

Quebecers support religious symbols ban, but are divided on how – or even whether – to enforce it

People in Quebec evenly divided over firing those who would violate Bill 21

May 8, 2019 – With public hearings underway in Québec's National Assembly on Bill 21 – the proposed law that would ban public employees in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols while on the job – Quebecers remain supportive of the proposed law but are largely unsure how such legislation could or should be enforced.

This, according to a new, national public opinion poll from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute, which finds nearly two-thirds of Quebecers (64%) supporting the bill overall, though certain symbols are [still considered more acceptable](#) for public employees to wear than others.

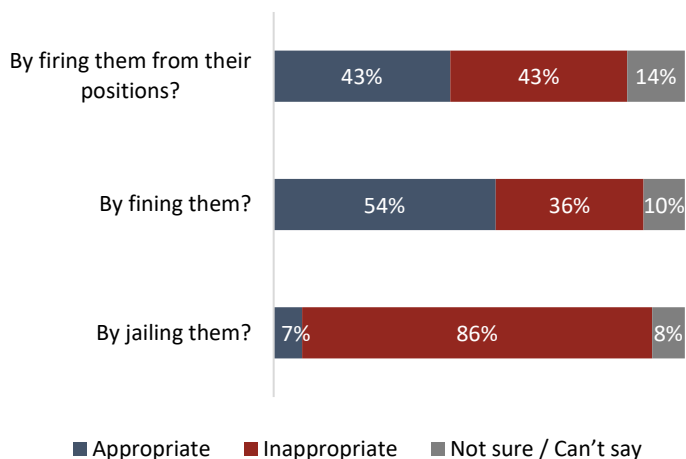
Despite significant support for the proposed law, there is less consensus over how to enforce it. Equal numbers in Québec say firing public employees for failing to obey the law would be appropriate (43%) and inappropriate (43%).

Further, a small majority of Quebecers say fining violators of the proposed law would be appropriate (54% say it would be), but a wide majority (86%) agree that jail time would be an inappropriate punishment for a public employee who disobeys Bill 21.

More Key Findings:

- As was the case when ARI asked [last October](#), slightly more than half of Quebecers view wearing a crucifix (57%) or a Star of David (51%) as acceptable for public employees. Seven other symbols are more likely to be seen as unacceptable than acceptable, with burkas, niqabs, and kirpans drawing the most opposition
- While nearly two-in-three Quebecers (64%) support Bill 21, those living elsewhere in Canada are more likely to oppose such a law in their own provinces (52% do) than to support it (37%)

In your opinion, would it be appropriate or inappropriate for Québec to punish those who disobey this law ... (Québec respondents, n=400)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from April 26 – 30, 2019 among a representative randomized sample of 1,525 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#), including 400 Québec residents. For comparison purposes only, probability samples of these sizes would carry margins of error of +/- 2.5 and +/- 4.9 percentage points, respectively, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- Almost half of Quebecers (48%) say Bill 21, if passed, would have a negative impact on relations between ethnic groups in the province. Roughly half that many (25%) say it would have a positive impact in this arena

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part 1: Lack of clarity on enforcement

Should violators be fired?

For the better part of three centuries, the Catholic Church carried a [heavy role](#) in Québec society, overseeing education, hospitals and other social services in Francophone communities as well as promoting the survival of French language and culture in a province increasingly dominated by Anglophone business elites. During the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, when Québec modernized and vastly expanded its state bureaucracy, there was a strong anti-clerical movement to [secularize public institutions](#). This historical experience continues to inform Quebecers' unique attitudes toward religion, and the principle of *laïcité* (state secularism) represents a cornerstone of public policy in the province.

In this context, various "reasonable accommodation" bills have been proposed in the last decade, by all three major parties in Québec, to determine the extent of outward religious expression that should be permitted in public institutions. Bill 21, introduced by François Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, is seen by many as a [compromise from previous positions](#), only applying a ban on religious symbols to public servants in positions of authority rather than on all state employees. Nevertheless, [critics charge](#) that it would violate individuals' freedom of expression and unfairly target people of non-Christian faiths.

