

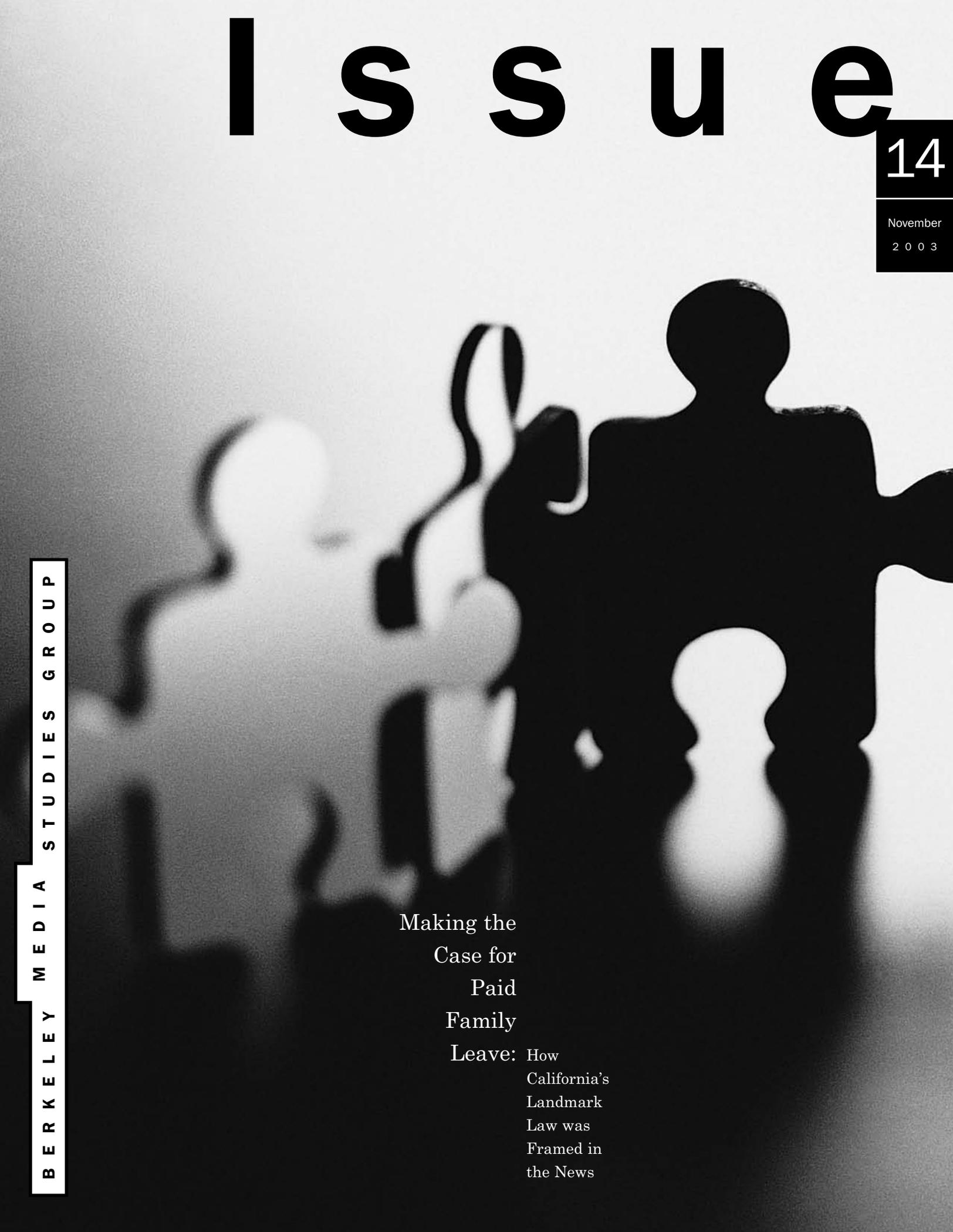
I s s u e

14

November

2 0 0 3

B E R K E L E Y M E D I A S T U D I E S G R O U P



Making the
Case for
Paid
Family

Leave: How
California's
Landmark
Law was
Framed in
the News

Making the Case for Paid Family Leave: How California's Landmark Law Was Framed in the News

In February 1993 President Bill Clinton signed the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows workers in eligible companies 12 weeks of job-guaranteed unpaid time off to care for an ill relative or a new child. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that the law applied to state workers as well. Although heralded at the time as a breakthrough for families, it has become clear that even workers who are eligible often do not take leave because they cannot afford to take the time off without pay.¹ In early 2002, California State Senator Sheila Kuehl introduced Senate Bill (SB) 1661, Family Temporary Disability Insurance to provide “wage replacement benefits to workers who take time off work to care for a seriously ill child, spouse, parents, domestic partner or to bond with a new child.”² Governor Gray Davis signed SB 1661 on September 24, 2002, making California the first state in the nation to offer paid family leave.

¹ Waldfogel J. Family and medical leave: Evidence from the 2000 surveys. *Monthly Labor Review* 2001: 17-23.

² Senate Bill 1661. For a copy of the bill, see www.sen.ca.gov.

The public health benefits of paid family leave are numerous. Family leave strengthens health through the healing that comes from personal interaction and care. The opportunity for parents to remain home with a new child will facilitate bonding between parent and child. Financial support for employees to care for adult family members helps reduce or avoid costs for skilled nursing and the associated medical costs incurred if no one is available to care for an individual, not to mention providing peace of mind.

Despite these benefits, SB 1661 was highly contentious. The business community vigorously opposed the legislation. Consequently, the news coverage reflected much debate between stakeholders in the months prior to the Governor's signing the bill into law. We examined the news coverage of paid family leave, to learn from California's experience so advocates in other states grappling with establishing their own paid family leave programs can be prepared to face reporters. We also hope this analysis will help reporters be better prepared to cover the issue comprehensively.

Specifically, we wanted to discover how paid family leave was framed in the news. Did the opinions of proponents or opponents come through most clearly? What were their arguments? Who voiced these arguments, and what values did they evoke?

Framing: What it is, Why it's Important

The process of organizing information and making meaning is called framing. In news coverage, the frame is the way an issue is defined, packaged, and presented in the news. When covering stories, journalists select certain arguments, examples, images, messages, and sources to create a picture of the issue. This selection — or omission — of arguments and voices not only indicates to readers what is important about an issue, but also what is not. In so doing, reporters indicate what or who is credible, which positions and arguments are valid, and which aspects of an issue need not even be considered.

Like a frame around a painting, the news frame draws attention to a specific picture and separates told from untold pieces of the story: elements in the story are said to be in the frame; elements left out of the story are outside the frame. Frames are the boundaries around a news story; they delineate what is and is not news.

Frames are powerful because they foster certain interpretations and hinder others — often without the reader's awareness. Frames are central arguments or perspectives on a news story that shape the perspective of the news audience on the issue. A frame does this by providing cues that activate a scenario in the minds of some readers. Frames create tracks for a train of thought and once on that track it's hard to get off.³

³ Scholars from various disciplines have elaborated the framing process and its effect on public discourse. See, for example, William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Stephen D. Reese, "Prologue—Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research," in Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. and August E. Grant, ed. *Framing Public Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001): 7-31.

