



# Quebecers With Linguistic Angst Show Less Support for Anglophone Education Rights

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#### Working paper series

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The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag above the letter "a".

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# Abstract

Since 2018, Quebec’s English-language school system has invoked section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to challenge Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government efforts to restrict its autonomy over hiring teachers (Bill 21), communicating with the government (Bill 96), and school board governance (Bill 40). As these legal cases progress, a question emerges: Do Quebecers know, support, and value the anglophone minority’s educational rights under section 23? This paper explores this question using data from a public opinion poll of 1,015 respondents. Most Quebecers are unsure whether anglophones even qualify as a minority, are somewhat more confident that they have access to education in English, but remain politically hesitant to support their rights. Quebecers who experience “linguistic angst”—concern that French is threatened, francophones may disappear, and English is not an essential part of Quebec—are significantly less likely to know about, support, or value these rights. This, along with limited awareness, creates fertile ground for policies that further erode the scope of section 23 protections.

# Introduction

Today's political context in Quebec is shaped by a series of court cases in which the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is testing the limits of section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. These cases challenge who has the right to govern English-language public education in Quebec—including teacher hiring decisions, communication with government, and governance through school boards. While some public opinion surveys have examined general attitudes toward the Charter, we still know little about how Quebecers understand section 23 specifically, or the rights it guarantees to official language minorities. If public knowledge of these rights is limited—or if support for them is weak—it may create space for governments to reduce the rights' scope without encountering significant resistance.

This paper offers insights into what Quebecers know, value, and support regarding the anglophone minority's right to education in Quebec. It also seeks to explain these results through the concept of “linguistic angst”: the perceptions that French is under threat, that francophone society may disappear, and that English is not essential to Quebec's identity. The underlying hypothesis is that such perceptions, especially when amplified by government discourse, tend to reduce public knowledge, support, and endorsement of minority language rights by shaping a kind of zero-sum logic, in which protecting French is seen as incompatible with protecting English. In our view, one should care about public opinion on anglophone education rights because the presence or absence of knowledge and support, shaped by linguistic angst, can give governments space to reduce rights that matter for all Quebecers.

# Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: The starting point

Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* affects all Quebecers. It guarantees that certain citizens have the right not only to send their children to English-language public schools in Quebec, but also to participate in governing those institutions. More precisely, a section 23 right-holder in Quebec is a Canadian citizen who received elementary schooling in English in Canada and/or has a child who received or is receiving elementary or secondary education in English in Canada.<sup>1</sup> When these criteria are met, the right-holder (whether a parent or a tutor) may have all their children educated in English at the elementary and secondary levels, where numbers warrant. Section 23 also ensures most Quebecers and people from other provinces educated in French, or who are of French mother tongue, access to publicly funded French-language education outside Quebec, where numbers warrant.

Section 23 exists because French and English are Canada's two official languages. The rights are designed to remedy past injustices toward the official language minorities in education, and to "preserve and promote the two official languages of Canada, and their respective cultures, by ensuring that each language flourishes, as far as possible, in provinces where it is not spoken by the majority of the population" (*Mahe v. Alberta*, 1990 p. 344).

It is important to distinguish between federal and provincial majority status in matters of education. As defined by the Canadian Constitution, jurisdiction over education resides in the provincial and territorial governments. While francophones are a linguistic minority in Canada as a whole, they form the governing majority within Quebec, and the scope of this governance includes education. Within Quebec's education system, the English-speaking school system holds a minority status. Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* recognizes this status by granting specific rights to parents who meet certain criteria and are thereby entitled to have their children educated in that system. While education is a provincial responsibility, the Charter requires provinces to take minority education rights into account when legislating. This creates a constitutional equilibrium between provincial authority and official language minorities' protections and capacity to govern their schools.

1 In Quebec, access to English-language public education is not automatically granted under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Instead, eligibility is determined by Quebec's Charter of the *French Language* (Bill 101), which sets specific criteria, such as whether the parent received the majority of their own elementary education in English in Canada. Québec. (2023). *Charter of the French Language*, CQLR c C-11. <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/C-11>

# Historical background

To understand what is at stake in today's court challenges over minority-language school governance in Quebec, it is necessary to recall how these rights were protected in the past—and how that protection has shifted over time to section 23.

Historically, the right of English-speaking Protestants in Quebec to operate their own schools was protected under section 93 of the *Constitution Act* of 1867, which guaranteed denominational school rights to Catholics and Protestants. As part of the compromise that led to Confederation, the provinces were given exclusive jurisdiction over education, with an exception: the privileges that Protestants and Catholics in Quebec and Ontario, and in any other province that would join Confederation thereafter, in relation to denominational schooling at the moment of union would be enshrined and guaranteed in the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> As it would develop in Quebec, this provision granted Protestant school boards (mostly *de facto* English-language school boards) a strong constitutional shield—one that could not be overridden by provincial legislation and that was upheld consistently by the courts. English-speaking Catholics, by contrast, were typically minorities within school boards that operated largely in French, though there were many English-language Catholic schools.

