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Exploring Parents' Perspectives on Paid Leave

A report from the
Institute for Family Studies
in collaboration with the
Ethics and Public and Policy Center

By Patrick T. Brown

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The Institute for Family Studies is dedicated to strengthening marriage and family life, and advancing the well-being of children, through research and public education in the United States and around the globe.

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Introduction

Last year, as Congress debated the comprehensive social spending package dubbed “Build Back Better” (BBB), some observers thought that the United States was on the verge of a political paradigm shift with the nation’s first federal paid leave program. As the UCLA World Policy Center has pointed out, the U.S. is the only developed nation not to offer a federal guarantee of paid leave for new parents (though the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) does provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for medical and caregiving situations, including childbirth and bonding.)¹

But the political conditions were always shaky, and the Biden administration’s initial proposal of 12 weeks of paid family leave was nearly dropped from the bill altogether. Ultimately, a four-week guarantee passed the House.² It was defined more expansively than paid parental leave alone; one estimate found that less than one-third of the benefits of the bill the proposal was based on would have gone to new parents.³ By the end of 2021, negotiations around the bill fell apart, which means that, at least for now, the status quo will hold.

For paid leave advocates, this may be disappointing, but it should also provide a clarifying moment. If an expansive paid leave package has proven politically infeasible - or, at least, not politically appealing enough to secure passage - a more modest and tailored proposal may find more backers and a more promising pathway forward.

There is no shortage of anecdotal voices of workers who have experienced varying de-

grees of paid leave, or lack thereof. But to know where the contours of public opinion lie, these individual stories must be read in conjunction with data on the public’s level of willingness to support different paid leave programs.

This paper seeks to identify parameters for a politically achievable paid leave proposal, using polling and interviews to illustrate what an approach to paid leave that puts parents first might look like. In particular, this report suggests the following elements might have appeal across the political spectrum:

- **Streamlining administrative burdens**, making any paid leave intuitive and easy to understand from the worker’s perspective
- **Expanding coverage**, potentially making a parental benefit universal
- **Focusing solely on paid parental leave**, leaving political battles over broader definitions of paid leave for another day, and
- **Providing the biggest benefits to new moms**, acknowledging the wide-spread recognition that they bear the biggest physical, mental, and emotional burden in recovering after a new birth.

For example, a policy that provides six weeks of modest maternity benefits to mothers who have just given birth, and three weeks of benefits to fathers or adoptive parents, could offer some baseline of stability to families’ incomes around the time of childbirth while keeping the price tag low enough to appeal to voters across the political divide.

This report approaches the question of paid leave through the lens of ascertaining what sort of approach might most appeal to parents and voters. It is informed by interviews with parents who were willing to share individual stories spanning a variety of experiences with both paid and unpaid leave, but also relies on nationally representative polling data to develop insights into what approach might be most appealing to voters.

The result points to an approach that will not be as comprehensive as progressive advocates might prefer, and leaves out a variety of family and personal circumstances that some may desire. It also may require more government spending and intervention than traditional economic conservatives may find ideal.

But a program that offers a tightly-defined purpose, and focuses on clear rules for eligibility and administrative legibility, could offer a compelling vision for how the state could

meaningfully support families and avoid many of the political pitfalls a more expansive - and expensive - approach to paid leave has fallen into.

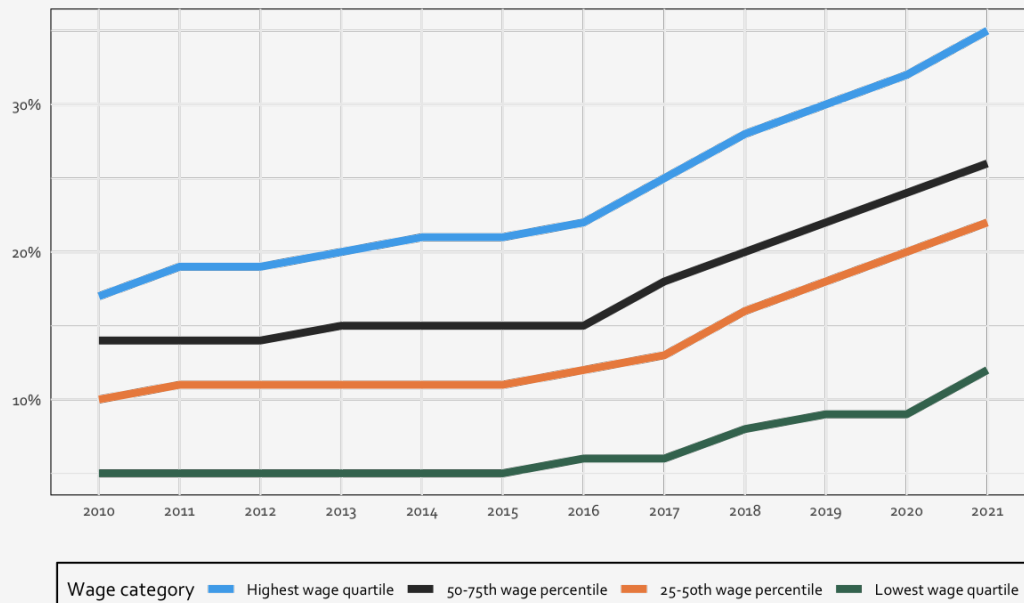
Current Paid Leave Access

In exploring how parents and voters might react to a future paid leave proposal, it is helpful to understand the current lay of the land. While the U.S. lacks a national paid leave policy, many workers currently do have access to paid family leave through their employers, and some states and localities have passed paid leave laws in recent years.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, nine states plus the District of Columbia have plans that provide parents and caregivers paid time off to care for a newborn or newly-

Figure 1a) Percent of civilian workers with access to paid family leave

By wage percentile, 2010-2021



Source: National Compensation Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

adopted child, address a serious health condition, or care for a family member with a serious health condition.⁴ They are predominantly clustered in the northeast and the West Coast: Washington, California, New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia. Oregon and Colorado will have their paid family leave plans go live next year. By 2024, roughly 100 million Americans (or 30% of the US population) will be living in a state that provides access to paid family leave.⁵

Additionally, the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act introduced a provision that allows businesses to receive a tax credit for providing paid family and medical leave to their employees. Employees who provide paid leave of at least two weeks at 50% of an employees' wages receive a tax credit of between 12.5% and 25% of the amount paid, depending on the generosity of the plan.⁶ The initial two-year pilot program was extended in late 2020, and will now run

until 2025, making it too early to study its impact in any great detail.

