

Why the United States Lacks Comprehensive National Family Leave Policies: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

The United States has a substantial amount of resources, yet many of its outcomes do not reflect that. Its social policies are lacking compared to other high-income countries. The United States is one of the only countries that does not provide national paid family leave, unlike countries like Sweden and Great Britain. Sweden's initial policy in 1974 provided 6 months of paid leave to both parents, and Britain's expansion in 2003 expanded the time and rate mothers were given and introduced paternity leave as well. This thesis examines the policymaking processes that led to these policies. Political institutions such as party systems, interest groups, and public opinion are found to impact the policymaking process and further reflect the values in each country. Understanding how institutions impact policy development and outcomes is vital in learning why the United States lacks many of the comprehensive policies its peers have.

Theory

Party Systems



- Sweden's proportional representation system would allow for more compromise and cooperation between parties, which leads to more effective long-term outcomes
- United States' majoritarian system would cause one party to have control and lead to less innovative short-term outcomes
- Britain's parliamentary system would have a narrow majority making most decisions but considering the opposition

Interest Groups



- Pluralist systems would have strong interest group influence in policymaking but short-term outcomes due to shifts in power
- Corporatist systems would have more direct collaboration between policymakers and stakeholders which would create long-term outcomes
- The United States and Britain would have more obstacles in implementation, while Sweden would have stronger policies

Public Opinion



- Countries with stronger welfare states would have more egalitarian views that allow for stronger social policies; the opposite goes for countries with weak welfare states
- Sweden would therefore have the strongest family leave policies, Britain would have weaker policies, and the United States would have the weakest policies

Findings

Sweden

- Goal of gender equality in the workforce—family leave was important to achieve this
- Women's groups formed many of policies and programs made to accomplish this goal; unions and employers worked directly with government officials to shape the policy
- Social Democrats won the 1972 election after emphasizing equality, social security, and the welfare state in their campaign
- Social Democratic government got the policy on the agenda and was easily able to implement it

Great Britain

- Tony Blair's role: balancing policy goals and business support, media speculation if he would take paternity leave
- Labour Party victory in the 2001 election, where they emphasized equality of opportunities in their campaign
- Opposition from Conservatives and businesses made the policy more restricted

United States

- Policy was on the agenda since the 1980s, but paid leave was never considered; was repeatedly passed in Congress and vetoed by Bush
- Women's groups and AARP supported it and provided resources, while small businesses were against it
- Gradually built bipartisan support
- In the 1990 election, both campaigns emphasized family values in different ways—Bush through international strength and Clinton through helping the middle class
- Clinton was elected and signed the bill that Bush vetoed; it was less comprehensive than Democrats would have liked but Republicans were trying to make changes to make it more restricted



Public Opinion

Table 1: Survey data for each country pre- and post-family leave (when applicable), %

		Sweden post-family leave	Great Britain pre-family leave	Great Britain post-family leave	United States pre-family leave	United States post-family leave
Less importance placed on work	Good thing	15.64	53.36	42.82	22.93	27.51
	Don't mind	7.99	27.14	34.9	63.19	28.95
	Bad thing	76.37	19.51	22.28	13.87	43.55
More emphasis on family life	Good thing	83.56	89.68	92.64	94.58	93.19
	Don't mind	11.12	8.9	6.95	1.51	6.27
	Bad thing	5.33	1.42	0.41	3.91	0.54
Confidence: Labor unions	A great deal	9.25	2.66	3.08	7.5	7.8
	Quite a lot	45.43	25.37	27.13	25.88	26.64
	Not very much	45.32	48.55	48.14	54.26	49.65
Confidence: Parliament/Civil Service/National Government	None at all	-	23.42	21.66	12.35	15.92
	A great deal	6	4.33	4.93	11.69	4.72
	Quite a lot	45.09	31.2	31.35	47.14	25.85
	Not very much	48.92	49.27	46.87	36.8	55.2
	None at all	-	15.2	16.86	4.37	14.22

Sources: 1981 WVS, 1999 EVS, 2005 WVS, 1990 EVS, 1995 WVS

Table 2: Post-family leave women's movement confidence, %

	Great Britain	United States
A great deal	13.79	11.07
Quite a lot	53.76	41.96
Not very much	26.91	35.88
None at all	5.54	11.09

Sources: 2005 WVS, 1995 WVS

- Sweden felt that decreasing work importance would be a bad thing, Britain felt it would be a good thing, and the United States started as neutral but then changed to feel it would be a bad thing
- All countries thought an increased emphasis on family life would be good
- Sweden had the most confidence in unions and government, the United States had the least
- Britain had more confidence in Parliament than in unions
- Britain had more confidence in women's groups than the United States, even though women's groups had a smaller role in Britain
- Overall, public opinion reinforced the institutions in place—countries with strong institutions had more confidence while countries with weak institutions had lower confidence

Conclusion

The family leave policymaking processes in each country were strongly influenced by the institutions in place. Party systems had the expected outcomes, even when actors did not act as expected; interest groups played a large role in shaping the policy; and while public opinion was not explicitly an influence, the public's social values and attitudes regarding institutions further reinforced the patterns present. These findings are important in understanding which factors impact the policymaking process and how our own interactions with institutions can affect policy outcomes.