

EM9536: The Globe and Mail, September 16, 1995, page A14

Reasons unclear for surge of No side

Liberals say their message about real referendum issue starting to sway public opinion

BY HUGH WINDSOR
Parliamentary Bureau

OTTAWA — The latest opinion poll published in Quebec gives the No side a significant advance over the Yes forces, but it's unclear how much of the difference between the SOM poll results published yesterday by La Presse and those of Groupe Léger & Léger presented last weekend in *The Globe and Mail* is due to differences in methodology and how much represents actual movement of public opinion.

The SOM poll indicated that 54 per cent of decided voters would vote No and 46 per cent would vote Yes if the Quebec referendum were held now. That compares with the Groupe Léger & Léger finding of a 50-50 split after undecided voters were reallocated into the Yes and No sides.

But the differences in the two pollsters' results to the same question are more pronounced if the actual numbers are compared because SOM and Léger & Léger allocate the undecided or refusal responses in different ways.

The Léger & Léger poll, taken on Sept. 7-8, immediately after the wording of the referendum question was released, found that 44 per cent of respondents would vote Yes, 43 per cent would vote No and 13 per cent were undecided, refused to answer or would not vote.

The SOM poll, which began on Sept. 8 and continued until Sept. 12, found that 37 per cent would vote Yes, 45 per cent would vote No and 18 per cent were undecided, refused to answer or would not vote.

Both polls had about the same sample size, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.8 per cent, which means that the difference of seven percentage points in the Yes side, while technically just inside the margins, is substan-

tial.

Pierre Paradis, Liberal House Leader, said the poll numbers suggest that the No side's message that separation is the real issue is getting through to the public.

"The more the stakes become clear..... the more people will be inclined to say No," he said in Quebec yesterday.

SOM president André Thérien said the difference between conducting a poll over five days, as his company did, and over 24 hours, as Léger & Léger did, could explain some of the gap.

The SOM results also had a five-percentage-point higher level of undecided respondents, which Mr. Thérien attributed to a difference in methodology.

Mr. Thérien said the differences between his results and those of Léger & Léger follow a well-established pattern in which SOM tends to give the Liberals a higher level of support and the Parti Québécois a lower level than does Léger & Léger. There is a similar pattern relating to support for sovereignty or separation, he added.

Among analysts, SOM has a reputation for volatility. However, during the Quebec election last year, one of its polls came the closest to the election result. But that poll was not printed by SOM's newspaper clients because editors could not believe that the Liberals were doing as well as the SOM poll indicated.

Jean-Marc Léger, president of Groupe Léger & Léger, said yesterday that he believes the No side picked up some momentum during the period the SOM poll was being taken, accounting for part of the difference between the two recent polls.

"The No side was very present immediately after the referendum question was ta-

bled in the National Assembly, both because of [Liberal Leader] Daniel Johnson's response and because of their advertizing campaign," Mr. Léger said.

He added that other polling he has done, but not yet released, tends to confirm some movement toward the No faction, mostly from the undecided category.

However, Mr. Léger said he is skeptical about whether the gap is as wide as the raw numbers in the two polls suggest. He offered some reservations about the SOM sample, especially in the age breakdown.

SOM results indicated that among respondents aged 18 to 24, 45 per cent would vote Yes and 48 per cent No, a reversal of the conventional pattern. According to SOM, the sovereigntists are leading only in the 35-to-44 age group, the baby boomers who gave the Parti Québécois its strongest support in the last referendum, when they were in their radical youth.

"If the SOM results for the 18-to-24 age group are correct, it is the first time in three years that sovereigntists are trailing in this segment," Mr. Léger said. In recent Léger & Léger polls, the youth group has been running about 45 to 35 per cent in favour of the Yes side, with the remainder undecided.

The SOM results are even more surprising, Mr. Léger said, because the poll sample overrepresented French-speaking respondents, a factor that should have favoured the Yes side.

The SOM and Léger & Léger polls are different again from a poll taken by the other major Quebec-based polling firm, CROP, just before the wording of the referendum question was announced. It gave the Yes side 55 per cent and the No side 45 after factoring out those who were undecided or refused to respond.

The article EM9536 reprinted above is used in Figure 2.2c of the STAT 332 Course Materials.