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Gender Politics in Massachusetts

Progress for Paid Family Leave

Elizabeth A. Sherman, Ph.D.

Advances in the educational and occupational status of women in the United States over the past quarter century have greatly expanded the participation of women in the workforce. However, economic and social changes in women's lives have put pressure on traditional family roles and on the political system to respond to the problems families face balancing work and family responsibilities. Initiatives for paid family leave in Massachusetts reflect the newfound political strength of women in politics — as leaders of political organizations, as elected officials, and as voters — and the willingness of the state's political elite to grapple with legislation designed to respond to those pressures. Gender politics has shaped the debate over paid family leave in part because the first woman governor in the state's history has herself faced the dilemma of combining her professional work life with care for newborn and young children.

Whether by political contrivance or extraordinary happenstance, just as acting governor Jane Swift embarked in the summer of 2001 on a “working maternity leave” after the birth of twins, Senate president Thomas Birmingham won a unanimous, bipartisan vote in the Massachusetts Senate approving a bill providing paid family leave for parents after the adoption or birth of a child. The bill would establish a three-year pilot program offering twelve weeks of paid leave, funded by a combination of state funds and the surplus in the Medical Security Trust Fund. Benefits would be based on a formula similar to the state's unemployment insurance plan.

Birmingham's legislation challenged two political adversaries at the same time; first, Swift, whose generous maternity leave arrangement made her opposition to paid leave for other mothers appear, at best, disingenuous. And second, the bill posed a populist alternative to a proposal backed by House Speaker Thomas Finneran who, in league with the state's major business interests, favored a plan granting tax credits to small and medium-size businesses if they voluntarily offer paid family leave to their employees. Having attracted even the Republican senators to his banner, Birmingham could spend the remaining weeks of summer “out of the

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building” (in State House parlance) pedaling his bike around the commonwealth on a meet-and-greet tour with potential voters.

Senate passage of the paid family-leave bill identified Birmingham with a social benefit that polls showed enjoyed widespread support in Massachusetts.¹ Furthermore, whether the bill survived the House or not, his extraordinary success in garnering total Senate support for it would enhance his candidacy going into the 2002 Democratic race for governor. If he were successful, he could point to his leadership in creating a new and meaningful form of state support for parents squeezed by the time and financial demands inevitable after the birth or adoption of a child. The paid family-leave bill further burnished Birmingham’s image as the standard-bearer for traditional Democratic Party values, aligning him in favor of spending initiatives that improve the lot of working families.

Indeed, the Massachusetts initiatives for paid leave could be construed as a return to Old Democrat programs and a turn away from New Democrat social policies (long on regulation, short on spending) that had characterized policymaking at the national level during the Clinton administration. Having come to office during a time of deep federal deficits, President Clinton had sought to reduce, not expand, federal spending. As a former governor, he was not averse to state initiatives to solve social problems; at the federal level he was more likely to promote workplace rights rather than new funding. Hence, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, often touted as the hallmark of Clinton-Gore social policy, guaranteed job security for most workers, but offered no funding for wage replacement. Not surprisingly, the lack of paid leave made the FMLA unworkable for millions of families who could not afford to take the time off.

States, however, could initiate legislation to give financial underpinning to the federal law. By proposing a paid plan with near universal access, Senator Birmingham’s bill would rectify what many viewed as the critical shortcoming of the FMLA legislation. Politically, looking ahead to an election year in which his candidacy for governor would likely rise or fall based on his performance as Senate president, Birmingham had ample motivation to steer paid leave into the forefront of the political debate over spending priorities in Massachusetts. As a champion of paid family leave, he could strengthen his support among organized labor and telegraph his sensitivity to women voters well aware of the work-family dilemmas facing many families in the commonwealth.

At the same time, Republican acting governor Jane Swift, having decided to take what she termed a “working maternity leave” at full salary, found herself in the summer of 2001 in a politically awkward position. How could she oppose a paid family-leave bill that would be especially helpful to working mothers desirous of leave arrangements similar to hers? As the still unannounced but likely gubernatorial candidate of her party, Swift let it be known that she, too, was working on a plan for paid family leave. She would, however, have to negotiate a perilous political pathway between the objections of the business community, her staunchest political base, and the needs of women — another vital, potential constituency. She was well aware that many, like her, held jobs and did not want to sacrifice too much income or professional ground to provide care for newborn or adopted children.

Because the advocates of paid family leave feared that Speaker Finneran and other opponents would derail Birmingham’s legislation once it reached the House, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO’s announced plans for an initiative petition on paid

leave to voters in 2002. If passed, the measure would mandate paid leave for working families through an employer-funded New Families Fund. Going directly to the voters would bypass the legislative process, allowing no opportunity for debate, compromise, or amendments. Lawmaking through referendum, once a rarity, had emerged as a powerful weapon in the political process for aggrieved groups frustrated by the often tedious and, some would say, unresponsive legislative process. The plan quickly gained momentum when U.S. senator Ted Kennedy, the state's popular liberal standard-bearer, offered enthusiastic support for the paid-leave referendum and another offered by the state labor federation to raise the minimum wage.

Although publicly the state's leading business organizations, including the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, the High Technology Council, and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, expressed support for paid leave, they were alarmed at the snowballing political momentum behind the issue and the proposed funding mechanisms that would impose more costs on business. All three organizations voiced strong objections to the prospect of a leave plan that would add more financial burdens to employers and, they argued, compromise the state's business climate. The leave plan backed by Finneran, offering tax credits to firms establishing such plans, was much preferred by the state's business community.

Without question, a major political battle was brewing among the state's top elected leaders over the proposed, near universal parental leave entitlement program.² While occasional articles and opinion pieces had appeared in various papers over the previous two years, nothing like the passage of the Senate bill, or the backing of Senator Kennedy for an initiative petition, had been foreseen. The idea of a new and expensive benefit program for young parents was anathema to political leaders who were expressing concern that budget cuts might be necessary to cope with projected declines in the state's revenues as a result of a slumping economy. But the governor's pregnancy and subsequent maternity leave changed the political calculus, giving paid family leave new relevance, prominence, and a touch of irony. Supporters estimated that women voters, considered more critical than ever to electoral victory, might well be asking if they, too, would enjoy paid-leave benefits similar to those of the Bay State's First Mom. Gender politics had emerged full-blown as the determining factor driving the debate.