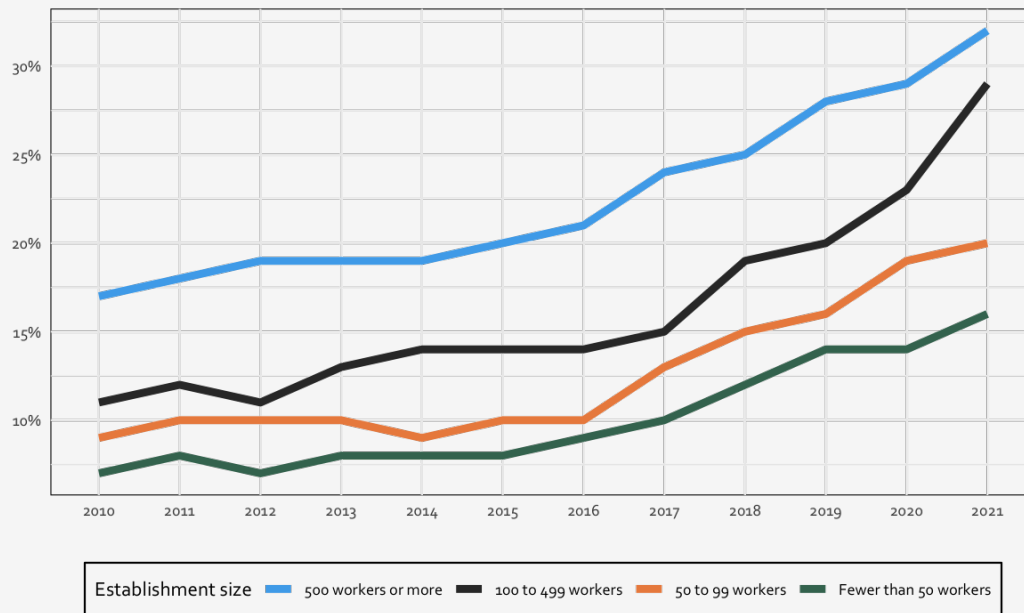
In the U.S., the National Compensation Survey (NCS) shows that 23% of private industry employees had access to paid family leave in 2021; up from 13% in 2017.

Unsurprisingly, higher-wage workers are more likely to report having access to paid family and medical leave than lower-wage workers. Over one-third of workers in the top wage quartile report access to paid family leave in 2021 (*Figure 1a*). Meanwhile, the share of workers in the bottom quarter of the wage distribution with paid leave broke into double digits for the first time last year.

There is also a strong correlation between the industry and firm size and a worker's likelihood of having access to leave (*Figure 1b*). Workers in small firms are the least likely to report having paid leave access, as smaller

Figure 1b) Percent of civilian workers with access to paid family leave

By size of employer, 2010-2021



Source: National Compensation Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

companies tend to have a lower ability to pool risk and afford the loss associated with having a worker out, reallocate or reduce work, or hire a temporary replacement.

State and local government employees, however, tend to report the highest rates of paid family leave availability in the NCS. Additionally, in October 2020, federal workers became eligible for paid leave for the first time, with a new law that grants federal employees 12 weeks of paid leave following the birth or placement of a child.⁷

Parents' Experiences with Paid Leave

There are three major dimensions of a paid family leave policy that will have the greatest impact on individuals' lives – who is covered, what is covered, and how the coverage is experienced from the worker's point of view. In discussions focused on working parents who had experience using family leave over recent years, the bulk of complaints and concerns about how a new paid family leave system would be put into practice tended to center around coverage and implementation.

As the NCS data shows, larger firms tend to be more able to afford paid family leave programs. And nationally, about 45% of workers are employed by establishments with fewer than 50 employees (goods-producing sectors of the economy tend to have more employees on the payroll, while services-providing firms, including everything from restaurants to fi-

ancial services, tend to have smaller staffs.)⁸

In addition, FMLA only applies to the public sector, public or private elementary or secondary schools, and private-sector firms with more than 50 employees (both for- and not-for-profit), meaning that about four in every 10 workers are not eligible for the provision.⁹ These gaps in coverage can cause headaches for parents who are not eligible for the guaranteed job protection.

“I was shocked to find out that I wasn't eligible for FMLA,” said one mom, who worked for a small North Carolina non-profit. Her firm told her it couldn't afford to guarantee her job would be available if she took six weeks off after childbirth. “I had a lot of issues with that... and [eventually] I left as a result of it,” she said.

A secondary benefit to running a paid leave program through the state, rather than encouraging individual or firm-level coverage,

“It was very stressful... I just wanted everything to be taken care of, and not have to fill out a bunch of forms...[and] sit on hold all day.”

could achieve greater efficiencies and efficacy in administering the program. The difficulty of navigating the paid leave process, especially in small and mid-size firms without large Human Resources departments, was brought up by multiple par-

ents interviewed for this report.

One mom who had been working in Pennsylvania at the time of her first child recalled getting “lost” in bureaucratic hurdles in trying to apply for paid time off from her small firm. “It was very stressful” trying to negotiate the short-term disability vendor, her company's HR representative, and manage a high-risk

pregnancy, she said. She “just wanted everything to be taken care of, and not have to fill out a bunch of forms...[and] sit on hold all day.”

Questions on these types of implementation and administrative hurdles rarely get asked in public opinion polls, and may not be especially likely to produce informative results if they did given the idiosyncracies of each individual story.

But anecdotally, parents said that falling through the cracks or being trapped in the bureaucracy of an employer-based system was a common pain point. “It was just so confusing,” said one Texas mom, whose first child was born while she was a contract worker. “[You] just don’t know what your options are, who to talk to, [or] what you need to do...it’s frustrating.” Paid leave for her second child, born when she was working full-time for a large employer, was smoother.

There is obviously no guarantee a paid leave program administered by the state will be any less bureaucratically frustrating for parents than the private market. But a discrete and straightforward program would mean less need for bureaucratic complexity to administer it.

Tasking one specific agency with administering a plan that provides benefits to new parents could help achieve an efficiency of specialization. And a universal program with a dedicated administrative structure could help parents be more aware of the benefits they are entitled to and have an easier time accessing it.

