No More Baby Steps:
Political Insights from the 2018 Election for Moving Childcare Policy Forward in Ontario

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The 2018 Ontario election was a pivotal moment for childcare policy. In the pre-election budget, the sitting Liberal government unveiled an ambitious universal childcare strategy (Ontario Government, 2018). In the spring electoral campaign, two political parties (the Liberals and NDP) committed to building an accessible and affordable childcare system. The Liberal Party's detailed, costed, and multi-year childcare strategy represented the closest Ontario would have come to building and delivering a publicly managed and supported childcare system. Yet childcare was, in this case, and in every single election since 1993, an electoral loser.

Our research team is moving into the final year of a Social Science, Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project aimed at researching the ways in which care, and care work are understood and operationalized in social policy and practice, particularly in relation to early childhood education and care (ECEC). We realized that we had an opportunity to capture and preserve the confluence of advocacy, consultation, and adjacent policy work that had led up to childcare platforms in the 2018 election. We interviewed politicians, policy advisors, advocates, and academics across all parties and the ECEC sector about the election childcare platforms. We were interested in taking stock of the proposed childcare strategies. What were the strengths, problems, limitations, or fears associated with them? Importantly, we wanted to capture how politicians, policy makers, and advocates might hit the ground running to both talk about and build a high-quality childcare system when political conditions change. Our intention with this research study—, which is ongoing—is to create an institutional memoire for policy makers, advocates, and researchers that can assist Ontario specifically as well as other jurisdictions.

Method

An earlier study in our SSRCH project analyzed discursive constructions of the care and the care work in publicly available 2018 Ontario election childcare platforms and advocates' responses to them (Powell, Langford, Bezanson, Prentice, & Albanese, in press). In this study, we conducted, for the most part, fully on-the-record interviews about these earlier findings with two groups of informants: (a) politicians and policy advisors who were involved in developing and communicating childcare platforms during the 2018 Ontario spring election; and (b) childcare advocates who responded to the party platforms through various communications. As of the end of August 2018, we have conducted interviews with 14 politicians, policy advisors, and advocates, yielding insights into how and why the childcare platforms were developed, and advocate responses to them. Table 1 identifies participants in the study. We are continuing to recruit participants but have had considerable difficulty getting Conservative politicians, academics, and advocates to go on the record. The interviews were approximately one hour in length and conducted by an investigator and a research assistant. Collectively, we reflected on transcribed data and identified emerging themes, issues, and anomalies. In this article, we report on some preliminary findings.

Table 1

	POLITICIANS	POLICY ADVISORS	ADVOCATES AND OTHERS
Liberal	**Kathleen Wynne** (former Premier of Ontario)	**Monica Lysack,** Professor of Early Childhood Education and senior policy advisor **Senior Policy Advisor** (anonymized per request) **Andrew Bevan,** Chief of Staff and Principal Secretary to the Premier **Karen Pitre**, Lawyer and Engineer and Community Hubs Director, Office of the Premier	
Conservative		**Senior Policy Advisor** (anonymized per request)	
NDP	**Catherine Fife,** NDP MPP, Critic Early Years and Child Care 2014–18 **Doly Begum,** NDP MPP, Critic Early Years and Child Care 2018-present		
Academics			**Gordon Cleveland,** senior academic and author of Ontario childcare strategy
Advocates			**Lyndsay MacDonald,** Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) **Carolyn Ferns,** Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) **Laurel Rothman,** Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) **Bernice Cipparrone,** Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development **Martha Friendly,** Child Care Resource and Research Unit (CRRU)

Findings

Well before the 2018 election, the policy design of childcare in Ontario included some well-documented processes: building a JK/SK system at the elementary level, committing to adding a significant number of spaces for 0–5-year-olds, working with managers such as municipalities in relation to fees, and consulting with advocacy organizations on an ECEC workforce strategy. Policy design also included some deeply intersecting policy processes that set out to tackle gender inequalities, pay inequalities, and poverty reduction, areas in which childcare access and remuneration for workers proved important, as did finding, securing, and using existing locations (i.e., schools) to build a childcare system. The 2018 pre-election budget proposed an ambitious and unprecedented policy expansion in childcare, promising free preschool aged care in the province. The election campaign, in which childcare featured prominently, quickly ensued. In the next sections, we examine our research participants' reflections on the 2018 election childcare platforms.

The Importance of a Childcare Platform

Informants who were politicians or policy advisors/makers during the 2018 Ontario spring election viewed childcare platforms as inelegant articulations of policy strategies, in part because as several noted "Nobody (in the electorate) reads them." For Liberal informants, childcare policy actions taken prior to the spring election (i.e., free preschool in the 2018 budget announcement) were considered much more significant. Most informants also indicated that their childcare platforms were produced to pitch a simple key message—"a tax credit" (Conservative), "$15.00 a day" (NDP), and "free preschool" (Liberal)—that answered, as one informant stated, two questions, "What are you going to do?" and "How are you going to do it?"

