

Simon's appointment underscores linguistic divides as French Quebecers say "non" to non-French speaking GG

Choice of English and Inuktitut speaking Governor General hailed outside Quebec

August 11, 2021 – Mary Simon made history earlier this summer when she became Canada's first Indigenous governor general.

In a moment of national reflection catalysed by the on-going confirmation of unmarked graves at residential schools, the appointment of an Indigenous governor general is [heralded by many as an important move](#).

Despite most agreeing with her appointment, Simon—bilingual in English and Inuktitut—has come under fire from Francophones due to her lack of fluency in French.

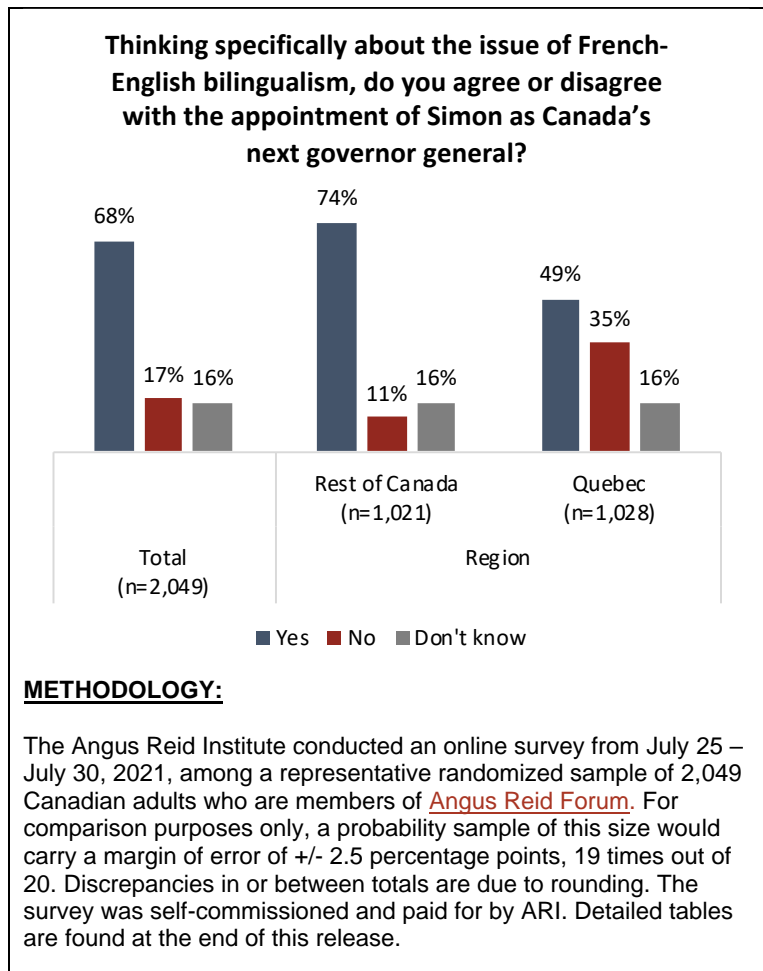
While the latest data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds seven-in-ten (68%) Canadians agree with her appointment—especially through the lens of bilingualism—these data belie important regional and linguistic divides.

Fuelled by unhappiness over Simon's lack of fluency in French, Quebecers are divided. Half (49%) of those surveyed agree with her appointment while over a third (35%) disagree.

There is a further linguistic divide within Quebec. When it comes to those who agree with Simon's appointment, 81 per cent of Anglophones in the province are on board compared with 40 per cent of Francophones.

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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INDEX

Part One: Most Canadians agree with new GG's appointment

- Indigenous, visible minorities opinions
- CPC voters split by region

Part Two: Quebec's two linguistic solitudes

Part One: Most Canadians agree with new GG's appointment

If Canadians remain unenthused by the scandal-prone outgoing governor general — [with many even opting to eliminate the position altogether](#) — they appear to have quickly warmed to the newly appointed Mary Simon.

Born in Kangiqsualujuaq, Nunavik (Quebec), Simon has [championed Indigenous causes](#) over the course of her storied career—which has seen her hold executive positions on the Inuit Circumpolar Council and become the first Inuk to hold an ambassadorial position. Acclaimed nationally and internationally for her work in the Arctic and on advocating for Indigenous rights, Simon was previously awarded both the Order of Canada and the Ordre national du Québec.