Still, few could say that paid family leave had caught fire among the general electorate or even among women. Until late summer, hardly any press or public debate had emerged over the measure. Voter opinion polls in the 9th Congressional District, where a contentious primary was under way among aspirants to the late congressman Joe Moakley's seat, indicated that health care and education overwhelmingly topped the list of public concerns, a finding that probably held true across the state. Paid leave had not surfaced as a popular demand and would probably not have registered among the top twenty preferences of citizens' major concerns. Nevertheless, Beacon Hill lobbyists and legislators alike had become embroiled in a policy fight over a potentially expensive, permanent universal benefit for workers, a policy some in the press were now calling a litmus test for the next state election. But why paid family leave, and why now?

Economic Pressures on Women

The work-family dilemma that many families encounter today is rooted in the social, educational, and economic gains women have made over the last several de-

ades, changes that have dramatically altered the contours of family life. One of the most important social and economic trends of this period is the expansion of the female workforce. Paid family leave is often presented as a necessary response to major changes in the lives of women in the United State who try to combine child rearing and paid work. The percentage of women working went from one third of all women in 1950 to two thirds in 1990, a shift that Robert Putnam has called “the most portentous social change of the last half century.”³ Labor Department statistics show that 70.6 percent of married women with children under age eighteen work full or part time, a rate expected to increase by one percent each year until 2015.⁴ As a result there has been a growing need to provide parents, and new mothers in particular, with reasonable time off to spend with their young children without suffering drastic losses in income. In Massachusetts, 64 percent of women with children under age six work outside the home, up from 24 percent in 1970.⁵ Women now occupy positions of leadership and authority as never before in government, business, academia, labor unions, and religious life. But at a time when women make up nearly half of the American workforce, they continue to lag behind men in wages, benefits, and retirement security.

Women with children often find themselves under pressure owing to this new social and economic reality. The traditional definition of “family” has changed dramatically with the postponement of marriage, the decline in fertility rates, and the high proportion of children in single-parent homes. Because of a combination of business needs, higher levels of education, and changes in child-raising patterns, women have been encouraged to succeed at work and achieve economic independence, while at the same time fulfilling family obligations. Poor women, especially single mothers, face daunting challenges, given the cutbacks in social supports and limited job opportunities. For women doing low-wage work, without a second breadwinner, wages often do not stretch to cover family expenses without some form of government aid. Millions of women were faced with increased economic vulnerability during the 1990s as government programs were being retooled and downscaled. The emphasis on work, even with young children at home, has made it difficult for women at all economic levels to succeed in both the work and the family realms. Working at low-wage jobs while raising children is probably one of the most stressful undertakings facing women today.

For women of color, the economic challenges proved particularly troublesome. A Department of Labor report in 1997, *Black Women in the Labor Force*, found that race compounded the economic inequities. Nearly half (3.7 million) of all African-American families were headed by women in 1996, and of those female-headed households, half were living in poverty. In fact, African-American women were nearly three times as likely to live in poverty and twice as likely as white women to be unemployed.⁶

But while women have become more indispensable to the functioning of the American economy, at the same time they often pay the real economic costs of nurturing children or sick relations. Studies by Professor Jane Waldfogel at the Columbia University School of Social Work have found that women pay a lifetime penalty for staying home, even for short periods, on the so-called Mommy track. Dropping out to do the necessary nurturing work of raising children often makes it difficult for women to reenter the workforce without falling behind in both rates of pay and seniority status. For many families, budgets are close to the margin and can easily be

devastated when one household worker is forced to take unpaid time off from work to care for a new child or a sick relative. Almost alone among advanced industrial nations, the United States lacks the public policies and financial supports that enable parents to take extended paid family leave to devote time to early child raising.⁷ And, as Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Ralph Whitehead, Jr., found in their 1980s focus groups on issues of child care and other work-and-family concerns, there is a widely held belief in the United States that “the essential form of care for a newborn is a parent in the home.”⁸

Many women experience emotional strain as a result of their desire to succeed both at work and at parenthood, conflicts that can be sources of anxiety. As Sara Evans puts it, “Women remain caught between a world of work, which presumes that there is someone behind every worker who is available to take care of family needs, and the ongoing presumptions that women assume primary care for children and household. The process of redefining work — through such measures as flextime, shared or part-time jobs with full benefits, parental leave, and on-site child care — has proceeded at a glacial pace.”⁹

Balancing work and family responsibilities might cause personal problems, but it is unlikely that the public’s perception of those problems recognizes their social roots — or whether anything can be done about them by government. Changes in social policy do not occur, however, unless somehow those affected by difficult circumstances begin to see their problems as social, not personal, and potentially ameliorated through politics. For that to happen, political organizations, voluntary associations, or social movements will need to articulate and frame work-family pressures as social problems subject to change through government policies. Organizations provide a forum for the generation of political ideas and strategies, and they can serve as a vehicle for collective action. As Joseph Kling and Prudence Posner have pointed out in *Dilemmas of Activism*, “Organized publics emerge, and structures are challenged, only when people come to believe that what they first considered to be personal grievances are, in fact, socially grounded; that others, outside their immediately identified peers, suffer the same undue treatment; and that some form of broad-based collective action may result in policies to regulate or redirect the sources of anxiety and frustration.”¹⁰

Women and Interest Group Politics

One of the most enduring assumptions about representative government is that citizens can make their preferences known to elected officials and affect their decisions about civil and legal rights and the allocation of public resources. While voting provides only a general and imprecise method of expressing policy preferences (many issues are not discussed in campaigns, and those that are seldom address all the options) interest group activity offers a way for citizens to specify policy choices. Since government officials set the policy agenda for deliberation, interest groups — sometimes only a few well-organized people — play a central role by providing information and arguing for specific policy choices.

Today there are more single issue organizations and public interest groups engaged in making their case to public officials than ever before. Allan Cigler and Burdett Loomis have analyzed interest group activity and claim that we are in the midst of an American “participation revolution” with larger numbers of citizens

groups participating in advocacy work than ever before. They note that new interests are being created through social and demographic changes even as old interests are being redefined.¹¹ Many organizations have arisen over the past quarter century to advance the interests of women in different occupations or socioeconomic strata. Women's organizations have become more sophisticated about their needs for resources (money, members, technology, and think tanks are always valuable) as well as their opportunities to influence decision making at various levels of government.

But external factors affect the ability of interest groups to achieve their goals. Economic conditions, constituent support, and elections figure prominently in shaping the decisions of elected officials to back particular issues. When policy debates deal with the redistribution of resources from one segment of the population to another, as many argued would be the case in some forms of paid family leave, interest group activity and mobilization can be particularly intense, and for politicians, politically treacherous. Policy disputes over redistribution often involve labor interests demanding more government assistance and business groups seeking to privatize the conflict, arguing that government intervention is unnecessary, or even harmful. This recurring debate between labor and business in American politics figured prominently in the battle over paid family leave in Massachusetts.

