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REPUBLICANS ARE SLOW TO BACK DONALD TRUMP'S PAID MATERNITY-LEAVE PLAN

Democrats criticize the proposal as insufficient compared with what Hillary Clinton is offering

By Richard Rubin
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Donald Trump's proposal to create a new federal program offering six weeks of partially paid maternity leave is winning few Republican supporters in Congress.

The mixed reaction to Mr. Trump's proposal, put forward in a speech Tuesday night, leaves him squeezed between Democrats who dismiss it as insufficient and Republicans reluctant to embrace ideas they have spent years criticizing.

If more Republicans sign on, Mr. Trump's plan could turn the paid-leave debate from a partisan standoff over whether to create a new benefit into a discussion over how generous it should be and how it should be paid for.

For now, however, there is significant wariness within the party. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.), as well as two members of Congress who attended Mr. Trump's speech, don't support a federal paid-leave plan.

A spokesman for one of them, Rep. Diane Black (R., Tenn.), said she supports only Mr. Trump's tax cuts for child care. She "wants to see more businesses adopt paid-leave policies, but she does not support mandates to this effect at the federal level," said spokesman Jonathan Frank.

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R., Utah), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he supports federally provided maternity leave, though he was concerned about the cost.

"Women are increasingly becoming workers," Mr. Hatch said. "And it's very unfair when they have families, and especially when we don't have an economy that's doing as good as we would like it to do."

The U.S. is the only major country that doesn't provide paid leave for workers. Changing that has been a consistent cause for many Democrats, including presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. In the 1990s, her husband, former President Bill Clinton, signed a law requiring many employers to offer 12 weeks of unpaid leave.

Republicans have resisted federally guaranteed paid leave, warning against creating new entitlement programs, higher taxes or mandates for businesses. Instead, they have proposed tax incentives to businesses and plans to let workers accumulate leave instead of overtime pay.

Mr. Trump, who was urged to make the shift by his daughter Ivanka, broke that mold as he tries to woo suburban and female voters.

Mr. Trump's plan would expand unemployment benefits to include six weeks of maternity leave for workers who aren't covered by employers. Mr. Trump's company released a statement saying it offers eight weeks of paid leave, but wouldn't say how long that policy has been in effect and also said some policies vary across its different businesses.

The campaign estimates the plan would cost \$2.5 billion a year, which it says would be financed by eliminating waste and fraud in unemployment insurance. That's less than 10% of Mrs. Clinton's more expansive plan, which would guarantee 12 weeks of coverage, at a higher pay rate, for a broader range of reasons.

"I'm just so delighted to have a Republican talking about maternity leave, because it finally puts Republicans in the debate," said Rep. Cynthia Lummis (R., Wyo.), who backs Mr. Trump's tax proposals but said she wants to study paid leave further.

The rest of Mr. Trump's child-care plan is a collection of tax cuts, including tax-advantaged savings accounts, a deduction for child-care costs and a rebate for low-income households. Because it relies on deductions that are more valuable to higher-income households, the plan provides bigger benefits to the upper middle class than to lower-income households.

Democrats criticized Mr. Trump's proposal as inadequate and tilted to high-income households. They also say his paid-leave plan doesn't replace enough income, fails to address leaves for illnesses and caring for elderly parents, robs from unemployment benefits and is sexist because it focuses only on mothers.

"It does put a little pressure on conservatives over time – you'd think they'd have it anyway – to do something, to actually wrestle with the problem," said Chuck Marr, a former Democratic Senate aide who is director of federal tax policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which advocates for policies that benefit lower-income families.

Mrs. Clinton has a better plan and will actually work to turn it into law, said Marc Brumer, a spokesman for Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D., N.Y.), author of a bill to create a national paid-leave program.

"While Sen. Gillibrand is glad that we're debating paid leave in this election, she thinks Donald Trump's plan falls woefully short," Mr. Brumer said.

The plans from Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Gillibrand would provide up to 12 weeks of coverage for family and medical leave, not just newborn care. They would also guarantee workers at least two-thirds of their income, more than they typically get from unemployment insurance. Unlike Mrs. Gillibrand's plan, which includes a new payroll tax, Mrs. Clinton relies on taxes on high-income households.

Mr. Trump's plan could encourage employers to drop existing leave policies in favor of the government program, said Ben Gitis, director of labor market policy at the American Action Forum, a conservative-leaning policy group.

Because it's tied to unemployment benefits, payments would vary by state. Mr. Gitis, who has proposed his own plan targeted at lower-income workers, questioned the idea of finding that much money inside the unemployment system.

"That's money coming straight out of people who get laid off," he said. "To me, that's concerning."

—Mike Bender contributed to this article.