

POLICY BRIEFING:

## **New Research Shows Voters Support a Strong Paid Family and Medical Leave Plan**

OCTOBER 2018

New research shows that paid leave is a key component of a policy agenda that supports working people – especially women, who continue to do a disproportionate share of family caregiving. Paid leave also benefits businesses and the broader economy. Candidates for Congress should embrace a national paid family and medical leave plan that covers all working people in the United States, no matter where they live, their employer or their job. Support for paid parental leave is not enough. [Polling](#) shows that only focusing on paid parental leave confuses voters and is less popular than comprehensive paid family and medical leave.

Right now, the [FAMILY Act](#) (S. 337/H.R. 947) is the proposal that best meets people’s needs. It is popular, reflective of what the public wants and has substantial congressional support, as well as support from smaller and larger businesses. It would close the substantial gaps in working people’s access to paid leave – because, today, just **17% of workers** have paid family leave at their jobs and less than 40% are offered personal medical leave through an employer’s short-term disability insurance plan.

### THREE KEY POLLING AND MESSAGING POINTS

- 1. Voters across party lines overwhelmingly support a national paid family and medical leave policy that covers all of the key reasons people need leave from work – to care for a new child, a seriously ill family member or their own serious health issue, illness or injury or for military families’ needs.** More than eight in 10 (84%) support a comprehensive national paid family and medical leave program overall, including 94% of Democrats, 83% of independents, and 74% of Republicans.
  - ▶ **What animates this support?**
    - ▶ Voters overwhelmingly believe that no one should be kept from seeing a baby’s first smile or holding the hand of a dying parent. A national paid leave plan will strengthen families’ financial security and allow people to be there for their child’s first moments and their loved ones’ last moments. Voters also believe that this is a pro-family policy and families are the building blocks of our country.
    - ▶ Voters’ views are grounded in personal experience and family economics:
      - ▶ 66% of voters say they would face serious financial hardship if they had to take up to a few months of unpaid leave for a serious family or medical issue.
      - ▶ 53% of voters think they will need paid family or medical leave in the future – including 72% of voters between the ages of 18 and 44. [Demographic research](#) shows that these are people who are either thinking of starting families, already facing the need to care for aging

relatives, or both. The research also shows that the need for family care will only grow as the country's population ages.

- ▶ 50% of voters have faced one or more experiences where finances interfered with their ability to deal with a serious family or medical need, to care for a new child, a loved one or themselves.

**2. Paid leave is not a partisan issue for voters – 70% believe their party should support paid leave.** More than eight in 10 Democrats (86%), the vast majority of Independents (66%), and even a majority of Republicans (54%) agree that “Regardless of which political party you identify with more, your party should support a comprehensive national paid family and medical leave policy that covers all working people.”

- ▶ 80% of voters say it is important for a candidate of Congress to support a comprehensive, meaningful national paid family and medical leave policy, including 97% of Democrats, 77% of independents and 72% of Republicans.
- ▶ 70% of voters say they are more likely to vote for a 2018 U.S. congressional candidate who publicly supports a national paid family and medical leave policy. Most Democrats (86%), independents (66%) and Republicans (58%) agree.
  - ▶ Voters most excited about a candidate's support for a strong paid leave plan include: 18-29 year olds (77% more likely to vote for) and 30-44 year olds (79%), unmarried voters (75%), those with a prior personal experience needing, delaying, shortening or forgoing leave (77%) and those who anticipate needing paid family or medical leave in the future (79%).
- ▶ Conversely, close to two-thirds (64%) say they are less likely to vote for a 2018 congressional candidate who publicly opposes a national paid family and medical leave policy. Majorities of Democrats (77%), independents (60%) and Republicans (53%) feel this way.
  - ▶ Those who are less likely to vote for a candidate who does not support paid leave are: women (68%), younger voters (69%), college graduates (70%), middle-income voters (67%), those with a prior personal experience needing, delaying, shortening or forgoing leave (68%) and those who anticipate needing paid family or medical leave in the future (69%).

**3. The vast majority of voters across party lines are most supportive of a plan that looks like the Family And Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act – and reject a narrow, harmful alternative.**

- ▶ When given a description of four national paid leave plans, voters preferred the plan that resembled the FAMILY Act. The plan as described would provide leave to all working people for personal, family care, parental and military leave, at two-thirds of their usual wages for up to 12 weeks, paid for through a shared cost between employers and employees.
  - ▶ 80% of voters support the FAMILY Act model, including 89% of Democrats, 74% of independents and 76% of Republicans (with relatively equal support among women and men).
  - ▶ Majorities of voters are also supportive of an even more expansive plan that would provide higher wage replacement to low-wage workers and a longer period of leave – similar to those passed in Washington state and Massachusetts. Democrats (83%) are especially supportive, but so are 67% of independents and 60% of Republicans.