While fluent in both English and Inuktitut, she was tapped for the job despite lacking one traditional skillset: fluency in French.

Following her appointment there were more than 400 complaints lodged with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and an official investigation was opened. In a highly unusual move, the Commissioner weighed in on the debate directly, [commenting](#) that decision makers could “respect official languages while being inclusive.” Since the investigation was opened, the number of complaints [has exceeded 1,000](#).

According to [data from the 2016 census](#), 75 per cent of Canadians spoke English as their preferred official language while 22 per cent spoke French. Within Quebec the split is 85.4 per cent French and 13.7 per cent English. If the demographic weight of Francophones in the country is declining, the rate of bilingualism is on an upward trend and recently reached its highest rate ever of 17.9 per cent.

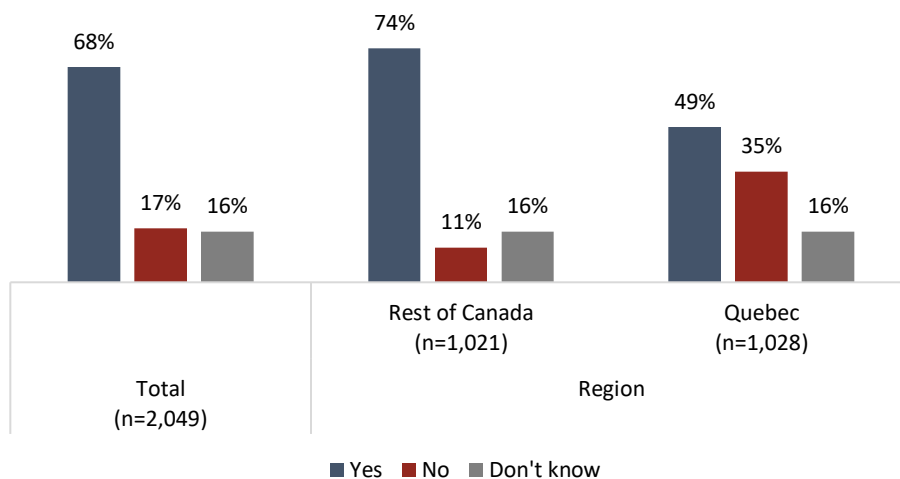
When it comes to Indigenous languages, Inuktitut is the [second most spoken](#) in the country with almost forty thousand reporting that they speak it at home.

The appointment of Simon—at least through the lens of bilingualism—is largely popular outside Quebec. Indeed, three-quarters of Canadians in the rest of the country say this was the right choice, while just one-in-ten disagree (11%). That said, in Quebec, while half still agree with the appointment on the basis of English and French capability (49%), a much larger minority disagree (35%):

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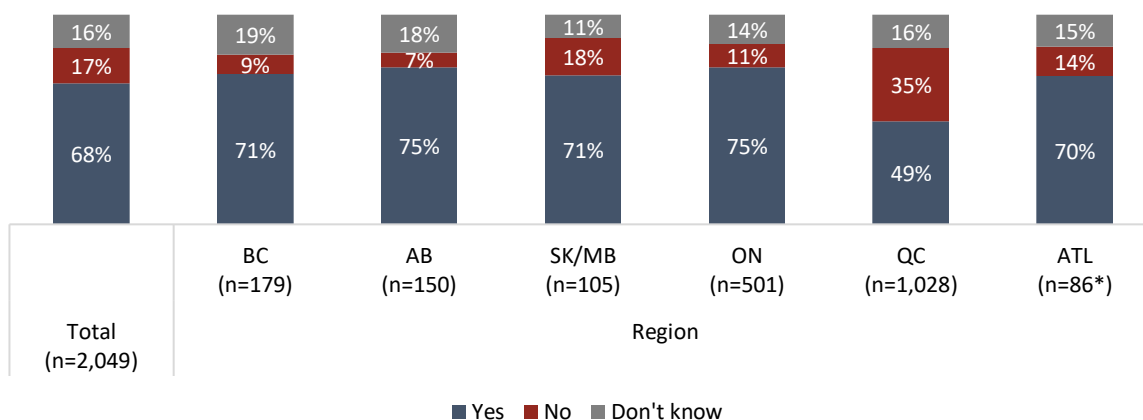
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Thinking specifically about the issue of French-English bilingualism, do you agree or disagree with the appointment of Simon as Canada's next governor general?