This protection was removed in 1997 through a constitutional amendment, which ended the application of section 93 to the province of Quebec. The provincial school system was thereafter restructured along linguistic lines. Thus, whereas Quebec education used to be divided into Catholic and Protestant systems, it is now divided into French- and English-language ones.

Since the change, English-speaking Quebecers have had to rely on the combination of provincial legislation granting minority-language school rights, originally granted through Bill 101, the *Charter of the French Language*, in 1977, and, importantly, section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, entrenched in the Canadian Constitution in 1982. Both pieces of legislation, among other provisions, grant English-speaking Quebecers who are deemed eligible for English-language schooling the right to access such schools for their children. Unlike section 93 of the Constitution of Canada, however, the applicability of section 23 is subject to interpretation, and must be justified through legal means. That is, rather than providing absolute protection to the minority-religion school systems that existed at the time of union, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has important limits. First, section 23(1)(a), which allows Canadians the right to have their children receive elementary and secondary school instruction in their own first language, does not apply in Quebec until the National Assembly of Quebec allows it to.

<sup>2</sup> Section 93, *The Constitution Act, 1867*, 30 & 31 Vict, c 3.

To date it has not. Thus, in Quebec, the Charter limits access to minority-language schooling to the children of parents who went to school themselves in the minority language (section 23(1)(b)), or in the language their sibling went or is going to school (section 23(2)). Moreover, and very importantly, section 23(3) requires that there be sufficient numbers of children to warrant the provision of minority-language instruction. The Charter does not, however, define what constitutes a “sufficient number,” leaving its application open to the courts and their interpretations.

This shift raises a key question: has Quebec society—both anglophone and francophone—fully transitioned from seeing minority school governance as protected by historical *denominational* rights, which the courts consistently ruled offered firm constitutional guarantees to minority school systems, to recognizing that such governance now relies on the *minority-language rights* of individuals under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which must be more actively invoked and defended through the mobilization of the community with a “sufficient number”? Whether this transition in legal frameworks has been matched by a shift in public understanding remains unclear. This is where survey data becomes important.

## Past surveys on section 23

Several surveys have shown that both Canadians and Quebecers view the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as an important national symbol—sometimes even more strongly in Quebec than elsewhere in the country (Environics, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2013). That said, when asked to rank specific Charter rights in order of importance, Canadians consistently place minority-language rights below others, such as freedom of expression (ACS–Léger, 2023).<sup>3</sup> This suggests a disconnect between the Charter’s symbolic status and the degree to which minority-language education is prioritized across the population. This uneven support is not just about ranking rights lower overall, but also about who is seen as deserving those rights. Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell, and Tetlock (1989) found that, while support for section 23 language rights is high in principle, it proves conditional among Quebec francophones. In their survey, about four out of five francophones (81%) endorsed English-language schooling for anglophones moving into Quebec, but a majority of those initial supporters (52%) withdrew their support when the right was framed as a threat to Quebec’s integrity as a francophone community (p. 278). This pattern illustrates how preserving francophone status in Quebec shapes attitudes to minority education rights.

While past surveys show that minority-language rights rank low in general and are unevenly supported across linguistic groups, they tell us little about how these rights are understood and valued today within Quebec and across its own linguistic majority and minority communities. This limited understanding becomes especially consequential as the CAQ government pursues reforms that test the boundaries of minority-language rights in education, relying in part on public sentiment to justify its actions.

3 According to a 2023 ACS–Léger survey, only 3% of respondents in Canada (and 4% in Quebec) named “language rights of minorities” among the Charter rights most in need of protection.

# Context of legal disputes: CAQ governance of English-language education in Quebec

The political stance of the CAQ government regarding English-language rights can be traced back to a series of position papers the CAQ released before it came to power (Rocher & Gagnon, 2023). In 2015, as an opposition party preparing for election, the CAQ presented a vision of language policy respecting the rights of the English-speaking minority—justified by “our long tradition of tolerance and respect, particularly toward Quebec’s historic English-speaking minority, which enjoys special rights that the CAQ has no intention of challenging” (CAQ, 2015, pp. 8–9, our translation). By 2016, while reiterating its intention to strengthen the French language, the party omitted any reference to that tradition of tolerance or to the anglophone minority altogether. This rhetorical shift marked the beginning of a broader reorientation in the CAQ’s language policy—from affirming coexistence with the anglophone minority to framing French as the pillar of Quebec’s identity. That shift, first visible in the party’s 2016 discourse, set the terms for the legislative and nationalist agenda the CAQ would later pursue after their election in 2018, positioned as a third way between partisans of Quebec’s independence and the province’s affiliation to Canadian federalism, as documented by Mailhot and Montigny (2024). This political realignment culminated in Bill 96 (*An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec*), which crystallized the CAQ’s language priorities into law.

