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ANALYSIS / *The moderate wording of the question tries to sway hesitant voters*

Parizeau remains firm on secession

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JAQUES Parizeau has tabled a referendum question and outlined a strategy designed to portray independence as nothing more than a moderate political makeover that would not sever the bonds between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

The question and the strategy are aimed at winning over a small but crucial group of voters who make up from 10 to 20 per cent of the electorate and are called "hesitant voters" by sovereignty strategists.

Make no mistake about it, the Quebec Premier has not softened his stand on secession from Canada.

He still says openly that he wants Quebec to become an independent country.

But with a referendum question and a sovereignty bill focused on a political and economic partnership with Canada, the sovereigntists believe they have found a formula that will lead them to victory on referendum day.

Numerous polls have shown that the majority of Quebeckers have made up their mind on the sovereignty issue.

The Parti Québécois government has concluded that nothing it says or does can change the mind of those who believe in Canada.

The other major group of Qubeckers identified in polls are hard-line sovereigntists who would vote Yes to any question that could help push Quebec toward total political secession from Canada.

But there is a third group. And the referendum question is designed for them.

The referendum question deliberately avoids mentioning Quebec as a sovereign country, let alone any reference to complete political secession from Canada, in order to please this group.

And the Parti Québécois strategy that emphasizes a new partnership between Quebec and the rest of Canada is directed at voters who continue, according to several polls, to have emotional ties to Canada despite defining themselves first and foremost as Quebeckers.

After months of holding focus groups and more than two years of very selective polling by the Parti Québécois, a clearer picture of this key group has emerged.

The majority of the group are women – about 60 per cent – and they have a deep resentment and mistrust of politicians and politics in general.

Parti Québécois research has shown that these voters only occasionally follow political news and are more inclined to take the advice of friends and family on political issues rather than to decide on the basis of what they read or hear in the media.

In the struggle to win over these crucial voters, it is vital to Mr. Parizeau's game plan to get out the right message as to the meaning of sovereignty.

The struggle has dictated not only the wording of the referendum question, but also the roles that each sovereigntist leader – Mr. Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard of the Bloc Québécois and Mario Dumont of the *Parti de l'action démocratique* – will play during the campaign.

Yesterday, Mr. Parizeau acknowledged again that he has no credibility when it comes to convincing Quebeckers that he would try to negotiate a new economic and political partnership with Canada. This is why the sovereignty bill mentions specifically that a committee would supervise partnership negotiations if Quebeckers vote Yes to independence.

For good measure, Mr. Parizeau said the committee could be appointed before referendum day to demonstrate that the government is committed to negotiating a new partnership with the rest of Canada.

Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Dumont will undoubtedly be charged with selling the concept of a new partnership to the voters. This may explain why Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Dumont were not present on Wednesday at a ceremony to unveil the declaration of sovereignty. The declaration reflects the true nature of Quebec's secession and is closely tied to Mr. Parizeau's view.

It has become important for the sovereigntists to create the impression that they do not constitute a homogeneous group in their views on Quebec sovereignty.

Mr. Bouchard, who remains Quebec's most popular politician, and Mr. Dumont, who reflects the more moderate elements in the sovereignty movement, remain convinced that they can play a more constructive role in persuading the hesitant voters to vote Yes if they are not perceived as being part and parcel of the Parti Québécois's vision of sovereignty.

In fact, strategists believe that the more the differences within the sovereignty camp are made public, the easier it will be to convince hesitant voters that Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Dumont would keep Mr. Parizeau in check after a referendum victory.

Another measure designed to allay mistrust of the Parti Québécois is the sovereignty bill's call for a committee made up of representatives of various groups in Quebec society to help define the constitution of a sovereign Quebec. Citizens are being told that they, not the politicians, would control the process.

In addition, Mr. Parizeau embraced yesterday the Quebec Liberal Party's Allaire report of 1991, which called for a referendum on sovereignty should negotiations to revamp the Canadian Constitution fail. At the time it was presented, the Allaire report was criticized bitterly by the Parti Québécois. Mr. Parizeau said the time has come to extend a hand of friendship to Canada and pursue a new relationship.

Victims of their own nationalist past, Quebec Liberals are being pushed into a corner where they can do little but support status quo federalism and drive home the message that a Yes vote would mean total separation from Canada. The strategy equating sovereignty with total separation worked for the federalists in the referendum of 1980 and they are convinced it will work again.

But they are carrying much heavier political baggage this time – the patriation of the Constitution without Quebec's consent in 1982, the failure of the Meech Lake accord in 1990 and the rejection of the Charlottetown accord in 1992.

(*continued overleaf*)

THE QUESTION

1995

The official translation of the referendum question on which Quebeckers will vote Oct. 30 reads: "Do you agree that Québec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new Economic and Political Partnership, within the scope of the Bill respecting the future of Québec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?"

1980

The question that Quebeckers voted on in the referendum of May 20, 1980, was: "The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, administer its taxes and establish relations abroad – in other words, sovereignty – and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; any change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be submitted to the people through a referendum; on these terms, do you agree to give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?" – Staff

The federalist side also believes it can win over the crucial hesitant voters. If these voters mistrust politics and politicians in general and only occasionally follow politics, previous failures to change the Constitution will have been largely forgotten, the federalists say. The decision by these voters will be based on the choice of remaining a part of Canada or not, the federalists argue.

The article EM9535 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Figure 8.8b of the STAT 220 Course Materials and in Figure 3.5b of the STAT 332 Course Materials.

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