

## **Report**

### **The 2018 Provincial Election in Quebec**

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#### **Abstract**

The 2018 election in Quebec marked an important turn in the province's political history with the victory of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ)—the first time since 1966 that a party other than the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP) or the Parti Québécois (PQ) formed a government. The incumbent QLP suffered from voter fatigue and a backlash against its austerity measures while the PQ had been struggling for several years due to the declining popularity of its sovereignty option, especially among younger generations of voters. The CAQ had been leading in the polls for over a year, although the campaign proved to be more competitive than expected in its second half. The battle for third place was hard fought between the PQ and the insurgent Québec Solidaire (QS). The election's outcome, and the CAQ government's success, suggest that the new party system configuration that came into place in 2018 may be a lasting one.

#### **Résumé**

La victoire de la Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ) lors de l'élection de 2018 au Québec marque un tournant important dans l'histoire politique de la province — il s'agit de la première fois depuis 1966 qu'un gouvernement est formé par un parti autre que le Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) ou le Parti québécois (PQ). Le gouvernement sortant du PLQ a souffert de la fatigue des électeurs à son endroit et d'une désapprobation de ses mesures d'austérité, tandis que le PQ était en difficulté depuis plusieurs années en raison de la baisse de popularité de son option souverainiste, notamment auprès des jeunes générations d'électeurs. Bien que la CAQ ait été en tête des sondages pendant plus d'un an, la campagne électorale s'est avérée plus compétitive que prévu dans sa seconde moitié. La bataille pour la troisième place a été ardue entre le PQ et Québec solidaire (QS). Le résultat des élections et les succès du gouvernement de la CAQ laissent présager que la nouvelle configuration du système partisan établie en 2018 pourrait être durable.

**Keywords:** Quebec, elections, 2018, Coalition Avenir Québec, François Legault

**Mots-clés :** Québec, élections, 2018, Coalition avenir Québec, François Legault

## Introduction

The 2018 provincial election marked a breakthrough in Quebec politics. For the first time since 1966, a political party other than the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP) or the Parti Québécois (PQ) won a plurality of seats in the National Assembly. By defeating Philippe Couillard's Liberals, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) succeeded where parties such as the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) had previously failed: to put an end to the two-party alternation that has characterized Quebec's political system for nearly 50 years. The 2018 provincial election was also historic, as the PQ suffered its worst electoral performance since its founding in the late 1960s. While it is true that this party had already finished third in the 2007 provincial election (Bélanger 2008), it had never received less than 20% of the vote before.

The Liberal Party, which had won a majority of seats in 2014—notably by mobilizing voters opposed to Quebec independence and to the PQ's "charter of values" (Bélanger and Falk Pedersen 2015)—was unable to secure a second term. And even if its defeat was less devastating than that of the PQ, the QLP also suffered its worst electoral performance since its founding, obtaining less than 25% of the vote. Although voices were raised to criticize the Liberal Party between 2014 and 2018, this outcome surprised many political analysts, as few expected such a poor electoral performance from the incumbent government.

Part of the criticisms raised at the government of Philippe Couillard related to its goal of achieving a balanced budget during its first years in office, to regain the control over public finances that was lost in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, this objective was greeted with apprehension by several citizens and civil society actors, including the unions. By cutting spending well beyond the financial framework it had presented during the 2014 electoral campaign, the QLP failed to sell its measures as "budgetary rigour". Rather, the term "austerity" quickly came to define the government's actions (Montigny and Grégoire 2018). Public discontent did not initially have a major effect on the voting intentions of Quebecers, but the tide turned in early 2017 when the Coalition Avenir Québec overtook the Parti Québécois in the polls, becoming the Liberals' main opponent. From that point on, the high level of dissatisfaction with the Couillard government (around 65% in October 2017 according to Léger), and a general fatigue vis-à-vis the Liberals who had been in power since 2003 (save for the short-lived PQ minority government of 2012–14), turned into support for the CAQ. The expansion of the economy as well as the announcement of new investments in health and education in the last few months before the end of its term did not help the QLP to regain the upper hand: the Liberals entered the electoral campaign in second place, some ten points behind the CAQ.