What We Did

To determine how paid family leave was framed, we analyzed the content of news media coverage of California Senate Bill 1661 as debate heated up in the months prior to the Governor's signing the bill and the weeks following, from June 1 through October 31, 2002 (with the addition of one article from November 7, 2002). To gather the sample of articles, we conducted a key word search of all California and national newspapers in the Lexis-Nexis database for the phrases "SB 1661" and "paid family leave." Staff from the Labor Project for Working Families (a Berkeley, California, based non-profit that led this effort) and Senator Kuehl's office provided us with additional California and national newspaper articles as well as magazine pieces and radio transcripts.

We obtained television clips from two sources: The Television News Archives at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and Multivision Inc. Vanderbilt supplied footage from the national evening news broadcasts on ABC, CBS and NBC. Multivision Inc. provided local news clips for the San Francisco Bay Area, San Diego, Los Angeles, Sacramento-Stockton-Modesto and Fresno-Visalia markets as well as for national cable programs including BET, CNN Money Morning, and MSNBC.

We first viewed the television news coverage to generate framing categories. We then refined the frames we identified and used them to code the print news pieces. The few discrepancies between us were resolved through discussion until we arrived at consensus.

What We Found

We collected 278 news pieces from newspapers and magazines, 21 television clips and five radio broadcast transcripts for a total of 304 news media pieces discussing paid family leave (Table 1). Of these, 212 were news and 92 were opinion (including editorials, op-eds, letters to the editor, and columns). Seventy-nine percent (240/304) of the total sample represented California sources, while the rest of the sample comprises pieces gathered from newspapers across the nation, as well as nationally broadcast radio and television broadcast and cable programs.

Overall, we found 15 different frames regarding paid family leave: six supporting the policy, six against, and three neutral. The frames both for and against SB 1661, as well as one of the neutral frames, are broken down into their component pieces in the matrix at the center of this report.

Table 1
News media pieces by type and location, June 1 – October 31, 2002

	News	Opinion	Total
California			
Print (Newspapers and magazines)	153	73	226
Radio	1		1
Television	13		13
Total California	167	73	240
National			
Print (Newspapers and magazines)	33	19	52
Radio	4		4
Television (Broadcast and cable)	8		8
Total National	45	19	64

Frames Supporting Paid Family Leave

The six frames that support paid family leave emphasize the benefits of the policy for individual employees and their families and counter the opposition's contention that paid family leave would be bad for business. These six are listed and discussed below in descending order of frequency of appearance.

Caring family, bonding moms [69%]⁴

Providing the opportunity to care for loved ones could almost be included in every story, since nearly every story or opinion piece incorporated the fact that the bill would allow employees to take time off for this purpose. Because this language was prominent in the legislation itself meant that it was repeated frequently, but less than one third of the stories elaborated the frame. The frame was given a more powerful presence in those stories where it was illustrated further with a personal story or quote.

For example, two attention-grabbing variations on this frame had unlikely spokespeople. One featured a male business owner expressing his support for parents taking time off to bond with infants.⁵ Another featured a husband struggling to care for his ailing wife.⁶ These stories were the most gripping and vivid in otherwise fairly dry reporting. While the primary representatives of this frame, particularly on television, were of mothers with their newborn babies, print coverage featured examples of fathers caring for infants as well.

Balancing work and family [41%]

This frame emphasizes that currently employees are being forced to choose between their family and their job. Two versions of the conflict between work and family appeared in the coverage, each focused on care for family members at one of the two ends of the aging spectrum. The first is the struggle of working parents to meet the needs of their children. In this case, the Balancing Work and Family frame is about no longer having to choose between being a good parent or good employee, or "your baby or your job" as one op-ed put it.⁷ The second conflict is the juggling done by workers trying to look after ailing parents. One advocate captured the strain of these situations: "People are just privately making these really painful decisions and choices and really struggling."⁸ Worker peace of mind is the image that dominates when this frame is evoked; relief from being "torn apart."⁹

⁴ The percentages for the frames are based on how many separate print pieces contained at least one mention of the frame. There were 278 print pieces from California and national news sources. This frame appeared in 192 different articles, therefore $192 / 278 * 100 = 69\%$

⁵ Louise Chu. "Family leave bill drawing support; Business owners urge governor to give his OK," *Appeal-Democrat*, September 20, 2002.

⁶ Miguel Bustillo. "Paid leave ignites emotions," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 2002.

⁷ Judith Barish and Arlie Russell Hochschild. "Extending family leave; Your baby or your job," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 2002, page A23.

⁸ Karen Hershenson. "Family leave an admirable start," *Contra Costa Times*, September 25, 2002, page F4.

⁹ Lynda Gledhill. "Bill would provide 12 weeks paid family leave," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 11, 2002, page A18.

Governor Davis provided this frame with its greatest boost by citing this argument in his signing ceremony remarks: “I don’t want Californians to choose between being good parents and good employees.”¹⁰ Because so much coverage was centered around that key event, Balancing Work and Family was the second most frequently appearing proponent frame.

Business wins too [27%]

While the Corporate Family Values frame, discussed below, speaks to the responsibilities of businesses to be “good corporate citizens” in the communities where they operate, the Business Wins Too frame says that, indeed, paid family leave will help businesses profit. The frame was often evoked by a self-identified small business owner who explained why paid family leave was a good policy. Labor leaders and others indicated that paid family leave would let small businesses offer a benefit that they otherwise could not afford, and therefore level the playing field with larger businesses.¹¹ The frame emphasizes that paid family leave is a sound business investment that will pay off for business in the future. Therefore, business leaders can look at it as a move benefiting, not hampering, their pursuit of their own self-interest: “You have to take care of your workforce...If you take care of them, you will keep them around and beat the pants off the competition, and that’s how you win in the long run.”¹²

The frame differs slightly from Corporate Family Values which is more about paid family leave being the right thing to do for workers, their families, and the communities they live in. Business Wins Too says there are benefits for businesses from paid family leave and that, from a business perspective, it’s not as bad as you might think.

Make family leave real [17%]

While the 1993 federal Family and Medical Leave Act has helped some, many could not afford to take time off without some compensation.¹³ This fact came through in the Make Family Leave Real frame. This frame brings reality into the picture and makes clear that the law is successful only when workers can afford to forgo their income. In other words, FMLA was “‘a mirage’ that most employees could not afford to use.”¹⁴

The coverage included several vivid examples of families that suffered because workers couldn’t afford to take time off, such as one woman who was faced with the death of her father and the adoption of a new child at the same time. After the death of her father, she was only able to take a week off to spend with her new child before she

¹⁰ Paul Chavez. “Davis signs family leave bill,” *Torrance Daily Breeze*, September 24, 2002, page A1.

¹¹ Marion Webb. “Business groups fighting new family leave law. Government: Bill gives workers 12 paid weeks for family emergencies,” *San Diego Business Journal*, August 26, 2002.

¹² Mary Ann Milbourn. “Business victorious in some legislative battles. Laws – But some ‘job killer’ bills such as paid family leave, await Davis’ OK,” *Orange County Register*, September 7, 2002.

¹³ Waldfogel, op cit.

