



Confederation
of Tomorrow

Support for bilingualism and learning a second language

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2024 SERIES



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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 with a mandate to conduct in-depth public opinion and social research on the issues shaping Canada's future. It is through such research that Canadians can better understand themselves and their changing society.

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The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities. They are conducted annually by an association of the country's leading public policy and socio-economic research organizations.

The 2024 study consists of a survey of 6,036 adults, conducted between January 13 and April 13, 2024 (82% of the responses were collected between January 17 and February 1); 94% of the responses were collected online. The remaining responses were collected by telephone from respondents living in the North or on First Nations reserves.

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Contents

Introduction	<u>1</u>
Official bilingualism	<u>4</u>
Learning a second language	<u>8</u>
Which second language?	<u>11</u>
Bilingualism and regional resentment	<u>15</u>
Bilingualism and social connections	<u>18</u>

Introduction

Canada has two official languages. The policy of official bilingualism ensures that citizens can interact with the federal government in either English or French, depending on their preference. But bilingualism in Canada has a personal as well as a political dimension, with many Canadians learning English or French as a second language. According to the 2021 census, nine percent of anglophones in Canada can also speak French, and 48 percent of francophones can speak English.

Official bilingualism was implemented over 50 years ago, partly as a means of preserving the unity of the country in the wake of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec. But while, historically, the policy attracted public support, it has sometimes also generated controversy, particularly among those who have seen it as symbolic of a federal government too preoccupied with the interests of Quebecers relative to those of other Canadians. From time to time, other critics have also questioned the rationale for prioritizing English-French bilingualism as the country's non-European population has grown, and as economic globalization has highlighted the importance of greater engagement with trading partners in Asia.

The 2024 Confederation of Tomorrow survey revisits this topic with a series of questions about the policy of official bilingualism and the importance of children learning to speak a second language.¹ It finds that support for bilingualism as a policy, and interest in children learning a second language, both remain fairly high. And most Canadians outside Quebec who think that it is important that their children learn a second

Support for bilingualism as a policy, and interest in children learning a second language, both remain fairly high. And most Canadians outside Quebec who think that it is important that their children learn a second language also think that the specific language they should learn is French.

¹ The issue was covered in the 2019 survey; the report is available at: <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/official-bilingualism-at-50>. Results from 2001 are from the Portraits of Canada survey conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (2001).



language also think that the specific language they should learn is French. Support for official bilingualism and interest in children learning French as a second language are both much higher among anglophones who have close friends who are francophone.

The survey confirms, however, that for some Canadians at least, opinions on bilingualism are linked to sentiments of regional resentment. Those who say their own region is treated unfairly in the Canadian federation, or who believe that Quebec is favoured, are much less likely to support official bilingualism.

Generally speaking, the preferred alternative for those who oppose English-French bilingualism is not another form of bilingualism (or multilingualism), but rather English unilingualism. In other words, a plurality of those who are not interested in having their children learn French do not think it is important for children to learn any second language. This suggests that a focus on English-French bilingualism in Canada is not in tension with the promotion of other languages, and remains the best pathway for strengthening second language proficiency of any kind.



Key Findings

- About eight in ten Canadians either strongly or somewhat support the policy of official bilingualism, including three in four Canadians outside Quebec. Support has held steady over the past two decades.
- Most Canadians say that it is important to them that their children learn to speak a second language. This includes two in three Canadians outside of Quebec. There has been little change in opinion on this question since 2019, but the proportion is lower than in 2001.
- Among anglophones who say that it is important to them that their children learn to speak a second language, the most common choice of second language to learn, by a wide margin, is French.
- Indigenous Peoples who agree that it is important to them that their children learn a second language are most likely to select the other official language (French for anglophones and English for francophones) as the second language that is most important for their children to learn. The next most common choice is an Indigenous language.
- While the proportion expressing the view that it is important for their children to learn French has declined over the past two decades, this is not mainly because there is more interest in learning other languages - it is because there is either less interest in having children learn any second language, or less definite opinions on the topic altogether.
- Opposition to bilingualism is higher among those who feel their own province is not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada, or who believe that the federal government favours Quebec over other regions of the country.
- Strong support for official bilingualism among anglophones outside of Quebec is almost twice as high among those who say they have many close friends who are francophone as it is among those who say they have no close francophone friends.

Official bilingualism

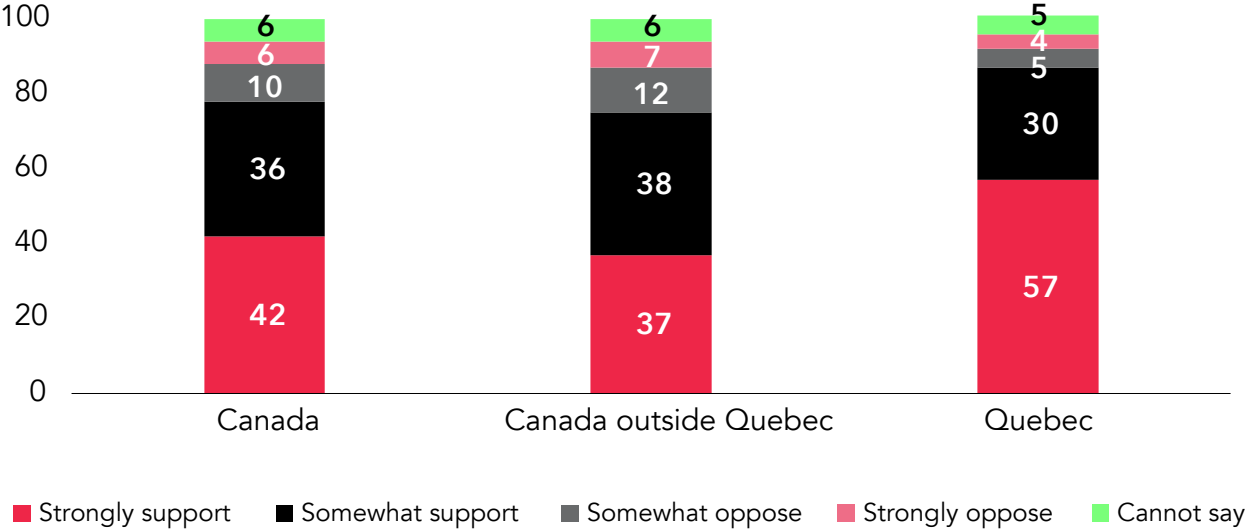
A strong majority of Canadians - including a majority of those living outside of Quebec - continue to support the country's policy on official bilingualism.

The 2024 edition of the annual Confederation of Tomorrow survey asked Canadians whether they support or oppose bilingualism, defined as a policy where all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language of their choice. About eight in ten (78%) Canadians either strongly or somewhat support the policy, including 75 percent outside Quebec. Support within Quebec is higher, at 86 percent.