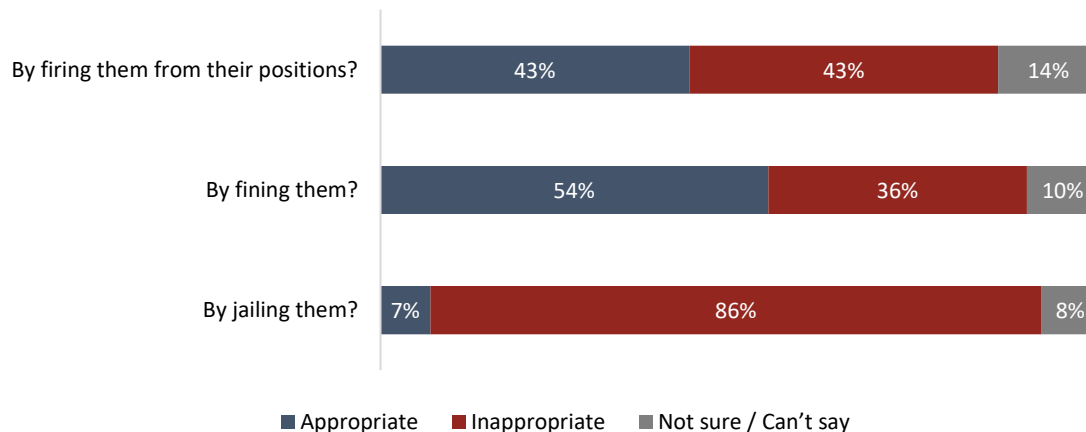
The bill seeks to prohibit certain public employees from wearing religious symbols while conducting their duties, but it doesn't prescribe any specific consequences for individuals or organizations that ignore such a prohibition – as [several school districts](#) and [municipalities](#) in the Montréal area have promised to do.

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Asked what would be an appropriate consequence for those who broke the proposed law, Quebecers are divided. They overwhelmingly agree (86%) that it would be inappropriate to jail those who disobey the law, but they are evenly split (43% appropriate vs. 43% inappropriate) when the question turns to firing such employees:

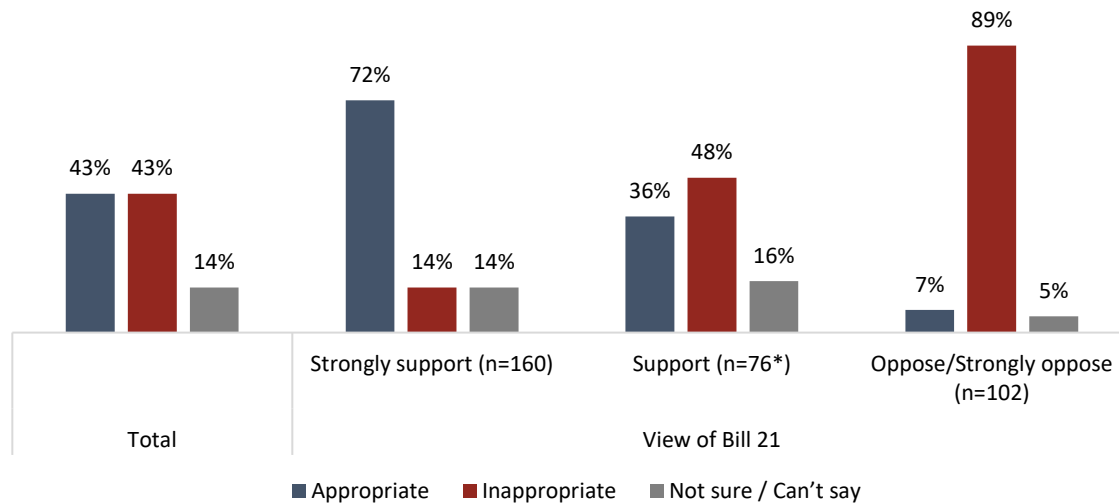
In your opinion, would it be appropriate or inappropriate for Quebec to punish those who disobey this law ... (Quebec respondents, n=400)



There is a split in opinion between the 44 per cent of Quebecers who “strongly support” the proposed law and the rest of the population that either opposes it (28%) or offers moderate support (21%). (Overall support for the bill will be discussed in greater detail shortly.)