¹⁴ Lynda Gledhill. “Davis OKs paid leave to care for family; Workers to get about half salary for 6 weeks,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 24, 2002, page A1.

needed to return to work.¹⁵ One article gave the frame a populist twist, reminding readers that without the new California legislation, we are left with “an insurance benefit that only the wealthy can afford.”¹⁶ This frame appealed to a sense of fairness by posing the question, “Is it fair to have a law that is inaccessible?”

Corporate family values [9%]

The Corporate Family Values frame asserts that corporations have duties to families and communities beyond (or despite) their primary goal to make a profit. Thus, this frame is about interconnection, between work, family and community well-being and paid family leave being the right thing to do for workers, their families, and the communities where they live and do businesses. This frame came up several times, notably after the coalition supporting paid family leave organized a media panel of business leaders to respond to criticisms of the bill and assure the Governor that there was business support for the measure.

In a letter to the editor, one business owner expressed his support for the Corporate Family Values frame as his duty back to the community in the form of supporting paid family leave: “I count these toward the dues I pay to operate in the fifth-largest economy in the world.”¹⁷ Another owner worried that his employees might balk at the new deduction from their paycheck, but said, “...we’re a family-run business and we want our workers to be able to take time off when they need to. We’ll discuss the new law with our workers. We’ll make sure they understand the costs and the benefits.”¹⁸

This frame is a reminder that businesses are a part of the surrounding community, and that everyone — business and citizen — has to do his or her part for the success and well-being of the community as a whole.

Competitive advantage [6%]

The Competitive Advantage frame takes Business Wins Too one step further. In addition to benefiting businesses individually, this frame emphasizes that paid family leave benefits the state as a whole. This frame indicates that rather than scaring business away, paid family leave will make California an attractive place for skilled workers¹⁹ because workers and their families will be happy here, and will want to work in the state. Therefore, it is in the state’s interest to support this policy. Governor Davis invoked the Competitive Advantage frame in his remarks at the signing ceremony: “It sends a message around the world [that] California is pro-worker, pro-employer and pro-family.”²⁰

¹⁵ Dion Nissenbaum. “State on verge of passing paid leave bill,” *San Jose Mercury News*, August 28, 2002, page A1.

¹⁶ Steve Lawrence. “Assembly OKs paid family leave program,” *Torrance Daily Breeze*, August 28, 2002.

¹⁷ Kenneth W. Lock. “Paid family leave bill is well worth the cost,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2002, page M18.

¹⁸ Rayne Wolfe. “Davis OKs paid family leave; First in nation, new law affects time off for workers to care for family members, to cost employees up to \$70 a year,” *The Press Democrat*, September 24, 2002.

¹⁹ Lisa Girion and Megan Garvey. “Davis OKs paid family leave bill; Benefits: Governor wins praise from advocates and strong criticism from business groups,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2002.

²⁰ Mary Ann Milbourn. “Paid family leave OKd; Workplace. Davis signs first such law in U.S. It gives workers up to six weeks off,” *Orange County Register*, September 24, 2002.

Frames Opposing Paid Family Leave

The six frames opposing paid family leave never challenged the core message that bonding with newborns or caring for sick family members was bad or wrong, but they challenged the notion that business or government should support the process.

Unfair burden [59%]

Used consistently by Chamber of Commerce spokespeople, this frame unfurled a laundry list of why business, especially small businesses, should not be saddled with what they claimed would be a backbreaking new expense. These were all summed up under the Chamber of Commerce's tag line "job killer." The Chamber apparently generates a list each legislative session of "job killer" legislation that it tries to defeat. The catch phrase was an effective device allowing opponents to communicate the frame succinctly. Several stories quoted small business owners saying that paid family leave would surely force them to close their doors: "This governor is making it more and more difficult to be an employer."²¹ "Job killer" was repeated in quotes from Chamber representatives, in headlines, in editorials, and by reporters in their exposition of the story. The "job killer" language is shorthand to Chamber supporters to indicate that the law is, from their perspective, not pro-business.

The frame makes an emotional appeal to the plight of struggling businesses, particularly small businesses that are trying to do the best they can to be profitable and to look after their workers. It relies on the "bootstrap" image of entrepreneurs, the proverbial "little man," trying to make it economically in an increasingly hostile environment.

Competitive disadvantage [30%]

The Competitive Disadvantage frame broadens Unfair Burden on single businesses to the perceived effect of paid family leave on the state as a whole. This argument sounds an alarm that passage of paid family leave "would cloud California's business climate"²² making the state unable to attract investment and companies willing to do business here. This frame was particularly vivid when coupled with descriptions of the actual deterioration of the California economy. The "job killer" legislation catch phrase promulgated by the Chambers of Commerce applied to this frame as well as the one above, as it invokes an image of California losing jobs, and therefore losing employees in droves, marching their way out of the state like a line of ants at a lousy picnic.

²¹ Robert Rodriguez. "Opinion divided on paid leave; Employers don't like new state law, but unions do," *Fresno Bee*, September 24, 2002, page C1.

²² Editorial. "Just say no; Bad bills merit governor's veto," *San Diego Union Tribune*, September 19, 2002, page B14.

Tax on jobs [29%]

This frame suggests that paid family leave is simply a tax by another name, with its proponents clearly assuming that a “tax” is automatically a bad thing. Chamber of Commerce representatives and others repeated the “tax on jobs” phrase to denigrate paid family leave. Those using this frame hope to link paid family leave with anti-tax sentiment. Supporters of the Tax on Jobs frame invoke the value of choice – workers should be able to choose what they contribute to, and this law is unfair because employees can’t opt out. The monies for paid family leave will be withheld whether or not they ever use the benefit. This frame is a less extreme version of Nanny State below.

The Tax on Jobs frame changed over time with the evolution of the bill. When first introduced, Senate Bill 1661 had the costs of the program split evenly between employers and employees; employers made their displeasure with this “tax” on them clear. After the bill was amended by the Assembly and the full cost of the program was shifted to workers, the frame was altered so that opponents voiced concern about the new tax burden on employees: the worker is the one who is suffering here, not the business. One Republican legislator made this sentiment clear: “It’s a tax on workers coming out of their paychecks so they cannot spend that money for things they choose.”²³ This frame is alternatively called Tax on Workers.

Nanny state/slippery slope [24%]

This frame links paid family leave to personal responsibility in its pure, libertarian form. It suggests that the state should not tell workers what to do; if there is a family emergency, employees and employers will work it out, like grownups. The proponents of this frame believe that the state is overstepping its bounds with paid family leave, and that the legislation puts California on a slippery slope to the welfare state. According to the *Orange County Register* editorial board “The measure mimics the kind of generous welfare-state benefits common in Europe, But since when should California model its programs on those offered in Europe?”²⁴ Republican candidate for governor Bill Simon repeatedly made the charge that this was a mandated benefit, “one-size-fits-all”²⁵ and therefore revoked the power and autonomy of individual businesses and employers. Some opponents of paid family leave punctuate their argument with an “I told you so” tone, reminding readers that supporters claimed the federal Family and Medical Leave Act would not be a first step toward paid family leave. Now they are worried that the next step will be putting the employer contribution back in, or extending the time off. The tone of this frame is dire.

