

Child care on the ballot, but is unlikely enough to swing the vote ^[1]

Child care has come up in many elections, but has never been a top priority for voters

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA – The Liberals \$30 billion child care spend is on the ballot this election, but it remains unclear if after decades of promises creating a national system will actually move votes.

The Liberals included the \$30 billion in their spring budget, with a promise to work with provincial governments to sign deals that would eventually create thousands of spaces at \$10 per day.

Eight of those deals have been signed and provinces are pledging to create more space and lower prices over the next five years, the NDP would honour those deals, but Conservative leader Erin O'Toole is promising a different plan.

O'Toole's plan would end those deals after next year and instead expand an existing tax credit for families allowing low-income families to claim as much as 75 per cent of their child care expenses as a refundable tax credit. The Conservative leader argues the Liberal plan doesn't do anything for families who work shifts or otherwise don't fit in a traditional daycare system.

Cancelling the child care agreements is a major part of the Conservatives plan to reach a balanced budget by the end of the decade, saving the party the \$30 billion the Liberals proposed to spend.

Child care has come up in many elections, but has never been a top priority for voters. Andrew Enns, vice-president with Leger research, said while there has been more attention on the issue voters still don't put it at the top of their list.

Enns recently conducted research asking people to rate their top issues and while many people believe creating more child care space is important, when they rank its importance compared to other issues it doesn't fair as well.

"What we found actually was that increasing spaces and reducing the cost of childcare ranked second from the bottom," he said.

Enns said in the 2015 election the Liberals wrapped plans for lower child care costs in with other social programs and it had a greater impact.

"Child care became not the policy, but one of several policies where the Liberals were saying we can do better for families and it was almost like a package," he said.

Morna Ballantyne, executive director of the lobby group Child Care Now, said part of the issue around child care is that until the system is in place one election can change it.

"Until we get the system, at least the foundation of this system and start to build it. It's subject to cancellation through an election," she said.

Ballantyne said Quebec's system is a good model because it now has high levels of support in the province.

"Once the Quebec government in the 90s started to build the system very quickly, the public support for that system was cemented and no political party in any subsequent election has proposed to take it away," she said.

Enns' data would seem to back up that suggestion, because when voters rated their top issue Bloc Québécois supporters rated the issue higher than supporters of any other party.

Ballantyne said the Conservative plan for tax credits relies on the market to address the problem and she has seen no indication over decades that it can do that.

"For 50 years in larger and larger numbers, women, mothers with young children, have been trying to and entering the paid labour force and the market has been expected to provide the childcare that they need and it has failed," she said

She said the government has to be a major player and she believes the pandemic has made it clear that something has to be done, not just for parents but for broader economic growth.

“There’s a very high level of frustration that their child care needs have not been adequately addressed up until now,” she said. “There is now much broader recognition that child care programs are not just a program that you describe as a social program. It’s also an economic program.”

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