Outside Quebec, support is evenly divided between those who strongly (37%) and somewhat (38%) support the policy. In Quebec, a majority (57%) strongly support official bilingualism, and an additional 30 percent somewhat support the policy.

FIGURE 1

Support for official bilingualism, by region, 2024



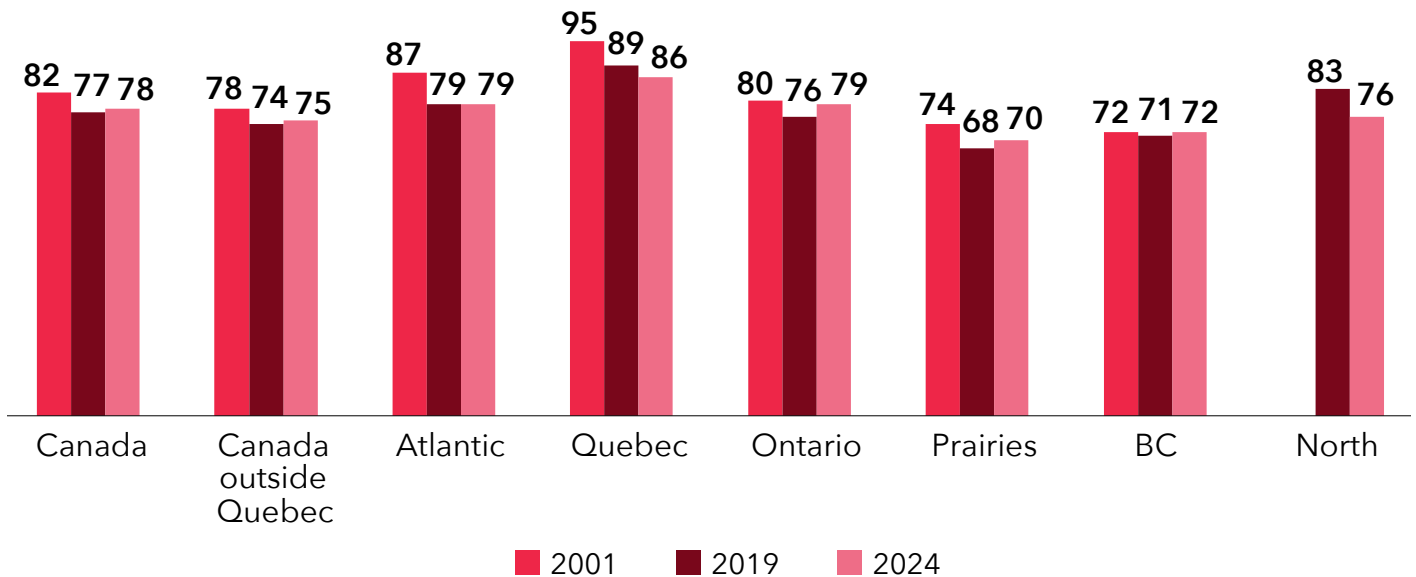
Q40. Canada currently has two official languages – English and French. This means that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose this policy?

Overall support has held steady over the past two decades:

- An earlier study in 2001 found that 78 percent of Canadians outside Quebec supported the policy of official bilingualism. The 2019 Confederation of Tomorrow survey reported the policy was supported by 74 percent of Canadians outside Quebec, which is about the same level of support as in 2024 (75%).
- Support has declined somewhat in Quebec (from 95% in 2001 to 86% in 2024), but remains very high.
- However, over time, Canadians both inside and outside Quebec have become less likely to say they strongly support the policy, and more likely to say they somewhat support it.

FIGURE 2

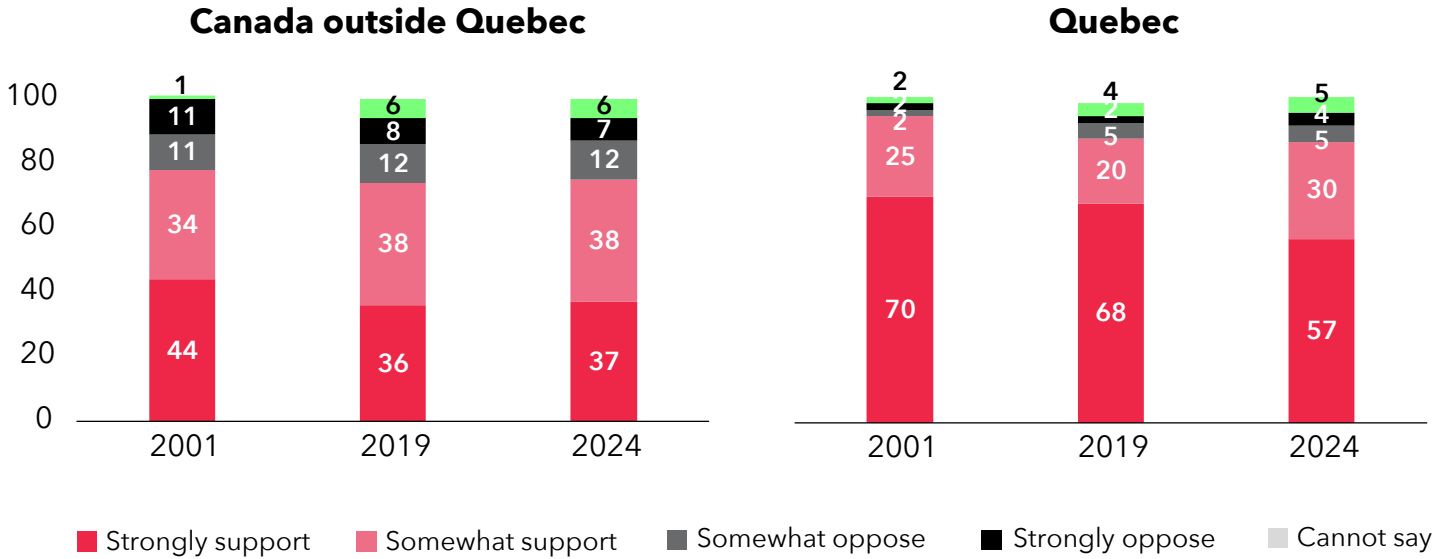
Support for official bilingualism, by region, 2001 - 2024
Strongly or somewhat support



C40. Canada currently has two official languages – English and French. This means that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose this policy? (Source for 2001: CRIC).

