

Conservatives and Liberals agree...this family sure looks Canadian ^[1]

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EXCERPTS.

Ron Comeau and Elaine Tan Comeau and their three young children are a typical Canadian family - so typical, in fact, that their photo has been featured in ads by the Liberals, Conservatives and the NDP to promote their family-friendly agenda.

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The Comeaus are the kind of multicultural, middle-class family who federal politicians believe are most likely to vote for tax credits for children's fitness programs and eco-friendly home renovations, for income-splitting and more government spending on child care. Every party has made family values a core focus of their campaign platform.

"It's a part of the population that intrinsically no party by default has carved out for itself," said Christian Leuprecht, a political scientist with the Queen's University Institute of Intergovernmental Relations. "It's a genuine competition, an open field for anybody to grab among people who are more likely to change their mind than any other electoral segment in the country."

As it happens, the Comeaus, who voted Conservative in 2008, are both working multiple jobs and getting over the flu. In between a recent two-week vacation and getting their daughter to softball practice on time they say they've been a bit too busy to pore over the deluge of family-focused promises coming from all of the parties in this election.

"I'm sure all the parties are tripping over each other to appeal to middle-class Canadian families if they think that's where the votes come from," said Mr. Comeau, a photographer who sells his family's picture as stock images. "My family is so much more important to me than my relationship to any politician or political idea."

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"The family is fashionable in a way that it wasn't in the past," said Sandford Borins, a professor of management at the University of Toronto who studies election narratives. "We have a family with young kids, so regardless of our political affiliation we've seen all these benefits directed at our demographic."

Despite the country's ageing population, young families are still a huge demographic in Canada. They made up about 18 million Canadians in the 2006 census. About 40% of those had children and most of those had more than one child.

Young two-parent families in their 30s and 40s are the most likely demographic to switch their vote as they shift from idealistic youth into adults with mortgages to pay and jobs to protect. Once they change their vote, studies have shown that they often stick with the party for years to come.

A family agenda is also a good way for parties to court recent immigrants, who tend to come from countries that honour family values and often have large families and live in multi-generational households.

"It's a back door way of getting at the immigrant electorate without getting into hot water by talking about the ethnic vote," Mr. Leuprecht said. "Family values is a sort of code for where you stand on the values agenda without giving other people the opportunity to attack you for having a hidden social agenda."

The focus on family in the election is part of a larger political shift occurring in Canada with the advent of things such as the Family Day holiday in provinces like Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan, said Kathy Brock of Queen's University's School of Policy Studies.

-reprinted from The National Post

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