According to Rocher and Gagnon (2023), the “bonjour-hi” debate (that is, the controversy over welcoming customers in both French and English in Montreal’s commercial spaces) helped shape how the CAQ would later articulate its intention to reinforce French through language policy. This move to reinforce French language in Quebec came amid a marked rise in francophone concern: 71% of Quebec francophones in 2020, and 75% in 2021, believed that the French language was under threat in the province. In that context, the CAQ increasingly emphasized French as Quebec’s common language. As Boily (2021) notes, the CAQ combines a nationalist orientation with close attention to public opinion, particularly among francophones. Mailhot and Montigny (2024) show how the CAQ built its rise by responding to francophone concerns about identity, language, and immigration. This agenda has increasingly come into conflict with anglophone minority rights, particularly in the field of education, but it remains unclear how Quebecers—both francophones and anglophones—understand the agenda’s consequences. This is why it matters to examine what people know, support, and believe about anglophone rights.

# Methodology

Data was collected through an online survey. The sample was randomly drawn from Léger's web panel, which is somewhat representative of the Quebec adult population. In total, 1,015 respondents aged 18 and over participated. The maximum margin of error associated with this probabilistic sample is  $\pm 3.1\%$ , 19 times out of 20.

Before the official survey launch, a pilot test of 39 respondents was conducted on April 3, 2025. This step tested the questions' clarity and average completion time. No changes were made following the pilot, and the 39 responses were included in the final dataset.

The survey was administered between April 3 and April 7, 2025. Participants received a personalized email invitation with a single-use link to complete the survey on Léger's Decipher platform. The questionnaire was available in both French and English. The average completion time was 9 minutes and 59 seconds.

To ensure that the results reflected the general adult population of Quebec, the data was statistically weighted based on key characteristics such as region, age, gender, language, education level, and presence of children in the household. This adjustment was necessary because the sample included an oversampling of anglophones ( $n = 250$ ) and allophones ( $n = 150$ )<sup>4</sup> to allow for subgroup analysis. The weighting corrected for this by restoring proportions found in the general population.

## Survey construction

Survey construction rested on three pillars, all of which shaped the variables analyzed in the report: 1) a literature review of previous Charter-related surveys, 2) Saris and Gallhofer's (2007) psychometric method for question formulation, and 3) social psychology research on group emotions, particularly collective angst (Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010; Wohl, Giguère, Branscombe, & McVicar, 2011; Tabri, Wohl, & Conway, 2020).

For knowledge-related items, we drew inspiration from the Canadian Election Study (Blais et al., 2004), which measured public awareness of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and assessed how confident respondents were in their knowledge of specific rights. Following this model, we asked respondents whether English-speaking minorities in Quebec have a constitutional right to receive education in English, and we included a certainty scale (0–4) to measure how confident they were in their answer. We also adapted the logic behind Sniderman et al.'s (1989) comparison of support for language rights across Canada. While their original questions contrasted

4 Francophones usually represent about 76% of the general population, while anglophones represent 8%, and allophones, 16%. In this survey, these proportions were intentionally modified through oversampling to allow for more detailed analysis across linguistic subgroups. Weighting was applied to bring the overall total results back in line with actual population distributions. Language categories are based on the first language learned and still understood, as self-reported by respondents. An allophone is a respondent whose first language learned and still understood (mother tongue) is neither French nor English. In analyses, this forms the third language-group category alongside francophones and anglophones.

attitudes toward francophone minorities outside Quebec and anglophone minorities within it, we retained only the latter focus. Our survey included items that asked respondents whether they would support a political party committed to protecting the specific rights of English-speaking Quebecers, thus allowing us to gauge political support for section 23–related guarantees.

To ensure conceptual clarity and psychometric rigour in the formulation of the survey, we drew heavily on Saris and Gallhofer's (2007) method for question design. Their framework distinguishes between postulated concepts, such as legal knowledge about section 23, and intuitive concepts, such as feelings of threat or support. For example, the item "*According to the Canadian Charter, English-speaking minorities in Quebec have a right to receive education in English*" was treated as a postulated concept. In contrast, items such as "*I would support a political party that protects the rights of English-speaking Quebecers*" reflected intuitive beliefs. This distinction helped us vary question types and formats, and guided our decision to alternate between positively and negatively phrased items to reduce response bias.

### The concept of “linguistic angst” in the survey construction

Finally, to interpret the emotional and identity-based dimensions of the data, we incorporated insights from social psychology, particularly the concept of collective angst as theorized by Wohl and Branscombe (2008). Unlike general anxiety, which is individual and diffuse, collective angst is a future-oriented group-level emotion that arises when members of a community perceive their group's continued existence or distinctiveness to be under threat.

In this study, we adapted the concept to focus more specifically on a new, related concept we developed: “**linguistic angst**”; that is, a form of collective angst centred on the perceived decline or fragility of a linguistic group (francophones) rather than the group as a whole (people living in Quebec). This conceptual shift allowed us to better capture the Quebec context, in which the protection and reinforcement of the French language have become central to political discourse, particularly under the CAQ government. In our survey, linguistic angst was measured through statements about the vitality of the French language and the perceived vulnerability of francophone society.