Women's voices in democratic deliberation, however, are still relatively new. For the first 130 years of the nation's history, women were barred from voting, and only in recent decades have women emerged in greater numbers as elected or appointed officials of government. Despite long-standing practices and beliefs that identified political engagement and institutions with men, women always have sought to make their preferences known. During the Progressive era from the late nineteenth century to about 1920, women effectively organized on behalf of hospitals, public education, municipal reform, and the needs of the poor. As Theda Skocpol has pointed out, federations of women's clubs succeeded in passing laws for the creation of the Children's Bureau, for mothers' pensions, and for the minimum wage.¹² Even before they gained the vote, women in voluntary associations pushed their causes for the social welfare of all American families. The campaign for suffrage used every form of political activism short of voting — lobbying, letter-writing, press releases, demonstrations, and endorsements to obtain in 1920 the right for women to vote. Women would use these same organizing methods to win the struggle for temperance and the imposition of prohibition.

Later in the century, the women's liberation movement in the 1960s prompted an explosion of women's activism and the creation of organizations to advance an array of causes for women. Legislative victories such as Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, religion, national origin, or sex, led to new kinds of activism for women's organizations to monitor enforcement and use the institutions of government — legislative, executive, and judicial — to advance their needs. In 1966, political, professional, and labor union women founded the National Organization for Women, which spearheaded the effort for a national Equal Rights Amendment. NOW and other women's organizations also succeeded in mobilizing women behind the pro-choice decision of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, the passing of Title IX of the Higher Education Act, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, and the expansion of welfare participation through the National Welfare Rights Organization. According to historian Sara Evans, the 1960s and 1970s should be recognized as "the golden years" of feminist organization and political gains.¹³

As barriers to educational and occupational advancement for women fell and women entered formerly inaccessible jobs, more specific forms of organized action grew among professional as well as blue-collar women. The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), for example, filed successful court suits on the basis of sex discrimination against colleges and universities holding federal contracts. Organizations such as Women Employed and 9 to 5 demanded child care as well as better working conditions and higher pay for clerical workers. In the 1970s, women in the labor movement established the Coalition for Labor Union Women, which served as a support group, a training ground for women's leadership, and a caucus for women's demands at a time when women were becoming a larger part of American union membership. By the 1990s, women's organizations were recognizing the importance of political involvement in state politics, where women had won, on average, close to 25 percent of seats in legislative assemblies.

Women's organizations also were becoming more vocal and visible on the international stage. The United Nations conference on women convened in 1995 and attracted more than 50,000 women to Beijing, inspiring delegates and representatives of nongovernmental organizations to press for women's rights worldwide. The Beijing conference served as a catalyst for local efforts on a host of women's issues, including the elimination of women's poverty and brutality against women as well as action on issues of pay equity, child care, education, retirement security, and women's health.

Family and Medical Leave Legislation

Nationally and locally, women's groups and others concerned about the pressures on women's lives began to focus on ways to make it easier for women in the United States to fulfill home and workplace responsibilities. Spearheaded in the mid-1980s by Donna Lenhoff at the Women's Legal Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., policies covering both parental and medical leave were conceived and advanced by a working group representing some of the nation's major women's and children's organizations. Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Children, Youth, and Families argued that employees needed a law to protect their employment status when medical and family circumstances called for a necessary period of time off. For political reasons the groups decided to include only guaranteed job security, not financial support, for leave takers, assuming that budget politics in Congress would preclude any new and significant funding measures.

After his election in 1992, Clinton was eager to sign the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) vetoed twice by his predecessor. Paid-leave benefits, however, were never seriously considered as part of the package, mainly because making such a massive change to the substance of the bill would require returning to square one in the legislative process. Activists were not willing to revisit the legislation (even though some women in Congress decried FMLA as weak) because doing so would open the bill to delay, loss of momentum, and even defeat. Advocates also recognized that even the new Democratic president might not favor a wage replacement guarantee, a potentially expensive, new entitlement program hardly congruent with his New Democrat persona. Furthermore, employers contended that even without wage replacements, giving workers time off to care for new children or sick relatives entailed a considerable business expense.

However, once the federal family-leave bill was implemented, its limitations were obvious. Most workers simply could not afford time off to care for new children or sick relatives without financial help. Even the advocates of the national FMLA, signed into law by President Clinton a few weeks after his inauguration in 1993, knew it had problems.

According to a federal evaluation study, “A Workable Balance: Report to Congress on Family and Medical Leave Policies” in 1996, only 2.3 percent of the workforce had taken advantage of family leave. And among those who did, most were already relatively well-off. Of those who did utilize the program, 43 percent were college graduates, 81 percent were white, 58 percent had incomes greater than \$30,000 with fully 37 percent reporting incomes of \$50,000 or more. Leave-takers were split almost evenly between men and women.¹⁴ Another study by the U.S. Department of Labor found that about 2.7 million workers say they could not use the FMLA between 1999 and 2000 owing to financial constraints. For those who did use the act, 52.4 percent did so for reasons of their own health, 18.5 percent to care for a new child, 13 percent to care for an ill parent, 11.5 percent to care for an ill child, 7.9 percent because of complications after childbirth, and 6.4 percent to care for an ill spouse.¹⁵

The initial prognosis for the efficacy of the federal FMLA was not auspicious. It was clear that the FMLA was not reaching lower-income workers who needed it most. But the introduction of an entitlement program for paid leave in Congress was not in the offing. The primary concern remained budget issues, in particular the national budget deficit, which had the effect of limiting the range of federal spending to entitlement programs. Paid family and medical leave, which many considered a middle-class benefit, would not get on the agenda. During the Clinton years poverty relief policies were under pressure, even though U.S. tax and government support policies designed to lift the poor nonelderly out of poverty compare unfavorably with most other industrialized countries. Welfare reform had come to mean moving from welfare to work even though it was known that most entry-level service jobs for women were low paid and hardly sufficient to cover family costs. But if women were going to be working “no matter what,” support for caring for sick relatives or new children would have to be addressed, if not at the federal level then through policy developments in states and cities, each with particular priorities and constraints.