Towards the end of his mandate, Philippe Couillard intended to put forward his own policy of national affirmation, which was entitled "Quebecers, our way of being Canadian". The then Premier claimed that it was time for Quebec to reopen constitutional negotiations with Canada, and ultimately, to ratify the Constitution Act of 1982. The Liberals reiterated the five

conditions<sup>1</sup> set by Robert Bourassa's government at the time of the Meech Lake Accord but insisted that most of them were now agreed upon, and that they could easily be made constitutional (Lecomte 2017). However, Justin Trudeau immediately dismissed this proposal. The Prime Minister of Canada categorically refused to open up the Constitution, and the Quebec Liberals' proposal was quickly forgotten.

Since Pauline Marois resigned as leader of the Parti Québécois when the results of the 2014 provincial election were announced, the pro-independence party had to find a new leader soon after Philippe Couillard came to power. In an unsurprising leadership race, the PQ's star candidate in the Saint-Jérôme riding, businessman Pierre Karl Péladeau (also known as "PKP"), was elected in the first round with 57.6% of the vote (Bélair-Cirino 2015). PKP's arrival as leader of the PQ in May 2015 initially had a positive effect on voting intentions, but this was short-lived. Indeed, Péladeau's honeymoon with the electorate only lasted a few months (Montigny and Grégoire 2018). Family reasons led PKP to leave active politics less than a year after his election. In May 2016, he announced his resignation as leader of the PQ, forcing the party to organize a new leadership race. On October 7 of the same year, Jean-François Lisée was elected leader of the PQ with 50.6% of the vote. The new PQ leader tried to form a strategic alliance with Québec Solidaire, a left-wing sovereigntist party, but QS members rejected this idea of a pre-electoral coalition between the two parties. Québec Solidaire—for which Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, one of the former leaders of the 2012 student movement, became co-spokesperson in 2017—instead merged with Option Nationale (ON), a party founded in 2011 by Jean-Martin Aussant with the objective of achieving Quebec independence as soon as possible.

The Quebec independence movement indeed experienced a rather turbulent period between the 2014 and 2018 provincial elections. On the federal scene, Mario Beaulieu was elected leader of the Bloc Québécois (BQ) in June 2014. However, poor results in vote intention polls compelled him to leave his place to Gilles Duceppe, leader of the BQ between 1997 and 2011, before the start of the 2015 federal election (Dutrisac, Bourgeault-Côté, and Vastel 2015). This last-minute change did not allow the Bloc to recover all the losses from the 2011 "Orange Wave" (see Bélanger and Nadeau 2011), with the party only able to win 10 of Quebec's 78 seats in the House of Commons. Martine Ouellet became the first woman to lead the BQ in March 2017, but her leadership was challenged when seven Bloc MPs left the party in February 2018. She was defeated in a confidence vote in June 2018 and replaced by Yves-François Blanchet in January 2019.

Unable to establish itself as an alternative to the two traditional parties in the 2012 and 2014 provincial elections (see Bélanger and Falk Pedersen 2014; 2015), the Coalition Avenir Québec decided to adjust its approach during its 2015 general council held in Laval (Bélanger et al. 2018; Castonguay 2015). The party unveiled a new logo and adopted a new platform. In an attempt to sell the CAQ as a nationalist but not separatist party, François Legault proposed a multi-stage plan for a new agreement between Quebec and Canada. The plan included a transfer of fiscal resources from Ottawa to Québec, the repatriation of powers over culture, language and immigration, and constitutional changes to recognize Quebec as a nation (Chouinard 2015). This strategy seems to have paid off: in the spring of 2017, the

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<sup>1</sup> The five conditions were 1) the recognition of Quebec as a distinct society; 2) a veto for Quebec in constitutional matters; 3) a formal voice in the appointment of Supreme Court justices; 4) the entrenchment of Quebec's role in immigration, and 5) a limit on the federal spending power.

CAQ surpassed the PQ in the polls and by the end of the summer of the same year, it became the favourite to win the next provincial election.<sup>2</sup> In October 2017, CAQ candidate Geneviève Guilbault won the by-election in the formerly Liberal riding of Louis-Hébert with 51% of the vote. With one year to go before the next general election, François Legault's party seemed to be on a promising path.