With the exception of Quebec, most agree with Simon's appointment. At least seven-in-ten in all other regions feel positively about her getting the job when it comes to the English-French angle:

Thinking specifically about the issue of French-English bilingualism, do you agree or disagree with the appointment of Simon as Canada's next governor general?



**Small sample size, interpret with caution*

Approval for her appointment are similar across age, gender, and educational attainment ([see detailed tables](#)).

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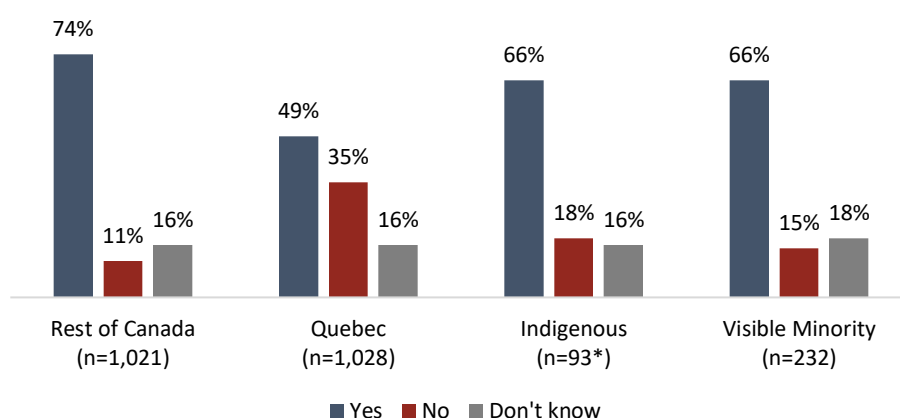
Indigenous, visible minority opinions

In a year during which questions of racism and reconciliation have increasingly come to the fore of national debates, many have celebrated the importance of having an Indigenous woman taking up residence in Rideau Hall.

Mary Simon [explicitly made this connection](#) during the installation ceremony and emphasized that “reconciliation is a way of life and requires work every day” — sentiments [echoed](#) by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Most respondents who identify as Indigenous or as a visible minority have few qualms with Simon’s lack of fluency in French. Two thirds (66%) among each group say they agree with the new governor general’s appointment.

Thinking specifically about the issue of French-English bilingualism, do you agree or disagree with the appointment of Simon as Canada’s next governor general?



**Small sample size, interpret with caution*

CPC voters split by region

Canadians are, to a certain degree, split along partisan lines on this question. The majority of those who previously voted for the Liberals or the NDP approve of Mary Simon’s appointment despite her not being officially bilingual — both in Quebec and the rest of Canada.

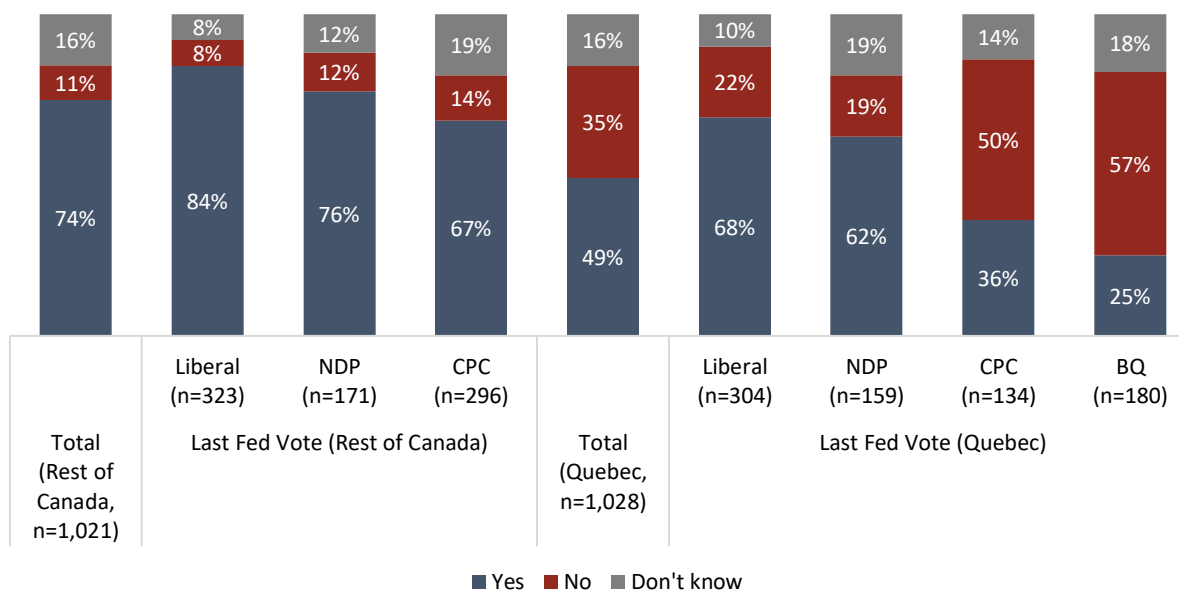
Those who cast their ballots for the Bloc Québécois are the staunchest opponents, with almost three-in-five (57%) disapproving of Simon’s appointment as an English and Inuktitut speaker.

