

# The federal election, child care: Where they stand [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

In the early days of the election campaign, Krista Thompson opened the doors of Boomerang Kids, a children's store she co-owns in Ottawa, to Conservative incumbents Rona Ambrose and Royal Galipeau.

The latter's staff said they wanted to use the spot to make an announcement on child care. But Ms. Thompson, a 37-year-old mother of three, ended up feeling used and confused after the MPs didn't announce anything new. Instead, Ms. Ambrose praised her party's \$1,200-a-year benefit to children under 6 that was brought in after the 2006 election, and accused Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion of wanting to axe the program.

It was a lesson in politics for Ms. Thompson.

"We were very surprised. ... We're a non-partisan store," she said, adding: "[The Conservatives] make no bones about it. They're trying to appeal to the demographic of the new parent or the new mom."

Indeed they are. In fact, all the major parties are positioning themselves as best suited to look after the interests of Canadian families.

"In the last three or four or five elections, you haven't seen this overt and early courting of the female vote," said Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, a political science professor at Queen's University who studies women and politics.

The issue of child care is central in the minds of many female voters, particularly the young professional women the Conservatives are looking to win over. While the Tories and Liberals have very different ideas of how to approach the problem of inadequate child-care spaces and stretched resources across the country, they will use the issue to appeal to the women they increasingly believe will be critical in determining the outcome on Oct. 14.

"For women to be equal in work and equal in society and equal in relationships, child care seems to be very important," said Caroline Andrew, director of the University of Ottawa's Centre on Governance. "Daycare again becomes a huge question for all different kinds of groups of women."

Both the Conservative and Liberal leaders are portraying themselves as the candidate for families. But the impact of their parties' varying views on the child-care debate greatly depends on the socioeconomic status of the family in question.

On one hand, the Conservative Party has said it wants to equip families with the tools to make the child-care decisions that work for them. The Tories criticize their opponents for getting bogged down with the bureaucracy of a national program to create more spaces, rather than helping parents find the option that best suits them.

"I think what Canadians are looking for is direct and practical help when it comes to these things," Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg, who is not running for re-election, said in an interview. "One of the best ways to give people help and to give them options is to put money right in their pocket."

The Tories' position has sparked long-running criticism from advocates who say the \$1,200 yearly benefit does only marginal good for cash-strapped families, or for those on waiting lists for child-care spaces.

On the other hand, the Liberals have promised to create a national child-care strategy, to be implemented over four years, that would focus on the creation of spaces to reduce waiting lists and provide long-term accommodation to Canadian children. A similar, more expensive, plan was a central part of the party's platform in 2006.

But critics say the Liberals' plan is too constrictive and doesn't help families who rely on relatives to watch their children or have other alternative child-care arrangements. In addition, the party has been accused of failing to follow through on promises made for national child-care strategies in previous elections.

The competing visions have elicited some of the nastiest mudslinging in the campaign so far. Mr. Dion publicly called Conservative Leader Stephen Harper a liar after the Tories repeatedly accused the Liberals of planning to scrap the child-care benefit if they take office.

Mr. Dion countered by pledging to not only keep the benefit, but increase the amount families receive, in addition to creating a national plan.

Despite this, the Tories still insist in public appearances and advertisements that the Liberals would eliminate the benefit if elected.

The nasty words risk overshadowing the substance of the debate on how to address child care, an issue that many female voters will be watching closely throughout the campaign.

As Dr. Andrew put it: "I think more and more women do think about the way they're going to vote in terms of issues that relate to being a woman."

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- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Tags:** election <sup>[2]</sup>

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