



## **Do Granite Staters really want mandatory paid leave?**

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House Democrats insisted on incorporating a mandatory paid leave program — and its \$168 million wage tax — into the state budget, knowing that this could trigger a veto by Gov. Chris Sununu. It's a strange hill upon which to die, considering that there's no evidence Granite Staters are demanding this specific workplace perk.

This month the UNH Carsey Center for Public Policy released a report asserting that Granite Staters support guaranteed job protection for paid family and medical leave programs and a 60 percent wage rate while on leave.

This is about as useful to lawmakers as a ping pong table is to the Game of Thrones' Night's Watch. It's nice to have, but when the real work starts its minimal utility quickly becomes apparent.

Nowhere did the survey ask whether respondents would prefer paid leave to other benefits such as flexible schedules, more health coverage or higher pay. Nowhere did it ask whether employees would prefer paid leave if it led to lower pay raises or reduced benefits in the future. Nowhere did it ask how much employees would be willing to pay for such a benefit.

The 2016 UNH poll that purported to show broad support for paid family leave in New Hampshire also left out crucial questions. It did not give respondents the option of choosing from a list of other possible workplace benefits. The only cost it included was \$5 per week, which is on the low end of the cost scale for various paid leave programs.

Other polls have asked such questions, and their results do not support the theory that paid leave is so critically important for employees that the state must guarantee it via a mandate and wage tax.

A 2017 Pew poll found paid leave statistically tied with more flexible work schedules as the most preferred new benefit, with 28 percent preferring schedule flexibility and 27 percent preferring paid leave. (That poll also found, by the way, that most Americans were satisfied with their workplace benefits and thought their employers cared about them and their well-being.)

A 2017 study by data research firm FRACTL found that employees ranked paid parental leave 8th among a list of 17 benefit options. More popular were better health benefits, more flexible hours, more vacation time, work from home options, unlimited vacation, student loan assistance and tuition assistance.

A 2017 survey by payroll and benefits firm JustWorks found that flexible schedules and remote work options were far more popular among employees than unlimited paid time off or parental leave. Fewer than half of employees said unlimited paid time off or paid parental leave were important.

A Cato Institute poll last December found that support for paid leave crashes when people are given the option of considering the costs. In the abstract, 74 percent of Americans support paid leave. But 60 percent oppose paid leave if it would lead to lower future pay raises.

Paid leave is being pushed on Granite Staters as if it is universally acknowledged as the holy grail of workplace benefits. It isn't. National polling shows that most employees prefer other benefits to paid leave. And even if it were the most popular benefit, that wouldn't make it the right benefit for every employee or every employer.

When employers are forced to offer this particular benefit over all others, employees are then forced to accept this particular benefit instead of others employers might have chosen. There is no compelling case for forcing this choice on all New Hampshire employees. Creating a budget showdown over an entirely unwarranted mandatory benefit would only compound the mistake.