Universal coverage need not go hand in hand with administrative simplicity; the BBB approach, for example, incentivized firms to provide their own paid leave program and be reimbursed for it, rather than taking a more streamlined approach.¹⁰

Alternatively, a paid leave proposal introduced by Sen. Jodi Ernst (R-IA) and Mike Lee (R-UT) would allow workers to receive paid family leave through the Social Security system in exchange for delaying the onset of their retirement benefits (in other words, taking a week of paid leave after the birth of a child

while accepting a one-week increase, or less, in that individual’s retirement age.)¹¹

That plan has been criticized by some for smoothing the costs of childbearing across an individual’s lifecycle, but not socializing them, as well as on the grounds that the approach would be less fiscally sustainable than its supporters believe.¹²

But even an approach such as the Ernst-Lee plan, by being open to any employed worker and run through the Social Security Administration, could theoretically be more legible to the average worker than a system that involves firms, state agencies, and third-party insurance companies, as BBB would have envisioned. A paid leave plan that put parents first would take those administrative concerns seriously.

Another, more subtle concern we heard about relying on firms to design and implement paid leave plans is how it could amplify work-life tensions for new parents, especially moms.

“It was just so confusing...[You] just don’t know what your options are, who to talk to, [or] what you need to do...it’s frustrating.”

In a 2017 study of employees' views on social roles, women who chose not to take maternity leave were seen as being a worse parent, but those who did take maternity leave were seen as less committed to and less competent at their jobs.¹³ That unspoken pressure was typified by a mom on the West Coast whose firm let her take some informal, unpaid time off. She said that no one forced her back to work after just two weeks: "I just felt guilty...and [felt like I] was not doing my share."

Another mom on the West Coast remembered being the first in her small marketing firm to apply for maternity leave. Her company wanted to be supportive, she said, but "since I wasn't eligible" for FMLA, the experience "felt very ad hoc." She ended up returning to work sooner than she planned to, partly because she felt like the informal nature of her leave was an imposition on her team members. These experiences underline the weakness of relying on firm-level incentives to achieve universal coverage.

A gender gap in leave expectations was cited in conversations with parents. "I think if [my husband] had said 'I'm taking six weeks,'" of the leave he was entitled to, one East Coast mom said, "he'd have been concerned about negative repercussions" in terms of his prestige and presence at his office. One dad talked about the desire to "go back to work...and be the provider," rather than rely on paid leave for an extended period.

One paper found that following California's introduction of paid leave, mothers took an

average of 12 weeks away from work through a combination of the state's leave program and short-term disability. Meanwhile, three-quarters of new fathers took less than the six weeks of leave to which they were entitled.¹⁴

The law can't directly change attitudes; but by presenting a new option for all employees it may influence expectations. A universal provision of paid benefits for new moms could help reset social expectations about how much time new parents should take away from their work without fear of losing their job – or, more subtly, letting their colleagues or employer down.

Providing a benefit for parents, and guaranteeing their job will still be available for them when they return from the time away, can provide support to workers who want to be able to spend the early months of childhood at home.

The different expectations on mothers and fathers were repeatedly raised in conversations about paid leave, with a general sense that leave policies should be gender egalitarian. But parents disagreed about whether that was an appropriate topic for policymakers to be concerned with, and, as we shall see, had contradictory impulses on whether paid leave should treat moms and dads the same.

Public Opinion

Of course, because of the fragmented system of paid leave in the U.S., personal anecdotes can, at best, give just a flavor of different experiences. Issue

"I think if he had said 'I'm taking six weeks [of leave]', he'd have been concerned about negative repercussions."

polls can help aggregate preferences, but also suffer from well-known acquiescence bias, meaning support for paid leave may be overstated. There are a number of surveys that purport to show high levels of support for various paid leave plans, but many are associated with advocacy organizations interested in advancing progressive policies.¹⁵

One of the most detailed, nonpartisan public opinion surveys on different aspects of paid leave was conducted in late 2016 by the Pew Research Center on 2,029 adults 18 and over. As in other mainstream opinion polls, the topline support for paid leave was high.¹⁶

But the Pew results allow a more fine-grained analyses of support for different types of leave. Perhaps unsurprisingly, support for paid ma-

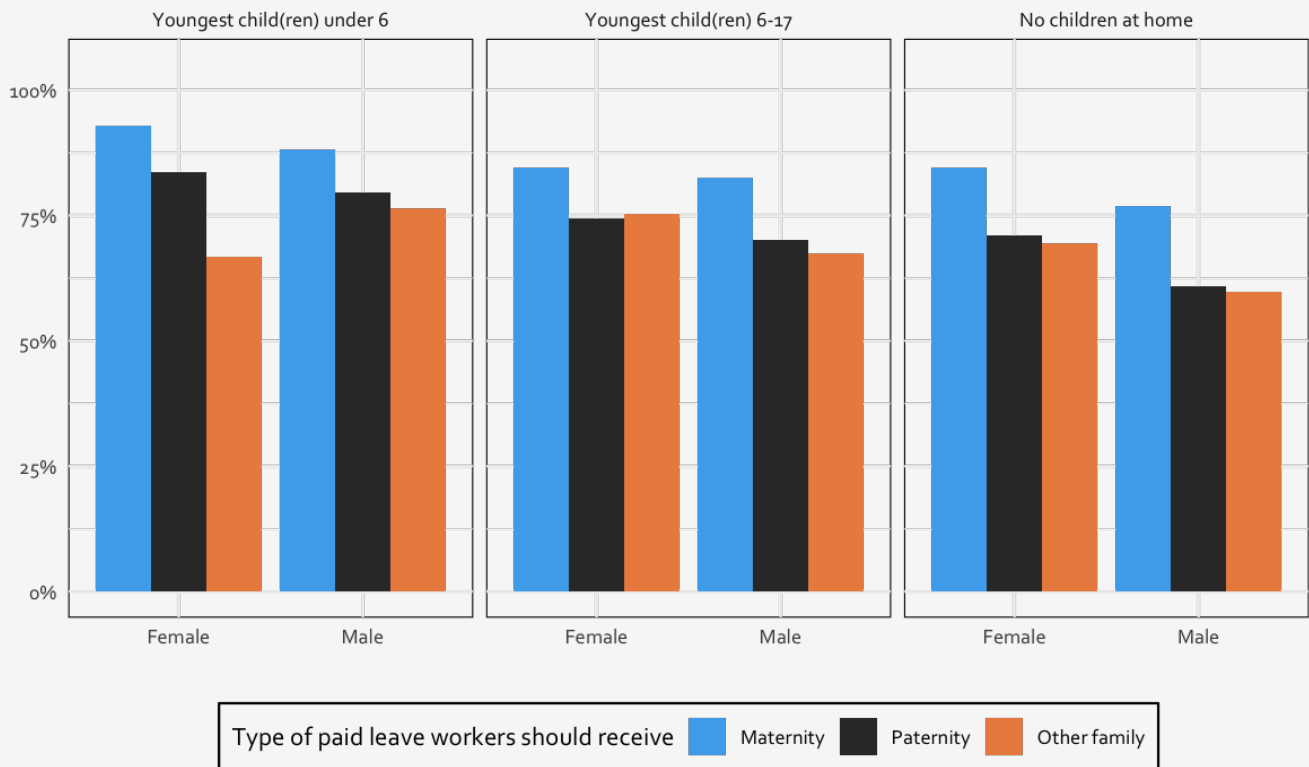
ternity leave was nearly universal among mothers of young children. Two-thirds of them support paid leave to care for a family member with an illness (**Figure 2**). Among respondents without a child at home, support was still higher for paid maternity leave, dropping off for paternity and other family leave.

