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Representations of the Quebec nation through reactions to Bills 21 and 96: an analysis of editorials and Op-eds in English-language media

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This article examines the representations of the Quebec nation in English-language media, specifically focusing on editorials and Op-eds which discuss Bill 21 An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State and Bill 96 An Act Respecting French, the Official and Common Language of Quebec. The study explores the perspectives expressed by members of the dominant English-speaking group in response to these nation-building policies introduced by Quebec public officials between 2019 and 2023. Specifically, it asks: How do editorials and Op-eds in established English-language newspapers represent the Quebec nation in response to Bill 21 and 96? In doing so, the research uncovers how the Quebec nation and its nation-building enterprises are portrayed in the media by examining four established newspapers: the *Globe and Mail*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and the *Calgary Herald*. Mobilizing a qualitative and inductive critical content analysis approach, it highlights core common themes and key normative and regional variations in the perspective advanced by the media outlets.

KEYWORDS

Quebec, Canada, representations, nationalism, minority-majority, secularism, French language, media

1 Introduction

The study of nations and forms of nationalism in various political systems have been extensively explored (for an overview, see Connor, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1990; Ozkirimli, 2008; Miscoiu, 2010; Smith, 2013; Dufour, 2019). Yet, there are still many perspectives that have been understudied from which new insights on the evolution of nations and nationalism can be learned. Minority forms of nationalism, their ideologies, political dynamics, mobilizations within civil society, and demands within political systems have proven to be of great analytical value to reenergize this field of study over the past three decades (Keating, 2001; Gagnon, 2014; Laniel and Thériault, 2021). Researchers that have fuelled this trend in the literature have focused mostly on power relations in federal systems following claims by national minority movements, making the relationship between minority and majority forms of nationalism a crucial area of interest in contemporary political science (Guibernau, 2013; Mathieu and Guénette, 2018; Lecours, 2021; Gagnon, 2022).

However, one aspect that has received far less attention is the problem of competing representations of minority national communities by majority groups in the public space in multinational polities (see Rocher and Carpentier, 2022). As the current special issue highlights,

this topic is particularly relevant in multinational federal systems, such as Canada or Belgium and even the United Kingdom and Spain, where regional institutional autonomy provides a structure and a political arena for minority groups to seek recognition of their distinctiveness from their significant others with which they share a modern state.

The broad question the special issue on “Representation of Minority Nations in Multinational Federal States” is addressing is whether the majority group’s portrayal of minority national communities is based on a radical critique of the latter’s identity representation and political claims. Does this critique serve to reinforce the social norms and identity representations of the majority group, which defines itself in opposition to its national minority? In this article, we address this puzzle by exploring whether negative discursive representations and critical viewpoints of Quebec in mainstream media are used to differentiate and inferiorize the minority nation in Canada, and whether they also play a role in defining the identity of the majority political community.

This article aims to investigate the representations of the Quebec nation in English-language media, specifically focusing on editorials, Op-eds, and opinion letters discussing two of Quebec’s recent nation-building policies introduced and implemented in the recent past: Bill 21, An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State, and Bill 96, An Act Respecting French, the Official and Common Language of Quebec. These bills were widely discussed and debated in the media and public sphere both in Quebec and Canada (see [Celis et al., 2020](#); [Ferretti and Rocher, 2020](#); [Cardinal et al., 2023](#); [Rocher, 2023](#)). We are interested in interpreting how the Quebec nation is portrayed by the dominant English-speaking group in response to these key policies. In doing so, we analyze and compare perspectives from four established newspapers: the *Globe and Mail*, the *Montréal Gazette*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and the *Calgary Herald*. The research employs a qualitative critical content analysis approach to uncover underlying meanings, ideologies, and power dynamics present in the analyzed texts. Overall, our analysis builds on a total of 839 newspaper articles published between March 2019 and August 2023.

Our objective is not to argue against or in favour of either Bill 21 or Bill 96, but to observe and map out how they are represented in English-Canada’s mediatic sphere. We ask: How do editorials, Op-eds, and opinion letters published in established English-language newspapers approach and criticize Bill 21 and Bill 96? In doing so, how do they represent the Quebec nation? Do the negative critical viewpoints carry any specific representations of the Quebec nation? Similarly, do they convey any specific image of the majority group in Canada as they express an opinion on these nation-building policies promoted in Quebec?

The article opens with a contextual section, in which we present Bills 21 and 96 and situate them within the longstanding and ongoing political debates in *La Belle Province* and Canada more broadly. Second, it outlines our methodological approach and research design. Third, it presents our empirical findings. Fourth, it moves to a discussion of the results, and finally we offer some concluding remarks.

2 Context matters: Bill 21, Bill 96, and Quebec as a *société distincte*

Roughly 250 years ago, in June 1774, the Quebec Act was introduced by British colonial authorities. For a variety of

reasons—none of which include pure benevolence—London decided to abandon what one might call “the assimilationist” strategy conveyed with the passing of the 1763 Royal Proclamation ([Laforest et al., 2014](#)). Instead, a new institutional path was designed, in which the French Catholic population in North America would be recognized as forming some sort of a *société distincte* in the British Empire ([Boulanger-Bonnely, 2022](#)), although that expression only came about two centuries later ([Laforest, 2004](#)). Be that as it may, the Quebec Act, 1774, is still part of Canada’s complex constitutional architecture, and represents “the first legal milestone of the Quebec nation’s deep roots in a distinct culture” in what would become Canada ([Brouillet, 2005](#): 111; see also [Neatby, 1972](#); [Lawson, 1989](#); [Bouchard, 2000](#)).

At various degrees of intensity, throughout the next 250 years, political and social actors have fought to preserve what still makes Quebec a distinct minority national community in the midst of Canada (see [Balthazar, 2013](#)). In many respects, these actions were oriented towards celebrating and protecting Quebecers’ (and, before that, French Canadians’) singular cultural heritage in North America ([Dumont, 1993](#); [Labelle and Rocher, 2004](#)).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the re-imagining of Canada as a civic, bilingual and multicultural society ([Igartua, 2011](#)) collided with Quebec’s own process of identity, social, and political reconfiguration known as the *Révolution tranquille* ([Bouchard, 2000](#)). In the process, Quebec gradually developed an intercultural citizenship regime ([Gagnon, 2000](#); [Mathieu, 2023, 2024](#)), reinforcing the idea that it represents a francophone minority nation to be differentiated from the Canadian political community as a whole ([Gagnon and Iacovino, 2006](#)). As a result, language, rather than religion, became the new core identity marker for Quebecers and the bearer of the culture fuelling the idea that they represent a “distinct society” ([Zubrzycki, 2016](#)).

To avoid any conceptual confusion, Quebec’s model of interculturalism may be understood as a response to Canada’s policy of multiculturalism (first adopted in 1971). While both models are rooted in the philosophy of pluralism, the former is aimed at protecting and preserving the culture of both the majority—which, in the case of Quebec is also a *minority* political community within the Canadian federation—and ethnocultural minorities; as for the latter, in principle it does not recognize *per se* any *majority* culture. Although discussing at length the distinctive features associated with Quebec’s model of pluralism vis-à-vis multiculturalism goes beyond the scope of this article, this may be summarized by invoking four key characteristics ([Gagnon and Iacovino, 2006](#); [Rocher, 2015](#); [Mathieu, 2023](#)):

- 1 Interculturalism shares similarities with multiculturalism in rejecting assimilationist approaches, advocating for recognition politics, and facilitating the fair integration of immigrants into host societies.
- 2 Interculturalism diverges from multiculturalism, as it is specifically tailored for minority societal communities within multinational democracies, while multiculturalism often assumes a singular *demos* within a “normal nation-state.”
- 3 Interculturalism fosters a “moral contract” centered on active citizenship, participation, and public deliberation for all members, nurturing a shared political culture through ongoing intercultural dialogue.

4 Interculturalism is more transparent than multiculturalism regarding intergroup power dynamics, acknowledging the state's non-neutrality toward diversity and suggesting managing this reality by legitimizing cultural majority preferences (itself a minority in the case of minority nations).