Those who strongly support Bill 21 are more likely to say dismissal from their positions is an appropriate punishment for those who break the law once it’s enacted. Opinion splits significantly among moderate supporters on the question of firing employees:

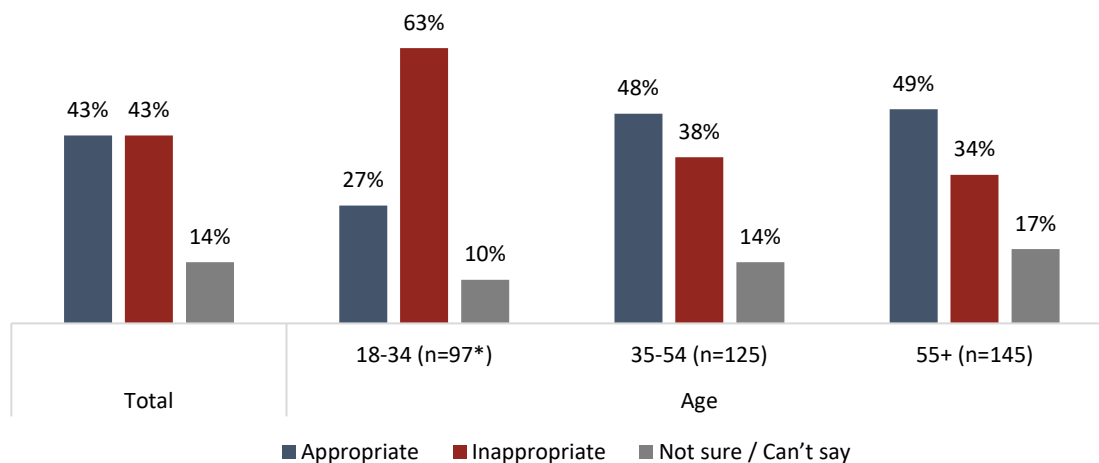
In your opinion, would it be appropriate or inappropriate for Quebec to punish those who disobey this law ... By firing them from their positions? (Quebec respondents, n=400)



*indicates small sample size

These divisions between strong supporters and everyone else may reflect, in part, the composition of those groups. Younger Quebecers are more likely to oppose the bill – or support it moderately. These groups are also more likely to say firing employees for violating the law would be inappropriate (see comprehensive tables for greater detail).

In your opinion, would it be appropriate or inappropriate for Quebec to punish those who disobey this law ... by firing them from their positions? (Quebec respondents, n=400)



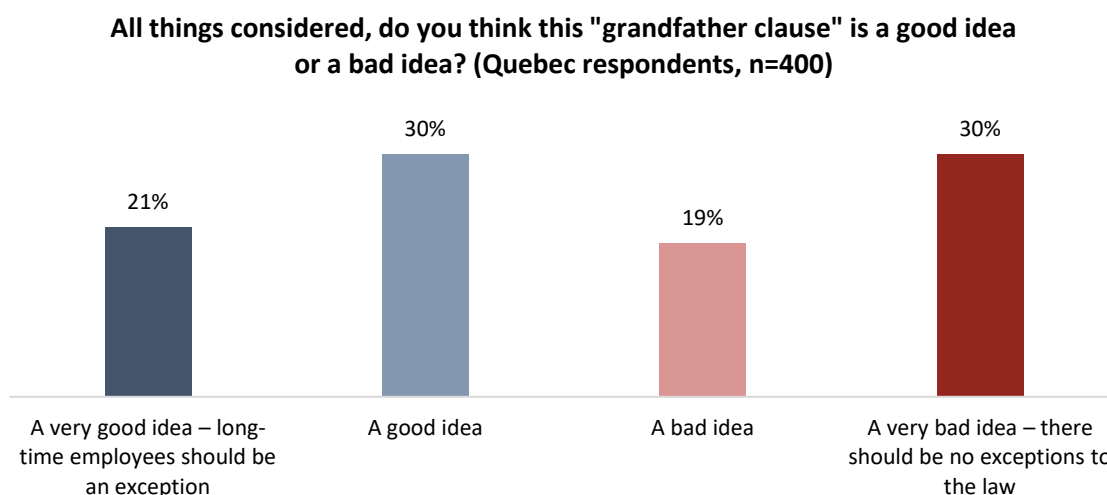
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Divisions around Bill 21's 'grandfather clause'