## The Campaign

Premier Philippe Couillard launched the electoral campaign on August 23, 2018. The campaign seemed to unravel in two steps. During its first half, the CAQ, which initially had a lead of around ten percentage points over the Liberal Party, saw its support gradually diminish, so much so that in mid-September the CAQ and the QLP were almost neck and neck. Importantly, though, the CAQ still enjoyed a clear plurality amongst francophone voters. During this same period, Québec Solidaire saw its support increase steadily, while the Parti Québécois seemed to be standing still. The second half of the campaign saw the CAQ and the QLP continue to lead a close race until the very last days. Polls indicated that the CAQ still retained first place in vote intentions during this second period, but they also suggested the possibility that François Legault's party could only form a minority government on the evening of October 1 because its lead over the QLP did not appear to be large enough. Moreover, this second half of the campaign saw the battle for third place between the PQ and QS intensify. A Léger-LCN/Le Journal de Montréal poll published on September 29 even suggested that the balance of power, in the event of a minority government, may well lie with QS rather than the PQ. This context led Jean-François Lisée to attack head-on the co-spokesperson of QS, Manon Massé, during the televised leaders' debate held two days later and broadcast on the TVA network. This strategy was essentially aimed at slowing the rise of QS in voting intentions.

Overall, the 2018 election campaign remained somewhat unremarkable, with twists and turns that were more anecdotal than dramatic. Notable incidents included the controversy surrounding the recruitment of Gertrude Bourdon as a star candidate by the Liberals after she flirted with the CAQ; the resignation in the middle of the campaign of the president of the CAQ, Stéphane Le Bouyonnec, following revelations about his association with a company making loans at high interest rates; and past anti-Semitic remarks made by PQ candidate Michelle Blanc. Four televised leaders' debates were organized between September 13 and 23, including one held entirely in English on CBC, a first in Quebec in over 30 years. A notable candidacy announcement was that of Christian Dubé, who joined what became the "economic trio" of the CAQ with candidates Pierre Fitzgibbon and Éric Girard. Finally, we may note the holding in Montreal, between September 8 and 15, of no less than three demonstrations against global warming aimed at making political parties more sensitive to this issue.

The promise made by Jean-François Lisée not to hold a referendum on Quebec independence before the second term of a PQ government contributed to sidelining this issue, so that the political debate during the electoral campaign of 2018 focused mainly on three other themes. The various political parties first put forward several state measures aimed at

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<sup>2</sup> A poll conducted by Mainstreet Research for The Gazette and Postmedia even placed the CAQ first in voting intentions as early as May 2017 (Authier 2017).

improving the well-being of citizens, in particular that of children (and, in turn, their parents) and the elderly. The Liberal Party proposed free childcare for 4-year-olds, as well as an annual allowance of \$150 to \$300 that would be given to families. Philippe Couillard also promised to expand the coverage of basic dental care for children and the elderly, to make public transport free for these same two groups of individuals, and to create 1,500 new places in long-term care centres (CHSLDs). For its part, the Coalition Avenir Québec put forward the idea of building a network of more modern elderly care centres called “Maisons des aînés” and offering kindergarten to 4-year-olds across Quebec. The Parti Québécois proposed to introduce a lunch service for schoolchildren, promised a massive investment in the renovation of schools in Quebec, and committed to air conditioning all CHSLDs by summer 2019. As for Québec Solidaire, the party promised to establish free education at all levels from early childhood centers (CPEs) until the end of university studies, to create universal dental insurance, to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, and make local community service centers (CLSCs) accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The second important theme debated during this campaign concerned the question of immigration, which is an issue that is closely linked to the theme of Quebec identity. The kickoff on this theme was given a few days before the launch of the campaign when François Legault made public his promise to impose state secularism during the first year of a CAQ mandate, specifying that he would not hesitate to use the notwithstanding clause provided for in the Canadian Constitution if this proved necessary. Since the adoption of a secular regime implies a ban on wearing religious symbols, this proposal was portrayed by the QLP and QS as a measure that could harm the integration of immigrants of Muslim, Jewish or Sikh faith in Quebec’s public administration. The PQ claimed to be in favour of a ban on the wearing of religious symbols but only for staff working in public primary and secondary schools as well as daycare centres.