After the 1995 referendum on Quebec's independence, politics in Quebec shifted from core constitutional debates to issues related to identity politics and "fundamental values".¹ Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, the focus was on "reasonable accommodations"—leading to the establishment of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences in 2007 by the Quebec government in response to public discontent concerning reasonable accommodations, co-chaired by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor—and secularism or, more precisely, *laïcité* (Lamy, 2015; Mathieu and Laforest, 2016). A series of bills were then introduced in the National Assembly Québec: Bill 195, Law on the Identity of Québec (2007); Bill 391, An Act to Assert the Fundamental Values of the Québec Nation (2009); Bill 94, An Act to Establish Guidelines Governing Accommodation Requests within the Administration and Certain Institutions (2011); and Bill 60, *The Charter of Quebec Values* (2013). The latter received wide support from intellectuals and political actors who advocate for a form of "jacobinisme à la québécoise" or French-inspired republican conception of society, such as public figure Mathieu Bock-Côté or emeritus professor Jacques Beauchemin. Be that as it may, these proposed bills failed to become law. But the political debate surrounding these issues did not stop.

After the Liberal Party of Quebec formed a majority government as a result of the 2014 general election, it took it upon itself to legislate on this matter and, on October 18, 2017, Quebec's National Assembly adopted Bill 62, An Act to Foster Adherence to State Religious Neutrality. The bill was meant to act as a middle ground position, which failed to satisfy most political and social actors invested in that ongoing debate. In turn, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) decided to dedicate significant energy and resources to this topic during the 2018 general electoral campaign, in the aftermath of which it was invited by the Lieutenant-governor of the province to form a majority government.

As promised during the campaign, the new CAQ government made sure the Quebec National Assembly would promptly adopt new pieces of legislation over the issues related to *le vivre-ensemble*, Quebec identity and values, and secularism. This led to the introduction of Bill 21, An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State on March 28, 2019, which was given assent on June 16, 2019. Similar to the PQ's Bill 60 *Charter of Quebec Values*, Bill 21 advances a French-inspired republican conception of *laïcité* (see Baubérot and Milot, 2011; Mathieu and Laforest, 2016) to establish a secular state by prohibiting

the display of conspicuous religious symbols in the provincial public administration (understood broadly), to ensure religious neutrality in the public sector. Specifically, it restricts the wearing of religious symbols by certain public employees identified as being in a position of authority, such as police officers, prison guards, judges, but also teachers and school principals. This normative vision of secularism is clearly different from the Anglo-Saxon, liberal approach one may associate with the United Kingdom or the United States of America (see Amiraux and Koussens, 2014).

As such, Bill 21 represents an attempt to redefine the symbolic place of religion in the public sphere. In doing so, it echoes the difficult relationship many Quebecers from the dominant cultural background have with religion in general, and Catholicism specifically, which is associated with an era recalled as "the Great Darkness." This period corresponds mostly with the Quebec provincial governments led by Maurice Duplessis (1936–39 and 1944–59) where no clear line of demarcation existed between religious and political powers. As a result of this, many criticized what they perceived as being the Catholic Church becoming all-powerful in both public and private spheres. Then, in the midst of the "Quiet Revolution" (1960s to early 1980s), society and institutions in Quebec experienced a most rapid movement of secularization (see Paquet and Savard, 2021), which can be seen as a prelude to contemporary debates over *laïcité* and identity politics (Lamy, 2015).

Without any doubt, Bill 21 is connected to these debates. As such, it was presented to the public by the CAQ government as a nation-building device, aimed at fostering integration of newcomers and minorities within the common, French public culture and institutions. Another piece of legislation that was also presented as such is Bill 96, An Act respecting French, the Official and Common Language of Québec, which received assent on June 1, 2022. It must be stressed that both Bill 21 and Bill 96 were adopted after preemptively invoking Section 33 of CA 1982, commonly known as the notwithstanding clause, which allows Parliament and provincial legislatures to declare that "the Act or provision thereof shall operate notwithstanding a provision included in section 2 or sections 7 to 15 of [the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms]" (Section 33. (1), CA 1982). This can be invoked for a renewable period of 5 years.

Bill 96 amends "Bill 101," the Quebec Charter of the French Language initially adopted in 1977, which has revealed to be one of the most important pieces of nation-building legislation Quebec ever produced (Paquette, 1996; Poirier, 2016). Perhaps one of the most defining pieces of legislation that encapsulate the spirit of the "Quiet Revolution," Bill 101 became a powerful identity marker as it contributed to switching the focus from religion towards language to define "who is a Quebecer."

Bill 96 aims to strengthen the status of the French language in Quebec and to expand the reach of the 1977 Charter of the French language. Its provisions include measures to promote the use of French in education, the workplace, and the public sphere, with an emphasis on reinforcing French as the primary language of communication for people living in Quebec. It also enhances language requirements for businesses, government services, and immigration, with the goal of preserving and promoting the French language and culture in Quebec. In addition to that, it amends the Constitution Act, 1867, by inserting the following after section 90: "90Q.1. Quebecers form a nation," and "90Q.2. French shall be the only official language of Quebec. It is also the common language of the Quebec nation."

1 The 1995 referendum on Quebec independence emerged in the context of two failed attempts at recognizing formally Quebec's distinct status within the Canadian constitutional order: the Meech Lake Accord (1987–1990) and the Charlottetown Accord (1992). These are often referred to as the "constitutional rounds" aimed at satisfying Quebec's historical demands (in addition to some demands of the Indigenous peoples as far as the second round is concerned).

As anyone studying Canadian politics and Quebec-Canada dynamics might have presumed, the introduction and coming into force of both bills came with its fair share of criticisms within Quebec, but also everywhere else in Canada (Celis et al., 2020). These critical viewpoints of the nation-building policies were expressed through a series of mediums in the Canadian public sphere, such as traditional media outlets.

3 Theoretical approach and methodology

Multinational democracies are polities in which at least two national communities coexist within the realm of a single sovereign state. Hence, democracies such as Canada are not only composed “of many cultures (multicultural) but also of two or more nations (multinational)” (Tully, 2008: 185). To avoid any conceptual ambiguity, it is important to clarify first that a “nation” shall refer to a *societal community*, that is “a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (Guibernau, 2013: 47; see also Kymlicka, 1995). Inevitably, multinational democracies are home to at least one *minority* nation. In a nutshell, there is no fundamental distinction between “majority” and “minority” nations (cf. Gagnon, 2014); that is, the former is not necessarily “civic” and “individualistic” whereas the latter would be “ethnic” and “collectivistic” (cf. Greenfeld, 1992: 9–12; Lluch, 2014). These two types of national communities mostly differ from one another as a result of historical contingencies: some have become the bearer of a sovereign state while others did not. Henceforth, and although additional nuances could be introduced (see Miscoiu, 2010), minority nations simply characterize such national communities whose inhabitants do not represent the majority of the population within a given sovereign state.

Irrespective of whether they are minority or majority nations, such political communities tend to (re)produce specific “social imaginaries” and collective representations that contribute to the overall sense of belonging shared by their respective members (Bouchard, 2014). Because of this, nations are commonly understood to be first and foremost “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2006). In turn, editorials and Op-eds contribute to shaping the contours of who is the national “we” and what it stands for (Lacombe, 2007; Lacasse, 2022). However, in a federal system such as Canada, where important regional cultures exist alongside linguistic and cultural divides (Wesley, 2011; Brie and Mathieu, 2021), there exists a plurality of “public spheres” and expressions of said “we” (Marland et al., 2012). That is why this article compares the editorials, Op-eds, and opinion letters published in four established media, which all have distinctive traditions, roots, and, as a result, differentiated typical normative viewpoints on key public and political issues.

The selection of specific newspapers for analysis in this research project provides valuable insights into the diversity of perspectives within the English-speaking communities of Canada and how they represent the Quebec nation in response to Bills 21 and 96. Each of the four newspapers selected represents a specific geographical region and readership, which adds depth and nuance to the research. The

four newspapers selected are the Globe and Mail, the Montreal Gazette, the Winnipeg Free Press, and the Calgary Herald.²

The Globe and Mail is the most widely read newspaper in the country. Being a Toronto-based media outlet, it is often associated with the values and interests of “Central Canada.” Toronto is Canada’s largest city and a major economic and cultural hub. As such, the Globe and Mail carries significant influence and reaches a pan-Canadian readership. It is widely regarded as one of Canada’s most prominent national newspapers, providing coverage and analysis on various issues with a broader scope. Analyzing representations of Quebec in this newspaper allows us to explore how the majority English-speaking group across different regions of Canada perceives and responds to Quebec’s nation-building policies. Given its wide readership, the perspectives presented in the Globe and Mail could reflect the views of a diverse range of Canadians, and its portrayal of Quebec’s actions may impact public opinions and debates at a pan-Canadian level.