²³ Lawrence, op cit.

²⁴ Editorial. “Burdening Californians with incremental taxes,” *Orange County Register*, August 5, 2002.

²⁵ Andrew Lemar and Jessica Guynn. “California governor sings paid family leave bill,” *Contra Costa Times*, September 24, 2002.

Two additional frames opposed paid family leave, but less stridently, by arguing that it is not the concept of paid family leave but this particular bill that is the problem.

Good idea, but... [13%]

This is a “reality” frame for opponents of Senate Bill 1661. In a desire not to look anti-family by completely opposing paid family leave, proponents of this frame embrace the idea of paid leave but have a host of reasons why this particular piece of legislation should not be enacted. If the state had all the resources in the world or the best economy it would be nice to offer paid family leave, proponents of this frame argue, but the reality is that this legislation doesn’t work for businesses or employees. The main objection they raise is the California economy (“bad timing”). The most dismissive insisted that California is not a utopia,²⁶ implying that paid family leave was in fact a fantasy and not grounded in reality, and though a nice idea, would never be a practical or reasonable choice given economic circumstances.

No safeguards [<5%]

The No Safeguards frame expresses employer certainty that workers will take advantage of the system and abuse paid family leave if enacted. Opponents of paid family leave insisted that workers would use paid family leave when they are not entitled to (for example, by lying about a family member being sick), and implied the bill is poorly written or that the bureaucracy it will create guarantees abuses. One tactic proponents of this frame used was to point out prior experience of worker abuse with unpaid FMLA. According to one businessman, “employees in one plant already had a name for the unpaid family leave act adopted under President Clinton. ‘They call it the “Gold Card,”’ he said.”²⁷ The implication is that employee misuse of the benefit will only get worse if the leave is paid.

Existing networks and mobilization

Paid family leave had active constituencies on both sides of the issue, and both groups worked to frame the issue from their own perspective and to communicate this message to the press and the public. Those opposed to SB 1661 had an advantage due to the ongoing work of the California Chambers of Commerce, which advocates regularly on behalf of business interests. The Chamber can mobilize quickly on an issue, and maintains an infrastructure to rapidly disseminate its frame on an issue through membership publications. Not only does this existing network facilitate the presentation of a consistent message in the news media across venues and spokespeople, it defines the issue first for member businesses, which might make it more difficult for proponents to reach business people with an opposing frame. For supporters of paid family leave, the messages were more diffused, reflecting a wider array of viewpoints, which might have reflected the fact that advocates did not have a ready-made network or structure through which to disseminate their message, but rather had to form a new coalition specific to this issue.

²⁶ Editorial. “No costly mandate; Legislature debates paid family leave,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, July 30, 2002, page B6.

²⁷ Girion and Garvey, op cit.

Neutral Frames

The final three frames have more to do with routine news constructions than with paid family leave per se. They represent typical tenets of what is considered newsworthy: “firsts” and “political contests.”

A landmark law [>75%]

The Landmark Law frame is about California being first with paid family leave. This frame appears at the top in almost every story, usually in a phrase like “first in the nation,” to indicate newsworthiness and importance. While it typically had no value attached to it, the frame was adjusted to reveal either a positive or a negative impact on the country as a whole. For those who hope that California will be only the first of many states to adopt paid family leave programs, the state is viewed as having “opened the door”²⁸ or at the “forefront of a growing national movement”²⁹ or indeed, as an example of the U.S. “catching up to the rest of the world.”³⁰ In contrast, opponents exhorted the rest of the country to watch out: “Like it or not, here it comes,”³¹ and in one syndicated column, even went so far as to ask whether, in the U.S. we really wanted to be supporting social programs like Europe.³²

Several stories included reporting indicating 27 other states were considering similar legislation; a few articles, particularly those in the national press, went into a bit more detail about which states were more serious, including which already had a state disability system to support the administration of paid family leave. Similarly, many stories mentioned the fact that most industrialized nations already provide paid family leave.

²⁸ Bob Keefe. “New Calif. Law requires half-pay family leaves,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 24, 2002, page A7.

²⁹ Nissenbaum, op cit.

³⁰ Gregg Jones. “Davis to sign bill allowing paid family leave; Benefits: Measure grants most workers time off to care for a new child or sick family members. Supporters see it as a model for the nation,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2002, page M1.

³¹ Editorial. “California, here it comes: Bellwether state breaks new ground with family-leave law,” *Nation’s Restaurant News*, October 14, 2002.

³² Maggie Gallagher. “Does Europe know best?” *Oakland Tribune*, November 7, 2002.

Slugfest [9%]

The Slugfest frame highlights the political contest. A headline invoking this frame said paid family leave is “hailed by labor, slammed by business groups,”³³ to characterize the labor versus business angle. Few articles lingered on this frame. It was generally invoked in the beginning of an article as an orientation, but usually was not elaborated. If it was, the frame slipped into Political Ploy. There was not much explanation of the battle between labor and business (although occasionally labor was called “Big Labor” and business was frequently limited to “small business.”) One article talked about labor going on a “shopping spree” at the end of Governor Davis’ first term.³⁴ More often the face off, if there was one, was between business and families.

Political ploy [<5%]

This frame focused on Governor Davis’s support of paid family leave as a political maneuver to attract Labor support at the polls. It focused less on what paid family leave was about and more on who supported it, who opposed it, and what that meant politically in the California Governor’s race. Articles posing the question, “Will he or won’t he sign the legislation?” come under this frame.

The Slugfest and Political Ploy frames generally appeared in pieces focused on the political race for California governor. In these news stories a candidate’s support for or opposition to paid family leave served to reveal something about the candidate. These were special frames since it was an election year and incumbent Democratic Governor Gray Davis was unpopular, and being challenged by Republican Bill Simon, who was against paid family leave.

³³ Steve Geissinger. “Davis signs paid family leave law. Landmark legislation starts in 2004 and is hailed by labor, slammed by business groups,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 24, 2002.

³⁴ Gregg Jones. “Labor bills test Davis the Centrist; Politics: Governor will try to balance interests of business as he considers proposed legislation,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 2002.

