



The Case for Making It Easier for Mothers to Get Involved in Politics

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Mothers are talked about in politics constantly. Media and political commentators highlight the attitudes of “soccer moms” and “momma grizzlies” and focus on whether or not women candidates can have kids or are able to balance the demands of parenthood and elected office. Despite all this discussion – and despite the fact that mothers are the primary breadwinners in 40 percent of U.S. families – women make up less than a quarter of legislators worldwide and less than one in five members of the current U.S. Congress.

Until recently, researchers have paid little attention to the underrepresentation of mothers in elected office, so little is known about how being a parent affects the agendas policymakers pursue or adopt. In our recent book, Melanee Thomas and I examine the role of parenthood in politics and highlight the social and institutional barriers facing mothers in politics. Breaking down these barriers, we suggest, will make it easier for mothers to run for office – which will likely improve public policies affecting mothers and society as a whole.

Gendered Barriers Facing Mothers in Political Life

Mothers are treated differently in political life. Sometimes they are openly challenged about their ability to raise children while running for office or serving in public office. At other times they must navigate institutional constraints, such as rules that prevent them from breastfeeding in public or bringing children into the workplace. All too common, such obstacles not only prevent many mothers from running for office but also make it difficult for female legislators to raise their children. The many hurdles create strong disincentives for mothers to participate fully in U.S. political life.

- Among candidates who actually run for office, moms rarely feature their family but endure the media spotlight nonetheless. Dads and especially grand-dads in politics are likely to include photos and information about their children in their mailers, campaign websites, and other campaign materials, but mothers are substantially less likely to do these things. Despite such reticence by the female candidates themselves, media coverage focuses on issues of fertility and family life for women candidates more often than it does for males.
- Once elected, women face new difficulties in office. Working in state or national government, for example, often means legislators must live in the capital and commute home. Parents with young children find this difficult, and many legislators say that they waited until their children were older before running for office. Commuting to the capital is also a problem for legislators who have ailing family members or aging parents at home. To many people, combining caregiving with legislative responsibilities seems impossible, given the long hours and travel involved.

- Legislative rules and routines also create unnecessary barriers that keep representatives from caring for their children. Late night votes or overnight sittings make it difficult for parents to be home to eat supper with their children, for example. Furthermore, some representatives say it proved impossible to breast- or bottle-feed their babies – either because breastmilk is classified as a ‘refreshment’ prohibited in the legislative chamber or because babies are classified as “strangers” not allowed into the chamber.

Motherhood involves incentives to get involved as well as barriers to doing so. We find that mothers are more readily engaged in political life after their children reach a certain age. Those with young children are not particularly engaged or active in politics, and we think this has something to do with the overwhelming needs of very young children and mothers lack of extra time in this phase of life. Once children are in school, however, moms are substantially more politically engaged, and get involved with school activities and boards, as well as other types of political activities. Some of this increase in activity is likely enabled by an increase in available time, but mothers of older children are also more exposed to community issues and concerns. As families are connected to one another through the school system, parents learn more about community issues and events and are drawn into activities through larger social networks.

What Public Institutions Can Do to Help Mothers Participate

Some steps are simple and obvious:

- Scheduling most votes and debates during normal working hours would allow mothers in the early years of child-rearing to fulfill their political duties and balance responsibilities to their families and their public constituents.
- Amending institutional rules that block mothers from breastfeeding their babies should make the job more manageable and appealing to new parents.

Social policies supporting families could also have an impact on representation. Paid parental leave for mothers **and** fathers, government-sponsored childcare, and flexible work-time arrangements are all correlated with an increase in women’s presence in legislatures. We find that countries with the highest level of public support for families also have the highest participation rates of women, including mothers, in politics and government.

Research suggests that widening the pathway for mothers to pursue legislative careers is important to society. More diversity among representatives means that a greater range of ideas, values, and social concerns are injected into legislative debates and policymaking. Increased representation for women, including those at all stages of motherhood, makes sense given that mothers still bear the brunt of care responsibilities. Removing barriers to mothers’ full engagement in public life can help ensure that caregiving issues get full attention.

More public programs to support families and improved rules to allow parental engagement should enable increased diversity in representation at all levels of politics, including school boards, municipal councils, state and national legislatures. With such full and diverse participation will come, very likely, new solutions to emerging and longstanding challenges most Americans must face. The more moms and active dads we have in legislatures, the better our future.

Read more in *Mothers and Others: The Role of Parenthood in Politics*, (University of British Columbia Press, 2017).