The Montreal-based the Montreal Gazette, on the other hand, caters primarily to the Anglophone community within Quebec. Montreal is the largest city in the only majority French-speaking province. It is also a significant cultural and economic center for English-speaking Quebecers. As such, the Montreal Gazette has a distinct focus on local news and issues relevant to Quebec’s Anglophone community (Lacasse, 2022). Analyzing representations of the Quebec nation in this newspaper provides valuable insights into how English-speaking Quebecers perceive their own province’s nation-building initiatives. The Montreal Gazette’s portrayal of Quebec’s actions in relation to Bills 21 and 96 may reflect the concerns, interests, and values of the Anglophone community within Quebec in a way that would be overlooked in other Canadian newspapers. This analysis allows for a more localized and specific understanding of how Quebec’s nation-building initiatives are perceived by those directly impacted by them.

The Winnipeg Free Press mostly serves readers from Manitoba. As one of the long-standing English-language media outlets in the Prairies, it offers unique perspectives on local and pan-Canadian issues. Manitoba, just as the other Prairie provinces, have their distinct historical, cultural, and political contexts (Wesley, 2011), and the Winnipeg Free Press’s representation of the Quebec nation may provide insights into how the nation-building policies of Quebec are perceived and contextualized in Manitoba. Analyzing this newspaper’s viewpoints can offer valuable information about how regional dynamics influence the perceptions of Quebec’s actions and how they intersect with broader Canadian debates.

Finally, the Calgary Herald, based in Calgary, Alberta, serves as a prominent newspaper within the western region of Canada. Alberta is known for its unique political and economic landscape, often

² While we would have liked to complete this selection of newspapers by adding media outlets from the Atlantic provinces and British Columbia, doing so would have increased significantly the overall number of articles to analyze. Unfortunately, we lacked the resources to proceed as such. While there is no reason to believe adding these eastern and western media outlets would have impacted in any significant way our conclusions, we invite colleagues to replicate our study by looking at newspapers such as *The Chronical Herald*s and *The Vancouver Sun*.

characterized by a distinct regional identity and a strong focus on resource-based industries. The representation of the Quebec nation in the *Calgary Herald* offers a glimpse into how Western Canadians, specifically those in Alberta, perceive Quebec's nation-building initiatives in the context of Bills 21 and 96. The newspaper's coverage may reflect the interests, values, and concerns of a region that has historically held a different political and economic outlook from other parts of the country, but at the same time has often been aligned with Quebec when it comes to favoring institutional asymmetry in the federal system. Analyzing the *Calgary Herald's* viewpoints allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how regional dynamics and specific regional identities contribute to the broader conversation surrounding Quebec's actions and their impact on national unity and diversity in Canada.

By examining editorials, Op-eds, and opinion letters in these four newspapers, we aim to identify core common themes and key normative variations in the perspectives advanced by each outlet. Differences in representations are expected due to the newspapers' diverse readerships, locations, and traditions. Understanding how these newspapers portray Quebec's nation-building policies in response to Bills 21 and 96 contributes to a deeper comprehension of the complexities surrounding identity, nationalism, and power dynamics within Canada's multinational federal democracy. It also highlights the role of media in shaping public opinions and debates on critical sociopolitical issues, especially those that involve the relations between majority and minority political communities.

Concretely, this article mobilizes a qualitative approach rooted in the tradition of critical content analysis (see [Krippendorff, 2013: 27–30](#); [Neuendorf, 2017](#)). Basic software like Word and Excel have been used to compile the data and proceed with the descriptive analysis.

Critical content analysis is a basic, yet proven qualitative research method used to examine texts, such as articles, speeches, or media content, with a critical and interpretive lens. It has the ambition to probe into the underlying meanings, ideologies, and power structures present in the texts ([Wodak, 2004](#)). From a methodological perspective, our approach involves the following key steps.

First, the team of two researchers collected Op-Eds, editorials, and opinion letters from the *Globe and Mail*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and the *Calgary Herald* that made reference to Bill 21 and/or Bill 96. "Bill 21" and "Bill 96" had to be included in the title or body of the articles to be initially selected. The timeframe corresponds to the period between which Bill 21 was first introduced in the National Assembly of Quebec (March 2019), and the moment we started collecting data (August 2023).

In the second step, texts that mentioned Bill 21 and/or Bill 96 but failed to offer any explicit criticism (positive or negative) were removed from the selection. These include texts that strictly mentioned Bill 21 and/or 96 for contextual purposes and failed to make arguments that were related to the legislation. For an article to be excluded, both researchers had to explicitly agree that no substantial argument or criticism related to Bills 21 and 96 were being advanced. The final number of entries used for analysis was 839, from which 631 were published in the *Montreal Gazette*, 154 in the *Globe and Mail*, 28 in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and 26 in the *Calgary Herald*.

To code the selected entries, we created an inductive coding framework to identify and categorize specific themes, concepts, or patterns within the texts. Concretely, both researchers first scrutinized a random sample of 35 texts and attempted to identify typical and

recurring (positive as well as negative) critical viewpoints over Bills 21 and 96. The researchers adopted a flexible approach to assess whether a criticism was rather negatively oriented or positively oriented, i.e., they were not looking for keywords from a finite lexical field. Most of the time, the assessment was quite intuitive, and whenever there was a doubt, the researchers coordinated to make sure they reach a consensus. After the initial analysis of the random sample, 5 analytical categories were identified, 4 of which were negatively oriented. This served as an initial basis to set up an original analytical framework.

The entries were then systematically and chronologically assessed by both researchers, allowing for double coding. Meetings were held each time a new 100 articles were coded to address any inconsistencies in coding and to resolve incongruencies. As the coding progressed, a total of 14 analytical categories were defined and refined. The first 9 encapsulate negative viewpoints or criticisms of either Bills 21 or 96, while the remaining 5 are positively oriented. The "negative" categories are as follows: N1—Racism/Discrimination; N2—Social Divisions in Quebec; N3—Social Divisions in Canada; N4—Problematic use of Section 33 (The Notwithstanding Clause); N5—Access to Services; N6—Economic Impacts/Labour Shortage; N7—Lack of Federal Leadership; N8—Addressing Inexistent Problems; N0—Undefined. The "positive" categories are as follows: P1—Protection of French Language/Quebec Culture; P2—Democracy and Majority Rule; P3—Asymmetry and Federalism; P4—Strict *Laïcité* as a Form of Universalism; P0—Undefined. We will present these categories at length in the next section.

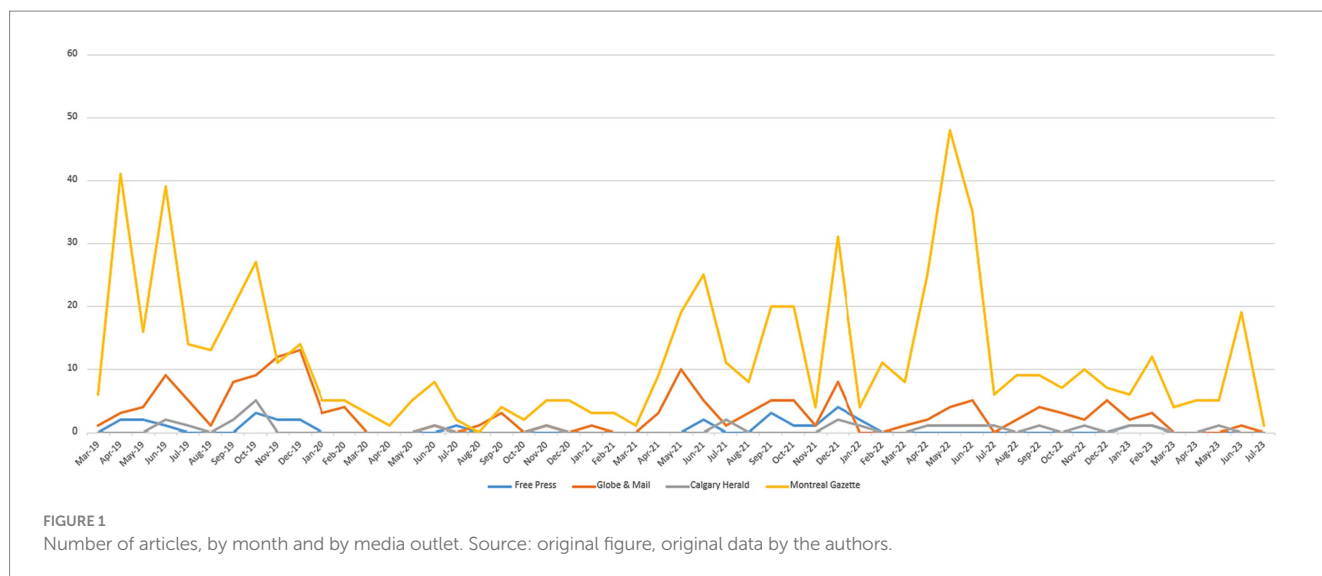
The analytical categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive with regards to the 839 entries: a single text could present multiple negative criticisms belonging to more than one category. In that case, the same text would appear in more than one analytical category. However, no entries were both positive and negative at the same time. For instance, in an Op-ed published in the *Montreal Gazette* on April 12, 2019, Lionel Perez provided a criticism of Bill 21 that fits three analytical categories (N1, N2, and N8): "[...] Bill 21 is unjust—legislating to resolve a non-existent problem, legitimizing institutional discrimination while trampling on fundamental rights and creating an unnecessary social divide [...]."