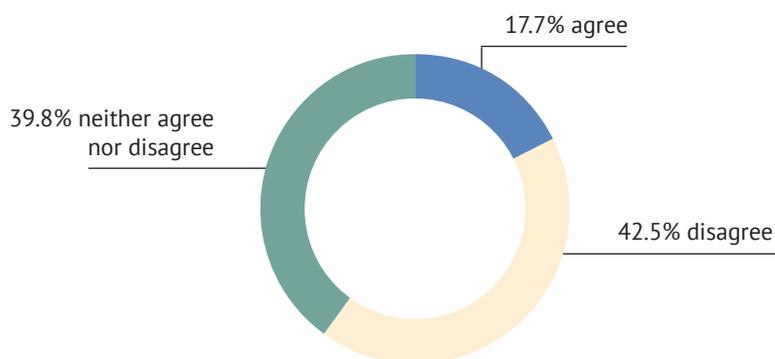
# Results from the rebalanced sample

Although the original sample included an oversampling of anglophone and allophone respondents to enable subgroup analysis, the figures reported in this section reflect a statistical adjustment to match the actual demographic composition of Quebec's adult population.

## Knowledge of section 23

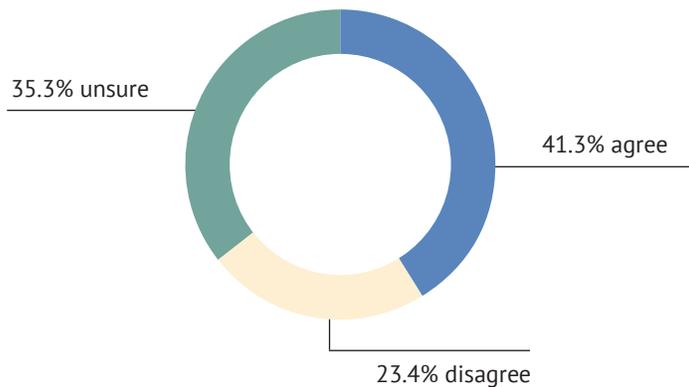
Section 23 is rarely recognized spontaneously by the public when explicitly named. Fewer than one in five (17.7%) agree with the statement: "I know section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, titled 'Minority Language Educational Rights.'" In contrast, 42.5% disagreed with the statement, while 39.8% remained neutral (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
I know section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*



Less than half of the rebalanced sample agreed that English-speaking Quebecers are officially recognized as a minority under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Yet more affirmed that this group has a right to receive education in English. When asked whether the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* recognizes an English-speaking official language minority in Quebec, 41.3% agreed. In contrast, 23.4% did not agree, and 35.3% were unsure (Figure 2). When asked whether this minority had the right to receive education in English, 65.4% responded that the statement was true—39.9% were “somewhat certain” and 25.5% “absolutely certain.” These results suggest a partial understanding of how minority status and rights are connected. They also suggest that public knowledge increases when the questions are framed around specific entitlements rather than abstract legal definitions.

**Figure 2:**  
**The Canadian Charter Recognizes an English-Speaking Minority in Quebec**



While a majority (65.4%) of respondents affirmed that Quebec's English speakers had the right to receive education in English, fewer respondents thought the rights extended to public funding for it. Only 49.5% agreed that such funding is required under the Charter, and just 18.0% were absolutely certain. This drop in perception of access rights vs. public funding rights (15.9 percentage points in overall certainty) points to a fragmented understanding of how minority-language rights operate: not just as access to schools, but as enforceable obligations involving state resources.

### Support for the implications of section 23

Public opinion on English-language education in Quebec reflects a layered pattern of support. A majority (58.1%) agree that English-speaking Quebecers should have access to education in English. However, as seen earlier with legal knowledge, support drops when the question shifts from principle to implementation. When the right is framed in terms of public cost (*"It is important to defend the right of English-speaking Quebecers to education in English, even if it involves additional public costs"*), agreement falls by 14.5 percentage points to 43.6%, while nearly 30% of respondents express opposition. This suggests that people may agree in principle with these rights, but they become more hesitant when costs are involved.

When asked whether the Quebec government should offer less protection to this minority in education, only 26.0% of respondents agreed, while 41.0% opposed the idea and 33.0% remained neutral. This progression suggests that, while broad agreement exists on the principle of access to English-language education, fewer Quebecers are ready to support it when it involves concrete political or financial commitments. Still, a plurality resists any reduction in the protections already in place, indicating that public opinion leans more toward maintaining the status quo than scaling back existing rights.

While a majority recognize that English-speaking Quebecers have the right to education in English, explicit political support for protecting those rights is more limited. In response to the statement “*I would support a political party that protects the specific rights of English-speaking Quebecers,*” only 35.2% expressed agreement (20.0% “somewhat” agreed and 15.2% “strongly” agreed). Meanwhile, 31.3% opposed the idea, and 33.5% remained neutral. While many Quebecers acknowledge anglophones’ right to receive education in English, they are not necessarily willing to actively support political efforts and costs aimed at defending those rights.