In Massachusetts, meanwhile, the 1990 election of Republican governor William Weld signaled a seismic shift in the state’s political center of gravity. Having captured the governorship as well as a third of the state Senate seats, Republicans felt that they could block Democratic initiatives by preventing overrides of the new governor’s vetoes. Faced with this realignment of state power, advocates of social policies to benefit women found themselves on the defensive, fighting a rear-guard action to preserve the social benefits threatened by a reinvigorated Republican regime. Determined to overhaul the welfare system, the Weld administration took full advantage of the “devolution revolution” of the 104th Congress that shifted power and resources to the states.

As Margaret Weir has commented, “The federal devolution of some social programs enhances the significance of state decisions, making it important to understand what drives state and local policy choices.”¹⁶ Weir warns of the impact of what she calls the fiscalization of federal social policy where the budget dictates the pa-

rameters of the possible and takes precedence over all other considerations. But the shift of policymaking to the states, she claims, can have a positive side by stimulating new organizational connections between citizens and politicians, which, optimally, increases the potential for productive political engagement. Gridlock between the Democratic White House and the Republican Congress led inexorably to increased efforts at policy development within states. Although paid family leave had little chance for consideration at the federal level, it might be taken up by the states, the traditional hothouses of experimental legislation.

Women's Politics, Women's Leadership

Because the struggle for paid family leave in Massachusetts became linked to the political aspirations of candidates for the 2002 race for governor, political considerations figured into the rapid rise of paid leave to the top of the political agenda. Clearly, gender politics played a crucial role and drove the campaign for family leave from the start. By the time Swift took the helm after former governor A. Paul Cellucci became ambassador to Canada in March 2001, her advanced stage of pregnancy made her inauguration a national story. For women legislators who had backed paid leave for many years to no avail, the timing could not have been more fortuitous. Finally, a woman governor and finally, they reasoned, an opportunity to push for legislation that had languished for years with few realistic prospects for passage. Representative Anne Paulsen, one of the lead sponsors of paid-leave legislation in the House, rejoiced that the symbolic imagery of the state's youthful governor on paid working maternity leave was pushing the issue to the forefront of political debate. "We have all been helped by Jane Swift. She was paid. She stayed out at Northampton. What is good for the goose, as they say. And that has pushed it [paid family leave] forward into the media."¹⁷

Family-leave policy proposals had been advanced by women legislators more than a decade earlier in Massachusetts, albeit with little progress.¹⁸ But the context would not prove fortuitous until a combination of women's political power in and out of the legislature, the pressures of an upcoming election for the legislature, and the governor's extended fully paid maternity leave made possible the weighing of some policy options. Women legislators were the first to place paid family leave on the legislative agenda, argue its merits, and file bills in both the Senate and the House. They proposed that the paid-leave benefits be structured in a way similar in funding and expenditures to unemployment compensation plans.

Legislators do not advance bills in a vacuum. Only a handful among the many that are introduced rise to the level of a governmental agenda. But gender politics had already become a powerful political phenomenon in Massachusetts because of efforts by organizations and individuals to promote women into high level political leadership and because of the new emphasis on issues of concern to women. In this particular instance, women in various roles — activists, scholars, and legislators — recognized the new economic realities pressuring women to return to work soon after the birth or adoption of a child. More important, it was these women leaders who articulated the seriousness of what they saw as a social condition causing hardship for young families in the commonwealth and proposed policy remedies. They moved political leaders to respond to the problems facing new parents.

The End Game

In a system of separated powers and multiple veto points, it is often easier to defeat than to pass legislation. Nonetheless, activists sought to build a grassroots as well as union-based constituency and to use as many levels of government and levers of change as possible to win their objectives, including bypassing the legislature altogether through the proposed ballot initiative. However, in doing so, advocates decided to frame the issue in gender-neutral terms to ensure support of traditionally male-dominated institutions — the unions, the legislature, and the Democratic Party. By casting paid leave as a family-friendly initiative, rather than strictly as a women's issue, women activists and legislators put pressure on the state's political leadership to provide material support as well as recognition for women's traditionally unpaid labor in the home, even though they never cast the issue explicitly in those terms.

Gender politics also played a central role in family-leave politics to the extent that politicians felt they needed to back issues that might appeal to women voters. The gender gap had become a national obsession in the electoral realm, putting politicians on notice that women voted in greater numbers and, in the majority, differently from men. Although race is a more prominent fault line in voting behavior, commentators have identified gender as the factor increasingly driving American politics.¹⁹ Stephen Stark has pointed out that the gender gap has less to do with abortion or equal rights than with issues having to do with the existence and expansion of a social welfare state.²⁰ In other words, women are interested in concrete policy proposals that address their economic situation and their family responsibilities. A 1998 University of Massachusetts poll found that women are far more worried than men about basic economic issues affecting them and their families.²¹ These findings suggest that women have greater concerns than men about income, and one can surmise that they would experience greater anxiety over the loss of family income from the birth or adoption of a child.

In the summer of 2001, with the primary season about to unfold, candidates would be openly vying for the women's vote and publicizing their records on family policies to shore up support among a crucial bloc of voters, married women with children. Politicians and the press had come to recognize women as an interest group requiring a targeted message. Ever since 1976, when an eight-point gender gap surfaced in the Carter-Reagan election, Democrats have depended on the women's vote. As voters, women in the United States demonstrated last year, as they have for the past twenty years, their general preference for Democratic candidates who are seen to be more favorable to so-called women's issues like reproductive freedom, pay equity, and retirement security. In the last presidential race, the gender imbalance was clear: 54 percent of women voted for Al Gore, and 53 percent of men voted for George W. Bush.²²

Women exerted disproportionate influence as policymakers, as activists, and as potential voters in the paid family-leave policy debate in Massachusetts. Women were active as inside players in politics and government, and as lobbyists and legislators identifying problems and posing solutions in an arena where they have long figured as outsiders. Women had achieved positions of political authority where they could advance new ideas designed to address some of the problems facing women in society posed by the functioning of the new economy. The formulation of paid fam-

ily-leave plans was thus driven partly by electoral ambitions and the effort to win over women voters and partly by the organizing success of a handful of determined women leaders in the state — in the labor federation, in a small women’s advocacy coalition, and among a handful of women legislators.

Now with those backing family leave willing and able to put pressure on the state’s first woman governor on paid maternity leave, the politics of family leave could not have been more promising. But how, in a period where every socially beneficial initiative at the federal, state, or local level was expected to be self-financing or budget neutral, would advocates advance the cause of paid family leave into statute? And how would a loose coalition of activists ever be able to exert sufficient pressure to get the state’s political leadership on board? Enter a new and important leader in the effort.

