Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Why is Paid Family Leave an Election Issue?

Family & Community Health

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The first of three presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump is tonight. One issue PolicyLab will be attentive to throughout the debates is paid family and medical leave, which covers maternity leave. This is a topic both candidates have prioritized in the months leading up to the election. Hillary Clinton has pledged to guarantee mothers up to 12 weeks of paid family leave to care for a new child and Donald Trump would require Unemployment Insurance to include six weeks of paid leave for new mothers.

As both candidates understand, maternity leave is a critical issue for the American workforce. About three-quarters of women ages 25-54 are working today, compared to one-half in 1970. This growth has created a greater need for protections for women to take leave from work to care for a newborn.

In addition to employment protections, maternity leave has implications for the health and wellbeing of children and their mothers. There is a wealth of research showing maternity leave is associated with a number of positive health behaviors, including increased rates and duration of breastfeeding, increased likelihood that children receive well-baby checkups in the first year of life and increased receipt of recommended vaccinations, all of which improve the health of children.

Furthermore, paid maternity leave may protect against serious adverse child outcomes. A comprehensive study of national paid maternity leave policies in 141 countries found that 10 weeks of paid maternity leave was associated with a 9-10 percent reduction in neonatal mortality (mortality in the first month of life), infant mortality (mortality in the first year) and under-five mortality rates.

A mother's mental health also greatly benefits from maternity leave. An estimated one in seven mothers experience postpartum depression and as many as one in three low-income mothers experience depression. In addition to impacting maternal health and well-being, maternal depression has significant implications for child health. Research suggests shorter paid maternity leave is associated with increased depressive symptoms and reductions in overall maternal health. In contrast, longer, paid maternity leave has short- and long-term benefits. A recent study demonstrated that paid maternity leave even reduces maternal depression later in life (after age 50).

So, with all of this research showing the benefits of paid family leave, why has this become an election issue? The presidential candidates are responding to a growing consensus that the current federal law – the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) – is not adequate and that the U.S. lags behind other countries in providing protections for new mothers.

The FMLA guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid leave, as well as job protection and continuation of medical benefits, for employees who have a new child by birth, foster care or adoption; who need to care for a family member (spouse, child or parent) with a serious medical condition; or who have a serious medical condition of their own. Each state must offer this minimum level of protection to employees who have worked for their employer for at least a year. However, because of certain exemptions – like those for private businesses with fewer than 50 employees and for part-time employees – only 60 percent of workers report having access to unpaid leave.

Some states have opted to provide even greater protections for their workers. Currently, three states guarantee paid family leave benefits. California (since 2004) and New Jersey (since 2009) offer eligible employees up to six weeks of paid family leave, and Rhode Island (since 2014) offers up to four. New York recently passed legislation for paid family leave, which will go into effect in 2018. Additionally, some states and Washington D.C., offer greater leave durations, while others – like Maine, Minnesota and Oregon – expand certain benefits to more groups of workers. Our home state of Pennsylvania adheres to the FMLA, offering no additional leave benefits.

No matter where you live, paid family leave is an important issue for families and children. In addition to maternity leave, paid family and medical leave affords protections to individuals to take care of sick family members, recover from illness and spend time with newly adopted children. We will be listening to tonight's debate and the remainder of the campaign events for the candidates to speak to this issue in the context of our national economy and health care.

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