FIGURE 3

Support for official bilingualism, by region, 2001- 2024



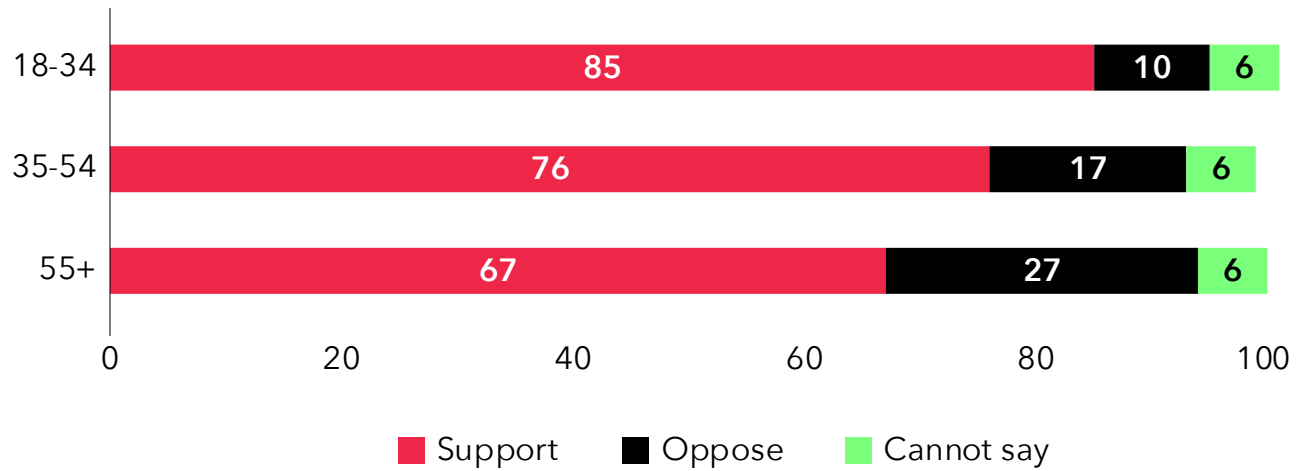
C40. Canada currently has two official languages – English and French. This means that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose this policy? (Source for 2001: CRIC).

Outside Quebec, support for official bilingualism is currently slightly higher in Atlantic Canada (79%), Ontario (79%) and the North (76%) than in British Columbia (72%) or the Prairie provinces (70%). About one in four residents of Western Canada (24%) oppose the policy. Within the Atlantic region, support is slightly lower in New Brunswick (76%) because of lower than average support among anglophones in the province (69%). One in four (26%) New Brunswick anglophones opposes the policy. Across Canada, the policy is supported by a strong majority of immigrants (83%).

Outside Quebec, support is somewhat stronger among those age 18 to 34 (85%) and age 35 to 54 (76%), compared to those age 55 and older (67%). Just over one in four (27%) in the oldest age group oppose the policy, compared to only one in ten (10%) in the youngest age group.

FIGURE 4

Support for official bilingualism, by age group, 2024, Canada outside Quebec



C40. Canada currently has two official languages – English and French. This means that all citizens can get services from the federal government in the official language that they speak. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose this policy?

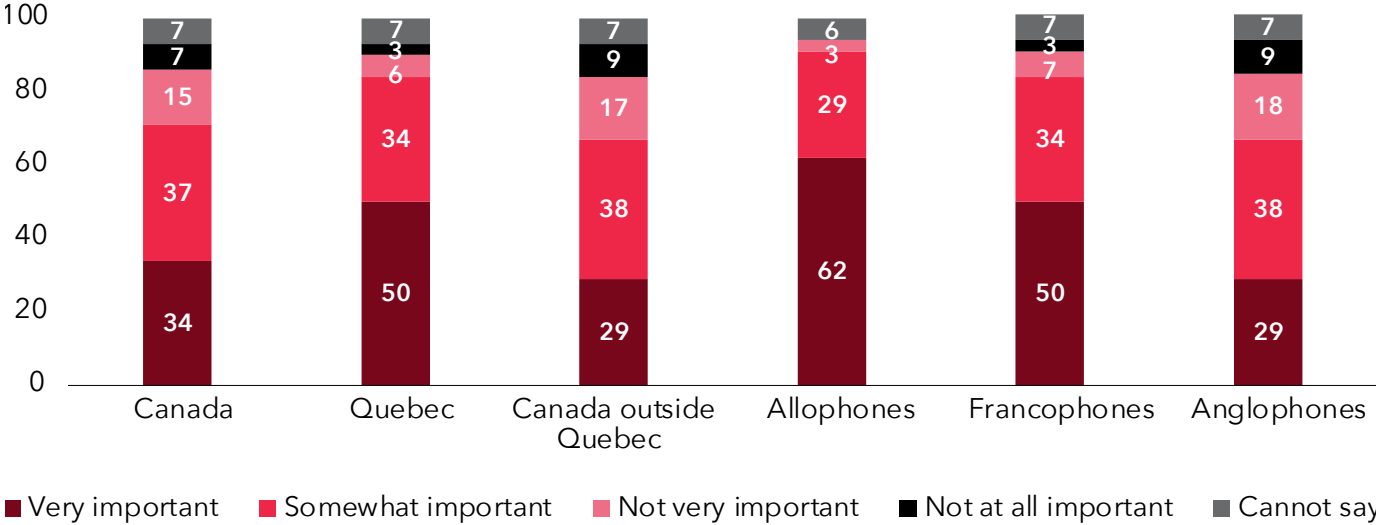
Learning a second language

Most Canadians (71%) say that it is important to them that their children learn to speak a second language. This includes two in three Canadians (67%) outside of Quebec.

The proportion saying that it is important for children to learn a second language is highest among allophones (those who mostly speak a language other than English or French at home) (91%), and also higher than average among francophones (84%). However, two in three anglophones in Canada (67%) also say this is important to them. At the same time, only 29 percent of anglophones say that it is very important to them that their children learn a second language, much smaller than the proportion for francophones (50%) or allophones (62%).