## Legal challenges

While the legal foundation remains obscure to many, nearly half of respondents expressed certainty that legal challenges are under way, and a similar proportion perceived tensions between francophone and anglophone communities. In response to the statement “*The Quebec government is currently involved in a legal challenge related to the rights of the English-speaking official language minority,*” 44.3% said they were certain this was true. What the public seems to grasp is not the constitutional principle, but its visible consequences. However, when the litigation was described in more specific terms (“*A legal challenge related to the Quebec government’s behaviour toward the rights of the English-speaking minority will soon be brought before the Supreme Court*”), certainty declined (from 44.3% to 36.8%). This pattern mirrors what we observed elsewhere in the survey. When references are made explicit, whether to section 23, to the cost of protecting these rights, or to specific court cases, levels of knowledge, certainty, or support consistently decline.

Legal disputes may not be perceived as isolated events but rather as part of a broader pattern of strained relations between the linguistic majority and minority. A revealing indicator comes from responses to the statement “*Current relations between francophone and anglophone communities in Quebec are marked by conflict.*” A total of 42.3% agreed with the statement, including 32.2% who “somewhat” agreed and 10.1% who “strongly” agreed. This perception lays the groundwork for a deeper examination of these tensions, beginning with the issue of language of communication with the state.

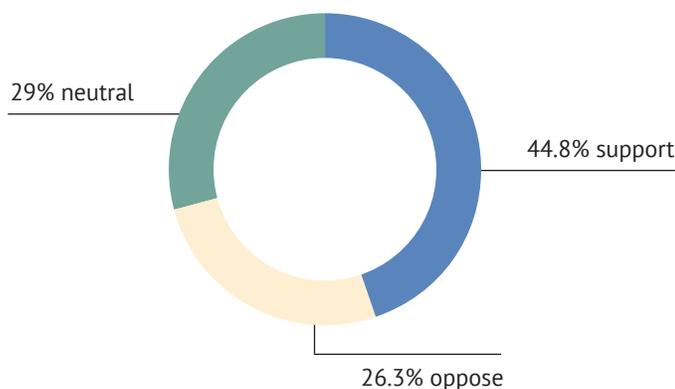
## Language of communication with the Quebec government (Bill 96): In French only?

The English Montreal School Board (EMSB), along with other English-language school boards, challenged provisions of Bill 96 that require them to use French exclusively in written communications with “other governments.” The EMSB sought a stay of these provisions in their entirety, including the ability to continue communicating in English not only with community partners and English-language institutions, but also with the Quebec government and its agencies. They argued that these restrictions infringed their rights under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, particularly their constitutionally protected authority to manage and control their institutions in the minority language. While the Quebec Superior Court acknowledged the seriousness of the constitutional questions raised, it granted only a partial stay.

Specifically, it allowed the EMSB and other English-language boards to continue using English in communications within the English-speaking community, but not with the Quebec government, where French is required by law.<sup>5</sup> The Quebec Court of Appeal upheld this reasoning, confirming that the stay did not apply to communications with government bodies that require French (*Quebec (Attorney General) v. Ortona*, 2024).

This legal outcome provides important context for understanding public attitudes toward the obligation imposed by Bill 96. One of the survey questions directly refers to this issue: “*Representatives of English-language schools should communicate only in French with the Quebec government.*” The question specifically echoes the legal requirement under article 16 of the *Charter of the French Language*, which obliges English-language school boards to communicate exclusively in French with government bodies. The general public is divided on this issue, with no strong consensus. While 44.8% support the rule requiring English-language school representatives to communicate only in French with the Quebec government, 26.3% oppose it, and 29.0% remain neutral (Figure 3). This fragmentation suggests a broader ambivalence, rather than a firm “yes,” regarding the obligation to communicate only in French with the Quebec government, even though this obligation has been reinforced by the courts.

**Figure 3:**  
Support for French-Only Government Interaction with English-Language School Representatives in Quebec.



5 As the court explained: “The Tribunal must adopt a measure that preserves the rights of the English school boards during the proceedings, while maintaining respect for the contested provisions in situations where the parties agree to communicate in French or where the partner or co-contractor requires the use of the official language” (see *English Montreal School Board v. Quebec (Attorney General)*, 2023 QCCS 1259, para. 170).

## School governance in Quebec (Bill 40): The future of English-language control

In 2020, Bill 40 abolished elected school boards across Quebec, replacing them with government-appointed school service centres. However, the English-language school boards contested the law, and their elected structures remained in place pending the outcome of legal proceedings (*Quebec English School Boards Association v. Quebec (Attorney General)*, 2020), which culminated in a 2025 court ruling declaring the reform unconstitutional for the anglophone sector. This reform was ruled unconstitutional by the Quebec Court of Appeal on the grounds that it violated section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which guarantees the English-speaking minority the right to manage and control its educational institutions (*Quebec (Attorney General) v. Quebec English School Boards Association*, 2025).