Entries were coded using the following logic: name of the journal (MG for *Montreal Gazette*, GM for the *Globe and Mail*, FP for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, CH for the *Calgary Herald*), date of publication, alphanumeric ranked number of the article within that newspaper during that month (A, B, ...x). Using Lionel Perez's article, an example of that would be: MG_Apr-19-12A.

4 Findings

Throughout the period we cover (March 2019 to August 2023), we observe a few peaks in the number of articles that have been published on the topic of Bill 21 and Bill 96 (see [Figure 1](#)). These peaks correspond to specific events that impacted public and political debates (see [Rocher, 2023](#)). Here is how we make sense of these trends.

The initial peaks in April and June 2019 are related to the introduction of Bill 21 on March 28, 2019, and its adoption on June 16, 2019. The upsurge in September and October 2019 is a consequence of the 2019 federal election (held on October 21, 2019). After a gradual decrease, there is an impressive rise in May and June 2021. This period corresponds to the introduction of Bill 96 in Quebec's National Assembly (May 13, 2021). Perhaps even more



significant was the delivery of Justice Jean-Marc Blanchard's (Superior Court, Quebec) long-awaited ruling on Bill 21 on April 20, 2021, which was quite critical of many of the Bill's provisions. Many articles commented on Blanchard's decisions and connected this with the introduction of Bill 96.

The peak in September and October 2021 coincides with the electoral campaign and the federal election (held on September 20, 2021). More specifically, the leaders' debate on September 9, 2021, fuelled significant debate as people reacted to the controversial question directed at the Bloc québécois' leader, Yves-François Blanchet by host Shachi Kurl: "You deny that Quebec has problems with racism, yet you defend legislation such as Bills 96 and 21 which marginalize religious minorities, anglophones, and allophones. Quebec is recognized as a distinct society, but for those outside the province, please help them understand why your party also supports these discriminatory laws."

After a rapid decrease in November, attention on Bills 21 and 96 sparked again in December 2021. This is related to two main events. In mid-December, Brampton mayor and public figure Patrick Brown invited other Canadian municipalities to join his campaign to help fund legal challenges of Bill 21. At the same time, Fatemeh Anvari, who was a Grade 3 teacher at an English-speaking elementary school in Montreal, gave a series of interviews to the media after she was reassigned to another, non-teaching position because of her decision to wear a hijab.

The final peaks are related to the adoption and assent of Bill 96 (May 24, 2022, and June 1, 2022, respectively), the debates surrounding the 2022 provincial election in Quebec (October 3, 2022), and debates in the Montreal Gazette about the forthcoming school year and staff shortages in schools (Summer 2023), which many viewed as a direct consequence of Bills 21 and 96.

4.1 Negative viewpoint categories

4.1.1 N1—racism/discrimination

This category includes entries that provide criticism of Bills 21 and/or 96 on the grounds of what is perceived to be racism and

discrimination. This would manifest itself both through explicit arguments such as: "Bill 21 is quite frankly, nothing more than institutionalized discrimination" (MG_July-20-24), and implicit suggestions of discrimination: "This reminds me of my father's experience in Germany in 1936, when he was told that because of his partly Jewish background he could not work as a doctor" (MG_Apr-19-06F). Many articles also comment on how the law is "aimed almost entirely at Muslim women who wear hijabs and niqabs" (MG_July-19-19) and how "most Sikh men, for example, cannot simply choose to stop looking like Sikh men from 9 am to 5 pm" (MG_June-19-05B). This demonstrates the criticism that the legislation disproportionately impacts women and religious minorities.

In turn, many condemn the government for targeting some religions while continuing to protect Catholic-Christian traditions: "Curiously, a large number of those supporting Bill 21 want the crucifix in the National Assembly to remain in the very room where this bill is to become law. The hypocrisy is staggering" (MG_Apr-19-02B). In the public debate, this has also been known as the "cathol-laïcité" critique: "What they want is the selective secularism that's been called 'Cathol-laïcité': secularism for others, but not for themselves" (MG_Mar-19-30C). Another group of articles in this category also point to the potential harms incurred on Indigenous peoples and their languages, specifically in reference to Bill 96: "Indigenous leaders have every right to reject Bill 96 and to denounce it as a continuation of the history of colonialism" (MG_May-22-12A).

319 out of the 839 articles collected (38%) made some form of reference to racism and discrimination, making N1 by far the largest category.

4.1.2 N2—social divisions in Quebec

Entries under this category denounce the legislation because they believe it will "severely weaken Quebec's social cohesion" (MG_May-22-28C). On the one hand, many suggest that it is meant to purposefully undermine the place of anglophones within Quebec:

"The CAQ government has shown itself only too willing to run roughshod over the constitutional rights of English-speaking Quebecers". (MG_Jan-21-02B)

“I already felt that the English-speaking people in Quebec have been left to die a slow death. Now, with Bill 96, I feel this death will be greatly accelerated”. (MG_May-22-20A)

Some articles also make comments that describe a growing regional division and schism between the population in Montreal, where the majority of Quebec’s English-speakers and religious minorities reside, and the rest of Quebec: “Indeed, the demographic, political and cultural chasm between Montreal and the rest of Quebec is wider than ever” (GM_Nov-19-09).

253 out of 839 articles (30.2%) made remarks that fit into this category.

4.1.3 N3—social divisions in Canada

This category includes criticisms that suggest the legislation will create divisions in Canada as a whole and will “separate Canada out of Quebec” (MG_Feb-22-26B). This includes references to Quebec’s rejection of Canada’s approach to multiculturalism and Canadian values of diversity and inclusion:

“Quebec’s secularism bill (Bill 21) is an attack on Canadian values of multiculturalism and religious freedom. This is a stain on Canada’s wonderful history of inclusivity and celebration of cultural differences. Simply put, this bill is extremely un-Canadian and must be condemned in the strongest possible terms”. (FP_June-19-24)

“The spirit of inclusiveness jostling through the rest of Canada has been stopped dead in its tracks at the Quebec border”. (GM_June-19-20C)

Some criticisms also link the legislation to separatist sentiments: “We should not make it easy for the Coalition Avenir Quebec government to pass laws like Bill 96 and create unequal citizens within Canada. If that’s their goal, they should do it the old-fashioned way and separate from Canada first” (MG_June-21-26B).

80 out of 839 articles (9.5%) were included in this category.

4.1.4 N4—use of Section 33 (the notwithstanding clause)

Entries in this category disapprove of the Quebec government’s use of the notwithstanding clause to partially shield Bills 21 and 96 from judicial review. Some references are specifically critical of the pre-emptive use of the clause: “the pre-emptive use of the override is an affront to liberal democracy” (MG_Nov-22-22), while others contain more general suggestions that its use is inappropriate because it “makes minorities even more vulnerable to the whims of a government in power” (MG_Nov-22-12). Significant criticism is also focused on the frequency of its use: “But there is also Ontario, which appears to be in some sort of a race with Quebec for who can invoke the notwithstanding clause most often” (GM_Dec-22-01). Some argue that the use of s. 33 is indicative of the government’s admission that the legislation is an affront to human rights:

“The law also clearly violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. The Legault government effectively acknowledges as

much, which is why it took the extreme step of invoking both charters’ notwithstanding clauses”. (GM_Dec-21-22)

181 of 389 articles (22%) offered negative criticism of the use of s. 33.