A Summary of Paid Family Leave Frames in California News Coverage, June 1 – October 31, 2002

	Package	Core frame	Core position	Metaphor	Catch-phrase
Pro	Caring family, bonding moms	We should do all we can do to strengthen the bonds of family and nurture children.	Caring for family is important and beneficial for individuals, business and society.	Caregivers are the glue holding families together.	“We have to take a look at us as a society and talk about how we can preserve family life.” ⁱ
	Balancing work and family	Workers should not be forced to choose between their families and their jobs.	Employees need financial support to meet their obligations to work and family.	“Families who struggle hardest to keep all the balls in the air.” ⁱⁱ “Tricky tightrope.” ⁱⁱⁱ	“I don’t want parents in California to have to choose between being a good parent and a good employee.” ^{iv} “Your baby or your job.” ^v
	Business wins too	The costs of paid family leave benefit business.	Business profits if employees can take paid time when needed. Reverse of unfair burden.	Good medicine. Employees as assets.	“This bill would actually help me save money as opposed to cost me money going forward.” ^{vi} “When you have an employer who is good to you, you stick with them.” ^{viii}
	Make family leave real	We cannot allow family leave to exist in name only.	Make family leave meaningful so that families can really use it.	“A mirage’ that most employees could not afford to use.” ^{ix}	“This makes family leave real.” ^x
	Corporate family values	Society won’t thrive if businesses think only of themselves.	Businesses are community members too. Stakeholders in community success.	Good corporate citizen. Community as family, business as a member of the family.	“I count these toward the dues I pay to operate in the fifth-largest economy in the world.” ^{xi}
	Competitive advantage	Paid family leave makes California a better, more attractive place for business.	Paid family leave attracts skilled workers and therefore helps, rather than hinders, the California business environment.	Golden state. Rx for success.	“Family-friendly policies are congenial not only to individual families but to the health of the American economy, the bottom line and the social fabric of the nation.” ^{xii}
Con	Unfair burden	Businesses, especially small businesses, do not need another mandated cost of doing business.	No more costs should be added to running a business in the state.	Small business is the life-blood of the economy, backbone of the state.	“This governor is making it more and more difficult to be an employer.” ^{xiii}
	Competitive disadvantage	California cannot afford to make itself unfriendly to business and investment.	The state is in an economic downturn; government policies should support business.	California shooting itself in the foot. Roadblocks and barriers to success.	“Job-killer.” ^{xiv}
	Tax on jobs	Employers and employees do not need another tax.	Paid family leave is a tax by another name.	Ball and chain.	“Tax on workers.” ^{xv} “A tax on a job eliminates jobs; this is a tax on a job.” ^{xvi}
	Nanny state/slippery slope	Employee leave is better negotiated between employer and employee than by state interference.	Leave decisions should be left up to each business. Unpaid leave already exists, no need to add more.	“One size fits-all mandate.” ^{xvii} “Trojan horse legislation.” ^{xviii}	“We’ve decided that everyone cannot be responsible, and we need to take the money from them so they can take care of themselves.” ^{xix}
	Good idea, but...	Care for family is a great idea, but this is not the right law.	Paid family leave is a nice idea, but it doesn’t fit the realities of the business climate.	California is not a utopia. ^{xx}	“Bad timing.”
	No safeguards	This law leaves businesses vulnerable to the misdeeds of their employees.	Businesses will be at the mercy of their employees.	Conniving, cheating employees.	“Gold card.” ^{xxi}
Neutral	Slugfest	Will Governor Davis side with one group of donors over another in the prelude to his bid for re-election?	Sets up Governor Davis’ signing of the bill as a contest between two major political players, labor and business.	Boxing match.	“Hailed by labor, slammed by business groups.” ^{xxii} “Big labor.”

ⁱ Steve Lawrence. “Paid family leave bill moves on to Assembly; 21-15 Senate vote puts bill on verge of offering 12 million workers as many as 12 weeks to care for relatives, new children,” *Contra Costa Times*, June 1, 2002, page A14.

ⁱⁱ Editorial. “A family safety net; Gov. Davis can build on Gov. Wilson’s legacy,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 15, 2002, page E4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen Hershenson. “Family leave law an admirable start,” *Contra Costa Times*, September 25, 2002, page F4.

^{iv} Lisa Girion and Megan Garvey. “Davis OKs paid family leave

bill; Benefits: Governor wins praise from advocates and strong criticism from business groups,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2002.

^v Judith Barish and Arlie Russell Hochschild. “Extending family leave; your baby or your job,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 2002, page A23.

^{vi} Lynda Gledhill. “Bill would provide 12 weeks paid family leave,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 11, 2002, A18.

^{vii} Louise Chu. “Davis urged to sign paid family leave bill,” *Contra Costa Times*, September 20, 2002, page F4.

^{viii} David Goll. “Family leave program has businesses wary,” *East Bay Business Times*, October 4, 2002.

^{ix} Lynda Gledhill. “Davis OKs paid leave to care for family; workers to get about half of salary for 6 weeks,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 24, 2002, page A1.

^x Kevin Yamamura. “Landmark family leave bill. If the governor signs it, the bill will provide for partial pay for six weeks,” *Sacramento Bee*, August 31, 2002, A1.

^{xi} Kenneth W. Lock. “Paid family leave bill is well worth the cost,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2002.

Depictions/Visual Images	Roots	Consequences	Values
Mothers and babies, adults as caregivers for sick or dying parents or spouses.	No safety net to care for family. An economy where both parents must work to make ends meet.	Crucial bonding with a new infant, and time spent with loved ones during illness.	Nurturing and relief; taking care of families. Family values.
Need for balance, people need relief from being "torn apart." ^{vi}	Everyone needs care sometime. Without government action, families will continue to suffer under the strain of trying to secure a paycheck.	Productive employees and cared for families.	Nurturing and relief; taking care of others. Responsibility for work and family; family values
Small businesses as more competitive with the addition of this benefit; satisfied, productive employees.	Short-term investment gives long-term gain. Reality that employees have obligations beyond work.	Productive employees, increased profit.	Self-interest. Investing in employees is good for business.
Tortured workers and family can't take needed time off to care for sick family members. Disgruntled employees.	Most employees do not have a financial buffer that allows them to take time off from work unpaid.	With paid family leave, workers will be able to take leave, and families will benefit.	Fairness; makes paid family leave available to everyone, rich or poor.
Businesses, including small businesses, as caring about their employees, neighborhoods and state.	Everyone needs care sometime. Business thrives in healthy communities.	Happy workers, cared-for families, thriving communities.	Interconnection. Duty to community.
California as state where employees and employers are happy and productive.	Increased competition for workers in the marketplace.	Skilled workers will flock to California.	Self-interest. Protecting employees; safeguards for the workplace.
Small business owners as especially burdened. Workers filling in for others, businesses shuttering their doors.	Government, esp. Governor Davis, inhibiting, not helping, small business with addition of requirements, on top of changes in workers compensation.	All businesses will suffer, and small businesses especially will be forced to cut other employee benefits, lay off employees, or close down completely.	Hard work reaps rewards that should be enough. Self-reliance.
California as unfriendly to business; execs across the country have voted it the worst place to do business. Businesses leaving state.	California already has tougher laws than other states.	The state will suffer; the economy will be further damaged.	Unfettered free enterprise.
Employees as victims, unable to opt-out of contributing to a benefit they may never use.	Tax-happy Democratic government.	Unhappy employees.	Free choice.
Government as interfering in lives of employees and employers; politicians as going back on promises.	Supporters of FMLA claimed that it would not be a first step toward paid family leave; the next step will be to include the employer contribution.	Liberalism run amok. Government intrusion into the lives of its citizens will continue; government will make decisions for individuals.	Personal responsibility.
Business and employers as caring for family but grounded in economic reality.	Business' focus is profit and vitality, not familial relationships.	Individual businesses and the state economy will suffer.	Pragmatism and sympathy.
Employees cannot be trusted, and government is inept at protecting against fraud.	Self-protection is smart business.	Businesses already suffer from employees who exploit FMLA. Paid family leave will make it worse.	Selfishness. People won't think twice about using paid family leave for their personal advantage.
Governor Davis as pandering to interests.	Politics; Governor Davis up for re-election; needs to secure support of constituencies.	If Governor Davis sides for one side or the other, could lose valuable support of other group.	Cynicism. Politics as usual.

