

Paid Parental Leave Is a Great Idea—It’s Time Republicans Caught On

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Republicans have long claimed to be the party who supports the family unit. Despite balking at it for years, the GOP finally seems to be getting on board with paid family leave, a policy that, if crafted well, would surely be a boon for struggling parents without padding government bureaucracy too much.

Just last week, Ivanka Trump announced Congress will provide 12 weeks of paid parental leave to the government’s 2.1 million federal employees. The \$3.3 billion provision is part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which passed the House, and the Senate is expected to pass it soon as well.

“We want the United States to be the best place in the world to live, to work, and to raise a family,” Ivanka Trump announced at the White House’s “Summit on Child Care and Paid Parental Leave” on Dec. 12.

Cost is a factor in raising a family, and lawmakers have attempted to fiddle with things such as the child tax credit or paid parental leave to ease the increasing burden. Statistics show that, in 2015, it cost approximately \$233,610 to raise a child from birth until the age of 17. Those costs soared 40 percent from 2000 to 2010, and if you’re a parent you’ve felt that sting.

As such, it’s high time the pro-life, pro-family party got behind paid family leave, if not at the state level, then by encouraging private businesses to offer it through positive corporate peer pressure.

Complicated Relationship

The United States has had a complicated relationship with paid family leave, despite its popularity—and the fact it’s usually mandated—elsewhere in the world.

In 2016, NPR reported, “Out of 193 countries in the United Nations, only a small handful do not have a national paid parental leave law: New Guinea, Suriname, a few South Pacific island nations and the United States.”

Still, that has slowly started to change. In general, most workers are covered by the Family Medical Leave Act, which allows up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave per year to care for family members.

According to 2018 data from the Society for Human Resource Management, more than a third of U.S. employers offered paid maternity leave beyond the amount required by law, up from about an eighth in 2014. Many employers have discovered this is a good way to keep employees happy without necessarily raising wages. However, as of 2018, still only 17 percent of U.S. civilian workers got any paid family leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

While paid maternity leave is more common, and Democrats have been advocating for paid family leave for a while, Republicans are finally catching up—and it's none too soon.

Last year, lawmakers proposed various forms of paid family leave, but none of them even came close to a floor vote.

In his State of the Union address this year, President Donald Trump renewed his call for a federal paid parental leave plan saying, “I am also proud to be the first president to include in my budget a plan for nationwide paid family leave—so that every new parent has the chance to bond with their newborn child.”

While I'm no fan of a mandated nationwide paid family leave, I'm inclined to say states need to keep trying: Paid parental leave boosts a parents' satisfaction, which in turn produces happy employees. Happy employees increase productivity and are a boon for the economy. Many private businesses already know this: Companies such as Dell, Spotify, Twitter, and Facebook already offer general paid parental leave packages.

Paid family leave is great for new moms but particularly so for new dads. Studies show fathers who take more than a couple weeks of leave are more involved in day-to-day childcare nearly a year later in the child's life than those who don't. Paid paternity leave policies at work might also help retain more skilled workers.

Past Proposals

Right now, only a handful of states and the District of Columbia have paid family leave laws. On Jan. 1, residents of Washington state started paying into their mandated paid leave policy, which is basically their version of the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act (FAMILY Act), which was first introduced to Congress in 2013.

In this model that many Democrats support, employees and employers pay a small amount from each paycheck into an insurance fund to pay for leave.

In Washington state, workers can take up to 12 weeks paid leave per year after the birth of a child, for a serious illness, or to care for a sick family member. Workers and employers pay a 0.4 percent premium into a fund. Employers can either pay the entire premium, or they can withhold up to 63 percent of the premium from the worker's paycheck.

A few folks, such as federal employees, self-employed workers, or federally recognized tribes, are exempt from the law. It's often touted as something that's helpful for lower-income working people—without compromising Social Security benefits down the road.

Republicans introduced several different types of paid parental leave legislation in 2018. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fl.) worked with Ivanka Trump on a bill—the Economic Security for New Parents Act—that many conservatives favored more. His plan would have allowed employees to draw on Social Security funds for two months of their “paid” leave. In exchange, employees would delay receipt of their benefits by about six months, following retirement. The benefits would have been transferable for fathers and mothers. For many families, this would have been a small price to pay.

The beauty of Rubio's bill was that it wasn't a government-mandated program paid for via a tax, and didn't affect everyone. (This would have been unfair to couples without children, families who have already had children, or families who wouldn't participate.)

Critics weren't so delighted. One Fortune contributor said, “Ivanka Trump's paid leave policy would be disastrous,” arguing this type of paid family leave would not function well for people in lower-paying jobs as they would have to push back retirement until nearly 68 if they had two children.

However, Republicans tried again in March this year, with Senators Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) and Mike Lee (R-Utah) introducing a similar bill to Rubio's as the CRADLE Act.

Supporters believe it's clear that paid parental leave is helpful to the family unit, which in turn trickles down to aiding the economy. The question is, if it's such a boon, why don't more states do it? Why don't more employers?

Vanessa Brown Calder, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, thinks the plans offered on both sides are just too different. “The Democrats' FAMILY Act relies on a payroll tax for funding, an anathema to many Republicans. Rubio's plan is based on the existing Social Security program, and Democrats are worried it will raid SS benefits for the elderly, while Republicans are considered about adding additional obligations to the existing Social Security program, which is already in trouble financially, of course.”

Hopefully, this new provision that offers paid parental leave for federal employees will spur other states, or at least other private corporations, to offer their employees the same.