The Women’s Statewide Legislative Network

In 1998, Linda Johnson, a former Massachusetts welfare rights organizer, became the executive director of the Women’s Statewide Legislative Network. WSLN, often just called the Network, had long been dedicated to promoting legislation and budget issues of concern to women in Massachusetts, principally by linking activists and women’s organizations with progressive state legislators. But the Network had fallen on hard times and Linda had few illusions about the job. There was no money in the WSLN coffers, no offices, little equipment, and the board of directors had become concerned about the future of an organization that seemed to have lost its identity and purpose.

It had not always been that way. In the 1980s the Network had tracked legislation on women’s issues and budget expenditures affecting women in Massachusetts. With a solid base of dues-paying members and strong foundation support, its founder, Diane Balser, was able to galvanize women to contact policymakers and voice support for a range of bills. The strategy achieved some notable success, such as passage of one of the strongest sexual harassment laws in the nation, a legislative victory for representative Susan Tracy of Brighton, who would later run for Congress. The WSLN sponsored regular meetings of activists and women legislators, established a committed membership base, and published reports on pending legislation affecting women.

The Network kept women activists across the state informed about key legislation on a host of issues — abortion, pay equity, domestic violence, welfare, education, and training — rallying Network members and those of affiliate organizations to lobby legislators by phone, mail, or direct lobbying efforts. Annual reports on how the state budget would affect women made WSLN one of the most reliably well informed of the women’s organizations in the state. The WSLN concentrated on state-level politics and policies while reaching out to other women’s organizations and academic centers, adding to their connections. Of course, the task of advancing legislation to benefit women across the social and economic spectrum was made immeasurably easier by the Dukakis administration’s willingness to tackle a range of state problems affecting women, including the intransigence of poverty among most female-headed households in the state.²³ In the 1990s, however, the economic and political climate changed markedly. A deep recession obliterated the Massachusetts Miracle and jettisoned the state’s nascent legislation to establish a universal health

care program. Under the leadership of executive director Kelley Bates, the WSLN continued to press for legislation of benefit to women, especially plans to oppose the onerous welfare reforms of the Weld-Cellucci administrations. But the organization struggled in a vastly altered and more resistant political environment. Beset by an economy mired in unemployment and foreclosures, Weld maintained liberal social policy on issues like abortion and racial equality, but crafted a new regime of fiscal conservatism and vastly reduced welfare benefits. Massachusetts would soon institute one of the strictest welfare policy bills in the nation, mandating work requirements for welfare recipients, ending education and training as equivalents to work, and imposing lifetime welfare limits of five years per recipient.

Working with other welfare and legal services advocates, WSLN waged a losing battle to retain, at the state level, the benefits for the poor that had once been federally guaranteed. Suffering from battle fatigue made more difficult by problems in obtaining foundation grants, the staff was hard pressed to keep the organization afloat. Lacking the resources of its early years, the Network found it nearly impossible to monitor and disseminate information on a wide range of women's policy issues or to sustain the dues-paying involvement of its dwindling middle-class base of supporters. By 1997, the organization was near collapse.

But the support of a handful of board members convinced Linda Johnson that she could bring the Women's Statewide Legislative Network back from the brink of dissolution and recreate it as a political force on behalf of Massachusetts women. Drawing on her experience as a welfare rights organizer (Johnson had once been on welfare), she felt that WSLN could succeed only if it focused its full attention and meager resources on a limited agenda that would speak to the work-family problems affecting issues in women's lives. For Johnson, two central needs cut across income and racial lines for women: to achieve some measure of economic security and to have and raise happy, capable children. But she saw these needs as conflicted under current policies as women sought both personal and public success. "Women can't progress," she lamented, "because they are constantly being dragged in and out of the work force because of having kids."²⁴

The WSLN board, along with other activists and liberal academics, brainstormed about the need for a significant advance for family-friendly social policies in Massachusetts. Johnson's working group decided that paid family leave, which, she said "no one was talking about in 1998," would address the difficulties intrinsic to women's unpaid, unrecognized, and unvalued labor — caring for children, sick relatives, or elderly parents. With financial benefits for family and medical leave, women could perform their family care responsibilities with less stress. Johnson also believed that winning paid leave might bolster the prospects for addressing other issues affecting women such as pay equity, the glass ceiling, and pensions.

Women's Leadership for Paid Family Leave

With the WSLN as the lead organization for paid family leave, Linda Johnson recruited a board of activists and scholars supportive of the issue to create the Paid Family Leave Coalition. Prominent among those on the Steering Committee was Kathleen Casavant, secretary-treasurer of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO who was initially intrigued and soon sufficiently enthusiastic about the campaign that she convinced her fellow labor leaders to make its passage a priority for the federation.²⁵

One of Johnson's first organizing efforts involved a statewide listening tour to test the paid family-leave concept in a series of meetings and focus groups: what Johnson called her road show. Taking a doggedly grassroots approach, Johnson targeted community leaders and activists for input on content and strategy, finally settling on three must-do items: universal access (meaning available to all families regardless of income), paid leave, and job protection. Encouraged by expressions of support across the state and bolstered by the strategic partnership forged with the state labor federation, the WSLN began to craft viable policy proposals with realistic funding mechanisms for legislative consideration.

The struggle for paid family leave would greatly benefit from an alliance with the state AFL-CIO and the dedication of Kathy Casavant, secretary-treasurer and highest ranking woman in the history of the state federation. Casavant's involvement and leadership proved crucial to bringing the resources, prestige, and membership of the state AFL-CIO front and center for the looming political battle. The debate over paid family leave was no longer the heroic struggle of a small women's organization with limited resources. Once the Massachusetts AFL-CIO set it as a key priority for passage, paid family leave would have the political muscle of the state's largest labor organization behind it and the total dedication of a handful of political advocates with the will to see it through.

As noted earlier, the Women's Statewide Legislative Network had for nearly fifteen years worked to connect women concerned about women's issues to those in positions to create through legislative politics the programs and policies defined as important and necessary for women's lives. Realizing that paid leave would require a strong coalition able to research, publicize, and mobilize the issue, Johnson assembled academics, organizers, labor, and community activists and women's rights advocates committed to work on the project. The Paid Family Leave Coalition benefited from the combination of political savvy of women labor leaders, the expertise of progressive-minded academics, and the grassroots community organizing focus that Linda Johnson brought to her directorship. Johnson was determined to take leadership on issues that the board and staff felt strongly related to needs of the majority of women. Groups like WSLN are established because they realize that many citizens belong to certain categories based on personal identity — race, gender, or national origin, for example — but as such, they are poorly organized. Public interest or citizens' groups take it upon themselves to speak for the collective needs of society.²⁶ However, as in this case, public interest groups make much more headway when they align with those who possess more resources, experience, members, and influence, organizations like the AFL-CIO. As a result, small groups achieve greater political viability and legitimacy and therefore a greater chance of achieving their policy goals.