Across all demographic groups, maternity leave was the most popular type of paid leave, with paternity leave second for adults who identified as white respondents. For black and Hispanic adults, paid leave to care for other family members was more popular than parental leave (**Figure 3**).

The demographic group with the lowest amount of support for different varieties of paid leave is white men. Even still, three-quar-

Figure 2) Under what type of circumstances should workers receive paid leave?

Among U.S. adults, by sex and age of youngest child



Source: Pew Research Center paid leave survey (2017)

ters of white men supported paid *maternity* leave. The highest rate of support for paid maternity leave was seen among black women and Hispanic men.

When Pew asked U.S. adults whether the government or employers should be responsible for deciding whether employers are offered paid leave, liberal and moderate respondents tended to favor a larger government role (Figure 4).

Self-described conservatives tended to favor employers deciding for themselves, with one notable exception: Moderate conservatives (who made up one-quarter of the sample) who had children at home were equally divided on whether the government should mandate paid parental leave or not.

This notable variation suggests that having kids may move some conservatives away from more typical limited-government sentiments when they recognize the potential benefit to new parents, or have a greater understanding of the challenges parents face balancing work

and home life.

Most respondents saw a paid leave plan as something that should be shouldered by employers. The preference for employer-sponsored paid maternal leave increased slightly with education, though without a meaningful gender gap.

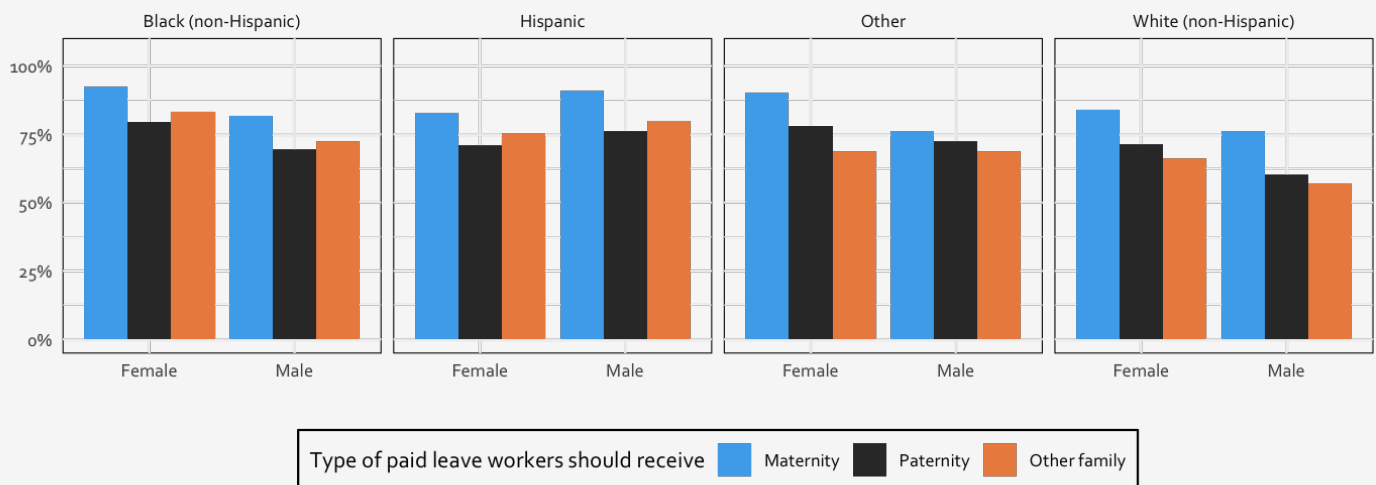
Mandating that employers provide leave, however, comes with attendant downsides. If firms know that female employees of child-bearing age may require additional resources, they may discriminate against them in hiring.

And, from an economic point of view, the incidence, or actual burden, of the paid leave plan may not fall on employers, even if it were to flow through them. Employees could bear the cost if firms reduce wages to compensate for the new benefit.

So while a mandate on employers to provide paid leave may be politically appealing on the surface level, it would likely have unpopular knock-on effects.

Figure 3) Under what circumstances should workers be able to receive paid leave?

