

# For more mothers to run, the political workplace has to evolve <sup>[1]</sup>

Job-sharing is one big way Canada could lead in modernizing political life, which is nearly impossible to balance with parenting young children.

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## EXCERPTS

“You’ll miss birthdays, you’ll miss anniversaries and graduations,” Jason Kenney warned his team when he addressed the United Conservative Party caucus after their election win in Alberta. Outgoing NDP Speaker Bob Wanner added hockey games to that list during an orientation for new MLAs before going on to inform the group they would have “an unpredictable and ever-changing and evolving schedule that is managed by others.”

These statements highlight one of the major barriers facing women who want to run for office and have a family, too: political life is not structured in a way that’s conducive to balancing caregiving responsibilities such as raising young children. At the federal and provincial levels, most politicians spend a great deal of time away from their families and support systems. When they’re in their ridings, they are expected to attend a myriad of evening and weekend events. Debates and votes are scheduled into the evening, and politicians can get tied up by late-night marathon sessions with minimal notice. This spring, Parliament extended its sitting hours until midnight for the final four weeks in an effort to get legislation passed before adjourning. When politicians do take a break with their families, they often face public scrutiny and vacation shaming.

For mothers considering running for office, it isn’t just a matter of figuring out how to balance political life with family responsibilities. A certain amount of domestic and caregiving work can be outsourced. However, a very personal question remains: How many of life’s precious moments are you willing to miss?

Some women have miraculously made it work, like NDP MP Niki Ashton, who had twins while in office, or Christine Moore, who pushed for short-term child care options on Parliament Hill. But these women have also spoken about the challenges and the need for reforms. The perceived incompatibility of politics with family life no doubt continues to lead many mothers to decide not to run for office. Indeed, a report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found domestic responsibilities are the greatest deterrent to women entering politics. But for men, they did not rank in the top five reasons.

Challenges of work-life balance in politics don’t impact just the choices of individuals. It’s well known that women are underrepresented in legislatures across the country. Statistics on the number of women who get elected in the early years of parenting aren’t available, but it is almost certain they would not be on par with the numbers in the general population. When governments fail to reflect the communities they represent, one result is that policies don’t properly address their needs. Is it any wonder we don’t yet have universal child care in Canada when so few politicians have children enrolled in child care?

Fortunately, there are changes that can be made to promote better balance and representation. One promising idea is opening the door to job-sharing for politicians, by amending electoral laws to allow two candidates to run as a team. If elected, they would share a single vote and the same salary, but also the workload. This has been discussed or attempted in several jurisdictions – Australia and the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland – but none has yet implemented it. Canada has an opportunity to be a leader by adopting this innovative approach and showing the world we’re committed to making politics more family-friendly.

The corporate sector uses job-sharing to recruit and retain more women. Political office is simply another type of workplace that can and should bring its practices into the 21st century. Job-sharing would allow more people to make their voices heard without accepting the premise that they have to work around the clock to be effective. Job-sharing could make it possible for female politicians to take parental leave and could also benefit people with disabilities and chronic health conditions who can’t work full-time. Some critics have raised concerns about logistical matters, but these are not insurmountable obstacles, and the alternative is continuing to have governments that don’t reflect our population.

Job-sharing is not the only option to open the doors of political office to more mothers. In April, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women tabled a report on increasing women’s representation in politics. It discussed creating family-friendly political workplaces by improving child care options and enabling better work-life balance. Some specific measures discussed include facilitating more remote work, such as participation in committees or votes by video conference, and establishing rules to make schedules

more predictable. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs also tabled an interim report in 2016 on how to make Parliament more family-friendly. However, that report declined to make recommendations or deferred for future study possible reforms like compressing the sitting week or implementing proxy or electronic voting.

One positive reform did take place this June, when the House of Commons unanimously adopted a new rule allowing MPs to be away from Ottawa during late pregnancy or after the birth or adoption of a child without a deduction in pay. However, media reports stating that MPs are now entitled to a year of fully paid parental leave do not paint an accurate picture. As highlighted at the Board of Internal Economy and the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs during consideration of the new policy, MPs cannot take leave in the same manner as employees. Elected officials are not replaced and still have duties they must attend to for their riding, particularly if they hope to be re-elected. Despite this rule change, MPs who expand their family are not able to disconnect, but they are not accommodated to continue their work either. Without alternative means of voting and the ability to participate in debates via video conference, fulfilling essential functions of the job could remain a challenge for expectant mothers and new parents.

It is clear more solutions need to be implemented to make it easier to balance family and holding elected office. We have an aging population, and women still shoulder the majority of caregiving work and face more career consequences as a result. As more women find themselves caring for both their parents and their children, we could find ourselves moving backward on gender parity if we don't modernize political workplaces.

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**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

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