FIGURE 5

Important that children learn second language? 2024, by region and language



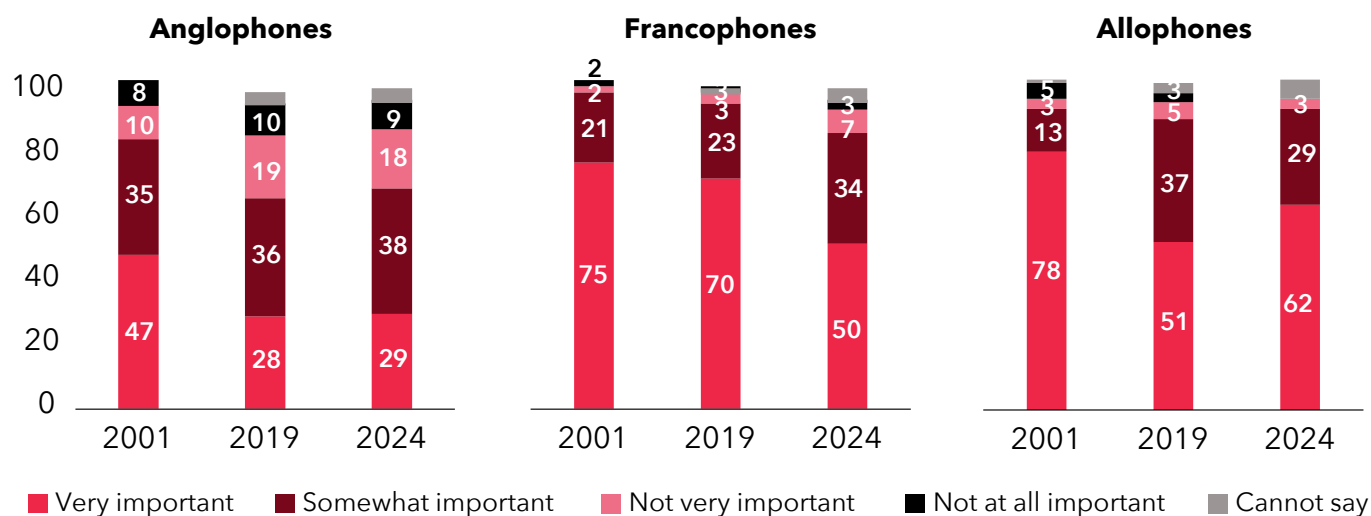
Q42. How important to you is it that your children (if you had some) learn to speak a second language?

Among anglophones, the proportion saying that it is important for children to learn a second language declined between 2001 and 2019 (from 82% to 64%) and has remained more or less unchanged since then (standing at 67% in 2024). Among allophones, overall support has remained very high throughout this period, at roughly nine in ten.²

While remaining very high, overall support among francophones dropped by nine percentage points between 2019 and 2024.³ And since 2019, francophones have become less likely to say that it is very important for children to learn a second language (down 20 percentage points), but more likely to say it is somewhat important (up 11 points).

FIGURE 6

Important that children learn second language? 2001 - 2024, by language



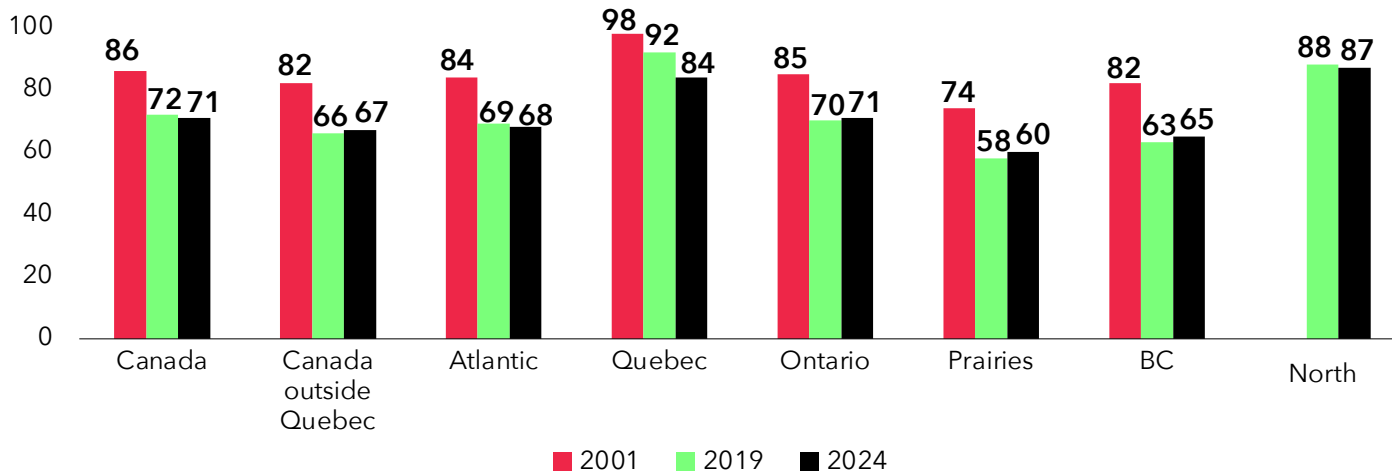
Q42. How important to you is it that your children (if you had some) learn to speak a second language? (Source for 2001: CRIC).

2 Note that the sample sizes for allophones are comparatively small (2001 = 115; 2019 = 379; 2024 = 178) and are not assured to be strictly representative of the actual distribution of allophones across the country.

3 The drop specifically among Quebec francophones is nine percentage points. There appears to have been less change among francophones outside Quebec, but the survey sample does not allow results for this population group to be reported separately with confidence.

FIGURE 7

Important that children learn second language? 2001 - 2024, by region
Very or somewhat important



Q42. How important to you is it that your children (if you had some) learn to speak a second language? (Source for 2001: CRIC).

Across the provinces, the proportion saying that it is important to them that their children learn a second language is currently highest in the North (87%), Quebec (84%), New Brunswick (80%) and Ontario (71%), and lowest in the Prairies (60%), especially Saskatchewan (52%).

The proportion is also higher among first-generation immigrants (82%) than second-generation immigrants (71%) or those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents (68%).

Indigenous Peoples (78%) are somewhat more likely than the national average to agree that it is important to them that their children learn to speak a second language. This proportion is higher among those identifying as First Nations (82%) (including 89% for those living on-reserve) than those identifying as Métis (69%). It is also higher for Inuit (87%), though this result should be treated with caution as the subsample for this group is very small.⁴

⁴ There were 57 respondents who identified as Inuk.

Which second language?

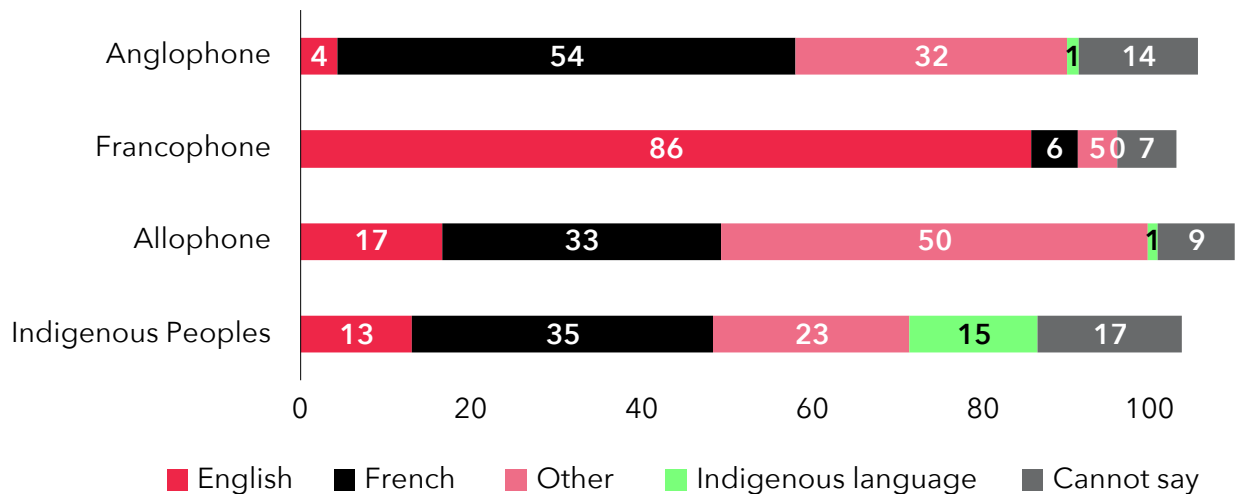
Canadians who said that it is important to them that their children learn a second language were asked which second language in particular they think it is important for their children to learn.