^{xii} Caryl Rivers. "Commentary; Some pay a high price for taking paid leave," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 2002.

^{xiii} Robert Rodriguez. "Opinions divided on paid leave. Employers don't like new state law, but unions do," *Fresno Bee*, September 24, 2002, C1.

^{xiv} "State bill seeks paid leave for all workers," *Oakland Tribune*, June 11, 2002.

^{xv} Miguel Bustillo and Nancy Vogel. "The State; Renewable-energy bill passed by assembly; Legislation: Lawmakers also

approve a measure to allow workers to take paid time off in case of illness or childbirth," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2002.

^{xvi} *Oakland Tribune*, op cit.

^{xvii} Andrew Lemar and Jessica Guynn. "California governor signs paid family leave bill," *Contra Costa Times*, September 24, 2002.

^{xviii} Frank Green and the Associated Press. "Gov. Davis signs bill for paid family leave; Insurance program providing 6 weeks to care for relative, child is first in nation," *San Diego Union*

Tribune, September 24, 2002, page A1.

^{xix} Bustillo and Vogel, op cit.

^{xx} Editorial. "No costly mandate; Legislature debates paid family leave," *San Diego Union Tribune*, July 30, 2002, page B6.

^{xxi} Giron and Garvey, op cit.

^{xxii} Steve Geissinger. "Davis signs paid family leave law. Landmark legislation starts in 2004 and is hailed by labor, slammed by business groups," *Oakland Tribune*, September 24, 2002.

Messengers

The types of spokespeople found in our sample of the coverage of paid family leave can be found in Table 2. In the period before the bill signing, 203 individuals on both sides of the issue were quoted, and fell into the major categories listed. Before and after the bill signing, supporters of paid family leave had more quotes, which follows as California state Senator Sheila Kuehl, the legislation's sponsor, was quoted regularly.

The increase in quotes from elected officials in support of paid family leave after the signing was not only due to the increased coverage density, but was almost entirely a consequence of Governor Gray Davis' presence in the news. His signing ceremony remarks alone accounted for 19% of the total sound bites found in the print coverage in the period following the bill signing. This is important because it reveals that only a few voices had the responsibility of shaping the issue for the public while the legislation was being considered in Sacramento, while a wider array of voices were responding to it. Proactive spokespeople have a hand in defining the issue and possibly influencing its progress on the public and policy agendas, while reactive speakers comment once the frames are already established, which is much less powerful.

In some coverage, the conflict over SB 1661 was represented as a fight between labor and business, but in fact labor representation was not as prominent as the voice of the Chamber of Commerce, which had many voices speaking before the signing of the legislation to shape the debate. Additionally, while the heads of local Chambers from across the state were available to provide a statement for their local paper on the passage of paid family leave, local labor representatives were virtually absent from the coverage, instead replaced by quotes from national labor leaders.

Supporters of SB 1661 were successful in communicating business support for the bill. As can be seen from Table 2, the teleconference of pro-paid family leave business people held in the days immediately proceeding the bill's signing generated wide coverage, indicating that business support for the bill was newsworthy. "Paid family leave gets unexpected support; Business owners attend rally for bill"³⁵ read the headline on the Associated Press coverage of the teleconference.

What is also striking is that input from the academic research community in support of paid family leave was almost entirely absent. While the authors of SB 1661 had been careful to articulate the value of enhancing bonding between parent and child in the bill's preamble, there were no public health spokespeople to elaborate on these benefits. The quoted researchers in the news articles focused exclusively on the economic impacts of the pending legislation.

Table 2
Percentage of sound bites before and after the signing of SB 1661,
by support or opposition and roles of speakers, in California and national print coverage

Speaker types	Before bill signing, June 1 - Sept. 22, 2002 (N=203)	During and after bill signing, Sept. 23 - Oct. 31, 2002 (N=274)
Supporters		
Elected officials	17%	26%
Advocates	17%	10%
Business	17%	4%
Personal stories	8%	9%
Labor	7%	13%
Academic	1%	1%
Opponents		
Chamber of Commerce	13%	17%
Elected officials	10%	11%
Personal stories	2%	1%
Associations	5%	2%
Business	3%	6%

³⁵ Louise Chu. "Paid family leave gets unexpected support; Business owners attend rally for bill," *Modesto Bee*, September 20, 2002.

Accuracy

News media coverage of a bill and its progress through the legislative process can lead to confusion among the public, especially when the bill is amended and the details of the changes are not immediately clear nor well-explained. Senate Bill 1661 was no exception. Major changes in the original bill that garnered news attention were the reduction of the length of leave from 12 weeks to 6, and the shifting of the financial costs from an even split between employers and employees to employees only, even though other changes were also made.

The amount of money that would be paid into the system by employees and paid out to those taking paid family leave was the major source of confusion. Both the amount deducted and the amount paid out to the workers taking the leave is based on a salary range beginning with the minimum wage and expanding to a maximum salary cap. This variability allowed each reporter to package the basic bill information differently. The amount of the paycheck deduction was reported as a sum taken out on either a weekly, monthly or annual basis. The salary upon which these deductions and the payout were based was represented as the minimum, average, or maximum amount. Additionally, at times the reported salaries, deductions, and payouts reflected the costs for the year 2002, and at other times for 2004 when the legislation will actually go into effect. Each calculation could be accurate in itself but the differences were not always made clear, and therefore casual readers could come away confused as to what the law would mean to them financially.

SB 1661 makes paid family leave a part of California's existing State Disability Insurance (SDI) program, which may have eased the bill's passage. SDI is funded by payroll deductions from employees, and provides partial wage replacement for individuals unable to work because of a non-work related disability.³⁶ Ironically, making paid family leave part of SDI — which simplifies matters administratively — caused confusion in news reports. For example, some news reports made it seem that paid family leave would allow workers to take time off for their own illnesses, when in fact this was a benefit that was already present in SDI. This confusion could dilute the powerful impact of now being allowed to take paid time off to care for family. California is one of only five states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico that offers some type of SDI.³⁷

The costs or benefits of paid family leave were calculated differently in the news media depending on the agenda of writer or speaker. While the intent of reporters is to convey the factual details of the bill, others are using the numbers to make a winning argument and draw readers to their side. For example, an editorial in the *San Diego Union Tribune* cited a Chamber of Commerce study: "The chamber estimates that SB 1661 would cost \$3 billion in the first year alone."³⁸ These numbers were presented to refute the estimated \$89 million in business savings found in a study by economists at the University of Chicago and at the University of California.³⁹ In the end, dueling numbers become meaningless, as the reader is lost in a sea of unanchored claims.

³⁶ Employment Development Department. "Disability Insurance; About the DI Program", State of California, 2000. <http://www.edd.ca.gov/direp/diind.htm>. Accessed on June 17, 2003.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Editorial *San Diego Union Tribune*, op cit.

³⁹ Ibid.