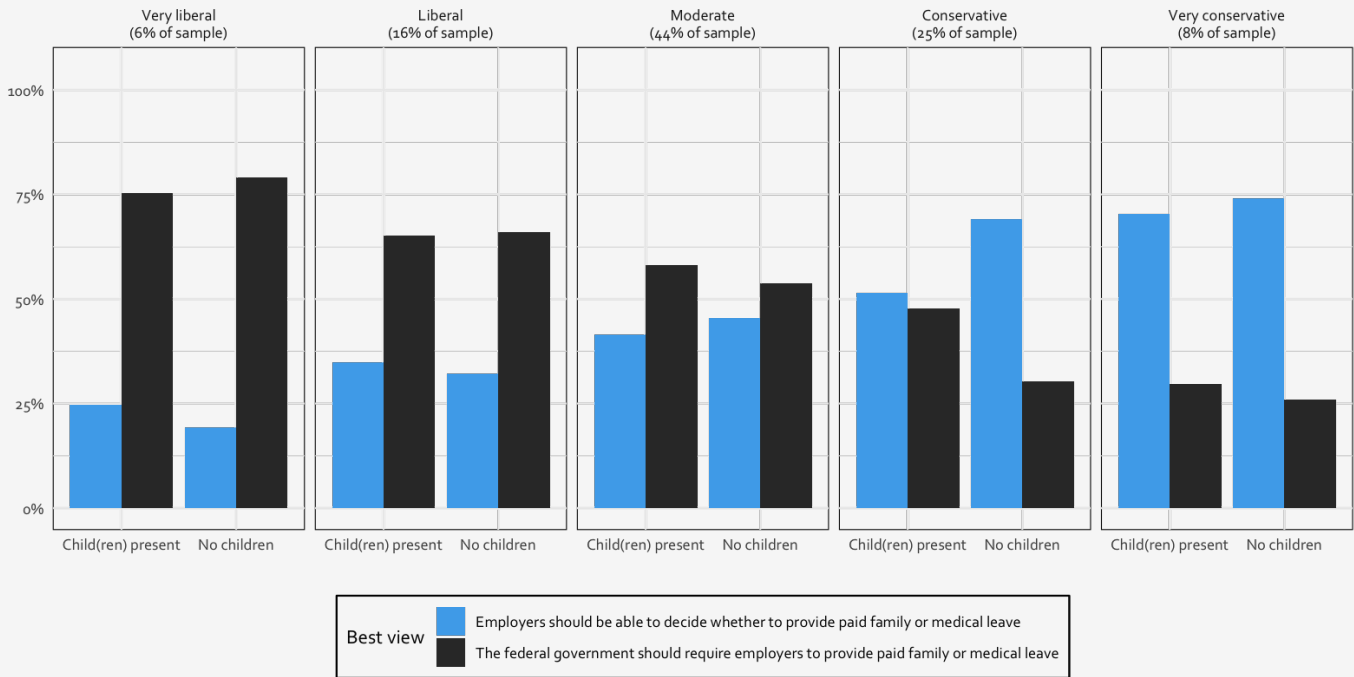
Among U.S. adults, by race and gender



Source: Pew Research Center paid leave survey (2017)

Figure 4) Which statement comes closer to your own views — even if neither is exactly right?

Among U.S. adults, by political ideology and presence of children under 18 at home



Source: Pew Research Center paid leave survey (2017)

In discussing the scope of coverage, conservative policy analyst Abby McCloskey expressed sentiments in a recent paper that a majority of our interview participants likely would have agreed with: “It should be the birthright of all American children to spend their first weeks of life with their mother and father without their parents’ experiencing unnecessary financial or employment-related stress.”¹⁷

Nearly all of the women interviewed for this report expressed the desire that parental leave not strictly be for mothers. “It’s important for men to get that bonding time too,” said one mom of three, adding that her husband’s unpaid time off of work still allowed him to take care of the other children while she was recuperating.

A March 2020 YouGov poll found majority support for an egalitarian approach to paid leave, though one in five fathers thought that

companies should provide paid leave only to new mothers, not fathers (*Figure 5*). It should be noted the poll was specifically asking about companies’ practices, not public policy.¹⁸

At the same time, while respondents will often give a nominal commitment to gender egalitarianism, they will also acknowledge the biological reality of giving birth and postpartum recovery as requiring more time to recover.

In the Pew survey, two-thirds of respondents said that moms should receive more days of paid leave than dads, with another one-third arguing for equality (notably, there were no major racial or educational subgroups that had a strong preference for one option over another.) For mothers “who take leave from work following the birth or adoption of a child,” the median Pew response was a recommendation

of 60 days of leave; for paternity leave, or leave to take care for an ill family member, the median response was 30 days.

This suggests that the unavoidable physical burden that childbirth places on women is socially recognized as being different in degree and kind than welcoming a child as a father or adoptive parent. And in the words of one of the more socially conservative parents interviewed for this report, a Pennsylvania mom who had left the workforce after giving birth to her second child, the bond between a new mother and her baby was “this, like, almost holy thing.”

Building support for paid leave among conservative parents might have the highest rate of success if it taps into those emotions and pays tribute to that unique and essential relationship.

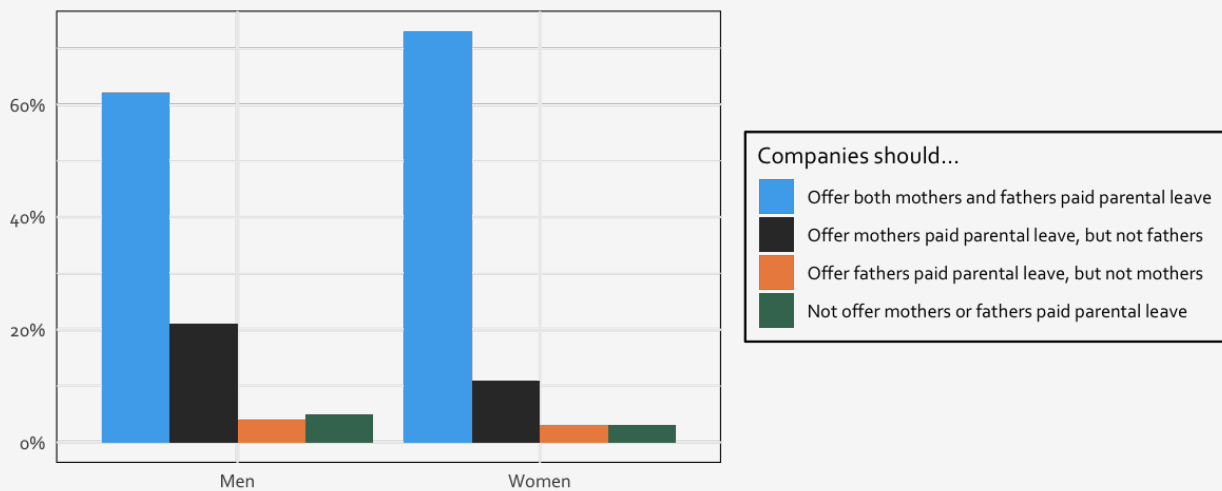
Political Considerations

As American political opinion has moved leftwards over recent decades, a federal paid leave system has become more popular, even among Republicans. In 1992, the American National Election Survey found that 24% of self-described conservatives, and 36% of liberals, favored requiring companies to provide six months of unpaid leave.

In 2020, when asked if government should require employers to offer paid leave to parents, 47% of conservative parents with children at home said they favored the proposal a “great deal,” and another 21% favored it moderately or a little. Conversely, the share of those who opposed requiring paid leave was twice as high among conservatives without children in the home compared to those with children.

