsibility for building the economic connections that make a single national market possible.

Nowhere has this tension been more evident than in energy policy. Quebec's hydroelectric megaprojects became symbols of provincial autonomy and economic pride, even as they exported power beyond provincial borders. Alberta's oil and gas sector, by contrast, became a flashpoint when federal policy appeared to centralize revenues or constrain development. The National Energy Program of 1980 remains a defining episode, demonstrating how national coordination can fracture unity when it is perceived to override the federal bargain.

The lesson from these episodes is not that nationbuilding should be avoided, but that it must align regional interests with national objectives. Cooperation, consent, and shared benefit are the conditions under which federalism works.

### **A Federation Under Renewed Strain**

Today, Canada faces stresses that echo earlier periods of transition. Regional economic divergence is widening. Western provinces express frustration over pipeline constraints, emissions policy, and perceived federal overreach. Quebec pursues a distinct energy model centred on hydroelectricity and electrification. Ontario balances industrial competitiveness with nuclear investment. Atlantic Canada looks to offshore wind and emerging cleanenergy opportunities. At the same time, debates over carbon pricing, affordability, and equalization payments expose deeper questions about fairness and burdensharing within the federation.

These pressures are intensified by global forces. Energy transition is reshaping markets faster than institutions can adapt. Supplychain vulnerabilities and geopolitical

instability have reelevated energy security as a core national concern. Indigenous nations, long excluded from decisionmaking, are asserting rights to consent, equity, and ownership, reshaping how development must proceed. Without deliberate coordination, these dynamics risk pulling federalism toward fragmentation rather than cooperation.

Energy sits at the centre of this challenge. The sector remains foundational to the Canadian economy, contributing roughly a tenth of GDP, employing hundreds of thousands of Canadians directly and indirectly, generating billions in public revenues, and accounting for a large share of goods exports. Yet its benefits are unevenly distributed, and its environmental footprint poses legitimate policy dilemmas. Unmanaged, energy becomes a zerosum contest among regions. Strategically developed, it can once again provide the economic glue of Confederation.

### **NationBuilding Through Energy Infrastructure**

Largescale, crossjurisdictional infrastructure offers a constructive way forward. Nationbuilding projects succeed precisely because they require cooperation: federal facilitation, provincial consent, and partnership with private capital and Indigenous communities. Energy infrastructure—pipelines, transmission lines, export terminals, carboncapture networks, interprovincial grids, and nuclear facilities—is uniquely suited to this role due to its scale, connectivity, and export potential.

Recent initiatives signal a renewed appetite for this approach. Canada is expanding LNG export capacity on the Pacific coast, investing in carbon capture and storage in oilproducing regions, modernizing electricity grids, strengthening nuclear generation, and exploring hydrogen and criticalminerals development. Increasingly, these efforts are framed not as isolated megaprojects but as components of a coordinated national strategy that links emissions reduction with competitiveness and regional strengths with global demand.

A defining feature of this new model is Indigenous leadership and ownership. Projects that include majority Indigenous equity stakes and governance represent a decisive break from the extractive approach of the past. Rather than positioning reconciliation and development as competing priorities, energy infrastructure now has the potential to align economic opportunity with self-determination—adding legitimacy, durability, and moral authority to nationbuilding itself.

### **A Rare Global Opportunity for Canada**

The international context makes this moment particularly consequential. Canada is among the world's leading net energy exporters, with vast reserves of oil and gas, enormous hydroelectric capacity, a mature nuclear sector, and growing renewable and low-carbon fuel potential. At the same time, global energy markets are increasingly shaped by instability. Conflict, chokepoint risk, and geopolitical rivalry have exposed the vulnerability of traditional supply chains.

Major importers such as India and China are actively seeking to diversify energy supply away from volatile regions. Energy security has become a strategic priority, not merely an economic one. In this environment, reliability—political stability, rule of law, predictability—has become the scarce commodity. Canada possesses it in abundance.

This creates a rare, timebound opportunity for Canada to position itself as a reliable, long-term global supplier across the energy spectrum: responsibly produced oil and gas, low-emission LNG, hydroelectricity, nuclear power, and emerging fuels such as hydrogen. These exports are not simply commercial transactions; they are instruments of economic diplomacy, national influence, and strategic relevance.