For anglophones, the most common choice, by a wide margin, is French: this is the choice of 54 percent of anglophones who say that it is important that their children learn a second language. The next most common choices are Spanish (8%) or a Chinese language such as Mandarin or Cantonese (4%).

Not surprisingly, English is the most common second language choice for francophones who say that it is important that their children learn a second language: 86 percent choose this option. Another six percent of francophones choose French.⁵ No other second language is preferred by more than two percent of francophones.

FIGURE 8

Which second language should your children learn? 2024, by home language



Q43. Which second language in particular do you think is important for your children to learn? Asked to those who say it is very or somewhat important that their children learn a second language. Answers add to more than 100% because some respondents name more than one language.

⁵ Francophones might name French as a second language in this context either because they are thinking of Canadian children in general, and not only of children within their own family, or because their children, despite have at least one francophone parent, may not have French as their first language.



Among Indigenous Peoples who say that it is important to them that their children learn a second language, 15% mention an Indigenous language such as Cree or Inuktitut.

Allophones are more likely to choose French (33%) than English (17%) as the individual second language their children should learn. However, 50 percent of allophones name a language other than English, French or an Indigenous language, including eight percent who select a Chinese language, seven percent who select Punjabi and five percent who select Urdu. (For allophones outside of Quebec, 33 percent select French, 12 percent select English, and 52 percent select a language other than English, French or an Indigenous language.)⁶

Indigenous Peoples who say that it is important to them that their children learn a second language are most likely to select French (35%) as the second language that is most important to learn.⁷ However, the next most common choice is an Indigenous language (15%), such as Cree or Inuktitut. An additional 13 percent select English. Among Indigenous Peoples living outside of Quebec, 37 percent select French, 17 percent select an Indigenous language, and nine percent select English.⁸

6 Note that survey respondents who are allophones (speaking a language other than English or French at home) may have children whose first or main language is English or French; some also may choose to answer the question with reference to children in Canada more generally, and not necessarily to their own family.

7 This figure rises to 41 percent when considering Indigenous Peoples who mainly speak English at home. Indigenous Peoples who are francophones are most likely to select English as the preferred second language.

8 Note that some Indigenous Peoples speak an Indigenous language at home, suggesting that, in these cases, English or French might be a second language in their families or communities. This is more likely to be the case for Inuit respondents and for First Nations peoples living on-reserve.

Since 2001, among those living outside Quebec who say that it is important for children to learn a second language, the proportion selecting French as the most important language to learn has declined, from 73 percent to 52 percent, while the proportion selecting a language other than English, French or an Indigenous language has increased, from 20 percent to 33 percent.

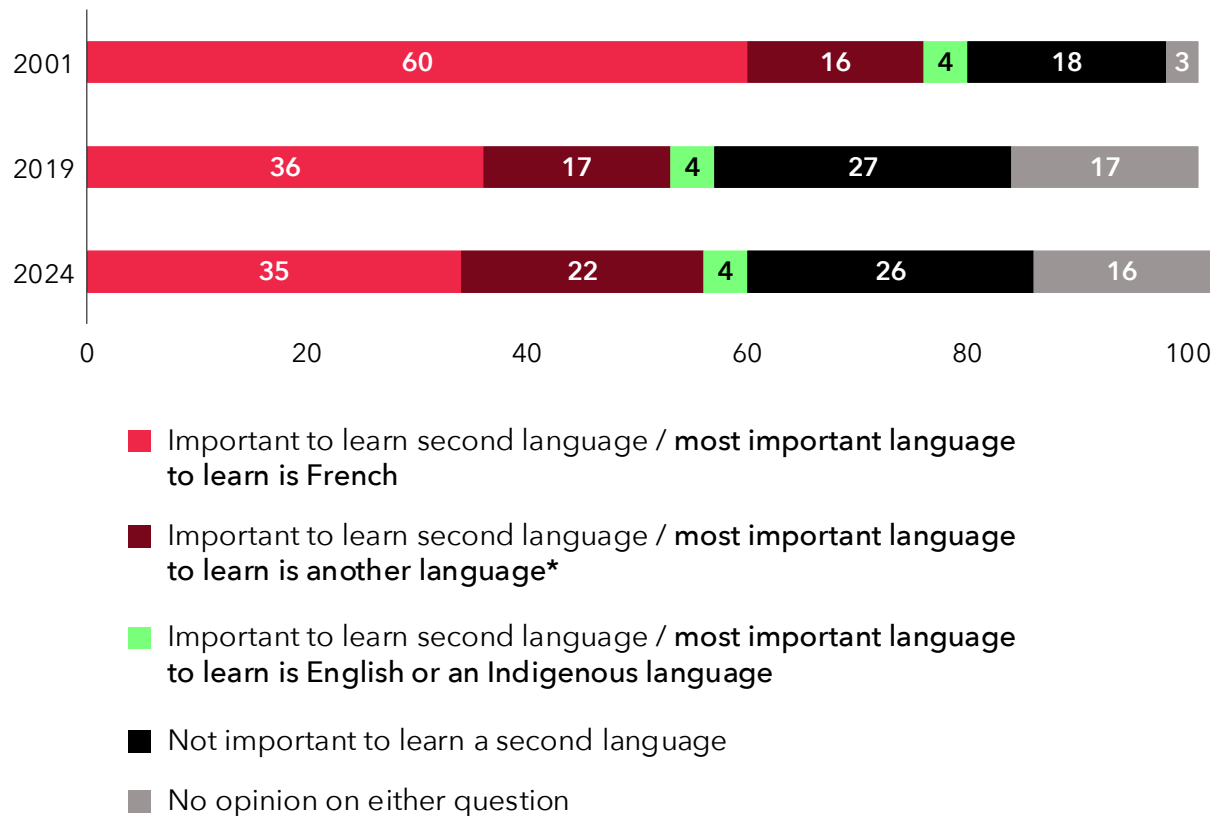
As mentioned, however, this is not the only change: over the same period (since 2001), Canadians have become less likely to agree that it is important for their children to learn *any* second language. Taking into account the whole population outside of Quebec, and not just those who agree that it is important to them that their children learn a second language, the following changes have occurred since 2001:

- the proportion saying that it is important that their children learn a second language and that the most important second language to learn is French has declined from 60 percent to 34 percent;
- the proportion saying that it is important that their children learn a second language and that the most important second language to learn is a language other than English, French or an Indigenous language has increased from 16 percent to 22 percent;
- the proportion saying that it is not important that their children learn a second language has increased from 18 to 26 percent;
- the proportion with no definite opinions on these questions has increased from three to 16 percent, which partly reflects a change in the way the survey was administered.⁹

9 The 2001 survey was conducted by telephone, while the 2019 and 2024 surveys were conducted online. Telephone surveys do not initially offer respondents the option of saying they have no opinion; this response is recorded only when respondents choose not to select any of the opinions mentioned by the interviewer. For this reason, telephone surveys generally produce fewer “don’t know” responses than do online surveys.

