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The Fight Working Moms Won

By BRYCE COVERT SEPT. 17, 2016

Working mothers, take note: You have won the culture war. Now you are making advances in the policy battle. This presidential race has become, at least in part, a debate over how best to help you balance work and home, not whether you should be working at all.

On Tuesday, Donald J. Trump became the first Republican presidential candidate to put forward a proposal that, he says, would give all mothers paid leave for the birth of a new child. He would guarantee six weeks, run through the existing unemployment insurance program, and he would pay for it by eliminating fraud in that system. The plan is deeply flawed — and, because it focuses only on mothers and offers nothing to fathers, could end up hurting working women. But it is significant that he decided to offer it at all.

Any discussion of paid leave in a presidential campaign is a recent phenomenon. The first time the issue was raised prominently by a candidate was when Hillary Clinton made her initial run at the White House, in the 2008 election, and proposed a goal of paid family leave for all Americans by 2016. It wasn't a winning issue then and certainly hadn't come close to being a winning issue before.

The 1980s and 1990s were full of working-mom fearmongering. The media jumped on scare studies and stories about day care centers harming children — including claims of satanic rituals and sexual abuse — and blamed mothers for disrupting children's development. TV and radio hosts urged women to stay home with the kids. Movies like “Mrs. Doubtfire” made working women out to be cold. In

a speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention, Marilyn Quayle argued, “women do not wish to be liberated from their essential natures as women.”

Policies to help working parents balance family and career were similarly divisive. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which today guarantees just 12 weeks of unpaid leave, was introduced in Congress regularly for a decade before it became law in 1993. President George H.W. Bush vetoed it twice. Conservatives continually denounced it, arguing that it would destroy the free market and the family; a Republican congressman at the time called it “nothing short of Europeanization — a polite term for socialism.”

Democrats weren't completely afraid of work and family issues. The first thing President Bill Clinton signed into law was the Family and Medical Leave Act. He also expanded some child care assistance for low-income families.

But the issue of paid family leave rarely came up for the next decade and a half.

The political challenge for these policies is that the constituencies can be fleeting. For one thing, Americans may not even be aware that virtually every other country guarantees paid maternity leave, and most developed ones include fathers, but we don't. It is often not until people are themselves thinking of starting a family that they realize how threadbare the safety net for working parents really is. And once they start their families, their energies are zapped by sleepless nights, running after toddlers, and all the other labor that goes into raising children, with little left over to devote to organizing for legislation. Then their children grow up and it's not a pressing problem.

Still, the issue has broader political salience now. That's thanks in part to the determination, or necessity, of working women. Less than a third of women worked full time in 1979; by 2000, nearly half did. With two working parents in almost half of all families, men are just as much in need of parenting support as women. And for the more than two-thirds of single mothers who work, the necessity is even more urgent.

The growing demand has led to four different states creating their own paid leave programs, with a high-profile win in New York from the fiscally centrist Gov.

Andrew M. Cuomo just this year. They serve as proving grounds that leave can work.

Today, these policies have huge popular backing; poll after poll finds that overwhelming majorities of Americans support paid family leave, including some Republicans.

When he was still in the presidential running, Senator Marco Rubio became the first Republican contender to formally broach the topic in a campaign. He put forward a plan to give employers a tax break for offering at least four weeks paid leave to employees. He also proposed expanding the same tax credit aimed at families with children that Bill Clinton was criticized for increasing.

What Mr. Trump has put forward, however, is a world apart. He proposes creating a totally new social program to give new mothers paid leave. It's worth repeating: The Republican nominee for president has proposed a new government program to help working mothers.

Certainly his motivations are most likely political, given that he trails his rival by double digits among female voters, who are particularly interested in these policies. And the plan would be likely to backfire in many ways. By cutting men out of the picture, it carries a significant risk of increasing the existing "motherhood penalty" and making employers wary of hiring women of childbearing age for fear they will disappear if a baby arrives. The unemployment system is already in crisis, so it's ill prepared to handle a new benefit, and it seems like women would have to quit their jobs to be eligible. Meanwhile, states could opt out of Mr. Trump's policy.

Mrs. Clinton, for her part, started her current presidential campaign talking about paid family leave, and she has very different ideas for how to do it. She would ensure that anyone who took leave under the F.M.L.A. also got a portion of their pay while they were off work — mothers and fathers alike, as well as adoptive parents, people caring for seriously ill family members, and those recovering from their own medical issues. Hers would be paid for by new taxes on the wealthy, which is a questionable policy design, putting it at risk thanks to fluctuating tax revenues, congressional budget games and less buy-in from the people it serves.

Like Mr. Trump, Mrs. Clinton has also put forward plans to tackle the high

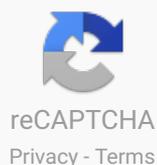
cost of child care, although her plan would be much more progressive, capping costs at a percentage of a family's income, while Mr. Trump's would give the most benefits to the wealthy.

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But the debate is now about how, not whether, to support working parents. Instead of being frowned at by Marilyn Quayle, attendees at this year's Republican National Convention heard Ivanka Trump applaud working moms. "As a mother myself of three young children, I know how hard it is to work while raising a family," she said. "Policies that allow women with children to thrive should not be novelties, they should be the norm."

Perhaps 2017 will be the year when the rhetoric finally reaches reality.

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