In arriving at these "simple" messages, the Conservative informant indicated that Patrick Brown, the Conservative leader prior to Doug Ford, had developed a tax credit approach that was fully adopted during the election campaign. While the NDP consulted with a variety of stakeholders prior to the election, in the end, the party embraced three ideas for a universal childcare system (low fees or no fees for parents; decent work and pay for educators; and an expansion of public and non-profit services) articulated by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC). The Liberal government used academic Gordon Cleveland's (2018) detailed report, which featured in the 2018 budget, to build on past childcare initiatives and launch an election campaign based on a free preschool plan. While supporting free preschool, informants from advocacy organizations questioned why the Liberal government had not implemented and institutionalized this plan earlier in their mandate. Taken together, these findings suggest that leaving significant childcare policy to the end of a four-year (or longer) term and policy implementation to the vicissitudes of election outcomes cements childcare's precarity in the policy landscape. From a policy and design perspective, childcare budgeting and building require a great deal of planning and coordination, making them deeply vulnerable to other "more pressing" political considerations and general electoral ambivalence.

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advocacy informants recommend working with opposition parties on refining childcare plans in order to be ready for an election campaign and implementation shortly after. Moreover, since the political informants who were interviewed know their party's current childcare plans, there are opportunities for advocates to influence them. Thus, while responding to the current Conservative government's tax credits as negative childcare policy is necessary, it is also important to prepare for the next election.

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Informants reported that polling in Ontario showed reasonably high levels of cross-class and party support for the Budget 2018 childcare approach, and the election result was likely not a result of policy aversion. Even the Conservative informant, a policy advisor to Doug Ford during the election stated, "Universal childcare sounds great and a good thing for families, but there's a sub-

stantial cost associated with it." This finding points to the need for current opposition parties and advocates to cost out their childcare plans prior to the next election, particularly in relation to the often-comparable costs of a tax-credit approach. It also speaks to translating the complexities of building a childcare system and explaining tax policy in terms that can be easily understood, while attending to short- and long-term system capacity building.

One lesson, then, from the 2018 Ontario election is that systems need time grow: policy and budget commitment, with a clear vision and targets for implementation, must start early in a government's mandate. Childcare platforms are clearly necessary but are not as important as childcare policy deliberated through comprehensive consultations with stakeholders and implemented early and consistently during a government's mandate.

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Fitting Care into an Election Campaign

Care or the *quality of life* dominated political debate during the election. The 2018 Liberal campaign focussed on a message of "care over cuts" and foregrounded universal programming such as pharma care and childcare. The focus, as described by former Premier Wynne, was, post-recession, on social infrastructure investment, similar to the kind of physical infrastructure investment that had formed part of spending during the economic crisis. A Liberal policy advisor put it another way, "People just under-

stood it [care] better than anything else. It's in healthcare, it's in childcare, it's something that's consistent throughout some of those social policy pieces and something the people understood, that made sense to folks." Consistent with Tronto's (2013) premise that every political party/government/party has a plan "to care" for its citizens, the Conservative informant we interviewed also stated, "people want to know that the government actually cares for me." The private versus collective orientation of policy logics regarding care was evident in this informant's use of "me," which underscores a general Conservative focus on individual choice and responsibility (evident in its tax credit proposal), in contrast to a Liberal/NDP focus on broader childcare policies to address social issues.

Despite this contrast, most informants agreed that caring about voters' anxieties and fears about what some called "personal economies" is an electoral necessity. This personalization strategy was evident in the Liberals' call for "helping people in their everyday lives," the NDP's focus on childcare offering "peace of mind for parents who want to get ahead," and advocacy messaging that uses personal stories and "the fears and emotions of parents" to push for change. The Conservative informant emphasized "getting government out of the way so that individuals can make their own decisions" and using "personal stories to relate to everyday people." Nevertheless, some informants suggested using a personalization strategy cautiously. As not-

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ed above, this strategy is entangled in Conservative philosophical commitments to individual choice and, specific to the 2018 election campaign, a new kind of conservative populism. As one informant from an advocacy organization remarked, personalization as a form of populism results in polarization and a tendency to lose "sight of what was really important." A personalization approach thus tends to result in an obfuscation of high-level policy messaging that focusses on concrete childcare plans. Indeed, in the case of the Conservative election campaign, there appeared to be an association between high personalization messaging and limited budget and policy details.