Figure 5) Views on businesses' provision of paid leave

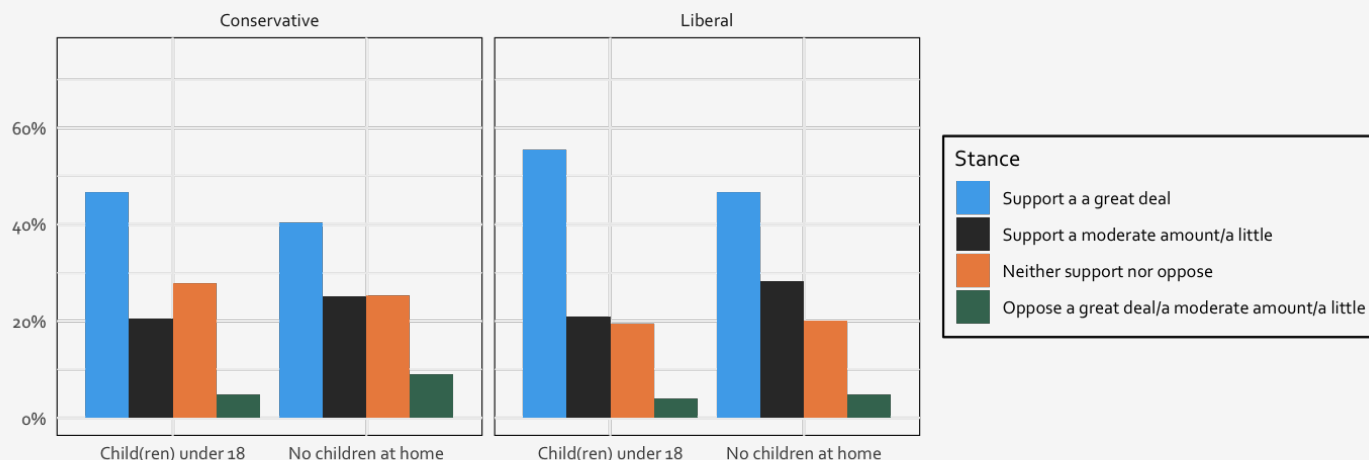
Among parents 18 and over, by gender



Source: YouGov poll fielded March 2020 ('don't know' not shown)

Figure 6) Do you favor or oppose requiring employers to offer paid leave to parents of new children?

Among eligible U.S. voters, by self-described political ideology and household status (2020)



Source: American National Election Studies 2020 Time Series Study

Support for requiring employers to provide paid leave was higher among self-described liberals, with more than half of parents saying they supported it strongly (*Figure 6*).¹⁹

But the lack of intensity of support for the program, and the relative unwillingness to shoulder the burden of paying for it, has kept federal paid leave bills from becoming law (the introduction of paid leave for federal workers, for example, was included in a must-pass defense bill, rather than stand-alone legislation.)

As pollster Christine Matthews told the *New York Times* in November 2021, “It’s not that Republican voters don’t support it. It’s that politicians know they’re not voting on that particular issue.”²⁰

In 2017, another poll from Pew found that a relatively scant 35% of Americans cited family medical leave as a “top priority” for the fledgling Trump administration. Two years later, a similar poll found that paid leave didn’t even

make the list of top policy priorities, and it remained absent from the list of top priorities in coronavirus-impacted 2021 as well.

Even in the BBB negotiations, paid leave remained largely a political afterthought, especially compared to some of the other items on the table. Only 27% of U.S. adults surveyed in an AP-NORC poll said paid family leave should be a “high priority” in the social spending bill, compared to health care (64%), education (59%), and the environment (46%).

Even comparing it to its closest analogue, the BBB’s proposal for expanded child care subsidies, shows that voters simply did not feel as strongly about paid family leave as an essential political investment (*Figure 7*).

Notably, child care is a higher priority for the lowest and highest income groups polled, and paid leave showed a similar, though lower in magnitude, pattern.

Additionally, polls have found the high numbers for paid leave soften somewhat when a proposal is paired with the costs that would be incurred. A 2018 poll conducted by the Cato Institute and YouGov found that 74% of respondents favored a new federal guarantee of 12 weeks of paid leave for new parents or workers faced with a family member’s serious illness.²¹

However, when a follow-up question asked how much more in taxes each respondent would be willing to pay each year to fund such a program, 52% opposed paying \$450 a year in taxes, and 44% opposed an additional \$250 a year, to fund a federal paid leave program.

Ultimately, support for paid leave tends to be broad but shallow, leaving it vulnerable to political opposition that deems it too expensive and too much of an imposition. Its strongest elements, however, are maternity leave, which means focusing a plan on that demographic would not only trim the overall price tag but

make it more politically compelling.

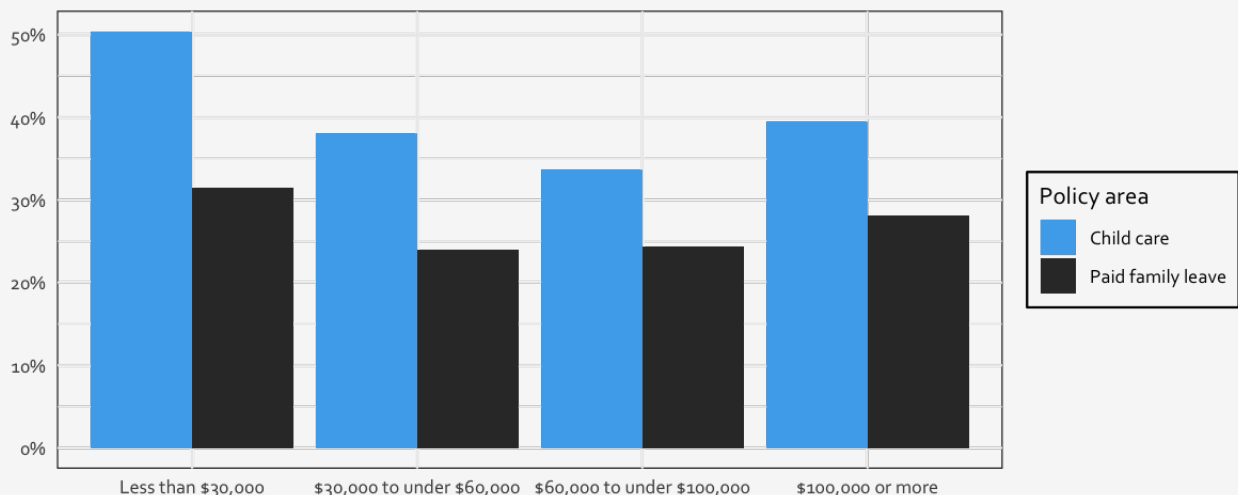
Other Considerations

Two of the most common cases for expanded paid leave are its purported impact on helping keep women connected to the labor force, as well as making it easier for parents to smooth income around childbirth. Theoretically, advocates argue, paid leave keeps new moms better attached to the labor force, and thus less likely to suffer the well-documented “motherhood” wage penalty or even leave their job.