FIGURE 9

Children learning a second language: how important, and which one? Canada outside Quebec, 2001 - 2024



Answers may add to more than 100% because some respondents name more than one language.

*"Another language" means a language other than English, French or an Indigenous language

While the proportion expressing their view that it is important for their children to learn French has declined over the past two decades, this is not mainly because there is more interest in learning other languages - it is because there is either less interest in having children learn any language, or less definite opinions on the topic altogether.



Bilingualism and regional resentment

As noted, support for the policy of official bilingualism varies somewhat across regions and among age groups. But two other factors are much more strongly related to opinions about the policy.

The first is perceptions about fairness within the federation, particularly as it pertains to the treatment of Quebec relative to other provinces. Outside Quebec, opposition to bilingualism is higher among those who feel their own province is not treated with the respect it deserves, those who disagree that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province, those who say that the federal government favours Quebec over other regions of the country, or those who say that Quebec contributes less than its fair share to the country.

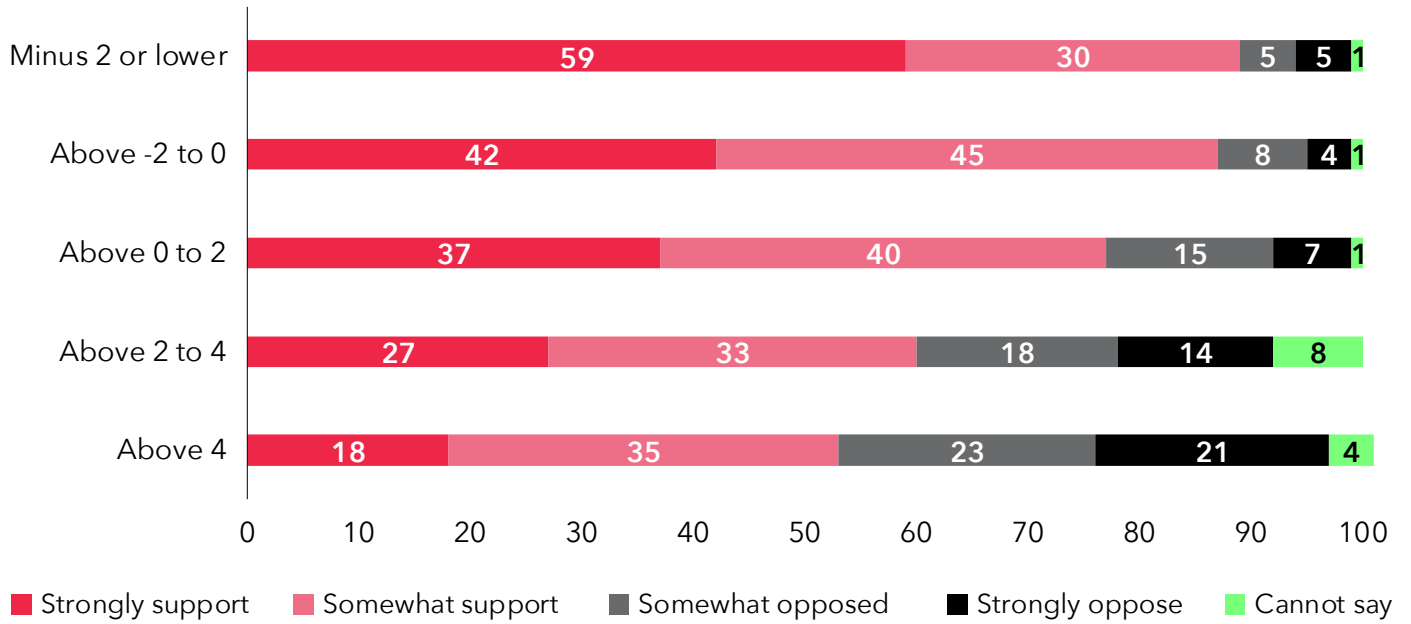
This relationship between views on bilingualism and perceptions of fairness can be illustrated by making use of the survey's resentment index, which combines several questions in the survey related to the treatment of different provinces within the federation. The index provides a concise way of measuring "how resentful or aggrieved Canadians are about the place of their province in the federation."¹⁰ The index maps feelings of resentment on a scale ranging from minus six (least resentful) to plus six (most resentful).

Those with the lowest scores on the resentment index are three times more likely than those with the highest scores to strongly approve of the policy of official bilingualism. Conversely, 43 percent of those with the highest scores oppose the policy, compared to only 10 percent of those with the lowest scores.

¹⁰ The construction of the index is explained in: Charles Breton, Olivier Jacques and Andrew Parkin, *Resentment in the Canadian Federation* (Centre for Excellence on the Canadian Federation, October 18, 2022); <https://centre.irpp.org/research-studies/resentment-in-the-canadian-federation/>.