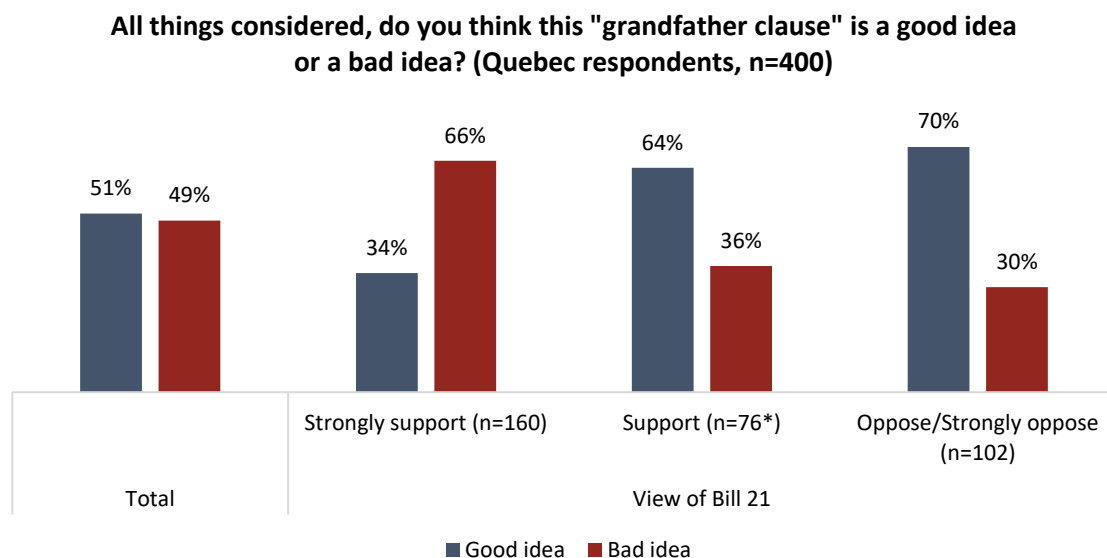
Bill 21 contains a controversial "grandfather clause," which would allow current public employees to continue wearing religious symbols as long as they remain in their current positions. New hires and those who change jobs would be required to adhere to the ban.

Legault has characterized this "grandfather clause" as further indication of his government's moderate approach to secularism, but it has been attacked by Bill 21 supporters who see it as creating inequalities between employees.

Half in Quebec (51%) describe the provision as a good idea, while the rest (49%) say it's a bad one:



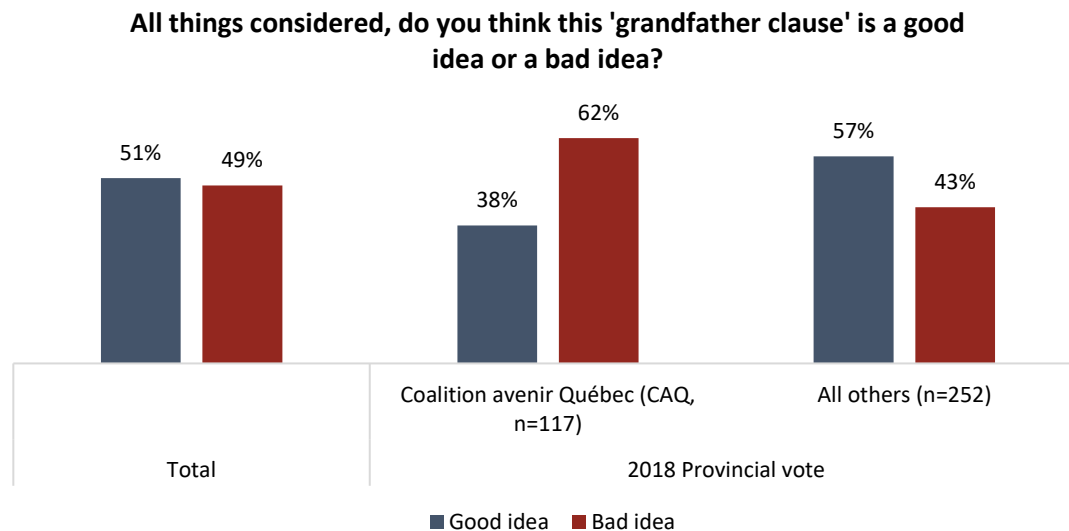
Again, respondents who strongly support the bill diverge in opinion with the rest of respondents on this question:



