The federal constitution of 1867 gave priority to Canada’s national government, reserving to the provinces ‘matters of a merely local or private nature’. As this phrase suggests, the document’s authors thought of the provinces as little more than glorified municipalities. Since then, however, ‘Canada has moved from a highly centralized political situation to one of the most decentralized federal systems in the world’ (Landes, 2002, p. 102). What explains this transformation?

Canada’s decentralizing trend, perhaps unique among federations, reflects the central issue of its politics: the place within it of French-speaking Quebec. From the sixteenth century, France and then Britain colonized the territories of Canada, with Britain finally defeating the French in 1763. The francophone population in Canada has declined since then, falling to 22 per cent by 2006.

In contrast to the racial division in the USA, where blacks do not comprise a majority in any state, more than 85 per cent of Canada’s francophones live in Quebec and about 80 per cent of Quebec’s population speaks French as a mother tongue (Lachapelle, 2009). Canada therefore provides a test case of federalism’s ability to integrate a geographically concentrated minority.

For many francophones, Canada consists of two founding peoples – the British and French – whose status should be equal. The assumption is that the country is a compact between two cultures, rather than 10 provinces. The inference is that Quebec, as a representative of one of the founding cultures, should receive special recognition within the federation.

From the 1960s, a revived nationalist party in Quebec sought to implement this vision. However, the federal response has been to decentralize power to all 10 provinces, not merely to Quebec. In Quebec itself, the Parti Québécois (PQ), elected to power in 1994, held a referendum in 1995 on ‘sovereignty association’ for the province. This scheme would have combined political sovereignty for Quebec with continued economic association with Canada. The proposal lost by the narrowest of margins. Subsequently, the issue of constitutional reform declined in intensity, with the PQ voted out of provincial office in 2003. The share of the vote obtained by the Bloc Québécois (which runs candidates at federal elections) also plummeted in the 2000s (Figure 14.2).

Multilevel governance, known in Canada as executive federalism, continued to operate even during these phases of intense debate over the position of French-speaking Canada. As Brooks (2012, p. 220) puts it, ‘divided jurisdiction has given rise to a sprawling and complicated network of relations linking the federal and provincial governments. This network is often compared to an iceberg, only a small part of which is visible to the eye’.

Although multilevel governance is often viewed favourably in the European Union, its secrecy and unclear accountability in Canada has sparked significant criticism. In the context of a state with clear democratic traditions, executive federalism lacks any explicit base in law and the constitution. Even so, the practices of multilevel governance are surely an inherent feature of Canada’s distinctive but long-lasting federation.