

Republicans, seeing opportunities in the suburbs, advance paid leave plans

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Democrats have dominated discussions surrounding parental leave for decades. But Republicans are now poised to introduce a raft of new proposals in the coming weeks, reflecting the party's effort to win back the suburban women it lost in the midterms.

Lawmakers working on new legislation include Sens. Mike Lee of Utah, Joni Ernst of Iowa, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Rep. Ann Wagner of Missouri, Roll Call has confirmed.

The bills are the first wave of what GOP pollsters, strategists and advocates of paid leave expect to be a surge of paid leave proposals from Republicans in the run-up to 2020.

"A lot of swing women voters are up for grabs in the next election," said Olivia Perez-Cubas, a spokeswoman for Winning for Women, a group dedicated to electing Republican women. "This could be one of those issues that brings them in."

For years, many on the right said paid leave policies could harm small businesses, inflate government spending, and make it too expensive for companies to hire women — or conversely, that it would be better for children to have their mothers leave the workforce and stay at home.

But now, spurred in part by activism from Ivanka Trump, a growing number of Republicans have embraced arguments that it would improve maternal and fetal health, provide income stability for families, and strengthen caregivers' connection to the workforce.

Ivanka Trump, the daughter and senior adviser of President Donald Trump, promised voters during the 2016 campaign that her father would make paid leave a reality. She has met several times with members of the House and Senate to promote such policies, including a series of meetings last month. The president has called for paid family leave in his two State of the Union addresses.

Paid family leave would allow the GOP to showcase its claim to uphold family values while still appealing to working-class voters whose sense of economic instability helped propel Trump to victory in 2016, Perez-Cubas said.

"Republicans want to be the pro-family party, the pro-jobs party," she said. "This addresses the challenges a lot of working families are facing today. For the first time, Republicans can stand up and say, 'We have solutions.'"

In one demonstration of how far the party has come, and how far it still has to go, former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum appeared last week at the Conservative Political Action Conference — the annual incubator of right-leaning ideas — to stump for paid-leave policies.

Santorum, a longtime proponent of “family values” conservatism, voted against the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, which mandated 12 weeks of unpaid time off to care for loved ones or bond with a newborn. But speaking Thursday, he described the economic pressures facing American families, including the high cost of child care, which he said has contributed to low birth rates.

“We can’t just sit back and say, ‘Well, let the private sector worry about this,’ ” he said. “A lot of private sector does provide paid family leave, but to who? The upper incomes of society. Middle- and lower-class families can’t afford to take leave.

“Those are our voters. These are our people. If you want to talk to them, if you want to take the Trump coalition and continue that coalition, you’d better have answers,” the former senator added.

But not everyone in the audience was convinced. One man wondered if it would be better to incentivize mothers to stay at home during their children’s early years. Another worried that Republican proposals, which would allow new parents to draw from Social Security, would deplete the fund.

Santorum parried, saying it was important to “build momentum” for Republican proposals.

“This is a new subject area for conservatives. It’s not new for the other side,” he said. “What we need to do is try to define the debate and talk about how important this is for the future. ... This can be winning issue for us.”

Polls show that paid leave is overwhelmingly popular among voters on both sides of the political spectrum. The libertarian Cato Institute, for example, found last year that 88 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of independents and 60 percent of Republicans support a government program to provide 12 weeks of paid family leave. Among Republicans, the support was driven by women, with 72 percent saying they would support such a proposal compared to 50 percent of GOP men.

Until recently, Republican proposals focused on tax credits for companies that provided leave for their employees. (The 2017 GOP tax overhaul included such a credit.) The new GOP proposals, however, would create a social insurance program funded by the government — just like those favored by Democrats. The main difference is how it would be paid for, according to descriptions provided by congressional aides.

The Democrats’ main offering — the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act, reintroduced by Kirsten Gillibrand in the Senate and Rosa DeLauro in the House — would establish an insurance trust fund that pays out claims through the Social Security Administration.

A proposal by Lee and Ernst, and another by Wagner, would be similar to a plan put forth by Sen. Marco Rubio last Congress, which would allow new parents to draw from future Social Security benefits to finance their leave. Cassidy’s office did not provide details of his plan.

“The president has made it clear that paid family leave is a priority for his administration, that’s why I am all the more encouraged to continue working with my colleagues, and the administration, to create a path forward for a budget-neutral, child-focused paid leave program rather than impose a new entitlement or mandate,” Ernst said in a statement.

Lee said his bill would be an extension of his work on the child tax credit included in the 2017 tax law, which he described as “making sure our nation’s entitlement system gives working families the flexibility they need.”

“Making federal policy work better for working families has always been a focus of mine,” he said in a statement.

Wagner, likewise, has been an advocate for paid leave for years, according to an aide — who pointed out that the congresswoman has three children and a grandchild. As a Republican National Committee co-chair from 2001 to 2005, she helped introduce a maternity leave policy there, the aide said.

Wagner told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in December that she would spend much of her time during the 116th Congress working to steer other Republicans toward legislation that appealed to suburban voters, like those in her district outside St. Louis.

Issues on that agenda include career and technical education, paid parental leave, flex hours for workers and support for first responders, the newspaper reported.

“If we are going to be a majority party again, we have got to have a party that looks more like America, that looks not just like our rural areas that are so wonderful across our country, but also that looks more like urban and suburban (America),” she said.

Wagner survived the blue wave last fall, winning re-election by 5 points, and has said she plans to revive the Suburban Caucus, an informal group of Republican members who sought to advance policies with appeal to suburban voters in the early 2000s.

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Ann Wagner, who is leading the Family Leave Act on the House side, is also the representative who is launching the Suburban Caucus, which is being designed to promote issues like paid family leave,” said Andrea Zuniga, vice president of legislative affairs for the advocacy group PL(plus)US: Paid Leave for the United States.

“Paid family leave is a winning issue, and I’m really looking forward to see how Republicans talk about it. I think they know they have an Achilles heel. They are working to cover it and engage with women,” Zuniga said.

Republican pollster John McLaughlin, who tested policy ideas for the earlier Suburban Caucus, said he conducted several national and local surveys for lawmakers in the last Congress and found overwhelming support for paid leave.

“The Republicans, for whatever reason, they didn’t bring it to a vote when they had the majority in the House, and they should have,” he said. “It would have helped re-elect a lot of members. I was advocating for that.”

One of the polls McLaughlin conducted was in the swing suburban Long Island district of New York Rep. Peter T. King, who faced his first real challenge in years from a Democrat who stressed her identity as a mother of small children during the campaign.

About 75 percent of voters in that district supported paid leave, McLaughlin said.

King did not return a request for comment, but he spoke favorably about policies that would create options for working parents after he and other Republican lawmakers met with Ivanka Trump about paid leave in 2017.

“We’re supposed to stand for traditional values,” King told The New York Times. “Well, the traditional family now is a working mother with kids. I just hope Republicans don’t just jump into this lock-step, knee-jerk reaction of ‘another crazy program.’ ”