*indicates small sample size

Notably, the grandfather clause divides past voters for Legault’s own party. Some 62 per cent of those who cast ballots for the CAQ last year say the grandfather clause is a “bad idea.”

The clause gains more support from those who didn’t vote for the CAQ – a group that includes many who oppose Bill 21 to begin with. This finding arguably vindicates Legault’s description of the bill as a political compromise, though perhaps not in the way he intended.



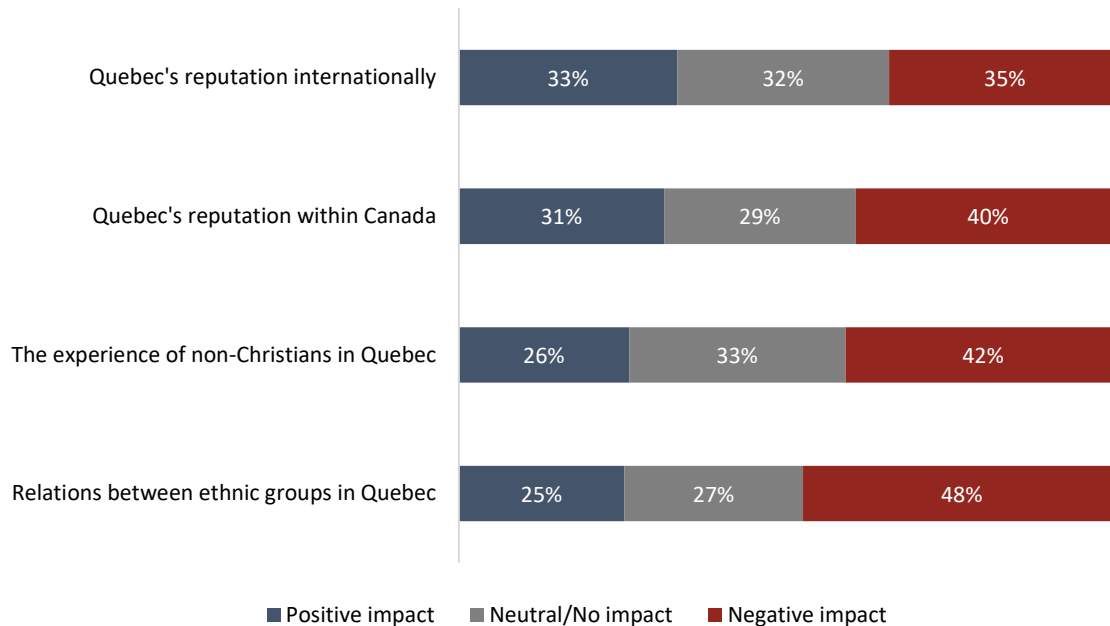
*indicates small sample size

Social and political effects of Bill 21

Quebecers are not especially worried about the potential effects of passing Bill 21 on their province’s reputation within Canada or abroad, but close to half (48%) do believe the bill would have a negative impact on relations with ethnic minorities in Québec.