### **Jobs, Prosperity, and the Federal Bargain**

Crucially, this opportunity is not only about exports or global stature. It is fundamentally about jobs and shared prosperity at home. Energized nationbuilding creates high-quality, durable employment across the federation—construction workers, welders, engineers, technicians, manufacturers, port operators, environmental specialists, project managers, and Indigenous entrepreneurs. These jobs are long-term and high-wage, anchoring communities rather than producing transient booms.

Importantly, they are not confined to producing provinces. National supply chains link Prairie extraction and carbon-capture expertise with Ontario manufacturing, British Columbia terminals, Atlantic logistics, and Indigenous-owned enterprises across the country. When Canadians in every region can see tangible benefits—from paycheques to procurement contracts to municipal tax bases—the federation becomes a shared economic project rather than a collection of competing interests.

Energy exports also reinforce the fiscal foundations of federalism itself. Revenues strengthen provincial and federal balance sheets, support equalization payments, and finance public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. In this sense, energy is not simply a sectoral issue; it is a pillar of the social contract.

Just as importantly, modern energy nationbuilding rejects false tradeoffs between jobs and climate responsibility. Low-emission LNG can displace higher-carbon coal abroad. Carbon capture allows heavy industry to remain competitive while reducing emissions. Grid interconnections enable clean electricity to flow across regions, improving reliability and lowering systemwide costs. Prosperous societies are better positioned to innovate, decarbonize, and adapt.

### **Renewing the Confederation Bargain**

In the nineteenth century, railways transformed scattered colonies into a functioning federation by creating shared

economic purpose. In the twentyfirst century, energy corridors—pipelines, transmission lines, export terminals, and modernized grids—can play the same integrative role. They make federalism tangible, linking regions through commerce, employment, and shared fiscal capacity.

Federalism thrives not by suppressing regional diversity, but by harnessing it toward common purpose. Energylined nationbuilding does exactly that. It respects provincial ownership of resources while enabling national coordination on trade access, infrastructure, and global engagement. It aligns reconciliation with development. And it advances Canadian sovereignty by diversifying markets and insulating the economy from external shocks.

Confederation endured because it delivered mutual gain—because it translated cooperation into material improvement in people’s lives. Canada now faces a similar test. The alternative to deliberate nationbuilding is stagnation amid division, an untenable path for a country whose unity rests on economic solidarity. By investing strategically and inclusively in its energy future, Canada can reaffirm the Confederation bargain for a new century—delivering reliable energy to a world in need while creating good jobs, shared prosperity, and renewed unity at home, from sea to sea to sea.

# Separation in Theory and Practice: Process and Purpose, and Limits

JACK JEDWAB

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## Introduction: What Quebecers Want— and What Separation Means

This essay draws on recent survey findings examining how Quebecers and other Canadians understand both the process and the purpose of Quebec separation. Taken together, these findings reveal a fundamental tension: while sovereignty retains appeal to Quebecers when it comes to the protection of language and identity—there is limited confidence in its practical benefits and considerable uncertainty about how it would unfold. This tension is not new. It has shaped the sovereignty debate for decades. What is different today is the extent to which it is reflected in public opinion. The contemporary debate is no longer simply about whether Quebec should become independent, but about how such independence would occur and who would ultimately benefit from it. To

understand the current state of sovereignty, it is necessary to begin not with its motivations, but with method.

Sovereignty is often presented politically as an option or decision that simply requires the endorsement of a simple majority of Quebecers in a referendum. In the aftermath of such a result, the details that culminate in the accession to nationhood are often assumed to fall into place. However, since the 1995 referendum and the introduction of the Clarity Act, there has been increasing attention to the process required to reach that point and what it implies for the entity from which Quebecers would seek to separate—that is, the rest of Canada.

Across Canada, there is broad recognition that any move toward independence would require a clear question, a decisive level of support, and a period of negotiation involving multiple actors. These expectations reflect the legacy of the Supreme Court’s Secession Reference and the subsequent Clarity Act, which established that a referendum result would not automatically produce independence but would instead trigger negotiations under constitutional constraints.

However, this legal and political framework has never been fully accepted within Quebec’s sovereigntist movement. While Quebec’s Bill 99 affirms the Quebec people’s right to self-determination, its constitutional interpretation has remained contested. In litigation surrounding the law, Quebec’s attorney argued before the courts that the form of self-determination contemplated could be understood as internal—that is, exercised within the Canadian constitutional framework. The Quebec Court of Appeal, for

its part, indicated that any attempt to use Bill 99 as the basis for a unilateral secession could be found unconstitutional. Yet politically, sovereigntist actors have often presented the law more expansively, portraying it as affirming Quebec's ability to determine its future free from external constraints. This has produced an enduring ambiguity between the legal interpretation advanced before the courts and the political interpretation presented to the public.