4.1.5 N5—access to services

Responses in this category focus on how the legislation will impact an individual’s ability to access services, including “access to education, to health and social services, to the courts and to government services and information in English” (MG_Sept-22-29). Many statements reveal a serious concern about access to healthcare:

“I wonder, as an anglophone under Bill 96: Would hospital staff take the time to understand my needs and communicate my medical advice properly? Especially because of the nursing shortage, they might have more time-sensitive tasks”. (MG_Sept-21-25B)

The majority of entries in this category are related to Bill 96 and its restriction of the English language. 64 out of 839 articles (8%) express concerns about access to services.

4.1.6 N6—economic impacts/labour shortage

Entries in this category discuss the economic impacts of Bills 21 and 96. This includes the legislation’s impact on the labour shortage within Quebec, specifically the loss of qualified teachers and personnel in public administration: “Imagine a province with a teacher shortage turning down competent professionals because of their identity, culture and beliefs” (MG_Sept-19-03). Criticisms also reference the impact of this legislation on industry and business, suggesting that “this legislation would make it more difficult to do business in Quebec and to attract talent to our province” (MG_Feb-22-03A) and that “this type of bad publicity will hurt the province in the eyes of potential investors” (MG_Oct-22-26). It also includes criticism that the new legislation will lead to an exodus of young people and qualified professions from Quebec:

“By the time these two bills work their way through the court system, I expect many people will have already left Quebec to seek employment elsewhere, and many immigrants with potential to enrich our province will have already chosen the greener and more tolerant pastures of Ontario”. (MG_May-22-28A)

102 out of 839 articles (12%) fall into this category.

4.1.7 N7—lack of federal leadership

This category includes entries that condemn the Canadian federal leadership for their lack of intervention in Bills 21 and 96. Lack of federal intervention may refer to failure to openly condemn the legislation or failure to initiate legal challenges: “Our leaders should be decrying this law from the rafters, when not otherwise supporting the ongoing legal fight against it” (MG_Aug-19-29). Many responses are pointed directly at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, but many also include the leaders of other federal parties and members of parliament. Many of these criticisms accuse federal leaders of prioritizing Quebec votes over the responsibility to intervene:

“Our national political leaders could not run away faster from this issue. They’re scared of losing votes”. (CH_Sept-19-28)

“Our spineless federal leaders are scared spitless of ‘offending’ the voters in Quebec”. (CH_Oct-19-02A)

151 of 839 articles (18%) made negative comments about the lack of federal intervention.

4.1.8 N8—addressing inexistent problems

These responses suggest that the legislation is unnecessary, heavy-handed, or based on unsubstantiated fears or concerns; “a solution in search of a problem” (GM_Dec-21-22). For Bill 21, these criticisms suggest that religious symbols do not threaten secularism: “the law is so clearly unnecessary ... no one thinks they are living in a theocracy because a local police-officer wears a Sikh turban, or a teacher wears a hijab” (GM_Apr-21-22B). For Bill 96, criticisms suggest that the use of English is not a threat to the French language, or that “you have to work pretty hard to find data suggesting French is in decline at all” (CH_May-22-13).

107 out of 839 articles (13%) were sorted into this category.

4.1.9 N0—undefined

This category includes all entries (14 out of 839: 1.7%) that express a negative viewpoint, but could not be sorted into one of the above categories. This includes general statements of discontent with the legislation.

4.2 Positive viewpoint categories

4.2.1 P1—protection of French language/Quebec culture

Entries in this category contain positive evaluations of Bills 21 and 96 based on their objective to protect the French Language and/or Quebec culture, which is recognized to be somehow “fragile” and in need of protection: “I believe there are more Quebecers who support Bill 21 than are willing to admit it. I do not believe they are racists, but they are afraid. They fear losing their identity” (MG_Apr-19-02A). Another article suggests that “If you think this state of fragility does not warrant protection and promotion for the French language and Quebec culture, you are, simply put, wrong. [...] Francophones feel real existential fear at the thought of disappearing as a people” (MG_May-21-25).

The articles in this category also often suggest that the French language is in decline due to the growing use of English, and therefore that measures such as Bills 21 and 96 are necessary to ensure the survival of what makes Quebec a “distinct society”: “Protecting Montreal’s ‘French face’ is seen as imperative by most francophone Quebecers, but many allophone newcomers to the city still gravitate toward English, sometimes even after attending French public schools. And as Montreal goes, many fear, so goes the province. Which is why Bill 96 [is] a strict minimum” (GM_Aug-22-17). Similarly, while stressing that moving forward with these new pieces of legislation “is a lucid choice made by a mature society after a 10-year-plus debate” (MG_June-19-25), others stress that “French-speaking Québécois, too, are a minority in Canada, a minority whose rights have been trampled for centuries” (MG_Sept-19-17), which is why these new policies would be legitimate.

19 out of 839 articles (2.3%) are included in this category.

4.2.2 P2—democracy and majority rule

Entries in this category, while they may not always give expressive positive evaluations of Bills 21 and 96, nevertheless endorse the legislation because this appears to be representing “the wishes of the majority” (MG_June-19-27A). Similarly, many articles cite polls to point out that “[t]he majority of Quebecers seem to support the secular legislation” (FP_Dec-21-20). Another article discussing Bill 21 specifically suggests that the legislation appears to be legitimate because it is implemented by a democratically elected government: “the law reflects the will of the people as expressed through legislation passed by a hugely popular and legitimate government” (MG_Dec-19-24B).

24 out of 839 articles (2.9%) are included here, making this the largest of the “positive” analytical categories.

4.2.3 P3—asymmetry and federalism

Entries in this category approve of Bill 21 and Bill 96 because they recognize “the province’s distinctiveness” and “Quebec’s difficult history with the separation of church and state” (GM_Dec-19-05) and current unique status within the Canadian federation. Because of that, it is argued that Canadian federalism should allow for this kind of asymmetry. While they may not expressly agree with the provisions of Bill 21 and Bill 96, they nonetheless recognize Quebec’s right and ability to implement this legislation within its own borders. In doing so, and as one Op-ed in the Montreal Gazette stresses it, it is argued that Quebec is simply making use of “the 1982 Constitution Act, enacted over the objections of Quebec” but which ultimately provided *La Belle Province* with “the notwithstanding clause that protects Bill 21 from a charter challenge” (MG_Aug-21-31).

3 out of 839 articles (0.4%) are included in this category.

4.2.4 P4—strict Laïcité as a form of universalism

Entries in this category express support for the legislation (specifically Bill 21) because it promotes a specific vision of secularism. To put it in a nutshell, such a French-inspired, republican stance with regards to *laïcité* and the separation of Church and State convenes a series of key normative principles (see [Amirault and Koussens, 2014](#); [Peña-Ruiz, 2015](#); [Mathieu and Laforest, 2016](#)). Amongst these, one would find the idea of a strict separation between the private and the public spheres, whereas the religion one would choose to practice in their own private environment should not enter the public sphere. This “universalistic” *modus operandi* is argued to be the best way to prevent religious tensions, as nobody in the public sphere would know about the religion the others practice or do not practice. A few articles in that category made such an argument:

“Let us remember that practicing religion is a choice, pursued regularly by a minority of Canadians, and Bill 21 in no way restricts religious freedom in privately owned buildings or homes. Those who believe that their shot at eternal life rests on wearing particular clothing can continue to follow that view—privately, outside of public office”. (GM_Nov-19-11C)

“I wish there were no need to limit personal freedom in the name of religious neutrality. But I remain convinced that having visibly

neutral teachers, judges and police officers is the best way to appease the tensions that inevitably spring up in a pluralistic society”. (MG_Nov-20-24)

Some also insisted on the argument that “Laïcité is a rich intellectual tradition that does not take anything away from the freedom to choose a religion and worship” (MG_Oct-21-26), while others stressed the particular historical experience of Quebec with Catholicism to justify the need for Bill 21:

“I support Bill 21 because separation of church and state is a seminal value in Quebec, a place controlled by religion for too long.” (MG_June-21-15A)

“It is also true that the history of the relationship between the government and religion in Quebec has been a long and divisive one. The government of Quebec only removed the church, both Catholic and Protestant, from its public education system in 1997. Its goal was to make public education secular, so Bill 21 should not come as a surprise. It seems to me a commitment to secularism is the only way to prevent religious dogmas from infecting the public square.” (FP_Dec-21-20)

14 out of 839 (1.7%) articles are included here.