In addition, personal attacks on individual women leaders and a more general antipathy to social-equality informed policy and its advocates formed part of an approach aimed at personalizing voters' anxieties and fears. This was evident in the cautious and at times antagonist response to NDP and Liberal women leaders talking about their visions of care. One policy advisor informant described the 2018 election as "more about feminist politics and less about party politics."

Care, however, did have strong cross-party and electoral resonance. There appeared to be consensus regarding the need for certain social investments across the life course, particularly in elder care and in healthcare, recognizing that risks and needs associated with illness, injury, and age are shared by all Ontarians. In childcare, there was consensus that families require support to meet their childcare needs, but political parties diverged on where care should be located and by whom it should be delivered.

In summary, then, it does seem possible to fit care into a campaign, although clearly in an election there are different visions of what *care* means to political parties. In the case of the 2018 Ontario election, care had meanings difficult to untie from the gender of the leaders of the parties advocating investments. In the end, Conservative populist orientations gained ground and ultimately power in Ontario. The outcome of any election turns on both complex and simple factors; in this case, it is hard to separate personal attacks on former Premier Wynne as an individual and the record of her party in office from the broader question of whether care across the life course is a policy orientation that might counter austerity minded policy.

Gender in Electoral Childcare Debate

Informants from more socially progressive parties and advocacy associations suggested that gender was a salient feature in the framing and reception of childcare platforms. For example, gender was central in Liberal and NDP childcare platforms in relation women's labour market access. Gordon Cleveland indicated that his free preschool proposal was readily "picked up" as a "very important thing for women and families" by both female and male Liberal cabinet ministers. In describing their childcare platform, a senior NDP politician stated:

> [We had to] make the economic argument for early learning and care investment because the return on the investment is very clear. Now the investment does benefit women disproportionately, however, women make up 51% of the population so there is an argument to be made that when we benefit the lives of women, we also strengthen communities and the lives of children.

Informants from advocacy organizations emphasized that their responses to childcare platforms focussed on "the given that women are in the workforce," which even "Conservatives recognize," as well as on ECEs (who are predominantly women) struggling to support themselves and their families.

Nevertheless, Liberal politicians and policy advisors interviewed recognized that talking about gender during an election campaign was risky since it could be "seen as being too deeply entrenched in identity politics" or as only "important to women voters who have children and are worried about childcare." To mitigate these risks, some informants recommended promoting an understanding that childcare is at the intersection of many societal issues. One informant put it another way: "Childcare will not win votes in and of itself," adding, however, "it's more of a driver...especially when it fits together coherently with the rest of the plan."

In concrete terms, former Premier Wynne indicated that the Liberal campaign sought to make childcare part of the broader platform and part of the budget "as opposed to having it as an outlier." She added, "It's not as though we're going to do all these things for the economy and for society and then we're going to do childcare for this group of people who happen to be women. It wouldn't have made any sense."

In the end, a government for whom equality and redistribution goals are not priorities was elected. Does this mean that childcare, as a gender issue, does not resonate with voters? Is aversion to universalism or spending outlays more central to its policy absence? One informant argued that talking about childcare in relation to gender (or vice versa), at least for progressive parties, is "inescapable…you can't have women's equality without universal childcare." However, decreasing the motherhood wage gap (and improving the wages of ECEs) proves difficult to translate into short-term publicly accessible political messaging. One obvious remedy is to have more women in politics, supported by "a whole lot of other women" to "normalize childcare and…shift it from something that is a dysfunctional welfare service to a public good—something that all of us need and want at different times of our lives and for different reasons." This suggests that a strong childcare system, once experienced, known, and understood, has policy "legs"; its absence in the social policy landscape makes it hard to conceptualize or imagine, but its presence makes it hard to undo.

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Best Ways to Communicate a Childcare Platform

Political informants discussed how each platform was positioned within the party's broader campaign message (e.g., "Care Over Cuts" or "For the People"). As described above by a policy advisor to the Liberal Party, the message was about introducing a comprehensive plan wherein the various pieces, including childcare and higher policy objectives, fit together coherently. In

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campaigning for universal childcare, however, one challenge became how to foster voter understanding of the complexities of childcare, all the while, adhering to the prescription of simplicity and generating public appeal. For example, Conservative messaging harnessed a simple idea that family is the site of identity (and family knows best). The Conservatives also had an advantage in presenting a childcare plan consistent with other familiar tangible tax credits that Ontario families receive and know. In contrast, the NDP and Liberal parties presented novel proposals that, while appealing to families desperately struggling to access affordable childcare, represented a fundamental, unknown, and uncertain structural shift. Furthermore, these parties were held more accountable for a perceived higher level of government involvement in family life and the costs of their childcare plans. An NDP informant indicated that their plan with a fee structure was a response to criticism that the NDP promotes "big government." While the Liberal message of free preschool was concise, the proposal entailed significant social investment requiring ample justification, thereby increasing the message's complexity.