This divergence produces two competing conceptions of the process: a federal view, in which separation is conditional, negotiated, and constrained; and a sovereigntist view, in which a democratic mandate compels Canada to negotiate terms of partnership.

The latter has been consistently articulated in political discourse. In 1995, Lucien Bouchard argued that a Yes vote would lead not to rupture, but to a negotiated partnership with Canada. That argument persists today, with contemporary leaders such as Paul St-Pierre Plamondon continuing to frame independence as a reconfiguration rather than a break, while questioning the legitimacy of the federal framework governing the process.

Underlying this position is a strategic assumption: that Canada would have little practical choice but to negotiate a cooperative arrangement with Quebec. Yet this assumption is not widely shared. Public opinion surveys conducted by Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies suggest that Canadians do not see separation as a process that Quebec can define unilaterally. Instead, they expect a structured and collective negotiation in which the terms are far from predetermined.

What emerges, then, is a profound ambiguity. The rules of the process are partially understood, but their application remains uncertain. There is no shared expectation about timelines, outcomes, or even the basic parameters of negotiation.

## Why Separation? Identity as the Core Rationale

If the process appears complex and uncertain, the motivations for pursuing it are comparatively narrow.

The strongest and most consistent rationale for sovereignty lies in the domain of language and identity. Independence is widely associated with the idea that it would strengthen the position of French in Quebec. For many francophones, sovereignty is understood as a means of ensuring the long-term vitality of a linguistic community situated within a broader North American context.

Beyond this, however, the case for sovereignty weakens considerably.

There is limited belief that independence would produce clear economic advantages. Most Quebecers do not expect that sovereignty would make them more prosperous. Nor is there strong confidence that Quebec would gain greater influence on the international stage.

This creates an imbalance in case for sovereignty where it is driven by identity, but its adherents often urge that it be considered on its economic outcomes or what it would imply for global influence. While the symbolic and/or emotional appeal of independence remains significant, it is tempered by doubts about its material consequences. As the **Table 1** reveals, a majority of Quebecers do not believe that Quebec would be better off as an independent country (57%), only somewhat more persons elsewhere in Canada think Quebec would be better off on its own (66%).

Table 1

Quebecers would be better off as an independent country and not part of Canada	Canada	Quebec	Rest of Canada
Yes	16%	27%	13%
No	64%	57%	66%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	19%	16%	20%

Table 2

	English-speaking Quebecers will be better off in an independent Quebec than as part of Canada		Members of ethnic minorities will be better off in an independent Quebec than as part of Canada	
Quebec	French	English	French	English
Yes	15%	12%	18%	4%
No	55%	78%	49%	80%
I don't know / I prefer not to answer	30%	10%	33%	16%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

## For Whom? Unequal Expectations and the Question of Inclusion

If the motivations for sovereignty are uneven, perceptions of those that would benefit from it most are even more revealing.

A central claim of contemporary sovereigntist discourse is that independence is civic and inclusive, rather than ethnonational. This framing has been particularly important in the aftermath of the 1995 referendum, when Jacques Parizeau's attribution of defeat to "money and the ethnic vote" generated widespread backlash and forced a rearticulation of the movement's principles.

Since then, some sovereigntists have insisted that it's the ethnic minority voters that challenge the civic and inclusive vision underlying the independence option. Yet Quebecers' public perceptions do not fully align with this framing.

Recent survey findings reveal that a majority of Quebecers do not believe that independence would benefit English-speaking Quebecers or members of ethnic minorities. Only small minorities see clear advantages for these groups in a sovereign Quebec. As observed below relatively few francophone or anglophone Quebecers believe that English-speaking Quebecers will be better off in an independent Quebec than as part of Canada. And the same is true with respect to whether members of ethnic minorities would be better off in an independent Quebec than as part of Canada. Less than one in five Quebec francophones agree they'll be better off and less than one in twenty anglophones do.

This is neither implied nor intended to suggest that sovereignty as an exclusionary project. It does suggest, however, that many Quebecers perceive its benefits as unevenly distributed, with clearly the most tangible gains associated with the francophone majority.