FIGURE 10

Support for official bilingualism, by resentment index score, 2024

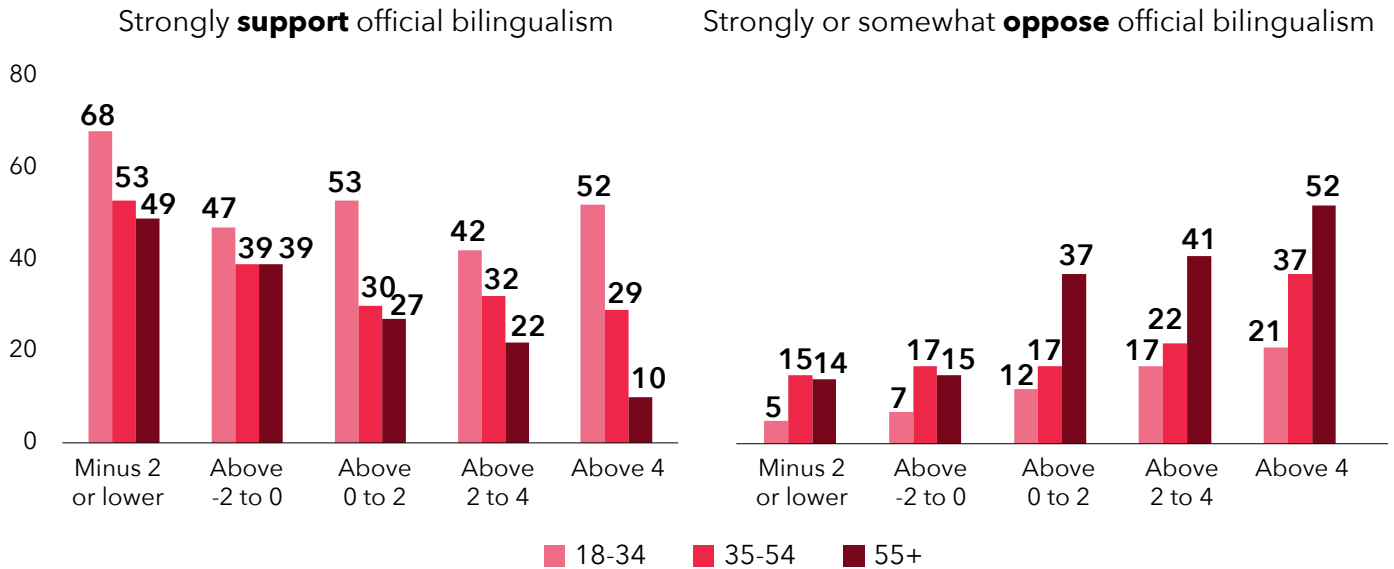


The index maps feelings of resentment on a scale ranging from minus six (least resentful) to plus six (most resentful).

The relationship between opinions on bilingualism and feelings of regional resentment is particularly strong in the case of older Canadians. Among Canadians outside Quebec age 55 and older who have a high score (above 4) on the resentment index, 52 percent oppose official bilingualism.

FIGURE 11

Support for official bilingualism, by resentment index score and age group, 2024, Canada outside Quebec



The index maps feelings of resentment on a scale ranging from minus six (least resentful) to plus six (most resentful).

This relationship between opinions about bilingualism and feelings of regional resentment is important because it suggests that Canadians do not approach the issue of language policy on its own, in isolation from other issues related to the federation. For some Canadians, at least, bilingualism is associated with other federal policies that are perceived to favour Quebec over other regions. Efforts to promote bilingualism can therefore be strengthened by addressing the political context in which opinions of the issue are formed.

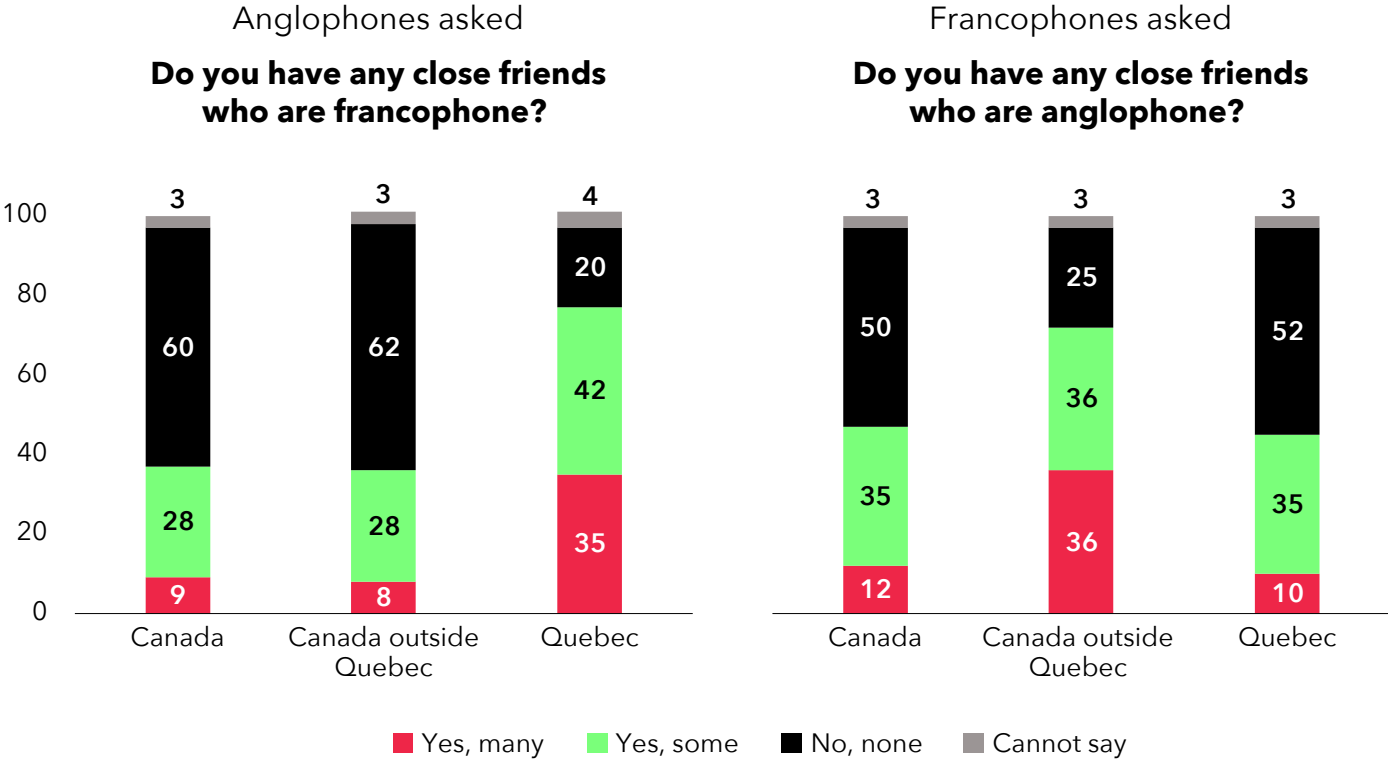
Bilingualism and social connections

The second factor that is strongly connected to support for official bilingualism is the extent of social connections to people who speak French.

The survey asks anglophones and francophones whether they have any close friends from the other official language group. Outside Quebec, eight percent of anglophones say they have many close friends who are francophone, and another 28 percent say they have some. The majority (62%) say they do not have any close friends who are francophone.

