

# *Americans Agree on Paid Leave, but Not on Who Should Pay*

By Claire Cain Miller The Upshot Blog at the New York Times  
March 23, 2017



Ivanka Trump at a luncheon at the White House for International Women's Day. She is pushing for a paid parental leave policy, for which there is bipartisan support but disagreement about the details. Credit...Shawn Thew/European Pressphoto Agency

**M**ost people say workers should get paid leave to take care of a baby, a sick family member or themselves, according to two new surveys. But they disagree on the details: who should pay, and whether it should be mandatory or optional.

The idea of a federal paid leave policy brings up issues that Americans have complicated feelings about — like government mandates for businesses and gender roles at home — according to [the surveys, released Thursday](#) by the Pew Research Center.

This ambivalence helps explain a paradox: why a policy with so much bipartisan support has nonetheless failed to be enacted. The United States is the [only industrialized country](#) that doesn't mandate paid leave.

“There’s massive distrust of federal government mandates in the United States,” said [Joan Williams](#), director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings. “Support for paid leave is depressed by the overall hostility to government.”

In a first, presidential candidates from both parties talked supportively about paid leave, but the Trump administration’s proposal, led by Ivanka Trump, faces hurdles because of deep divisions about what the policy should look like.

Yet the surveys make clear that the need crosses income, gender and political lines, and affects people’s career decisions and wages.

Ninety-four percent of respondents said paid leave would help families, and 65 percent said it would help the economy. When asked which work arrangements would be most helpful to them, they ranked paid leave the highest, alongside flexibility of hours. Sixty-two percent told Pew they’d taken paid leave or are very likely to.

American workers can get 12 weeks of unpaid leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act, but only about 60 percent are eligible. Thirteen percent of workers get paid leave from their employers, [according to](#) the Bureau of Labor Statistics. High earners are much more likely to get it, while low earners are more likely to fall into poverty because of a birth or an illness.

Large majorities support paid leave — between 67 percent and 85 percent, depending on the type of leave — according to the Pew report, which included two nationally representative online surveys of 8,000 Americans total. One survey was about people’s general opinions about family leave, and the other about their personal experiences with it.

A woman who works for the Ohio state government in Columbus said during a Pew focus group: “People are making too difficult of a choice every day: Do I go to work? Or do I take care of this person who I love dearly?”

But Americans are torn about the government’s role. Only half of people over all and one-third of Republicans think it should mandate leave, versus continuing to let employers decide. Sixty-nine percent of Democrats supported a government mandate.

Most people say employers should pay for leave instead. “I don’t think the government should pay for it because, I mean, we’d all be paying for it anyway because it would be in our taxes,” a Denver father and sales manager said in the focus group.

Respondents said offering paid leave would help employers recruit and keep good workers. Still, nearly half of respondents said offering paid leave would harm businesses.



Kristen Picciolo, right, a Starbucks barista, with her baby Adam, 4 months old, stood outside Starbucks headquarters Tuesday with Jessica Svabenik, a barista who is pregnant. They are asking for better paid parental leave options for noncorporate employees. Credit...Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

“You are going to have a much more productive employee, and you’ve also got an employee who has

better health, their children have better health,” said a mother in Denver who runs a small business. “But it is hard in the front. It’s a huge expense.”

The debate over family leave seems to have [moved on](#) from whether mothers should work to how to help working families, and people are increasingly likely to think of caregiving as a responsibility shared by men and women.

Most people said a paid leave policy should be available to both sexes: 81 percent of Democrats and 62 percent of Republicans. Opinions about [paternity leave](#) illustrate the shift: 82 percent of adults under 30 said new fathers should get it, and 55 percent of those over 65.

Yet women still shoulder the bulk of caregiving, and especially for conservative voters, opinions about gender roles color their views on paid leave, said Aparna Mathur, a [resident scholar](#) at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

“The feeling that policies that encourage women to be in the work force are not in the best interest of the family is pervasive among Republicans,” Ms. Mathur said. “But having access to these policies is really critical for these working families who are not in a position to even choose do I go back to work or not.”

Despite the fact that both parents work outside the home in most two-parent families, 44 percent of respondents said it was best if one stayed home. Thirty-nine percent said it should be the mother, and 56 percent said it didn’t matter.

Despite the enthusiasm for paid leave, there is disagreement about how to pay for it. The most popular idea was a tax credit to employers who offered leave; it was strongly or somewhat supported by 87 percent of respondents. Next was pretax savings accounts for employees to save for leave, supported by 84 percent.

Sixty-two percent of people at least somewhat supported a government fund that employers and employees pay into — a policy used in three states. Least popular, with 60 percent support, was a government paid leave program financed through higher taxes on wealthy people or corporations.

The Trump administration, which originally suggested six weeks of paid maternity leave paid for by eliminating fraud in unemployment insurance, is [now considering](#) more dependable sources of funding and including fathers and adoptive parents.

The need is most acute for low-income workers. Of people employed in the last two years, 16 percent told Pew that they needed to take leave but were unable. They were more likely to be low earners, as well as women, black, Hispanic or without a college degree.

One woman, who worked in retail in Denver, had to quit after giving birth; she accepted Medicaid and food stamps because her employer gave her no time off.

“It was really, really rough,” said another woman, in Birmingham, Ala., who needed to care for her mother but had no leave. “Some days I would just have to let them know I couldn’t come in because I had to assist her, and that would mean not a full paycheck and that was very stressful.”

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