This perception helps explain the continued sensitivity around the ethnonational question. To acknowledge that sovereignty is primarily understood as benefiting one group over others risks undermining its civic framing. To deny that's the case risks disconnecting political discourse from public perception.

## The Canadian Perspective: Constraint Without Enthusiasm

As noted, neither Quebecers nor other Canadians believe that the country would be better off without Quebec. Outside Quebec, attitudes toward separation reflect a combination of reluctance and constraint. At the same time, there is limited willingness to facilitate separation on flexible or undefined terms. Canadians tend to emphasize rules, procedures, and collective decision-making. This reinforces the idea that independence would not be a bilateral negotiation, but a multilateral and constitutionally grounded process.

It also highlights a key divergence between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Assumptions about citizenship, economic arrangements, and institutional continuity are not shared. What may appear plausible within Quebec is not necessarily accepted elsewhere.

What is often left implicit in these assumptions is the nature of the counterpart or partner with which Quebec would negotiate. Sovereigntist discourse frequently invokes the idea of a partnership with the "rest of Canada," as though that entity was politically unified, stable, and capable of acting as a single negotiating partner. Yet this is far from certain.

The prospect of Quebec’s departure could itself trigger or intensify regional instability elsewhere in the country, including the amplification of secessionist sentiment in provinces such as Alberta. In such a scenario, Quebec would not necessarily be negotiating with a coherent national counterpart, but potentially with multiple actors representing diverging regional interests and emerging political formations. The “nation-to-nation” framework that has long underpinned the imagined aftermath of independence may therefore rest on a simplifying assumption that does not reflect the complexity of what could follow a referendum result.

### Parallel Pressures: Alberta and the Changing Landscape of Separation

The debate over Quebec sovereignty no longer unfolds in isolation. Recent findings from the May 2025 Leger survey suggest that concerns about national unity are increasingly shaped by developments beyond Quebec, most notably the perceived rise of Alberta separatism.

A majority of Canadians (52%) believe that the threat of Alberta separation should be taken very seriously, compared to 42% who say the same about Quebec

separation. This represents a notable shift in the geography of concern within the federation. While Quebec has historically been viewed as the central locus of secessionist pressure, many Canadians now see Alberta as posing a more immediate or pressing challenge. And, as revealed in **Table 3** Albertans are considerably more likely to believe the threat of separation is far more serious in their province than it is from Quebec.

At the same time, these views are not uniformly shared. Quebecers are slightly less likely to regard Alberta’s separatist potential as more serious than their own province’s, underscoring the persistence of regional asymmetries in how unity is understood.

Perceptions of legitimacy further reinforce these patterns. Slightly more Canadians believe that Albertans have legitimate reasons to contemplate separation (35%) than say the same of Quebecers (33%). This does not signal a rejection of Quebec’s claims, but it does suggest that grievances rooted in economic and political dissatisfaction—particularly in Western Canada—resonate broadly across the country.

Table 3

Should be taken very seriously...	Canada	Quebec	Alberta
The threat of Alberta Separation	52%	46%	63%
The threat of Quebec Separation	42%	47%	31%

The emergence of Alberta as a focal point of concern complicates the traditional framing of Canadian unity. Quebec sovereignty has long been treated as a distinct case, grounded in language, culture, and history. The rise of Western alienation introduces a different logic—one rooted less in identity than in perceptions of economic imbalance and political marginalization.

For the broader Canadian public, however, the coexistence of these pressures appears to reinforce a preference for constraint. Faced with the possibility of multiple regions expressing dissatisfaction, Canadians are more likely to emphasize rules, clarity, and collective decision-making in any process of separation. The expectation that secession would involve structured negotiation rather than unilateral action is strengthened, not weakened, by the presence of multiple potential claimants.

In this context, Quebec sovereignty is reframed. It is no longer viewed solely as a unique constitutional question, but as part of a wider pattern of regional discontent. This does not erase its distinctiveness, but it situates it within a more complex and uncertain national landscape—one in which questions of belonging, legitimacy, and the durability of the federation are being raised in several regions at once.

## **Conclusion: Bridging Process and Purpose**

The contemporary sovereignty debate is defined by a growing disconnect between process and purpose. On the one hand, there is an emerging recognition that separation would be complex, negotiated, and uncertain. It is not widely seen as a straightforward or unilateral act.