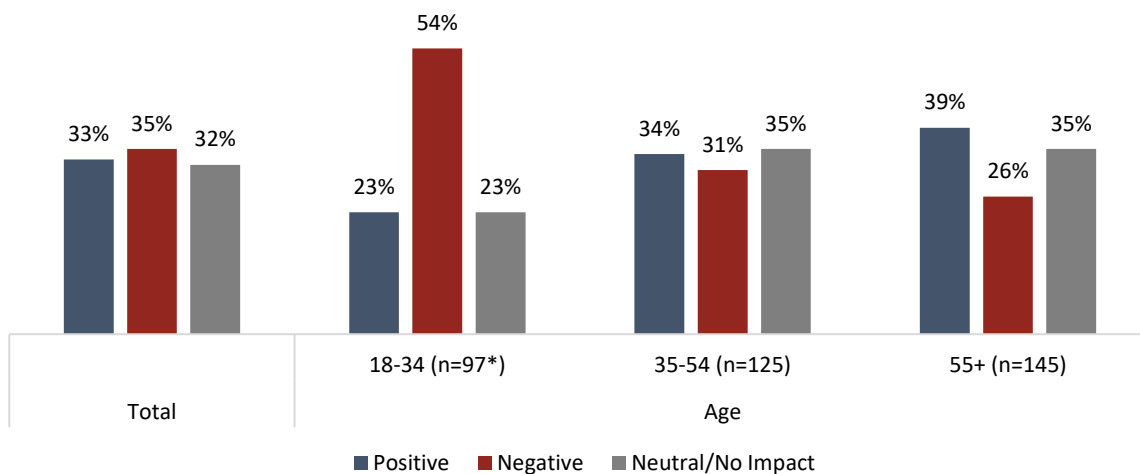
Indeed, as seen in the following graph, the perception that the bill would have a negative impact outpaces the perception that it would have a positive one on each of the four items canvassed. This is largely a product of the bill’s opponents being united in their belief that the impacts of the bill will be negative, while those who support it are divided between believing the impact will be positive and believing there will be no impact at all (see comprehensive tables).

What effect, if any, do you think this proposed law will have on each of the following? (Quebec respondents, n=400)



While age divides opinion on many of the questions asked in this survey, it's notable that younger Quebecers are nearly twice as likely as older groups to say the proposed law would have a negative impact on the province's international reputation:

What effect, if any, do you think this proposed law will have on Quebec's reputation internationally? (Quebec respondents, n=400)



Part 2: Support in Québec, opposition elsewhere

Different Views Based on Type of Symbol

Efforts by previous Québec governments to tackle the issue of state secularism and religious accommodation have enjoyed widespread popular support within the province, even as they drew condemnation from the rest of Canada.

In 2017, the Angus Reid Institute found [overwhelming support](#) for the previous Québec Liberal government's Bill 62, which sought to require people providing or receiving government services to do so with their faces uncovered.

In comparison, the two-in-three Quebecers (64%) who support the current CAQ government's Bill 21 – which goes further in terms of the religious symbols affected but stops short of placing limitations on the general public's interactions with the state – has considerably less support.

Support for Bill 21 is more in line with [what Angus Reid Global found in 2013](#) when asking Quebecers about the Parti Québécois (PQ) government's proposed Charter of Values.

That said, support for a law of this type is only part of the story. Underlying respondents' support for or opposition to a Bill-21-style law where they live is a nuanced set of views regarding specific religious symbols.

Please indicate whether you think public employees should be allowed to wear each of these religious symbols while on the job.			
(Percentage saying "should be allowed" shown)			
(unweighted sample sizes)	Total (1525)	Region	
		Québec (400)	Rest of Canada (1125)
Crucifix	80%	57%	87%
Star of David	78%	51%	86%
Kippa	72%	45%	80%
Turban	68%	41%	76%
Nun's habit	68%	42%	77%
Hijab	66%	41%	74%
Kirpan	25%	15%	29%
Niqab	20%	7%	25%
Burka	17%	5%	21%