4.2.5 P0—undefined

This category includes entries (2 out of 839: 0.2%) that express a positive viewpoint towards Bills 21 and/or 96, but could not be sorted into one of the above categories. It also includes remarks that the criticisms against the legislation are unfounded, or general statements of support for the legislation.

5 Discussion

5.1 Regional variations

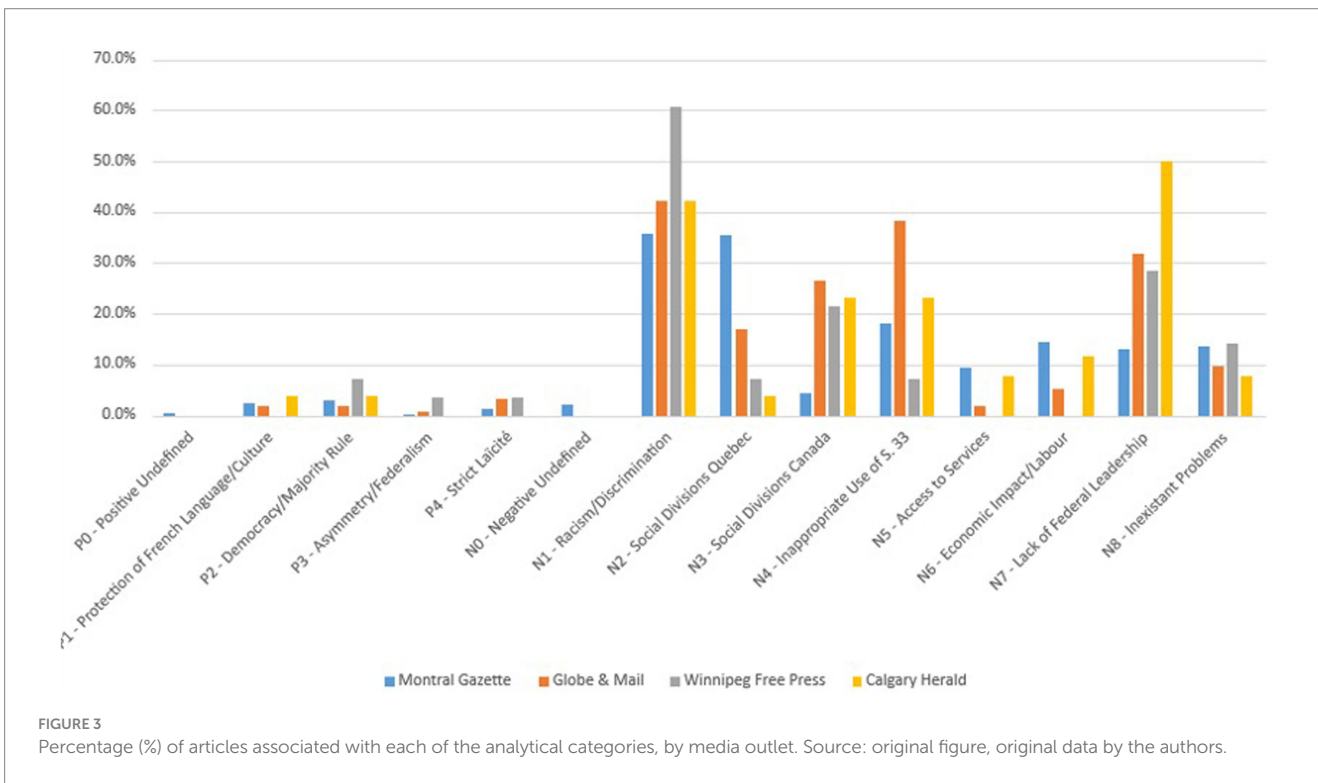
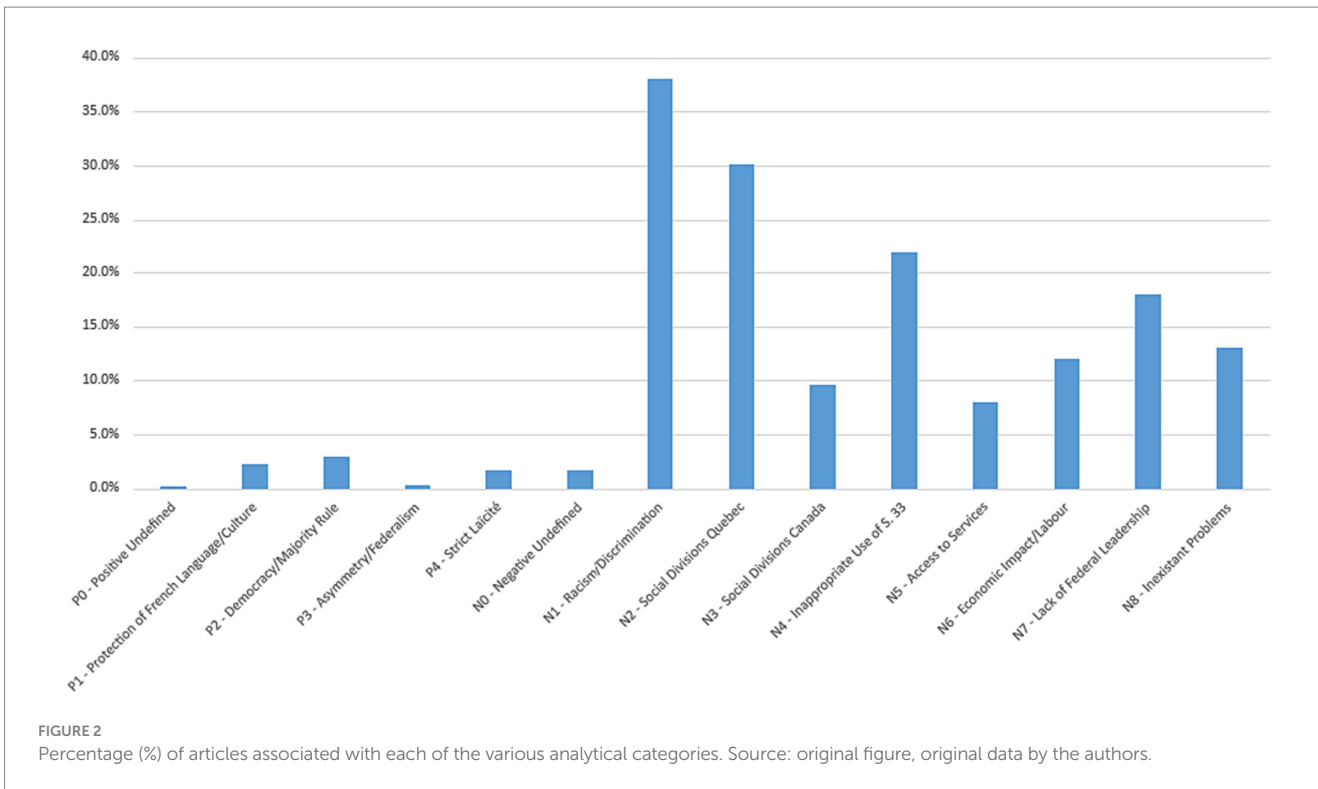
Our overall objective with this article is to observe and map how criticisms of Bills 21 and 96 are represented in English-Canada’s mainstream, printed mediatic sphere. While we observe significant variation in the number of articles in the analytical categories (see Figure 2), variations can also be found in the concentration of certain public responses in the different regions represented by the four chosen media outlets (see Figure 3). For example, negative responses referencing racism and discrimination (N1) were found in all four newspapers, but the highest concentration of these responses occurs in the Winnipeg Free Press, where over 60% of articles referenced these points. In contrast, the lowest concentration of this category is in the Montreal Gazette, where only 35.8% of articles mention this as an issue. On the other hand, concerns about access to services and the economic and labour shortage impacts of the legislation (N5 and N6) received moderate attention in the Montreal Gazette and the Calgary Herald (8–14%), but received almost no mention in the Globe and Mail and the WFP (less than 5%). These public responses point to variations in regional priorities (Alberta’s focus on economic realities, for example) and reactions to Quebec’s nation-building policies.