California versus National Reporting

In part because it was a Landmark Law, paid family leave got national news attention. We found the national reporting reflected many of the frames the California news contained. The only major difference was that national coverage asked the question, “What does the policy in California mean for us here?” In opinion pieces, the answer to the question reflected the perspective of the writer. Those opposed to paid family leave said that California is exceptional and similar legislation was unlikely locally. Indeed, one letter writer thought that if it was law in California, then it’s a good idea for his state to avoid paid family leave: “California’s passage of such a law is good reason for Indiana not to do it. They have been doing some strange things out there.”⁴⁰ Similarly, if the writer supported paid family leave, the piece called California the harbinger for the nation, emphasizing the positive aspects of the Landmark Law frame: “If it works, California will point the way for the rest of us in providing a safety net for stressed-out families.”⁴¹

Because the law applies to domestic partners in California, we expected to see news coverage and opinion that debated whether same-sex partners should benefit from paid family leave. We were wrong. There was virtually no news coverage in California that raised the issue of same-sex couples sharing in the benefit. We saw one opinion column in the national coverage that praised the extension of the benefit to gay and lesbian couples, celebrating the fact that it was a “regular” part of the legislation and did not require special attention. Deb Price, news editor at the Washington Bureau of the Detroit News wrote in her piece: “In an historic California breakthrough that will reverberate nationwide, gay and lesbian workers are being equally included — right from the start — in a major new benefit program intended to ensure that employees can afford to take time off to care for a family member.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Charles E. Bowling. “California did it, so Indiana should avoid it,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 18, 2002, page A23.

⁴¹ Editorial. “Imitating left coasties?” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 4, 2002, page B6.

⁴² Deb Price. “California leads on gay benefits,” *The Detroit News*, October 7, 2002.

Radio and Television

Our sample of radio was limited; five radio transcripts is not enough to characterize radio on its own. Four of the five were national broadcasts that occurred once the legislation was signed; the other was a local public radio segment that aired almost two months before the signing. While the radio shows generally featured the same cast of spokespeople and frames found in the print media coverage, the one difference was the unscripted rapid input of callers from across the nation, though again the callers reflected the common themes.

With the exception of one story, the television sample consisted of newscasts from either the day of or immediately following the signing of SB 1661. Television communicates ideas differently than print media as it is more concentrated symbolically; images as well as words provide information to the viewer. The most striking difference with the print coverage was the proliferation of images and interviews with moms with their newborn infants. While the print news featured many stories about adults struggling to care for parents or other adult family members in addition to parents and children, the television coverage almost exclusively featured moms with newborns. The one exception was a story of a Los Angeles-area man who was looking after his ailing wife.⁴³ A member of the public who received news information only from television would therefore be given the strong impression, regardless of what the reporter or anchor stated, that paid family leave is essentially maternity leave, which would mean that it has less relevance for the entire population of California. As television virtually ignored this story until the bill was signed into law, the damage that these images could have had for the campaign in support of paid family leave was avoided, but the importance of images and spokespeople in communicating ideas cannot be underestimated.

⁴³ CBS Morning News, September 24, 2002.

Lessons & Recommendations for Advocates

Advocates for paid family leave have come from the labor movement, the women's movement, child care and early childhood development, and a host of other arenas where the value of family care is recognized as an essential precursor to a smooth functioning and healthy society. However, the advocates' straightforward desires for policy that supports a nurturing environment in which to raise families often gets bogged down in the intricate details of writing and enacting such policy, which can be far from straightforward, especially after weathering legislative compromises. In the end, the legislation itself is enjoyable reading for only the wonkiest policy wonks. Thus the dilemma for advocates: how can they talk about the issues and problems paid family leave addresses and the values behind the legislation without drowning in a mire of technical detail?

Based on the framing analysis above, we offer the following suggestions:

State the values up front

Good bill language, in this case SB 1661's opening preamble about bonding, is invaluable because it can echo the values behind the legislation and gets picked up and repeated by reporters. This is the main reason that the Caring Family, Bonding Moms frame appeared so often; it was part of the bill's description that was included in nearly every print news story. In addition, spokespeople should take every opportunity to elaborate that sentiment and connect it with concrete images to the policy. Caring Family, Bonding Moms was rarely elaborated in the coverage.

We've found a similar void in other news analyses.⁴⁴ In general, advocates are not saying why the policy *matters*. It is not self-evident — the value of the policy needs to be explained and made vivid with descriptions that bring a picture to mind in readers. Reporters will have an easier time telling policy stories, and they'll tell them more effectively, when they can weave in real-life implications for real-life characters. Advocates should have at the ready examples that illustrate not only the tragedies that occur without paid family leave, but also the healthier families and stronger communities that result when workers do get the support they need.

⁴⁴ Lawrence, Regina. Issue 12: American Values and the News about Children's Health. Berkeley Media Studies Group, August 2002.

Emphasize meaning, not detail

Resist the urge argue facts within the opponent's frames. Statements from Senator Kuehl's office outline the concessions and technical clarifications more than they extol the benefits of the legislation. The tone is exasperated: "I have bent on several issues, as have the employees of this state."⁴⁵ These particular responses are missed opportunities to promote the values behind paid family leave. While the technicalities have to be addressed, they should be minimized. The consequence of focusing on the fight over details is a Slugfest frame rather than a pro-paid family leave frame. Senator Kuehl ends up delivering a message that says, well, we did what they asked: "This bill was extensively revised...to fully address the concerns of the business community."⁴⁶ But of course, "they" still aren't happy. The discussion then becomes, "Who will win?" Wrong discussion.

However, there are some audiences that need to hear the compromise message. In this instance, Senator Khuel was using the news to speak directly to the Governor to win his support for SB 1661. Emphasizing the compromises with Republicans at that moment was key to moving a moderate democratic governor, their target, even though it may have been lost on the public. Sometimes it is important to use of the news media to reach just one person, because the news coverage increases the credibility and legitimacy of the position. The key point is to be sure your message is the one you want for your target.

Ultimately, the best solution is to weave in the technical details with the values underlying the policy's benefits.

⁴⁵ Sheila Kuehl. "Leave bill benefits employers, families," *Ventura County Star*, August 25, 2002.

⁴⁶ Sheila James Kuehl. "A blatant misbilling of family leave bill," *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 30, 2002, page B9.

Use numbers in a vivid way to make your case

Use “social math.” Social math uses comparisons to put large numbers into an understandable context, helping advocates explain what the numbers mean to the individual worker and business. For example, when reaching out to businesses, advocates made the point that for the typical worker, the average monthly payroll deduction was less than \$3 per month, about the price of a Starbucks cappuccino. Who wouldn’t give up a cappuccino a month for the benefit of paid family leave?

In your own written materials, and when you talk to reporters and others, be consistent in your descriptions. Find a comparison that makes the point and repeat it in every brochure and every interview. You won’t be able to control how each reporter characterizes the technicalities of paid family leave, but if you provide a consistent, easy, descriptive phrase you will maximize the chances that your characterization gets repeated. Decide on simple examples and stick with them. Switching around makes things confusing and your overall point gets lost in a jumble of numbers.