During the first week of September, the CAQ also presented its promise to reduce the annual immigration threshold to Quebec to 40,000 individuals as of 2019. François Legault justified this proposal by claiming that the then-current volume of non-French-speaking immigrants in the province represented a potential threat to Quebec identity and to the long-term survival of a French Quebec. The CAQ’s immigration plan was strongly criticized by other political parties (as well as by the mayor of Montreal, Valérie Plante). The Liberals and the Solidaires preferred measures that would ensure a better integration of immigrants into the Quebec population, such as greater investments in helping integration into the labour market for immigrant workers (QLP) or an increase in francization and cultural integration services for people with an immigrant background (QS). As for the PQ, it argued in favour of lowering the immigration threshold but wanted to depoliticize this question by suggesting that the threshold be set according to the recommendations of the Auditor General. The debate around the issue of immigration was vigorous to the point that Philippe Couillard considered this issue as the “ballot box question” (Chouinard 2018).

The third and final theme that emerged during this campaign related to the environmental issue. Québec Solidaire set itself apart by taking strong pro-environmental positions, for example by proposing that the Quebec government ban the sale of gasoline vehicles starting in 2030 and by promising an investment of 7.6 billion more in the development of public transport infrastructures. The Liberal Party remained relatively timid on the environmental issue, while the Parti Québécois proposed to offer a financial incentive to citizens who use mobile carpooling applications, with the goal of removing approximately 150,000 vehicles

from Quebec roads during rush hour. For its part, the Coalition Avenir Québec was committed to building a third road link between Quebec City and the south shore of the St. Lawrence River. This position of the CAQ, popular in the Capitale-Nationale region, was nevertheless interpreted by its opponents as support for a more widespread use of cars, and therefore increased air pollution, in this region.

## The Outcome

On October 1, the Coalition Avenir Québec defeated the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard. The CAQ received 37.4% of the vote and won 74 of the 125 seats in the National Assembly, 52 more than in 2014 (see Table 1). This performance allowed François Legault's party to form a majority government. While most polls predicted a close race between the CAQ and the QLP, the Liberal Party merely obtained 24.8% of the vote on election night. Only 31 Liberal candidates were elected (39 fewer than four years earlier), most of them in ridings located on the island of Montreal. Star candidate Gertrude Bourdon would only come third in her Quebec City riding. Despite the disappointing performance of his party at the provincial level, Philippe Couillard was easily re-elected in Roberval. The outgoing Premier nonetheless announced his retirement from politics three days later, and the CAQ won the by-election held in December 2018 by a wide margin. The CAQ has since maintained its electoral and polling success.

**Table 1. Quebec Provincial Election Results**

	2014		2018	
	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)
Coalition Avenir Québec	22	23.1	74	37.4
Quebec Liberal Party	70	41.5	31	24.8
Parti Québécois	30	25.4	10	17.1
Québec Solidaire	3	7.6	10	16.1

Source: Élections Québec ([www.electionsquebec.qc.ca](http://www.electionsquebec.qc.ca))

The 2018 provincial election was particularly difficult for the Parti Québécois, which only received 17.1% of the vote and lost 20 seats. Jean-François Lisée was defeated in Rosemont, where the QS candidate, former *La Presse* columnist Vincent Marissal, won by 2,500 votes. Unable to hold on to its traditional strongholds in the French-speaking neighbourhoods of Quebec's metropolis, the PQ was wiped off the map on the island of Montreal.

Besides the CAQ, the only party that made electoral gains in 2018 was Québec Solidaire, which has existed since 2006. QS won seven new seats in the National Assembly and more than doubled its share of the vote.<sup>3</sup> For the first time since its founding, the left-wing party also succeeded in electing candidates outside of Montreal. The Solidaires secured two seats in Quebec City, one in Sherbrooke, and one in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Québec Solidaire actually became the second opposition party in 2019, when Catherine Fournier decided to leave the PQ to sit as an independent (Bélair-Cirino 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Both the PQ and QS were granted official party status by the National Assembly despite not having reached the standard threshold of 12 seats or 20% of the vote (Richer 2018).

Turnout in the 2018 Quebec provincial election (66.5%) was considerably lower than in the 2012 (74.6%) and 2014 (71.4%) elections, but still higher than in the 2008 election (57.3%). Not all citizens were equally likely to vote, however. An important determinant of turnout was age. The turnout rate for voters under the age of 35 was 53.4%, while the turnout rate for those 35 and older was 69.7%, a difference of more than 15 percentage points (Chaire de recherche sur la démocratie et les institutions parlementaires 2019). Another important determinant was sex. As is generally the case in Quebec, women (67.7%) were more likely than men (63.6%) to vote (Dubois, Blanchard, and Gélinau 2021). It should be noted that turnout also varied by constituency: it was especially high in Montarville—a riding on the south shore of Montreal (80.5%)—but below fifty percent in the riding of Ungava (30.9%)—the largest and least densely populated in Quebec—and in the Liberal strongholds of D’Arcy-McGee (46.6%) and Westmount–Saint-Louis (48.5%).