The survey reveals a widespread lack of clear understanding of the status of these institutions. In response to the statement “*The English-language minority does not manage its own school boards in Quebec*,” 44.8% of respondents correctly identified the statement as false. The remaining 55.2% either did not know or got it wrong. If the very basis of existence of English-language school boards is poorly understood, the rationale for protecting them through constitutional means may appear abstract, technical, or even unnecessary.

A second question addressed the principle of minority governance of schools directly. Here, 43.6% agreed, while 31.4% expressed disagreement with the statement “*English-speaking Quebecers should be able to manage their schools through their own school boards*.” Support for minority school governance is lower not only than support for access to English-language education (43.6% vs. 58.1%), but also than support for publicly funded access where numbers of students justify it (48.3%). As in other parts of the survey, there appears to be willingness to support access in principle, but less so when access is tied to concrete costs—whether financial, as with funding, or institutional, as with the delegation of governance power to a minority group.

## Hiring practices of school boards (Bill 21)

One such governance power, recognized in the Mahé (1990) decision, is the ability of minority-language school boards to participate with government officials in decisions related to the hiring of school personnel. The survey explored this issue through this statement: “*English-language schools should be free to choose the staff they hire*.” While this statement does not mention Bill 21 or religious symbols directly, it captures the broader issue at the heart of another EMSB legal challenge before Canada’s Supreme Court that will be heard in 2025.<sup>6</sup> The issue is whether the constitutional right to manage and control English-language educational institutions includes the freedom to hire staff in accordance with the community’s needs (*Hak v. Attorney General of Quebec*, 2024). The EMSB contends that constraints on hiring, such as those imposed by Bill 21, which prohibits the hiring of teachers who wear religious

6 *English Montreal School Board, et al. v. Attorney General of Quebec, et al.*, SCC Docket 41231 (Quebec (Civil) (by leave)). The Supreme Court of Canada granted leave to appeal on January 23, 2025, from the Quebec Court of Appeal’s judgment 2024 QCCA 254 on Bill 21.

symbols, may infringe on the institutional autonomy of English-speaking minority schools. The survey question on autonomy to hire teachers helps isolate the core value of governance rights and offers an entry point into how the public perceives institutional freedom in the minority context.

The wording of the of the statement (“English-language schools should be free to choose the staff they hire”) is intentionally broad. It does not specify the nature of the constraints being referred to, such as the prohibition on hiring teachers who wear religious symbols. As a result, any interpretation of responses to this statement in connection with support for or opposition to Bill 21 should be made with caution. The results show a relatively high level of agreement: 51.2% supported this principle (31.7% rather agreed, 19.5% absolutely agreed), while 26.4% disagreed and 22.4% remained neutral. In that light, the question may reveal a broad intuitive commitment to the idea of local control in minority institutions, rather than a specific stance on the controversies surrounding Bill 21. That intuitive support, however, appears to weaken when the principle of institutional autonomy is framed in terms that include religious needs.

Respondents were asked whether English-speaking Quebecers should have the right to manage and control their educational institutions *in a way that reflects their specific cultural and religious needs*. While 51.2% agreed that English-language schools should be free to choose the staff they hire, only 33.0% supported the idea that these institutions should reflect specific cultural and religious needs: a drop of 18.2 percentage points. Once again, we observe that support declines when institutional autonomy is framed more precisely or when it implies a stronger or precise exercise of power by the minority.

# Explaining the results by subgrouping<sup>7</sup> and linguistic angst

Support for minority rights tends to decline when those rights are framed more specifically or involve greater institutional power and autonomy. To better understand the patterns observed above, the following section examines how responses vary according to key explanatory variables such as linguistic angst. This factor helps explain why support for minority rights tends to decline when those rights involve institutional autonomy or power. Linguistic angst is defined here as the perception that the French language and culture are under threat and, conversely, that the English language holds little importance for Quebec's collective identity. Any expansion of minority power may be seen as diverting resources away from the protection of francophones.

Public opinion in Quebec is not only divided but also structured along sharp and consistent lines. These divisions reflect deeply rooted differences in language background and linguistic angst, embedded in the broader historical relations between British and French colonizers and the settlers who came to Quebec. Linguistic angst does more than confirm polarization, since it sketches a map of how different communities position themselves in relation to English-language minority rights.