- ▶ The FAMILY Act’s shared-cost approach to paid leave is the most popular national paid leave pay-for (38%), while having employers fund it (21%) or funding it through general revenues even if that means a tax increase (19%) are the next most popular approaches to funding a national paid leave program. Democrats, independents and Republicans all select the shared cost pay-for as their top choice.
- ▶ 83% of voters are willing to pay into a national paid family and medical leave fund that covers all working people, and the vast majority (70%) are willing to contribute far more than a national paid leave program would **actually cost**. This is true across voters of all parties and income levels.
- ▶ In stark contrast, a majority of voters (58%) oppose a proposal that would provide paid leave only for new parents, funded by people using Social Security benefits early and delaying their retirement. This is similar to a plan introduced by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.).
  - ▶ More voters oppose than support this plan (41% support, 58% oppose), with consistent results among voters of all parties: Democrats (52% oppose), independents (63% oppose) and Republicans (57% oppose).
  - ▶ And in a separate question, only 3% say they would want paid leave to be paid for through drawing early on Social Security.
- ▶ Voters overwhelmingly want a plan that makes leave affordable and accessible to low- and middle-income workers as well as high-wage workers (80%) and that covers contract and freelance workers, as well as traditional employees (80%). These sentiments are shared by voters across party lines, too.

## POLICY UPDATE

- ▶ **There’s a more robust, bipartisan debate in Congress on the issue of paid family and medical leave than ever before.** Republicans in the Senate convened the first-ever Finance subcommittee **hearing** this summer and lawmakers in both parties are discussing policy alternatives in the press. Many candidates across the country, including in some of the most contested House and Senate races, are featuring this issue. The most recently enacted **state paid leave programs** – in Washington state and Massachusetts – both passed with bipartisan and business support and are more generous and expansive than anything proposed at the federal level.
- ▶ **For candidates this fall, this means that having a position on the issue – and staking out support for a specific policy or policy principles is more critical than ever.** As national paid leave becomes a “when” rather than an “if” question, details matter. Polling and policy research both argue for taking a position in support of a strong, comprehensive national paid leave plan that covers all working people who need time away from work to care for new children or address a family or personal serious medical need – and rejecting a policy that only covers new parents or forces tradeoffs between paid leave and other crucial programs.
- ▶ **In Congress, the FAMILY Act (S. 337/ H.R. 947), sponsored by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Rep. Rosa DeLauro is the leading proposal.** The majority of the Democratic caucus in both the House and the Senate are co-sponsors, including every Democratic member of the House Ways & Means committee (the committee of jurisdiction). In the Senate, cosponsors range from important members of the Senate Finance committee (the

committee of jurisdiction) to leading moderates and progressives. A list of House cosponsors is [here](#) and Senate cosponsors is [here](#).

- ▶ The FAMILY Act is based on successful and, in many ways, more generous state models in effect in California, New Jersey, Rhode Island and New York, and soon to be in effect in the District of Columbia, Massachusetts and Washington state. More on state programs is available [here](#).
- ▶ **Other congressional alternatives are less comprehensive, unfunded or perpetuate inequality in access to leave, and would do more harm than good.** None of these proposals has meaningful support, even among Republican colleagues of the lead bill sponsors, and no candidate should be tempted to support them as a “first step.” The public does not want these half-measures. These include:
  - ▶ The Strong Families Act, adopted as a two-year pilot as part of the 2017 tax bill, which offers small tax subsidies to private companies that offer limited paid family or medical leave; to date, only one company – Rolls Royce – has publicly stated that the tax credit incentivized it to offer new leave benefits;
  - ▶ The Economic Security for New Parents Act, which would only cover new parents by allowing early use of Social Security benefits and forcing delayed retirement and an accompanying Social Security benefit cut to people who take parental leave;
  - ▶ The Working Parents Flexibility Act, which creates a new tax-free savings account, similar to a medical savings or flex spending account, so people can fund their own parental leaves – but, as noted above, a full 40% of Americans say they cannot afford an emergency expense of \$400 and FSA/HSA savings accounts are already underutilized; and
  - ▶ A proposal in the president’s budget for six weeks of leave for new parents, with a largely unfunded mandate on states to pay for it – an approach panned by conservatives and progressives.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT PAID LEAVE

[SupportPaidLeave.org](http://SupportPaidLeave.org)

[FAMILY Act resource page](#)

[‘Paid Leave Means’ by state \(map\)](#)