The 2018 Quebec provincial election confirmed a trend that began in the early 1980s and accelerated in 2007: the weakening of the two-party system and the rise of third parties in Quebec politics. For the past forty years, the share of the vote going to either the QLP or the PQ has been declining, dropping from 91% in 1981 to 42% in 2018 (Bélanger and Daoust 2020). Not only were new political parties created, but their political candidates have proven to be competitive at the constituency level. Indeed, the average effective number of parties (ENP) in Quebec’s ridings has increased from 2.07 (1981) to 3.09 (2012) over the past decades (Godbout 2013). Since single-member plurality voting tends to be detrimental to small political parties, it is nevertheless difficult to predict whether the current multiparty system is here to stay. Historically, Quebec has featured long periods of two-party politics (Conservatives versus Liberals, Liberals versus Union Nationale, Liberals versus Parti Québécois) with only brief multiparty periods between these; however, the current political divisions support more than two parties. One consequence of this trend toward multipartyism has been that 2018 is the first election since 1944 where the winning party was able to form a majority government with less than 40% of the popular vote. The victory of the CAQ thus speaks to this party’s vote efficiency: since the CAQ’s support was mostly spread out outside of the Montreal area, it meant that Legault’s party would not suffer as much from votes-to-seats disproportionality as the QLP and the PQ, whose support was regionally concentrated (indeed, overconcentrated for the QLP). That said, this situation also underlines the weakness of the CAQ on the island of Montreal, something that the CAQ shares with the old rural-based Union Nationale.

Beside regionalism, several factors can explain vote choice in the 2018 Quebec provincial election. First, Daoust and Jabbour (2020) point out that the weight of the national question in voters’ calculus has decreased between the 2007 and 2018 elections. Attitudes towards Quebec independence remained one of the best predictors of vote choice in 2018, but evidence shows that issues pertaining to identity, redistribution, and the environment have become increasingly important in recent years, especially among younger generations of voters (see also Montigny 2016). In this regard, it seems relevant to note that clear ideological lines structure the preferences of Quebecers on immigration and climate change. These two issues—which typically divide the left and right—were significantly related to vote choice in 2018, favouring either the CAQ or QS depending on voters’ individual values (Savoie, van der Linden, and Breton 2020).

Second, Daoust and Jabbour (2020) show that the impact of being Francophone on the propensity to support the Parti Québécois was weaker in 2018 than in the last four elections.

While the QLP has managed to maintain its high level of support among Anglophones and Allophones, many French-speaking Quebecers who used to vote for the PQ have turned to the CAQ or QS in 2018. The loss of support for the PQ among Francophone voters had a negative effect on the performance of Jean-François Lisée's party, which ended up second in many rural and suburban ridings.

Third, Daoust and Jabbour (2020) find that millennials had a greater propensity to support QS—but since this is an age group that tends to vote in lesser numbers, it means that QS did not benefit as much from this cohort's support as it could have. These authors also show that the CAQ received lower support among the youngest and oldest generations. The PQ's support in 2018 came mostly from the baby boomers, which confirms findings from previous studies (Bélanger and Mahéo 2020; Mahéo and Bélanger 2018).

Finally, one clear sociodemographic characteristic of the CAQ vote is that it came from less educated citizens (Bélanger et al. 2022). This education divide among the province's electorate may signal the emergence in Quebec of what some researchers have described elsewhere as an authoritarian-libertarian cleavage (e.g., Stubager 2013). This new ideological cleavage tends to pit against one another those voters who embrace the cosmopolitanism that accompanies the post-industrial economy and those who react negatively to it (Ford and Jennings 2020). The fact that the CAQ vote was also the strongest among those who were in favour of a curb to immigration and to the wearing of religious signs provides additional support to this interpretation (Bélanger et al. 2022; Cossette-Lefebvre and Daoust 2020). The particular benefit that the CAQ derives from this authoritarian-libertarian cleavage and these resulting new electoral issues give Legault's party advantages that did not exist for Duplessis' Union Nationale, and may provide the basis of a significant realignment of the Quebec party system.

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