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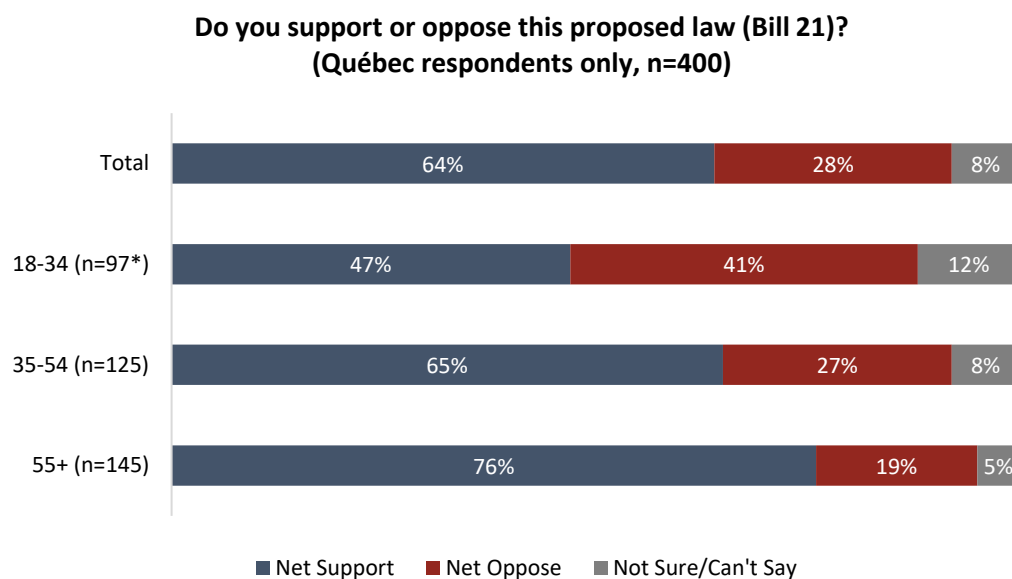
As seen in the preceding table, Québec residents are less likely than those elsewhere in Canada to say public employees should be allowed to wear each of nine religious symbols and garments canvassed in this survey. That said, even in Québec, some symbols are viewed as more acceptable than others.

Head coverings such as a Jewish kippa, a Sikh turban, a Muslim hijab, and a Christian nun's habit – are allowable in the eyes of fewer than half of Quebecers, while they are widely accepted outside of Québec. The Kirpan, Niqab and Burka are not seen as

These findings are quite similar to what the Angus Reid Institute found when it asked the same question [last October](#). In both surveys, respondents were shown a picture of each symbol while being asked if it should be allowed or not.

Two-thirds support in Québec, other provinces opposed

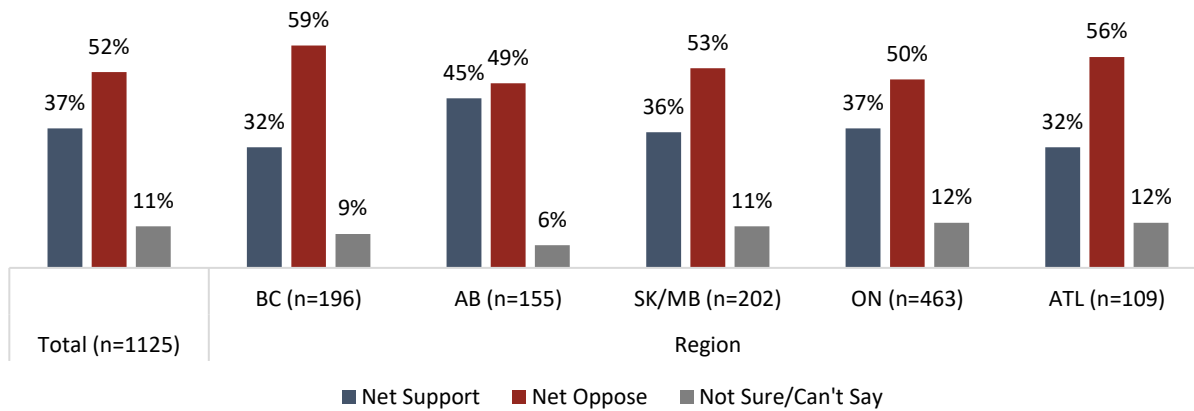
Age is the biggest demographic divide when it comes to support for Bill 21. Among Quebecers ages 18 to 34, fewer than half (47%) support the bill, while support rises to at least two-in-three among older generations:



*indicates small sample size

Appetite for a similar ban outside of Québec is weaker, while roughly one-in-ten (11%) are unsure whether they would support or oppose legislation in their province to limit religious symbols in public institutions.

Would you support or oppose your own provincial government implementing such a law? (Non-Québec respondents, n=1125)



*indicates small sample size

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, click [here](#).

For detailed results in Québec by federal political spheres, 2018 provincial election vote, and other demographics, click [here](#).