FIGURE 12

Do you have close friends from the other official language group?
2024



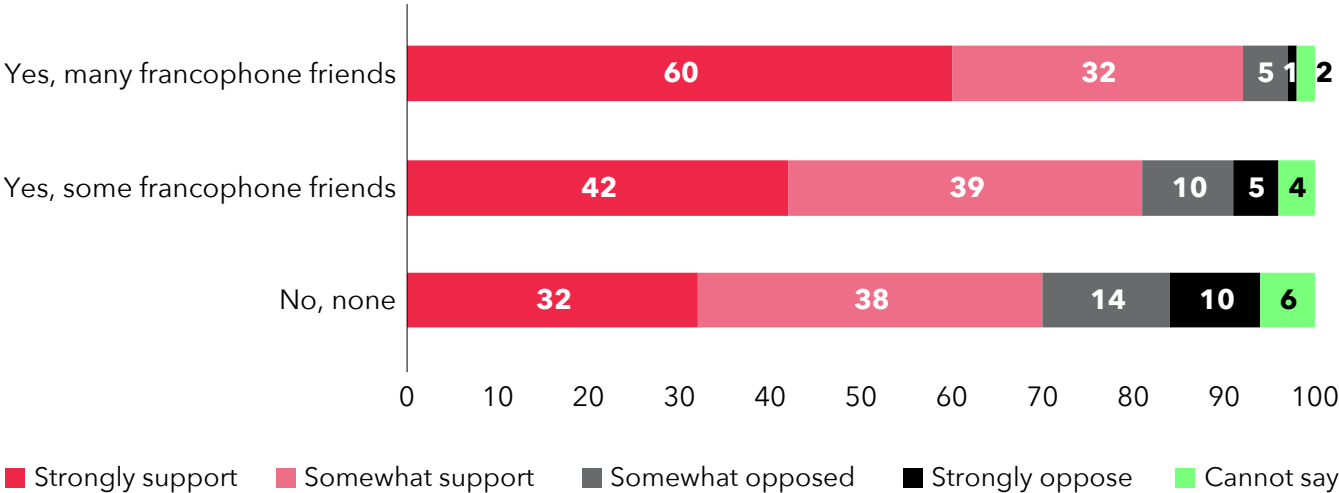
Q85. Do you have any close friends who are [anglophone/francophone]?

The proportion of anglophones with at least some close francophone friends is somewhat higher in Atlantic Canada (45%) and Ontario (38%) than in the Prairie provinces (31%) or B.C. (29%). It is also higher among younger Canadians: outside of Quebec, the proportion with at least some close francophone friends ranges from 46 percent among those age 18 to 34, to 37 percent among those age 35 to 54, to 30 percent among those age 55 and older.

Whether an anglophone has close friends who are francophone is strongly related to their support for bilingualism.¹¹ In fact, strong support for official bilingualism among anglophones outside of Quebec is almost twice as high among those who say they have many close friends who are francophone (60%) as it is among those who say they have no close francophone friends (32%).¹²

FIGURE 13

Support for official bilingualism, by number of close friends from the other official language group, 2024, Anglophones outside Quebec, by number of close friends who are francophone



11 This could be both because people with friends who speak another language are prompted to be more supportive of bilingualism, or because people with a positive view of bilingualism seek out social connections with those who speak another language.

12 In Quebec, francophones who say they have many close friends who are anglophone are also more likely to strongly support official bilingualism, but the subsample in Quebec of francophones with many anglophone friends is relatively small (n=132).



While this relationship between friendships with people who speak the other official language, and support for the policy of bilingualism, is not necessarily surprising, it is worth reflecting on because it draws attention to the social context that shapes opinions about public policies. It also points to the importance of providing opportunities for Canadians from different cultural and linguistic communities to meet one another, including through programs such as student exchanges or sports.

Anglophones outside Quebec who have close friends who are francophone are also much more likely to say that it is important to them that their children learn a second language: 62 percent of those with many close francophone friends say this is very important, compared to 33 percent of those with some close francophone friends, and 21 percent of those with none.

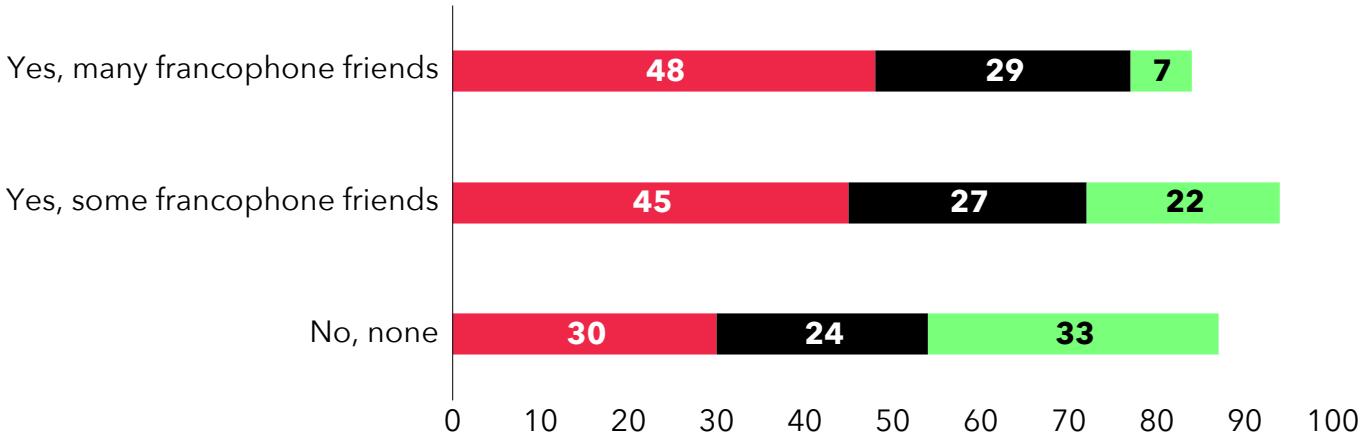
Anglophones outside Quebec who have close friends who are francophone are also much more likely to say that it is important to them that their children learn a second language: 62 percent of those with many close francophone friends say this is very important.

It is notable, however, that, for anglophones outside Quebec, having close francophone friends is associated with a greater interest in having their children learn any second language, and not only in having them learn French. Among those with many close francophone friends, 48 percent say that it is important for their children to learn French, but a significant proportion (29%) say that it is important for them to learn a second language other than French - and only seven percent say it is not important for their children to learn a second language.

Among those who have no close francophone friends, not only is the proportion who say that it is important for their children to learn French smaller (30%), but the proportion who do not think it is important for their children to learn a second language at all is much bigger (33%).

FIGURE 14

Learning a second language, by number of close friends who are francophone, 2024, Anglophones outside Quebec, by number of close friends who are francophone



- Important for children to learn a second language & that language should be French
- Important for children to learn a second language & should be a language other than French
- Not important for children to learn a second language

Answers do not add to 100% because some respondents did not express an opinion on one or both questions.

In short, among anglophones outside Quebec, having close friends who are francophone is associated not only with a greater interest in English-French bilingualism, but a greater interest in the ability for their children to speak any language other than English.



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