The category with perhaps the greatest imbalance in regional distribution is N3. Criticisms suggesting that the legislation creates

societal divides in Canada are frequently mentioned in the Globe and Mail (26.6%), the WFP (21.4%) and the Calgary Herald (23.1%). In contrast, only 4.3% of articles in the Montreal Gazette make any remarks about how the legislation could negatively impact national unity. The opposite effect can be observed for criticisms about the legislation’s impact on social divisions in Quebec (N2). A little over a third (35.5%) of the articles in the Montreal Gazette engage in this discussion, but the numbers are much lower for the other newspapers: 16.9% in the Globe and Mail, 7.1% in the WFP, and 3.8% in the Calgary Herald. Outside *La Belle Province*, Quebec’s nation-building policies are creating a sense of anxiety about shared Canadian values and identity. This anxiety does not appear to be present in the same way in Quebec, where concerns are much more concentrated on the social divisions between anglophones and francophones within the province. Judging from the results of N2, regions outside Quebec seem fairly unconcerned with Quebec national unity.

Another category that highlights significant differences in regional responses is N4: Inappropriate use of s. 33 (the notwithstanding clause). This topic was discussed in all four newspapers, but criticisms were most highly concentrated in the Globe and Mail, where 38% of articles made negative remarks on the topic, compared to 23% in the Calgary Herald, 18% in the Montreal Gazette, and 7% in the WFP. Criticisms about the use of the notwithstanding clause are often found in connection with criticisms about the lack of federal leadership (N7). In the Globe and Mail, WFP, and Calgary Herald, close to 50% of the articles that criticize the use of s. 33 also comment on the lack of federal intervention. This suggests that responsibility for the use of s. 33, although invoked by the province, is still strongly associated with the federal government. This could also explain the concentration of N4 criticisms in the Globe and Mail. The Globe and Mail is often affiliated with the interests of “Central Canada,” and its proximity to the capital region would naturally reflect an emphasis on federal politics. If the use of s. 33 is linked to the federal government and federal leadership in the minds of the public, then the newspaper’s focus on the notwithstanding clause is understandable.

In general, remarks about the lack of federal intervention (N7) were found much more frequently in newspapers outside Quebec. In the Globe and Mail, 32% of articles referenced this issue, followed closely by 29% in the WFP, compared to only 13% in the Montreal Gazette. The most astonishing results come from the Calgary Herald, where 50% of articles commented on the lack of federal leadership. There are multiple possible reasons for this response. One explanation could be the current Prime Minister’s general unpopularity in this region. Another reason could be Alberta’s position within the federal system. Alberta is known for its distinct regional identity (Wesley, 2011), and is sometimes even seen as aligned with Quebec in its strong interest in provincial autonomy and institutional asymmetry (Brie and Mathieu, 2021). However, the federal government’s hesitation to intervene in Bills 21 and 96 appears to have created a sense of indignation over the fact that Quebec is permitted to advance its nation-building policies without much pushback. In an opinion piece from the Calgary Herald commenting on an interview Trudeau gave during a visit to Alberta, the following statement is made: “At another point, the interviewer asked Trudeau why he did not take action against Quebec’s Bill 21. The Prime Minister said Ottawa does not get involved in matters of provincial jurisdiction. Really, he said that, in Alberta.” (CH_July-21-08). This illustrates a sense of resentment that could explain the high concentrations of criticisms against the federal government in the Calgary Herald.



5.2 Representations of the Quebec nation

Now that we have presented evidence of the way editorials, op-eds, and opinion letters published in established English-language newspapers approached and criticized Bill 21 and Bill 96, what do these tell us about the way the Quebec nation is being represented? Do

the negative critical viewpoints carry any specific representations of the Quebec nation? Do they convey any specific image of the majority group in Canada as they express an opinion on these nation-building policies promoted in Quebec?

Overall, after analyzing the political grammar and lexical field of these criticisms, six dominating trends can be highlighted as far as the

representation of the Quebec nation is concerned. As such, our study corroborates the conclusions reached by François Rocher and David Carpentier. Indeed, Rocher and Carpentier argued that “some English-speaking political and media elites in Canada contributes to an unfavourable portrayal of certain initiatives taken by the Quebec government” (2022: 41). They go as far as stressing “that certain representations went far beyond reasonable criticism and amounted to systemic Francophobia” (Rocher and Carpentier, 2022: 70; see also Rocher, 2023).

First, a significant proportion of articles suggest that Bills 21 and 96 convey a vision of “Quebec nationalism” that is exclusionary, illiberal, racist, xenophobic, nativist, regressive, populist, and, in other words, shameful. For instance, one wrote that today “Quebec nationalism aims to enhance the rights of one group of citizens by marginalizing, stigmatizing and disenfranchising others who do not speak their language (both literally and figuratively) or fit into their vision of Quebec” (MG_Oct-21-15). Regarding “Quebec’s shameful Bill 21” (MG_Sept-20-16), it is also said that “[t]he arguments in favour of Bill 21 [...] are rooted in Islamophobic tropes” (MG_Sept-21-22), and that those who support it are “regressive” (MG_Oct-19-30), since this is “a law that emboldens those who are intolerant of diversity” (MG_Sept-19-19B). With the objective “to satisfy xenophobes” (MGAug-19-22A), these “nativist” (GM_Oct-19-19) and “repugnantly discriminatory” (FP_Nov-19-28) policies are said to be fuelling an “us-and-them mentality” (MG_June-22-04) that “has effectively created an illiberal democracy at the heart of Canada” (GM_May-21-17). It also speaks of a form of “ethnic nationalism”: “Bill 96 is another symptom of the nationalism we should be seeking to instinctively avoid in our civil society” (MG_Apr-22-14).

Second, these and other negative critical viewpoints expressed against Bills 21 and 96 have led some to present a diminished or impoverished vision of Quebec’s nationhood. For instance, a letter to the editor published in the Montreal Gazette encapsulates the rationale—also found in more implicit ways in many other pieces—that there shall exist only one legitimate national community in a modern state such as Canada: “French Canadians may form a nation strictly in the sociological sense, but Quebecers as a whole form a province within a nation, as the Canadian passport attests. For the Quebec government flatly to declare the Constitution of Canada amended to say the opposite is contumacious in the extreme” (MG_May-21-18C). Similarly, expressions such as “the ‘nation’ of Quebec” (MG_Apr-19-10B) are meant to express an analogous idea. In the same vein, some would compare the typical difference they believe exists between those who support Bills 21 and 96 and those who condemn them: the former are said to be “almost exclusively male, angry looking” while the latter would entail “a more diverse crowd, friendly looking [people]” (MG_May-19-07).

Third, many articles refer to opinion surveys showcasing that Bills 21 and 96 benefit from widespread support in Quebec society and then try to explain that Quebec now represents “the country’s xenophobic zeitgeist” (MG_Sept-19-19B) because “these Quebecers had little, if any, contact with cultural communities” (MG_Apr-21-30). Indeed, some form of cultural isolation has created “thinly-veiled xenophobes” (MG_Mar-19-30A) that support these policies which create “a toxic environment” (MG_Apr-19-10B) and has given them the “perception that differences between people can be unacceptable, and that ‘they’ must be more like ‘us’.” In a subtle way, this helps nurture the beast of intolerance, enables haters and could contribute to

Islamophobic incidents” (MG_June-21-12B). Similarly, this critique of “cultural isolation” expresses the vision of a nation that is inward looking in comparison with Canada, which is open to the world: “This amounts to building a wall around Quebec to shield [it] from this international language of trade and business, rather than prioritizing the personal and business opportunities that bilingualism or multiculturalism can bring” (MG_July-21-03A). As a consequence, it is argued that this will further isolate French-speaking Quebecers: “without the ability to communicate globally in the most common communicative tool—the English language—French-speaking Quebecers will have been reduced to a future where their communication will remain regional” (MG_May-22-18A).