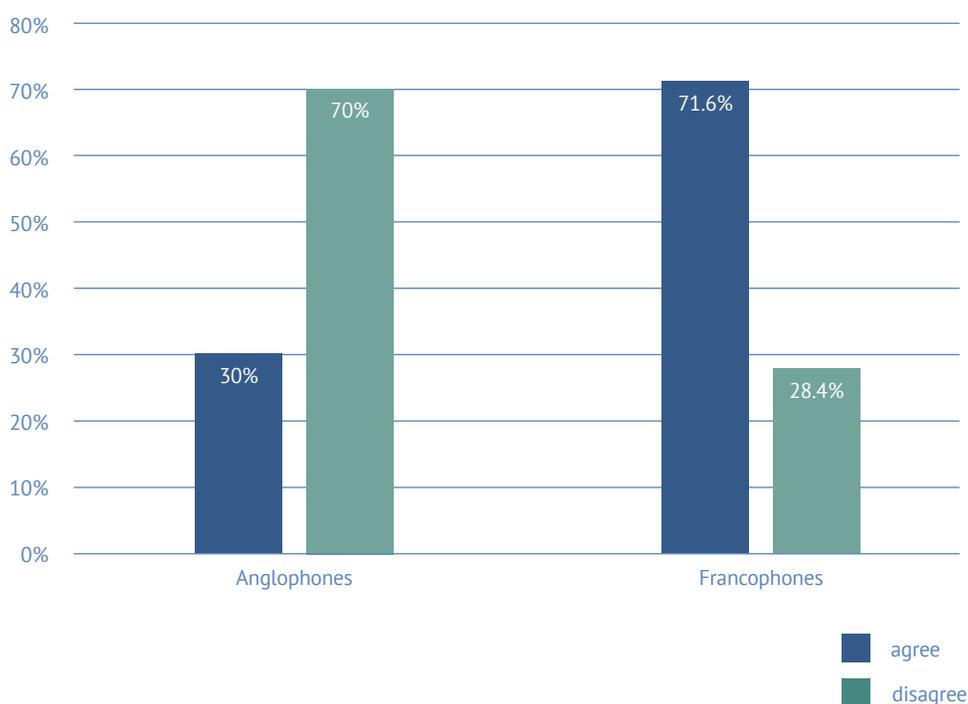
Let's begin with language. The factor of one's first language learned and still understood emerges as a powerful predictor of attitudes. This is not surprising, given the structure of minority-language rights in Canada: in Quebec, mother-tongue English speakers are typically the recipients of such rights, while French speakers only benefit from them when they move elsewhere in the country. The perception of threat to the French language, and to francophone society more broadly, varies sharply by linguistic group. Native French speakers are considerably and significantly more likely than other respondents to express such concerns.<sup>8</sup> This highlights the asymmetry of linguistic insecurity across Quebec's population.

7 While the descriptive statistics presented above were weighted to reflect the demographic composition of Quebec's population, the following analyses are based on unweighted data. This choice allows for valid statistical testing of associations (e.g., chi-square) and ensures that subgroup sizes are preserved for comparison purposes. The trade-off is that these results do not represent population-level estimates but are analytically robust for understanding internal variation across respondent profiles.

8 The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test is used to determine whether differences in response patterns across linguistic groups are statistically significant. In both cases reported here—perceptions of threat to the French language ( $\chi^2 = 362.3, p < 0.001$ ) and to francophone society ( $\chi^2 = 41.1, p < 0.001$ )—the differences are unlikely to be due to chance.

The contrast is striking. Anglophones (with English as their mother tongue or one of their mother tongues) largely rejected the idea that French is in danger (70% disagree), strongly affirmed the idea that English is part of Quebec’s identity (68%), and overwhelmingly supported measures to protect their community: 89% favoured English-language school governance and 87% supported public funding for English schools. On the contrary, 71.6% of French-speaking respondents said the French language is “rather” or “absolutely” threatened (Figure 4), and 65.3% said the same about francophone society; only 16.6% of francophones would support a political party defending English-language rights. These differences are statistically significant. They also reflect a deeper pattern of linguistic angst, particularly among French-speaking respondents. These results hint at the hypothesis that higher levels of linguistic angst are associated with lower support for minority rights, while also suggesting that at least two contrasting views of linguistic angst coexist within Quebec society, with allophone respondents positioned somewhere in between.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 4:**  
Perception that French is in danger in Quebec



Linguistic angst includes both the language itself (“*French is under threat from English in Quebec*”) and francophone society more generally (“*Francophone society in Quebec is at risk of disappearing*”). This broader sense of threat tends to be associated with stronger rejection of English as an essential part of Quebec identity (“*English is an essential part of Quebec identity*”) and,

<sup>9</sup> Allophones tend to fall between these two poles, often sharing francophone concerns about the vulnerability of French, while remaining more open to measures supportive of English-language rights.

more broadly, with less support for the rights of the English-speaking minority.<sup>10</sup> This nexus of fearing for the future of French and of francophone society, and of rejecting English as an essential part of Quebec identity, serves as a powerful lens through which respondents may interpret questions about anglophone rights. The variables reinforce each other. Francophones tend to see French and their society as under threat, and reject the idea that English is foundational to Quebec identity, while Anglophones affirm English as part of the province's fabric and are less sensitive to narratives of francophone decline; allophones stand in between, often leaning toward francophone threat perceptions but remaining more receptive to English-language inclusion.