In the struggle for paid family leave, the involvement of a high-ranking union official like Kathy Casavant as one of the founders of the Paid Family Leave Coalition made it possible for the press, legislators, and the public to take the issue seriously. Alone, WSLN would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to muster sufficient clout to advance consideration of paid family-leave legislation on Beacon Hill or even gain much press attention. By establishing the Coalition with committed labor leadership, the effort acquired far more prominence and feasibility. The campaign for paid family leave was a natural political cause for the state federation because it resonated with the central themes of the national AFL-CIO, which, under

John Sweeney's leadership, focused national political organizing on issues to benefit working families. The power and prestige of organized labor was greatly enhanced whenever it could achieve benefits for workers, union and nonunion, through political organizing.

But framing paid family leave as primarily a women's issue was problematic for all concerned. Even though the work of WSLN always had been to mobilize women to seek legislative redress for women's issues, Linda Johnson recognized that the general public, the legislators, and the unions would be much more favorably inclined to a political initiative that was gender neutral. The Coalition members agreed that adopting a message about working families rather than women's needs would bolster the strength of the Coalition and its chances for success. Furthermore, according to Casavant, the national FMLA had set the precedent that leave taking was as much a needed benefit for men as for women and should be seen as such.²⁷ Indeed, the Coalition could point to the increased interest of men in taking weeks from work to care for children as a realistic way to present the issue.

Strategic decisions were also made about a problem that legislators sponsoring paid-leave bills had raised from the start: how to finance a viable program and stay within the parameters of a state budget facing lower revenues. This concern would be complicated, given the different proposals for coverage: some for family and medical leave, which was covered in the national legislation, and others for parental leave only. As matters turned out, the involvement of the president of the United States would determine the outcome of the question regarding who would be eligible for paid leave, and for what reasons.

Initially, WSLN had envisioned coverage for family and medical leave, which would cover essentially the same conditions — time off for new children or to care for sick relatives — as the federal FMLA. Financing could be achieved, it was hoped, through a new system called Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI), which would function like the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund by granting workers a percentage of wages during their leave time. Jillian Dickert, a member of the Coalition and a research associate at the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, wrote a policy brief on paid family leave and medical leave, including how it might be financed through a TDI system.²⁸ Wage replacement for workers during periods of disability because of their own illness or injury, or that of their close relatives, would be covered by a TDI program.

TDI has been used effectively in New Jersey and California as a way to provide paid extended leave for women during pregnancy and after giving birth. According to Dickert, both states were considering expanding their TDI plan to include family disability, which would serve as a way for men and women to take time off to care for a close relative during a time of illness or after the birth or adoption of a child.

WSLN supported the idea of TDI and organized a legislative briefing in the State House under the sponsorship of representative Anne Paulsen and representative Patricia Jehlen to provide other legislators and staffers with information about paid family and medical leave. Dickert and the executive director of the National Partnership for Children and Families, Donna Lenhoff, the force behind the national FMLA, were asked to present their research and answer questions about how a TDI plan might work in Massachusetts. In a signal that paid leave was gaining ground, representative Peter Larkin and representative Stephen Lynch, the chairmen of the Commerce and Labor Committees in the House and Senate, sponsored successful

legislation in January 2000, establishing a state task force to study the current unemployment insurance system with the purpose of investigating paid family leave. The job of the task force included investigating the feasibility of a statewide insurance and retirement plan for temporary disability, family medical related leave, and retirement. Paid family leave in Massachusetts was on the agenda, but how would it fare?

Soon after the legislative briefing, activists questioned whether TDI was the best funding mechanism for family and medical leave. Patricia Jehlen said that she and others came to realize that “TDI was probably not a viable option.”²⁹ She recognized that a TDI program would likely be more expensive than other funding mechanisms and noted the difficulty of defining a family disability as a temporary disability. But advocates agreed that tapping the Unemployment Trust Fund (which at the time was running close to a \$2 billion surplus) would be an ideal way to finance the costs of paid family and medical leave for workers. Unemployment insurance is a long-standing, federally mandated program initiated during the New Deal whereby each state determines benefits, coverage, and taxes on business. The biggest impediment to drawing down the state’s Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund was a U.S. Department of Labor regulation barring such usage. However, this obstacle was overcome by the lobbying work of the National Partnership and other organizations, including the Coalition for Family Leave, who were able to convince President Clinton to change the Labor Department regulations to allow state unemployment insurance funds to be used. In making the change, however, the outcome limited the potential uses to parental leave, not family medical leave.

Meanwhile, women in the legislature introduced legislation that would mandate paid family leave in Massachusetts. Senator Susan Fargo and representative Patricia Jehlen filed a bill to provide for paid leave for employees after the birth or adoption of a child and leave for the illness of the employee or to care for a family member with an illness. Family member was defined as the spouse, son or daughter, parent, parent of spouse, grandparent, grandchild, or a person living in the immediate household of an individual seeking leave. All companies, regardless of the number of employees, would be covered.

The legislation was far-reaching, beyond what other states had established in that it created a category of family temporary disability as well as individual disability of the worker. Benefit levels would be set at 66 percent of the individual’s average weekly wage, but were not to exceed 51 percent of the state average weekly wage plus \$25 for each dependent. Temporary disability leave for the individual worker was limited to twenty-six weeks and family leave to twelve weeks. The legislators estimated the cost at \$1.3 billion, paid by employers. The Fargo-Jehlen bill made an enormous leap in terms of coverage and would have been the most comprehensive of its type in the nation.

However, even the Coalition feared it might be too complex and too expensive for passage. Another bill, filed by representative Anne Paulsen, would create a three-year pilot program providing paid leave to parents but did not deal with disability leave. Employees would receive 50 percent of their salary up to a cap of 57.5 percent of the state’s average weekly wage, with another \$25 for each dependent. The projected cost range, between \$43 and \$200 million per year, was far less than the TDI plan and would allow twelve weeks of leave. Most important, Paulsen’s bill required that paid leave be financed by the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund.