This brings us to the fourth analytical trend observed: Quebec’s nation-building policies are contrary to what it really means to be Canadian and to Canada’s core values and principles. As an op-ed published in the Globe and Mail suggests: “Quebeckers do not have a lock on fully understanding democratic principles themselves. If they did, Bill 21 would not have received a wide-spread support, as it’s blatantly contrary to notions of freedom that Canadians have valiantly fought for and been rightfully proud of” (GM_Nov-19-05). In a very similar way, it is argued that “Bill 21 [...] sits counter to the very identity that I believe, and hope, most Canadians hold dearest” (FP_Dec-21-22); that “utter nonsense [is] contrary to the principles of tolerance which our country has embraced in its finest moments” (CH_June-19-24). These nation-building policies are described as “an affront to the fundamental commitments we espouse in this country” (GM_Sept-21-14B). By the same token, those in the French-speaking province who oppose Bill 21, “which [...] goes against everything Canada stands for” (GM_Nov-19-11E), are represented as Quebec’s “best citizens [...], well-educated young people who reflect values that are truly Canadian” (GM_Dec-19-28A).

Fifth, and as a declination of the fourth analytical trend, many articles suggest that Quebec’s recent nation-building tools are anti-Canadian in the sense that they are against the logic of multiculturalism. These bills, which should not have “their place in a multicultural nation” (GM_June-19-20B), would indeed show that “[t]he spirit of inclusiveness jostling through the rest of Canada has been stopped dead in its tracks at the Quebec border” (GM_June-19-20C). Illustrating “Quebeckers’ distinct identity in the face of the multicultural ethos that prevails elsewhere in Canada” (GM_Oct-21-30), “Quebec’s secularism bill (Bill 21) is an attack on Canadian values of multiculturalism and religious freedom. This is a strain on Canada’s wonderful history of inclusivity and celebration of cultural differences. Simply put, this bill is extremely un-Canadian and must be condemned in the strongest possible terms” (FP_June-19-24). In doing so, these policies risk “poison[ing] many Quebecers’ understanding of what it means to be Canadian” (MG_Oct-19-09B).

Sixth, the way editorials, op-eds, and opinion letters published in established English-language newspapers approach and criticize Bill 21 and Bill 96 also reveals an interesting positive self-representation of what being a Canadian entails. As one op-ed published in the Calgary Herald stresses by invoking the results of a survey: “the top four reasons to be a proud Canadian were equality and justice; our reputation as peacekeepers; multiculturalism, diversity and bilingualism; and our respect for others. These survey results are a long way from the bleak picture painted by the Quebec government” (CH_June-19-26). Interestingly, some of these criticisms also make the point that

“[t]he English language and Canada are inseparable. If English is no longer one of the official languages of Quebec, then Quebec is no longer part of Canada, and Canada will have to be redefined—without Quebec” (MG_Sept-21-17B).

6 Conclusion

This article offers a qualitative, critical content analysis of 839 articles (editorials, Op-eds, and opinion letters) published between 2019 and 2023 in established English-language newspapers, by focusing on how they approach and criticize Bills 21 and Bill 96. By focusing on Quebec-Canada dynamics, it contributes to the literature by addressing the way the majority group in a multinational democracy portrays minority national communities and shows that this is often based on a negative critique of the latter's identity representation and political claims. These critical viewpoints were articulated according to 8 main analytical categories: N1—Racism/Discrimination; N2—Social Divisions in Quebec; N3—Social Divisions in Canada; N4—Problematic use of Section 33 (The Notwithstanding Clause); N5—Access to Services; N6—Economic Impacts/Labour Shortage; N7—Lack of Federal Leadership; N8—Addressing Inexistent Problems. The most popular critique was that of N1—Racism/Discrimination (38%), followed by N2—Social Divisions in Quebec (30%), N4—Problematic use of Section 33 (The Notwithstanding Clause) (22%), and N7—Lack of Federal Leadership (18%). All the other analytical categories received the attention of less than 15% of the articles analyzed.

The evidence presented in this article also reveals significant regional variation in the way that these critiques and representations materialized in mainstream printed media outlets. Although all four newspapers frequently criticized Bills 21 and 96 according to N1, it must be recalled that over 60% of the articles in the Winnipeg Free Press were concerned with this. This is the highest concentration of all. Manitoba is also home to the province where one may have found the most vocal premier of all to criticize Bill 21. Under Brian Pallister's leadership, the province launched an important media campaign denouncing the legislation and in doing so promoted “21 reasons why you will feel at home in Manitoba” and in “the Manitoba public administration” (Province of Manitoba, n.d.). On the other hand, 1 out of 2 articles in the Calgary Herald speak about the perceived lack of federal leadership in the fight against Quebec's nation-building policies, and almost 40% of the Globe and Mail articles focus on N4. Finally, the Quebec-based Montreal Gazette illustrates another feature of the province being a “société distincte,” as roughly a third of their articles discussed the fear of these bills reinforcing social divisions in Quebec specifically (N2)—which is something that is scarcely addressed in the other media outlets.

In this article, we also analyzed whether negative discursive representations and critical viewpoints of Quebec in mainstream media are used to differentiate and inferiorize the minority nation in Canada, and whether they also play a role in defining the identity of the majority political community. Specifically, we identified 6 recurring trends:

- 1 Quebec Nationalism is illiberal: Many articles suggest that Bills 21 and 96 portray a vision of Quebec nationalism that is exclusionary, illiberal, racist, xenophobic, nativist, regressive, and populist. Critics argue that these nation-building policies marginalize and disenfranchise individuals who do not conform to a specific vision of Quebec.
- 2 Diminished Vision of Quebec's Nationhood: Some criticisms present a diminished or impoverished vision of Quebec's nationhood, suggesting that there exist only one legitimate national community in Canada, which is the one that runs from coast to coast to coast. Although the evidence provided in this article cannot account for this, it would be interesting to compare what these critics say about Quebec's nationhood with how they approach that of the Indigenous peoples. One might find some form of normative inconsistencies.
- 3 Cultural Isolation and Xenophobia: Articles note that support for Bills 21 and 96 is linked to cultural isolation in Quebec, leading to a perception of differences as unacceptable. Critics argue that these policies contribute to xenophobia, intolerance, and potential Islamophobic incidents.
- 4 Contrary to Canadian Values: Critics also argue that Quebec's nation-building policies, particularly Bill 21, are contrary to Canadian values and principles, such as freedom and tolerance. Many express concern that these policies are an affront to the fundamental commitments embraced by Canada.
- 5 Anti-Canadian because Anti-Multiculturalism: Many articles suggest that Quebec's policies are anti-Canadian because they go against the logic of multiculturalism. Critics argue that these bills undermine the spirit of inclusiveness present in the rest of Canada and pose a threat to Canada's history of celebrating cultural differences.
- 6 Positive Self-Representation of Canadians: The criticisms also reveal a positive self-representation of Canadians, emphasizing values such as equality, justice, peacekeeping, multiculturalism, diversity, bilingualism, and respect for others. Some argue that these values are at odds with the portrayed image of Quebec's government.

All in all, the meta-normative foundation of most of these criticisms seems to rest in Canada's rejection of “multinationalism” as a legitimate way of thinking about the country's core political DNA, in favour of a multicultural and bilingual conception of it that is critical of “deep diversity,” to use the notion coined by political philosopher Charles Taylor (1992). Indeed, as Canada embarked on its journey to reimagine itself throughout the 20th century (Igartua, 2011), rejecting the founding myth of dualism and “two founding nations,” it contributed to delegitimizing the view that Canada is home to more than one political national community, at least when it comes to Quebec. This can be traced back to the sudden death (1968) of André Laurendeau and momentum associated with the ideas promoted by him and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which was to be replaced with Pierre Trudeau's remarkable arrival on the federal stage as Prime Minister (1968) and subsequent realizations: official bilingualism (1969), multiculturalism (1971), and chartism (1982). These all contributed to forging the idea that Canada is a cultural mosaic bounded by bilingualism (where language is viewed as a communication tool only, not a substantive part of being member of a community) and individual rights (as recognized in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, which does not make room for collective rights). However, over the past

few decades Canadians have become much more open to political discourses recognizing Canada's core multinationality when it's about recognizing Indigenous Peoples' nationhood and legitimate right to self-determination (Brie and Mathieu, 2021). Hence, as goes the saying, one never knows...

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

FM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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