Many informants questioned whether the for-profit/not-for-profit issue also worked against the principle of simplicity in a childcare platform. For NDP informants, this debate is always a key piece of their platform. However, for other informants, the debate distracted from high-level childcare messaging (i.e., a universal system). In addition, from a Liberal perspective, that debate can be easily reduced to an issue of "shutting down women

who provide home childcare." Several informants suggested that the for-profit/not-for-profit issue is a detail best negotiated and worked out through policy development before or after an election rather than during a polarizing campaign.

Some political informants highlighted that the role of party leaders is to meet people where they are at (e.g., doing the best they can to find childcare) and not necessarily to educate the public on issues such as profit making in a childcare market system. Moreover, platforms must reflect which aspects of a policy will resonate best with voters. However, this means that progressive parties with comprehensive childcare plans have the challenge of bridging a significant gap between expert knowledge and the public's current understanding of childcare issues.

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Some informants referenced British Columbia's "uncomplicated" $10-a-day plan advanced by BC advocates for years until the current NDP government took it up. According to one informant, the "beauty" of this communication is that it only shows "the tip of policy iceberg," while underneath, and unseen by most voters, is a massive childcare infrastructure plan that engages the sector. However, as the government, the Liberals had to account for the details (i.e., costs) beneath their free preschool plan, whereas the Conservative and NDP plans were criticized for lacking details.

These findings raise a question about whether it is more effective for unified coalitions of advocates to push for

a particular childcare plan. Some advocacy work can focus on identifying effective rationales for a publicly funded childcare system. Liberal and NDP informants reported struggling to position the costs of a public system in light of Conservative attacks on government deficits. As one Liberal informant noted, the problem with universal childcare "becomes that it's a lot of money for not necessarily a lot of political payback." While these informants preferred to use a "public good" rather than an economic rationale for their childcare plans, they maintained this rationale is necessary to counter the "public vulnerability" that progressive governments accumulate huge deficits. Less constrained by this vulnerability, advocates can draw on a range of rationales.

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Next Steps for Advocacy Organizations

Many findings in this article point to potential next steps for advocacy organizations; this section highlights

two more. Moving forward, advocacy organizations need, as one political informant described it, "a sense of hope and collaborative relationships." This hope builds on the fact that, in the 2018 Ontario election, two political parties envisioned universality, confirming one of OCBCC's advocacy messages that "universal childcare is possible." Furthermore, informants from advocacy organizations viewed their work with political parties as much stronger in the 2018 election than in 2014, particularly in "positioning childcare as a public responsibility." In anticipating future Liberal leadership campaigns, former Premier Wynne recommended that advocacy organizations meet with each candidate to discuss their positions on childcare and challenge regressive approaches. Meetings with NDP MPPs who champion childcare could potentially refine their 2018 childcare plan for the next election. A key reason for building these relationships with progressive parties is to push for childcare platforms that retain the "visionary boldness" and practicality of the 2018 platforms. At the same time, an informant from an advocacy organization described future work: "What we want to do is bring the childcare community together and have a really clear plan and a really clear vision of what we want. We want to be able to say that everybody's together on this; this is the plan that we want, this is the change we want."

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In promoting a vision for childcare in Ontario, some informants questioned the non-partisan stance of child-

care advocacy organizations. From their perspective, if a political party is proposing to make universal childcare possible then advocates should champion the proposal. One informant suggested looking to the education and health sectors where advocacy organizations are more likely to publicly favour one party over another with the aim of getting this party elected and a public policy in place. Another suggested approach for advocates is to avoid getting "distracted by" tax-credit-based childcare messaging and getting into a "conundrum of deciding between the NDP and Liberal...we should have been getting people out there voting NDP or Liberal but just not Conservative. Our messaging power was weaker because of it."

Taken all together, the findings indicate that advocates have much work to do. Prior to the 2018 election, childcare advocates maintained a more cooperative relationship with a Liberal government. Their current relationship with a Conservative government is increasingly conflictual (Langford, Prentice, Richardson, Albanese, 2016). This means that advocates must both intensify responses to regressive childcare policies *and* plan for

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Conclusion

In this article, our intention was to capture all that was happening with childcare policy before the Conservative government took office. In documenting the perspectives of those actively involved in the election, we hope that we will not have to re-do all that has already been done to get back to where we were before the 2018 provincial election. In this way, we are trying to create a kind of institutional *memoire* for policy makers, advocacy organizations, and researchers. We hope our examination of research findings will provoke recollections about the 2018 childcare campaigns and discussions among stakeholders about moving forward with childcare policy in Ontario.

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