On the other hand, the rationale for pursuing such a demanding process remains comparatively narrow. The strongest argument for sovereignty lies in the protection of

language and identity. Yet this objective does not translate into widespread confidence about economic performance, international influence or social harmony.

This is the central contradiction: a difficult and uncertain process paired with a limited and unevenly shared sense of purpose.

Compounding this is the absence of consensus on who would benefit from independence. While sovereignty is framed as inclusive, it is often perceived as primarily advancing the interests of the francophone majority. This perception complicates its ability to attract broad-based support.

The emergence of Alberta as a parallel source of separatist pressure further underscores the fragility of national cohesion. Rather than a single, historically rooted challenge, Canada now faces a more diffuse set of regional tensions that differ in origin but converge in their implications for unity.

Finally, the divergence between Quebec and the rest of Canada in their understanding of separation suggests that even the starting assumptions of a future referendum would not be aligned.

Rather than pointing toward any clearly defined outcome, we are staring into something closer to a vast unknown—a kind of political black hole or bottomless pit where the contours of a potential break-up are impossible to map. ‘Clarity’ remains persistently elusive: it is not at all evident what such a rupture would look like in practice, nor where it would lead, given the many fault lines that run beneath the surface. These fractures, along with the numerous practical and political hurdles they imply, are largely sidestepped in public discussion, leaving us without even a shared language to describe the consequences of what is being contemplated.

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# Nothing Justifies Secession in Canada

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Back at the Université de Montréal, where he was previously a professor of political science, Stéphane Dion is now the university's Diplomat in Residence, where he aims to share his experience with students.

In this special issue, the Association for Canadian Studies invites us to suggest ways to preserve national unity. I will stick here to only one suggestion: do not play into the hands of separatist blackmail.

We must always think about how we can improve our country. I have had the privilege of participating in reforms that, I believe, have well served the public interest, including constitutional amendments allowing the secularization of schools in Quebec and Newfoundland. Today, I have in mind an electoral system which, while strengthening the stability of the government in Ottawa, would guarantee in the House of Commons a representation more in line with the popular vote obtained by the Liberals in Alberta or the Conservatives in Quebec. I could propose a model of political party financing exemplary from a democratic point of view and of which

Canadians would be very proud. I would stimulate investments in decarbonized energy sources everywhere, particularly in Alberta. I would truly expand French immersion schools, and so on.

I am convinced that all these reforms would be useful for national cohesion. But what I will not do is present them as being necessary for the preservation of national unity or as a response to separatist grievances. Canada, as it is today, in no way deserves to be split. This state is a remarkable human achievement, a great democracy, one of the most admired countries in the world, and for good reason. When people are asked where they would like to live if not in their own country, Canada is always on the podium or not far from it.

We must resist the temptation to push our reform ideas by presenting them as vital to Canada's survival, necessary to make it acceptable. This amounts to making a huge concession to the separatist argument, perfectly circular, which comes down to saying this: We are separatists because Canada does not work, and the proof that Canada does not work is that we are separatists.

If Canada does not work, show us a country that works!

Regarding the distribution of federal and provincial powers, if one thinks that some would be better exercised by the provinces, it must be with the aim of improving public service and not in the vain hope of appeasing the separatists. They will never be satisfied with piecemeal

transfers of powers. They dream of a country of their own. That is why the Quebec separatist movement persists even though Canada is, according to several indicators, the most decentralized federation in the world, where the government of Quebec exercises numerous special powers.

The secessionists will welcome any new power granted to their provincial government as a step towards obtaining all powers. They will accept 50% separation, then 60%, 65%... and will continue to push until they achieve full separation. Each concession encourages them to claim even more powers, transfers of resources, and symbolic recognition, until the final dislocation.

This constant pressure to grant more and more powers, resources, and other concessions to a province, in order to convince it not to secede from the country, is a sure way to exacerbate the jealousy of other parts of the country. The perception will spread that the federal government only gives in to separatists, that the province in question is its favorite, that the citizens and provinces loyal to the country are put second, and that, consequently, the other provinces would also benefit from resorting to the threat of separation to get a larger share of the pie.

This resentment against the 'separatist' province, perceived as a spoiled, whining child, in turn spreads the feeling, among the very inhabitants of this province, that they are rejected by the rest of the country. The secessionists will use this feeling of rejection to promote their cause. In the end, citizens of all provinces and territories may come to see their country as the site of a perpetual conflict, and separation as a way to achieve peace.