Advocates in California commissioned a study from economists at the University of Chicago and the University of California, released on July 16, 2002, that demonstrated the benefits of paid family leave for the state and for individual workers. Having such a study was a useful counter-weight to the scenarios put forward by the Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Businesses, whose own report came out on August 13, 2002.⁴⁷ A similar study for other states, introduced early in the debate over paid family leave would let advocates repeat these numbers to provide the context for the issue, instead of rolling them out later as a response to the numbers already presented by the opposition.

⁴⁷ Frank Green. “Debate heats up on California family leave bill,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 14, 2002, page C1.

Highlight business benefits

The pro-SB 1661 business frames could be evoked more often by business leaders to counter traditional opposition frames. The Corporate Family Values frame emphasizes that businesses are an integral part of the community, and that they have to do their part to make the community successful, which in this case means recognizing that employees have families and that the need for leave is inevitable. The Business Wins Too frame could be used more often; it is striking to find business people in support of paid family leave in contrast to the dire drumbeat from the Chamber of Commerce that this legislation is bad for all businesses, large and small. The fact that a business representative is supporting paid family leave in and of itself is likely to be newsworthy.

Local voices come through powerfully. The opposition was able to personalize and localize the story by tapping spokespeople from the local Chambers of Commerce to speak out on the issue. Advocates for the same opposition frames gave a local slant to the Associated Press (AP) coverage of the issue. Proponents could do this as well, by finding local child and family advocates to be spokespeople, including representatives from local labor chapters, along with a network of local business people who support family leave.

For example, advocates organized a teleconference of businesses that support paid family leave on September 19, 2002, just days before the Governor signed the bill. This conference was picked up by the AP and Knight Ridder newspapers and appeared in 15 newspapers in California the next day. Holding a news conference of small business leaders earlier in the process would have allowed the Corporate Family Values and Business Wins Too frames to be introduced and take hold much earlier in the public debate over the legislation, and might have had an “echo effect” as more businesses heard about the benefits of paid family leave and felt more confident to speak with a voice other than that of the Chamber.

Be prepared when speaking to the press

Thinking and writing are not the same as speaking. Spokespeople need practice, especially if they are not used to speaking with reporters. Create situations where advocates can listen to each other answer questions about paid family leave. Spokespeople should be comfortable talking about the problem it solves and why the policy will work, and they should be able to describe why it will make a difference to families, communities, and business, using local data (when possible) and vivid examples. Train a range of spokespeople — mothers, fathers, caretakers and workers of all kinds, as well as business owners and managers — and then create news opportunities for them to speak.

Don't underestimate the importance of the AP. The AP and other wire services provided over 50% of the news articles for the California sample, making it very important who talks to and frames the issue for the AP reporter.

Recommendations for Reporters

Reporters carry a big responsibility with any social policy issue: they have to translate complicated language and sometimes unpredictable outcomes for the public and policy makers, so we can make well-informed decisions. The controversy surrounding paid family leave makes it a natural news story, in some ways an easy story. The best reporters will look beyond the Slugfest frame and dig deeper to help readers and viewers determine what having paid family leave will really mean. Reporters need to focus on the right story, and then translate the complicated policy details accurately.

Getting the Right Story...

What does paid family leave mean? Who takes it? Why? Are small business' fears well-founded?

The problem with the paid family leave story is that it is still a mystery — we don't know most of what will happen once it is in place. Will small business predictions of disaster be true, or were they just crying wolf? Will it make a difference to families with new babies or sick dear ones? The most immediate story is still in California — what happens in 2004 when the state implements the first such policy in the nation? In other states considering similar legislation, reporters will of course want to tell the usual political contest (“horse race”) or Slugfest story: who is for paid family leave, who's against it, and who will prevail? But readers will need more than the Horse Race if they are to be well enough informed to take a position on the pending policy. They'll need to know if employees have been able to forgo their paychecks and take the unpaid leave guaranteed under FMLA; they'll need to know what has happened when employees took family leave without pay, and once the stories emerge from California, what happened when they took paid family leave.

The “big picture” story on paid family leave involves the impact of the law on whole communities, from businesses to neighborhoods. This is the harder story to tell: what does a major policy change like this one mean for how families are cared for? Will it mean more to women? Will it change who does the caregiving in society? Will it affect elder care? What does it mean to the families who took paid family leave? What does it say about our values to have this law? Are local businesses already doing something similar on their own? How does this work for them? What have been the challenges and the benefits? What motivates a workplace to want to provide paid family leave? How do the other employees feel about it? Reporters could also investigate the public health and medicine angle on this story, like bonding, child development, and warding off elder depression as well as costs.

...and Getting the Story Right

Our findings revealed that in news stories before and after the paid family leave law was signed by Governor Davis, confusion abounded, with sources and reporters sharing the blame. The specifics of SB 1661 were intricate, and they changed over time as legislators fashioned compromises. And, interpretations about the expected effects of the law differed; the California Chambers of Commerce offered quite a different scenario than did researchers from the Universities of Chicago and California, or from the California State Employment Development Department, though these discrepancies were rarely explained or challenged. All of this points to several watch points for reporters who follow the implementation story in California or report on efforts in the 27 other states to enact paid family leave.

Reporters could help readers and viewers better understand what paid family leave means to them by doing the following:

- Clarify the facts for the audience. Try to be clear and consistent when using numbers. Are they for the current year or for when the legislation is actually implemented? Stick with the average pay-in and pay-out or always provide the range for the most complete picture.
- Don't just accept the numbers provided to you by a source, question their origin. What data are these conclusions based on? Ask for a copy of the report to check it out for yourself. Attention to these details will aid the reader in separating facts from rhetoric.

Stories to watch for:

How is paid family leave unfolding in California?

What happens during the implementation of the law in 2004?

Conclusion

As stated in many of the pieces in our sample, when Governor Davis signed the paid family leave law, the state of California took a great stride forward. Not only did the world's fifth largest economy join the ranks of industrialized nations around the world that have some sort of paid family leave, but the state has put its policy and money where its professed values are and has provided a way for workers to cope reasonably with the familial challenges inevitable in life.

This framing analysis examined the fight over this legislation in California, but there will be unique challenges, frames and points of contention in every state that works to enact paid family leave. In California, the main struggle was between business and families. In other states, the struggle might be different, and other voices and their perspectives on the issue may play a more important role in advocating for paid family leave, such as religious groups, or public health and medical groups.

As policy battles over paid family leave heat up, we hope news coverage will be thorough so that communities everywhere will have the opportunity to consider and debate this important public policy.



Issue 14 was written by Lori Dorfman, DrPH, and Elena O. Lingas, MPH. Thanks to contributions and insights from the Steering Committee of the Coalition for Paid Family Leave, especially Netsy Firestein, Jennifer Richard, Joannie Chang, Pam Haynes, Shelly Symonds, Lauren Asher, Lissa Bell, Greer McVay, Rona Sherriff, and Lisa Lederer from PR Solutions. *Issue 14* was commissioned by the Labor Project for Working Families, which thanks the David and Lucile Packard Foundation for its generous support.

Issue is edited by Lori Dorfman.

Issue is published by
Berkeley Media Studies Group
2140 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 804
Berkeley, CA 94704
510.204.9700 voice
510.204.9710 fax
www.bmsg.org

© 2003 Berkeley Media Studies Group,
a project of the Public Health Institute