Past Conservative voters are, for their part, of two minds about the new choice governor general through the lens of language. Two thirds (67%) of those outside of Quebec agree with the choice of Mary Simon, while fully half (50%) of Conservative voters within la belle province disagree.

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Thinking specifically about the issue of French-English bilingualism, do you agree or disagree with the appointment of Simon as Canada's next governor general?



Part Two: Quebec's two linguistic solitudes

Despite being from Nunavik (the Inuit homeland in Northern Quebec), and having been awarded the province's highest distinction, many Quebecers remain unconvinced Mary Simon is the best choice for governor general due to her lack of fluency in French.

Support is cleaved along linguistic divides in the only majority Francophone province in Canada. Those who grew up speaking French at home are nearly split down the middle with 40 per cent supporting Simon's appointment and 42 per cent opposing it. By contrast, all other linguistic groups in Quebec express strong agreement with the new hire at Rideau Hall.

Even if Simon is not currently fluent in French, she has since publicly committed to learning the language. Others have pointed out that the federal day school Simon attended as a child only taught English (while operated separately from the residential school systems, federal day schools were run by many of the same organisations).

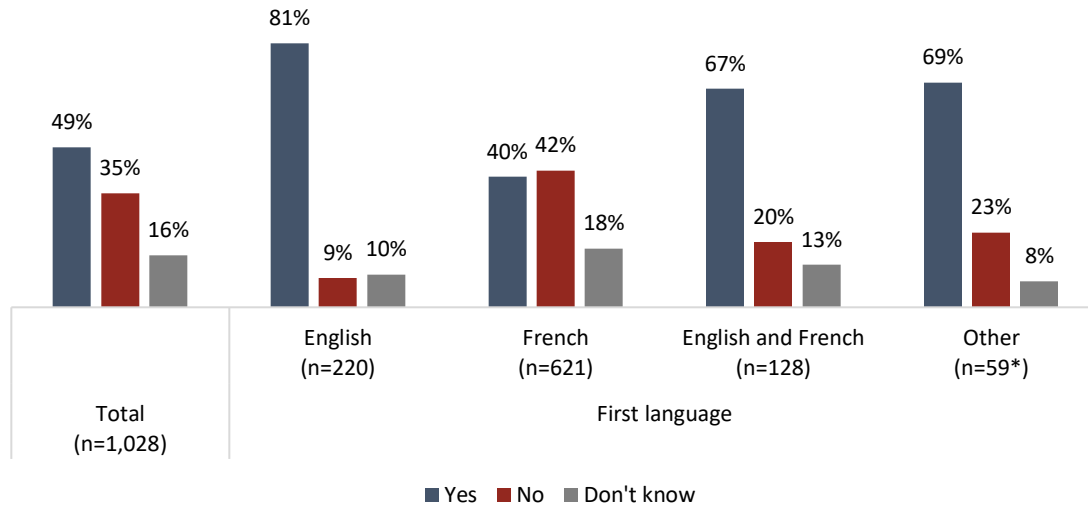
Among those critical of Simon's appointment, many go to lengths to clarify that they are supportive of increased Indigenous representation but lament that it is being positioned as a zero-sum game with linguistic diversity.

As a popular columnist wrote in *La Presse*, "We can rejoice that a colonial institution such as that of the governor general be assumed by an Inuk and deplore that someone who doesn't speak French was chosen. Two things can be true."

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Thinking specifically about the issue of French-English bilingualism, do you agree or disagree with the appointment of Simon as Canada's next governor general? (Quebec)



**Small sample size, interpret with caution*

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