If ever another pipeline were to be drilled to the Pacific Ocean, it should be in the name of the general interest of Canada, and not to appease certain Albertan separatists. Otherwise, the temptation would become too strong for them, encouraged by this success, to double down. And what should the people of British Columbia think? That

they should have threatened to secede in order not to be imposed a pipeline they did not want?

Since any negative response from the federal government to a demand for reform is presented as unacceptable, a slap to the nation, evidence in itself that secession is necessary, secessionist leaders are freed from the obligation to justify and explain their project. All they have to do is repeat the mantra: 'Since Canada said no to us, let's leave!' In the end, the why and how of secession are no longer the subject of a thorough debate.

I remember how, when I was Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, I had difficulty dissuading my federal minister colleagues from proclaiming loudly and proudly, after every success of a federal-provincial meeting (on health funding, fishing quotas, etc.): this is proof that Canada works! So, I would tell them, if we hadn't reached an agreement at this conference, would that have been proof that Canada doesn't work? There have been so many of these so-called last-chance conferences, where it was as if the very existence of the country was at stake.

This is how discussions about reform projects become embittered, how normal disagreements come to take on enormous dimensions, while the prospect of secession, on the other hand, is trivialized. It comes to be seen as something relatively simple to achieve, the culmination of a gradual evolution toward greater autonomy. We forget that secession is actually a rupture, a serious act, the loss of citizenship across the entire national territory, the transformation of fellow citizens into foreigners, a completely unusual dislocation in a democracy.

Let's look around us: everywhere in the democratic world, the integration of immigrants and policies to fight climate change create tensions, but only in Canada have they led to secessionist claims. We show a leniency toward the secessionist argument that is seen nowhere else.

Before the 1998 Supreme Court Opinion and the 2000 Clarity Act that gives it effect, normal disagreements

tended to be seen as existential, and secession as a simple solution within reach. Secession must be presented as it is: an extreme, existential measure, very difficult to implement and full of uncertainties. Presenting it for what it is is not ‘fearmongering’; rather, it is a responsibility that falls on us. We must meditate on this quote by Jocelyne Bourgon, Clerk of the Privy Council during the 1995 Quebec referendum, taken from her recent book: in *A Public Servant’s Voice*, UTP, 2026, pp. 97-98:

“Another observation is that avoiding talking about the tough questions concerning the separation of a province for fear that it might inflame the situation has served no one interest – not the people of Quebec, other Canadians, the provinces, or the government of Canada”.

As a project of rupture between Canada and the secessionist province, the secession process is also a serious cause of polarization within the province's own population. The latter is not a monolithic entity, but a society that the secessionist attempt risks fracturing. Hence the irresponsibility of attempting secession without clear support, with an uncertain, divided population, split down the middle.

It is also necessary to highlight that the attempt at secession induces fractures that can have territorial consequences. Thus, if certain Indigenous peoples were to hold their own referendums to remain in Canada with their territories, as they did during the Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995, such democratic initiatives could no longer be ignored by the authorities and the political-media class as was the case in the past. The Supreme Court's Opinion and the Clarity Act have clarified these issues, so that no one will be able to ignore them.

In summary, Canada is far from perfect, we all have our ideas to improve it, but presenting our reform projects as an antidote to secession is a mistake that produces a cascade of perverse effects that fuel separatism.

We must no longer play in this movie, whether in the role of the one who demands or of the one who yields. We must stop this sterile bargaining that devalues both ourselves and our country. If I did not feel any attachment to Canada and saw no ideal in it, but only a simple instrument to acquire increasing autonomy and ensure the transfer of more and more resources to Quebec, a sort of long process of detachment, then I would prefer to be a separatist. There is more pride and honor in wanting your own country than in staying in a country solely to extract more and more power and special status from it.

Faced with the possibility of other self-determination referendums in Canada, let us present secession for the extreme break that it is. Let us make it known that the unilateral secession procedure envisaged by the PQ leaders would be rejected by all the countries of the world, and that instead, in the case of clear support for secession, it would be necessary to go through a demanding constitutional negotiation aimed at protecting the rights of everyone.

And let us present Canada for what it is, a tremendous achievement, built through our complementary efforts, which we can only improve if we all stay together.