

The baffling indifference of Canadian voters to child-care proposals ^[1]

Author: Goodyear-Grant, Elizabeth

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The federal NDP recently announced that if elected, it would spend \$10 billion over four years to create 500,000 new child-care spaces. These spaces would be free for some parents and capped at \$10 a day for everyone by 2030.

The federal Liberals' child-care agenda focuses on before- and after-school care, with the party pledging to add 250,000 spaces and lower costs by 10 per cent.

The Conservatives have no specific promises on child care so far, though the party will not release its full platform until Oct. 11.

The Greens have pledged to work with the provinces and territories on an affordable and universal child-care system and to boost funding by \$1 billion per year until spending equals one per cent of GDP.

Despite the fanfare and the price tag associated with these programs, history suggests child care tends to be a surprisingly weak influence at the ballot box.

In the national spotlight

Child care has been on the national agenda for the past six decades, at least. The 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended the establishment of a publicly funded universal child-care program.

The federal Liberals have been promising child care for nearly three decades, and had adopted a program under former prime minister Paul Martin, signed by all 10 provinces, that would have seen the expenditure of \$5 billion over five years.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives, elected in 2006, cancelled Martin's program. And in the subsequent election in 2008, voters didn't punish Harper for scrapping the program. Only 68 people out of nearly 2,800 surveyed by the 2008 Canadian Election Study (CES) stated that child care was the top issue for them in the campaign. (All CES data are available through the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA) at Queen's University).

The 2015 Canadian Election Study included the same open-ended question asking voters the most important issue facing them personally in the election — it's a standard question on election surveys.

More than 7,500 people participated in the survey, and only 20 of them chose child care as their paramount issue in 2015. Most cited the economy, jobs or taxes as their primary concerns, and among those who prioritized social policy, health care and education garnered the most attention.

The 2015 Election Study also presented voters with a list of common campaign issues, including child care, and asked respondents to check all of the issues they really care about. Only 16 per cent of voters in 2015 chose child care.

By way of comparison, 18 per cent said they really cared about reforming the electoral system, 28 per cent said they cared about gun control, 18 per cent about Indigenous issues and 23 per cent about military involvement in the Middle East. The point here is that most Canadians "really care" about many other issues other than child care.

Surprising lack of interest

The low resonance of child care for the electorate is surprising.

Most Canadians have children, and child-care costs are high and rising. Child care in Canada is pricier than most other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and costs have risen dramatically in recent years, according to various studies.

Across the OECD, the average two-parent family spends 15 per cent of its income on child care, compared to 22 per cent in Canada. Costs are even higher in large urban centres. In its annual report on child care, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives reports that Toronto

has the highest cost in the country, an average of \$1,685 per month, or \$20,220 per year for an infant spot.

This is higher than undergraduate tuition for most programs at Canadian universities. The cost of a preschool spot in Toronto is \$1,367 per month, nearly as much as the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the city, and far out of reach for many residents.

Not only is child care expensive, but it's used by a majority of parents. Statistics Canada reports that 60 per cent of families with children aged two to four in Canada use child care of some sort, and the number could be higher if there were more spaces available.

Why doesn't a policy area like this have more power to drive votes?

Some families would save tens of thousands of dollars per child, not to mention all the additional benefits associated with greater labour force participation and flexibility, contribution to gender equality and more.

Quality child care contributes to the socialization of children, early childhood development and school readiness — all of which have positive cumulative impacts.

If Canadians want to advance financially, few policy innovations would offer the same boon to voters' bank accounts than a public child-care program.

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