One Michigan mom first shared her story with an online outlet. She was offered five days of paid leave at the advocacy organization where she worked. “Not even having the ability to save up over the time that I was off,” in addition to the amount she would have had to pay for child care for a newborn, “it was not adding up for me.” As a result, she left her job.

Figure 7) Do you think funding for these programs should be a high priority?

Among U.S. adults, by income



Source: AP-NORC poll of 1,083 US adults fielded Oct. 2021

Alternately, others have argued that paid leave will boost the nation's declining fertility rate. By effectively subsidizing the cost of having a child by compensating parents for the lost income associated with taking time off for childbirth, postpartum recovery, and newborn bonding, would-be parents may find it less financially risky to take the plunge.

There is a large research literature on the effect of paid leave programs on these and other outcomes (a prior working paper by IFS' Lyman Stone and the Center for Public Justice's Rachel Anderson summarizes the debate in fuller detail.)²² For instance, the bulk of the evidence appears to suggest paid leave has only a modest pro-natal effect, at best, and in some cases may actually reduce fertility.²³

Paid leave programs have been evaluated as having a modest impact on the labor market and in some cases may have created adverse outcomes for women of child-bearing age. The American Enterprise Institute's Michael Strain and Alain Viard argue that some paid leave proposals

*would impose additional burdens on employers. By subsidizing time away from work, the proposal would increase the number of workers who claim leave and the number of weeks that they claim...some businesses will respond to the burdens of parental leave by hiring fewer less-educated women of child-bearing age, by offering women fewer hours of work per week than they would like, and by promoting fewer women into management roles.*²⁴

At the same time, there are still many workers who face childbirth or other medical situations without the benefit of paid leave (and some, as we have seen, without even the job protections of unpaid leave.) But as the numbers shown above indicate, a tight labor market and cultural changes have begun to expand access to paid leave even without a national mandate.

As more and more employees obtain access to paid leave through their employer, a national push for paid leave may lead some workers to have concerns over what is known as "crowd-out;" when a firm gets rid of a generous paid leave plan when a new public option becomes available. Workers who highly prize their existing paid leave programs may oppose a government-run plan that threatens to undermine what they are used to, a dynamic that was seen in the political battles over the Affordable Care Act.

The Congressional Budget Office says if a national paid leave plan were to take effect, it expects "most employers who currently offer paid family and medical leave would ultimately provide fewer weeks of leave and less pay during leave."²⁵ Based on this dynamic, a plausible path forward for paid leave advocates would be to focus on a modest baseline of universal benefits, rather than spurring crowd-out fears with a push for more generous provisions.

Discussion

Framing a benefit to new parents as "paid leave" situates it in the context of wage replacement during absence from the workforce. This, of course, leaves out

parents who are not working, or would not otherwise meet eligibility requirements.

The proposal that became the framework of the BBB approach, for example, would have left out 30% of new parents, according to the Congressional Budget Office. At the same time, the bill's expansive definition of a qualifying leave event meant that the bulk of the programs' benefits - nearly 70% - would have gone towards paid leave events other than parenthood.²⁶

A plan designed to appeal to voters in both parties would ideally work on decreasing the number of parents left out of a paid leave program, and tailor the program's design to focus on parental leave to reduce program costs and provide a tangible rationale for the bill. A plan focused on capturing the political appeal of providing benefits to new parents, and particularly new moms, would offer a different script than purely a lens of labor-force attachment.

This different way of conceptualizing a benefit to new parents would be as a universal subsidy to all new parents, rather than as a paid leave program that only provides benefits to employed parents who meet certain criteria for eligibility.

For example, the requirement to be eligible for paid leave in the BBB approach would have left out young and low-income parents, who tend to be minorities, have less education, and a lower earnings profile. Ensuring they have a certain guaranteed benefit at the time of their child's birth, even without a steady work his-

tory could be desirable on distributional grounds, but more importantly could help streamline the operations of the program.

As Matt Bruenig, the founder of the left-leaning People's Policy Project, points out, "the idea that parental leave programs should cover all parents is...pretty normal across the developed world. For example, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Germany all provide parental leave benefits for all new parents, even those who have never worked a day in their life."²⁷

Some back-of-the-envelope math gives a sense of the relative affordability of a modest, yet universal parental benefit. The median weekly wage for a female worker in 2021 was \$930.²⁸ Targeting the equivalent of a wage replacement of 50% for six weeks would provide a maternal benefit of \$2,790 (it could conceivably be paid out as a lump sum upon the issuance of a social security number for the child, or as a payroll addition spread out over

the six weeks.) For dads, adoptive parents, or other parents who did not give birth, a benefit of equal size for three weeks would equal \$1,395.

In 2020, 3.6 million women gave birth (including some who gave birth to

twins or other higher-order numbers of children,) suggesting a naïve one-year estimate of \$15.1 billion (\$10.08 billion for the mothers delivering the child, and \$5.04 billion for the father/non-delivering parent.)²⁹ A plan that provided the same amount of benefits and job protection to both parents would cost an estimated \$20 billion.

A universal paid leave program that paired a modest parental benefit with a guarantee of job protection could cost around \$15.1 billion annually.

For context, \$15.1 billion is roughly half the size of the federal tax exclusion of the mortgage interest deduction on owner-occupied residences (\$28 billion in 2019). Out of the total value of the deduction, 84% goes towards the highest quintile of earners.³⁰ And while a number of potential pay-fors could make such an approach deficit-neutral without raising taxes, the \$15.1 billion cost is equivalent to an additional \$105 per year from each taxpayer.

To be clear – the goal of this program would not be an expansive federal benefit to replace workers' income. Rather, it would be a federal floor of modest benefits for all parents, both to help smooth the gaps in income associated with time away from work around childbirth, as well as to give new parents the resources they need for diapers, child care, cribs, clothes, or whatever else they may need.

This would have to be paired with a guarantee of job protection, either by revisiting the provisions in FMLA or, more simply, by creating a new statute that makes it illegal to fire a worker receiving the new parenting benefit.

While six weeks may be relatively short compared to other international nations, a cautious, intentional approach that sought to provide a baseline while avoid crowding out more generous and expansive provision of paid leave by firms would be more politically achievable.