The Paid Family Leave Coalition was closely aligned with this bill, believing that a pilot program had merit and that unemployment insurance financing made sense, especially given the change in the federal regulations. Dubbed Baby UI (because, according to Johnson, it was seen as the offspring of the unemployment insurance system and because the policy was connected to babies) the bill became the primary focus for supporters of paid leave. Johnson and Casavant wrote opinion articles in regional newspapers like *The New Bedford Standard Times* in July 2000, extolling the benefits of Baby UI and its modest cost — only \$10 to \$14 per employee per year. They pointed out that other advanced industrial nations already provide paid leave, including Canada (for fifteen weeks) and Germany (for eighty-three weeks). The use of UI funds, they claimed, was fully justified if social benefit programs are to respond to the needs of contemporary society.

An in-depth research report by professor Randy Albelda and Tiffany Manuel, published by the Labor Resource Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston in 2000, bolstered the claims of paid-leave advocates for Baby UI and provided financial information and analysis for legislators needing cost estimates on the program. Their study, “Filling the Work and Family Gap: Paid Parental Leave in Massachusetts,” was designed to demonstrate that a UI-funded system for paternal paid leave was feasible. Albelda and Manuel estimated that 28,887 claimants in Massachusetts would use paid leave at a cost of \$32,735,000 annually with each UI-covered employee costing \$10.81 per year to support the system.³⁰ Legislators recognized that using the unemployment insurance fund for paid parental leave only would be far simpler than the temporary disability insurance system, which, in any case, was designed for more than just parental leave. Wage replacement could be identical to the UI claims — meaning one half of a worker’s weekly wage, not to exceed \$261 per week (in 1998 dollars).

Although the legislature was considering funding paid leave for parents from UI funds, such a proposal was opposed by business interests. The 6,000-member Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM) argued that any paid-leave plan should originate at the national, not the state, level or be an issue brought up through labor-management negotiations at individual workplaces. Brian Gilmore, an AIM official, argued that employers do not want to be burdened with the costs of another social service program. He pointed out that when employees go on leave, they must be replaced, adding increased costs to business. Gilmore expressed strong opposition to the idea of using the UI fund, which he maintained “could not be used for anything else except its purpose since 1930 — for workers out of a job.”³¹ He noted with some aggravation that proponents of paid leave had put family leave into an outside section of legislation that would require funding through the UI system but that AIM had forcefully opposed the move. “We are against taking on family leave,” he said, “because it is a no wage employment cost, meaning it’s not related to the job. And it is only for parents, not for all.” Gilmore argued that employers are already burdened by several cost factors including health insurance, workmen’s compensation, and unemployment insurance; they would not support the imposition of new expenses to support paid-leave programs.

Indeed, business opposition to using the UI funds would prove so powerful that further attempts to use it for paid leave were abandoned, even though the legislation remained alive. Senate president Thomas Birmingham’s bill differed from Paulsen’s plan only by changing its funding source. The Senate plan earmarked \$120 million

in state funds for new mothers and fathers to take up to twelve weeks of leave at half pay. Costs for the plan that went above and beyond the earmark would be paid from a surplus in the Medical Security Trust Fund, an employer-funded account used to provide health insurance for the state's unemployed. According to *The Boston Globe*, Senator Birmingham defended his plan, claiming "everybody in public life pays lip service to family values and the work ethic. We're trying to put substance to this rhetoric."³²

But even with an alternative to UI as the funding source, business groups still opposed the legislation. Both the High Technology Council and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Association expressed fears that it was the worst possible time to initiate an expensive, employer-supported paid-leave benefit. As one business leader put it, "How can you be against a feel-good public policy? But what sounds appealing on the surface has some significant economic impacts below the surface."³³

Instead, the business groups favored a proposal offered by House Speaker Thomas Finneran to use tax credits to partly reimburse companies that provide paid family leave. Companies with 250 or fewer employees could offer 50 percent of weekly salaries up to \$477 for four to six weeks of leave. In return, employers would receive a benefit reimbursing 20 percent of their costs. The Speaker's plan would cost about \$10 million, far less than others.

The state AFL-CIO, having declared family leave a top priority, decided that all the proposed plans had drawbacks based on funding sources established for other purposes. Therefore, president Robert Haynes and secretary-treasurer Kathy Casavant backed a revamped paid parental-leave plan offered by Paulsen and senator Stephen Lynch that would create a New Families Trust. The new plan would be funded by employer contributions of \$20 per employee per year to raise an estimated \$64 million and provide twelve weeks off for working parents at the same rate as unemployment benefits. Tax credits would be allowed on a sliding scale, but only for businesses with 250 or fewer employees.³⁴

But the state labor federation recognized that getting such legislation passed would be difficult, given the opposition of the House Speaker and the governor. To increase the chances of passage, the AFL-CIO launched a ballot initiative plan that would force employers to pay into a special fund for family leave. At a rally announcing two initiative petitions, one indexing the state's minimum wage to inflation and another to establish paid family leave, Senator Kennedy vowed to throw his political support behind both measures. Labor groups expressed hope that the petitions would serve as a powerful organizing tool and give them enhanced leverage in the State House fight. But the reality, according to Casavant, was that all the paid-leave bills in the legislature had little chance of approval, given the Speaker's opposition. The ballot initiative was the best hope of getting paid family leave into law. The long and complex question crafted by the AFL-CIO and supported by the new Campaign for Working Families (a coalition including the WSLN, ACORN, the Women's Education and Industrial Union, and Senior Action, among others) took into account the needs of small businesses by offering tax credits to them on a sliding scale. Still, gaining the 75,000 signatures needed to get the initiative on the ballot would be difficult, especially since, according to Casavant, nearly one in four potential signers refused to support it on the grounds that caring for newly adopted or newborn children is up to the parents not the government. "It's going to be a battle," she said, "over what government does and doesn't do. But we are trying to keep the conversation alive."³⁵

The Acting Governor Responds

With so much political and press interest building for paid family leave, acting governor Jane Swift knew it was time to unveil her own proposal, which would target the state's low-income workers. Swift's plan, touted as "her most significant initiative to date," would provide more than 60,000 low- to moderate-income families up to \$300 a week for twelve weeks for parental leave.³⁶ The tax-free benefits would be offered to families making less than \$36,000 a year. Families with incomes between \$36,000 and \$88,000 a year would receive the same benefits, but in the form of no-interest loans to be paid back over five years. Swift's plan estimates that between 15,000 and 20,000 families will require paid leave, at a cost of \$30 million, funded, like the Senate plan, from the Medical Security Trust Fund.³⁷ According to the *Boston Herald*, Swift's plan was months in the making because "the issue required endless number-crunching as administration officials struggled to develop a plan that walks the tightrope between the needs of growing families and the faltering economy."³⁸

But Swift's paid-leave proposal generated immediate criticism from labor activists and from the WSLN, primarily over the requirements for repaying benefits. Linda Johnson marveled that the governor had even proposed a paid-leave plan, but warned that the loan and repayment requirements would "set a dangerous precedent." Furthermore, both the AFL-CIO and the WSLN objected to the central elements of the governor's plan. While progressive on its face, Johnson claimed that without universal coverage, such a program would have a limited low-income constituency and thus could easily become a political football and be cut in a budget downturn.