These fault lines become especially visible when we examine how people perceive the rights of the English-speaking minority. For example, awareness of the minority is closely tied to both language background and perceptions of threat. Those who feel that *“French is under threat from English in Quebec”* or that *“Francophone society in Quebec is at risk of disappearing”* are less likely to acknowledge that *“There is an official English-language minority in Quebec.”* On the other hand, respondents who believe that *“English is an essential part of Quebec identity”* are more inclined to recognize it. This pattern suggests that some respondents may not be rejecting the presence of English speakers, but rather the idea of defining them as a (federally) protected minority group.

**Knowledge:** A similar pattern appears when testing knowledge of rights. Most respondents correctly acknowledge that *“English-speaking minorities in Quebec have the right to receive education in English,”* while fewer recognize that this right also includes public funding for schools. In short, those who value English or reject the notion of a threat to French are more likely to know that anglophone minority rights exist.<sup>11</sup>

**Attitude:** The gap becomes even more pronounced when institutional autonomy is introduced with questions about funding and governance of English-language schools. Francophones who feel that French or their group is vulnerable tend to show less support for these forms of autonomy, compared with other respondents.

**Support:** These perceptions appear to shape political attitudes. Only 16.6% of francophones say they would support a political party that defends the specific rights of English-speaking Quebecers. That support reaches over 75% among anglophones.

10 On the flip side, respondents who view English as essential to Quebec's identity are consistently more supportive of minority rights. Their responses correlate with strong endorsement of English-school funding, governance, and the recognition of their rights.

11 Indicators related to legal awareness and intergroup relations reflect perceptual divides. Anglophones are more aware of ongoing legal challenges, while francophones more often express uncertainty.

In short, what people think about English-language rights depends a lot on who they are, especially what language they have as their mother tongue and how they feel about the place of French and English in Quebec. Those who feel that French is threatened are more likely to oppose English-language rights, while those who see English as part of Quebec's identity are more likely to support them. People's views are shaped not just by their mother tongue, but also by how they see the place of the English and French languages in society. These divisions affect whether existing rights are recognized and openness to expanding or defending those rights in the face of change.

# Conclusion

This study reveals that public understanding of minority-language education rights in Quebec—particularly those guaranteed under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*—is both limited and shaped by deeper tensions around linguistic angst (the fear that French and francophone society's vitality are under threat). While most respondents recognize the general principle that English-speaking Quebecers have the right to education in English, far fewer are aware of the legal foundation behind that right. Importantly, recognizing a right does not necessarily mean supporting it politically. This gap is especially visible when comparing broad agreement on the existence of rights with much lower willingness to support a political party that would defend them. This highlights the difference between passive acknowledgment and active endorsement, one of the central tensions revealed in this paper.

Cross-tabulation analyses show that linguistic affiliation and angst play a key role in explaining the results. Francophones are far more likely to perceive French and francophone society as threatened, and to resist current and/or additional recognition or autonomy for the English-speaking minority. Anglophones, in contrast, tend to affirm English as part of Quebec's identity and support institutional autonomy. Allophones often sit between these poles—concerned about the future of French, but more open to anglophone claims than francophones overall.

**Perhaps most critically, language threat perceptions matter even more than affiliation to one language group alone. Respondents who perceive French or the francophone group's vitality as threatened are significantly less likely to:**

- recognize English as part of Quebec's identity
- express support for institutional elements like school governance and funding
- be aware of legal dimensions including English-speaking Quebec as a minority
- know about ongoing court cases and tensions between the language groups
- express support for defending these rights through party affiliation or more general access to English-language education

These findings help explain the sharp divisions in public opinion surrounding the legal and political debates over bills 96, 40, and 21.

Ultimately, while section 23 provides constitutional protections, its perceived legitimacy in Quebec depends not only on legal rulings but on public understanding, support, and level of linguistic angst. This study suggests that recognition of minority-language rights remains uneven, politically fragile, and embedded in a wider struggle over the perceived vitality of French and francophone society in Quebec. Bridging the gap between legal frameworks and public legitimacy remains a central challenge for educators, advocates, and policymakers.

In the end, **the perception of English-language rights as part of a zero-sum game remains one of the most politically potent findings of this paper. For many respondents, especially those who see French as threatened, advancing rights for the English-speaking minority can feel like a loss for the majority.**

The perception of minority rights as a threat to the majority helps explain the cautious or ambivalent public support for institutional autonomy, even when legal guarantees are clear. At a time when the CAQ government is actively testing the limits of section 23 through legislation, litigation, and restructuring of the education system, these perceptions take on real political weight. Public opinion, shaped by linguistic affiliation and angst, is not merely reactive. That opinion creates space for governments to act. If English-language rights are not widely understood or strongly supported, efforts to limit them may proceed with little public resistance.

English-language education rights are protected in law, but not all Quebecers understand them or agree with them. When rights are poorly understood or lack public support, governments can more easily limit or withdraw them. As this paper shows, that risk is even greater when people feel their own language and group are losing ground. At the same time, the public's sense of linguistic angst must be considered. Linguistic angst and support for English-speaking Quebecers' education rights co-exist, and must be addressed together in Quebec.

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