States, of course, could still have more expansive requirements, and could pass or continue

to require a wider suite of eligible circumstances beyond just the birth or placement of a new child.

“Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Germany all provide parental leave benefits for all new parents, even those who have never worked a day in their life.”

A program operated by the federal government would avoid the problem of workers who live in one state but work in another, or the different levels of state capacity to operate such a program. But if legislators wanted to pilot out a small-scale version of this approach, they could

appropriate or block-grant funds to states who choose to participate.

Some might balk at a standard threshold of benefits, which would be far from full wage replacement for many earners. But providing a modest baseline of benefits, focused on women recovering from childbirth, should allay most fears about creating dependency or enabling fraud or abuse that could occur under more extensive leave definitions.

In negotiations over BBB, for instance, Senate moderates had expressed a concern about fraud, which would seem to be less of a concern for a plan focused solely on parental leave but could very easily become an issue if leave were defined more widely.³¹

And while discussions over a universal child benefit are beyond the scope of this paper, a parental benefit tied to the first two months of a child's life should be sufficiently modest to allay concerns about an expanded Child Tax Credit's impact on labor force participation.³²

An additional benefit of tying federal leave to parenthood rather than wage replacement is that it frees up the conceptual space for pursuing straightforward implementation.

Ideally, parents could apply for the benefit in the last few weeks of pregnancy, with benefits being disbursed upon the application for a new child's Social Security number (allowing parents who suffer a stillbirth would be a humane practice as well.) Allowing for pre-filing would limit the administrative burden on new parents, rather than having them wait to file until the heady and exhausting first days of being new parents.

Activists and stakeholders would certainly push for paid leave for circumstances beyond childbirth. And as the workforce ages, paid time to care for aging relatives may become more politically potent than time off for a new child. But current polling indicates views on mandating paid leave when taking care of a sick family member tends to fall along ideological lines.

Rather than maternity leave pulling personal and family paid leave along with it, the fate of paid leave in BBB provides evidence to support the hypothesis that a paid leave proposal focused on parents could have more cross-partisan appeal than an all-of-the-above approach. Part of the reason the provision of paid leave for federal workers sailed through on a bipartisan basis, for example, may have been because the bill's coverage was limited to new parents.

Lastly, by moving parental benefits away from being provided by firms and towards a universal provision through the welfare state, government can sidestep having to take a side

in the cultural battle over gender roles noted above.

The Independent Women's Forum Hadley Heath Manning has observed that "places that have more generous paid family leave programs [have] higher gender wage gaps...They encourage discrimination against women when it comes to hiring."³³ Some countries, such as Sweden and Germany, have tried to counteract this tendency by endeavoring to shift public opinion in a more gender-egalitarian direction through including incentives for men to take parental leave as well.³⁴

But that kind of heavy-handed social engineering is a poor fit for the U.S. Providing a benefit to all parents regardless of work status, rather than increasing costs on firms who employ women of child-bearing age, could ameliorate some of the concerns raised by Heath Manning and others.

A universal program could smooth some of those cultural hesitations around taking time away from the office that parents talked to for this report discussed, and relieve some of the economic pressures that force some parents back to work before they are physically or emotionally ready.

As Stone and Anderson wrote for IFS, "policy-makers should clearly understand that the main employment-related benefit of maternity leave is in empowering *worker choices about labor supply*, not necessary *inducing return to work or reducing gender inequality*."³⁵

This is not to say there would not be any benefits to employers. Paid leave can assist in worker retention, and lead to lower costs associated with hiring and retraining, should

an employee continue to work at the same firm. Small businesses and non-profit organizations that currently incur a financial penalty from offering paid leave to their workers would benefit as well.

And a parental benefit package that recognizes the specific biological burdens of postpartum recovery for women who have just given birth, while still increasing options for parents in other situations, could help more families make the choice that is best for their individual circumstance.

A basic guarantee of six weeks for moms, and three for dads, could help reshape cultural scripts around parenting without the state taking an aggressive stand in favor of prioritizing labor force attachment over home life or aggressive attempts at implementing gender egalitarianism.

Conclusion

Following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, some policymakers and pundits thought paid leave was an idea whose time had come. For a brief time, the U.S. had its first federal paid leave provision in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which was signed into law in March 2020 and remained in effect until the end of the year. It required most employers to provide up to two weeks of partial paid leave to workers impacted by quarantines or school closures.³⁶

But the status quo may have proven more resilient than some advocates wanted to believe. The expansiveness of the BBB approach to paid leave was a selling-point for the Biden ad-

ministration, which touted how it would allow workers to “to bond with a new child, care for a seriously ill loved one, deal with a loved one’s military deployment, find safety from sexual assault, stalking, or domestic violence, heal from their own serious illness or take time to deal with the death of a loved one.”³⁷ But that very lack of definitional clarity may have made the program too amorphous and expensive for voters to get behind.

In talking to parents who have taken paid leave, or wish they could have taken paid leave, it’s easy to find anecdotes about the times their arrangements worked out, but only after no small amount of bureaucratic distress. How a plan works could prove more important to many parents than the specifics of wage replacement rates or duration of leave. To attract broad support, any paid leave proposal should place a heavy emphasis on clarity and legibility to the general population.

Lastly, though this was not the focus of this paper, one important benefit of switching from a paid leave system tied to employment to one that provides benefits to all parents would be recognizing that new parents’ preference for work and family life can change after the birth of a child. A benefit framed as wage-replacement, rather than a parental subsidy, or an attempt to tie workers more closely to their firms through paid leave tax credits, may implicitly push some parents back into the labor force who would ultimately prefer not to return to work immediately.

Indeed, some parents who had planned on going back to work after childbirth find they now prefer to spend those early years at home with their young child, and a parental benefit that is universal would help direct resources their

way without putting a finger on the scale.

As of this writing, it appears Congress is headed for another time of divided government. Additionally, a pending Supreme Court case could reshape the political landscape around abortion and parenthood, which could create a new interest in providing a federal guarantee of paid leave among more conservative advocates and legislatures.

This suggests that if paid leave is to become a reality, it will most effectively be pursued in a

bipartisan manner. In turn, the shallow but broad support for paid leave will need to be converted into support for a tangible and visible proposal. Opting for administrative simplicity over strict eligibility, recognizing the unique burdens childbirth places on women, and affirming society's support for parenthood as a social good suggests a possible direction for a paid leave program to successfully become part of the American political landscape. ■

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