The governor's plan was also blasted from the governor's political right by columnist David A. Mittell in *The Patriot Ledger*, a Quincy-based paper that covers population-rich Southeastern Massachusetts. Mittell called Swift's proposal "two-headed," with the first head being the governor's "red face" for taking paid leave herself, and the second being public relations "pandering." Calling paid leave a "nanny-state" idea, he excoriated Swift for launching another scheme for "confiscating the people's money. . . with an innocent-sounding, well-meaning, initially inexpensive proposal to do a public good." But, he warned, once the camel's nose of paid family leave gets under the tent of state programs, the rest of the animal is sure to follow, requiring another bloated, expensive bureaucracy.³⁹

Despite such criticisms, politically speaking, paid family leave seemed to be moving forward inexorably. According to *The Boston Globe*, Senate president Birmingham would be running for governor in 2002, largely on the strength of his legislative record, and paid family leave could figure prominently in the campaign as a singular achievement. At the same time, acting governor Swift needed to capitalize on her image as the state's first working mother in the corner office, handling both babies and management of the state with aplomb. She could hardly provide a working maternity leave for herself at full salary and ignore the needs of working women in similar circumstance. Her plan, she argued, would address the state's neediest families and offer some benefits to middle-income taxpayers without breaking her no-new-taxes pledge.

Despite editorial criticism from *The Boston Globe* calling his support for the AFL-CIO ballot initiative "surprising and troubling," Senator Kennedy had thrown

his support behind an “up or down vote from the electorate.”⁴⁰ As the most prominent liberal official in the state, Kennedy was already closely identified with the membership of the labor federation and wanted to maintain his image as a leader on a working families initiative that unexpectedly had gained enormous political momentum in a short time.

Conclusion

Paid family leave emerged as a promising new initiative for the state’s working families because of a combination of several factors, all related to gender politics. First, women’s collective advancement in politics and government across the United States, but particularly at the state legislative level, has given women political leaders the power to advance laws directly beneficial to women in society. Second, changes in women’s lives through educational gains and career opportunities have brought about momentous changes in family life. Not only are women postponing marriage and childbearing, but those who choose to do so are looking for ways to combine their work and family lives in a way that will be amenable to them and their aspirations for success at home and at work.

Finally, the unexpected confluence of electoral politics sensitive to the gender gap with the advent of the first governor of the commonwealth ever to give birth while in office made paid family leave the foremost policy issue of 2000. Senate president Birmingham was able to usher a paid-leave bill through the Senate with unanimous support across party lines. With the House Speaker and business community on the defensive, it appeared that some sort of paid-leave plan would be passed and signed into law. For the acting governor, the political stakes were high. Looking ahead to her own likely candidacy for governor, she could ill afford to alienate women voters, but at the same time she needed to craft a bill that could past muster among the state’s business leaders. By promising not to raise taxes or impose an onerous financial burden on the state’s employers, Swift hoped to create a fiscally prudent program that would target the neediest for a modicum of support and offer loans to those with less financial need.

Just as the necessary debate over the merits of the competing plans was about to be joined, unforeseen events made all the initiatives moot for the time being. First, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO received disheartening reports early on that their attempts to collect 75,000 voter signatures backing the paid-leave ballot initiative were facing unexpected resistance. Having fanned out across the state, signature gatherers found registered voters reluctant to support a law that would mandate financial support for parents after the birth or adoption of a child. Kathleen Casavant, the labor official most identified with the measure, expressed dismay that the notion of public support for working parents after the birth or adoption of a child was widely dismissed as beyond the purview of government. The ballot initiative had failed to strike a responsive chord among the general public. Casavant surmised that many citizens believe strongly that costs associated with early child rearing, including the loss of wages, should be planned for and borne by the individual families. Having faced a poor showing on the initial signature drives, and with the economy clearly softening, the state AFL-CIO decided to shelve the paid-leave initiative and concentrate on winning their referendum to index the state minimum wage to keep pace with inflation.

Without question, legislation on Beacon Hill for paid family leave was also undone by the downward spiral of state revenue projections in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. An already softening economy was deeply strained by the traumatic events that had, by all accounts, precipitated a full-fledged recession nationwide that was already in the offing. In a brief postmortem on the demise of paid-leave proposals, *The Boston Globe* noted that the AFL-CIO initiative, like those proposed by Birmingham and Swift, had fallen victim to slumping economic conditions.⁴¹ In the midst of a budget battle with House Speaker Finneran over possible cuts to human services for the mentally retarded and others, Senator Birmingham was forced to jettison his paid family leave proposal and concentrate on ways to shore up existing vital programs.

Although the political efforts for paid leave seemed fruitless, advocates learned important lessons. Establishing widespread grassroots political support, just as Linda Johnson had favored, would require a more concerted campaign than the “inside baseball” legislative approach that a year earlier had seemingly held such promise. If anything, the AFL-CIO ballot initiative campaign revealed that voters are hardly supportive of programs that enable parents to receive partial wage replacements after the birth or adoption of a child. Individualist ideology runs deep in American political consciousness, and if citizens perceive the program as an expensive middle-class benefit rather than help for the “truly needy” — which prior polls in Massachusetts had found surprisingly popular — they may well hesitate to back it. If the labor federations decide to focus on mass political education on paid leave, support could certainly grow. To date, all the organizations and politicians who backed some form of paid family leave have vowed to revisit it once sunnier economic conditions return.

Whatever the contours of the final legislation, the politics of paid family leave in Massachusetts reflects the enormous economic and political changes that women have wrought on American society over past decades. It also shows that political elites are closely attuned to issues that strike a chord among women voters and legislators, and that interest groups with determined and politically savvy leadership may well be in a position at this time to seize the moment and demand rights and resources that will improve and sustain the livelihood of women. ❁

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