

Mandate Access to Ample Paid Time Off

By [Sylvia Allegretto](#)

The US is an outlier when it comes to paid time off (PTO) from work. It is the only advanced country in the world that has no federally mandated guarantee of paid time off – not one minute, whether it be for sick, vacation, holiday, family or parental leave (with an exception for federal contractors). Matter of fact, the US is a low bar across the world.

At the federal level, paid time off is entirely at the discretion of individual employers to implement their own eligibility rules, whether and how much of it is paid, and how much time is allotted. As a result, many workers do not have any PTO.

Access to PTO Disproportionately Benefits Professionals and Higher Earners

Access to paid sick leave is a revealing example. While 80 percent of the private sector workforce has access to some amount of paid sick leave, access varies significantly by occupation, firm size, wage rates, union status, geography, and other factors.

Disparities in access and generosity exist for all types of PTO such as holiday, vacation, parental, and family and medical leave. As with other policies — such as the long stagnation of the federal minimum wage — a wide range of mandated policies have been implemented at the state, local or county levels. However, without federally mandated policies many workers are left to shoulder the burden financially themselves when they need time off from work.

Solution: Pass Federally Mandated Leave Policies

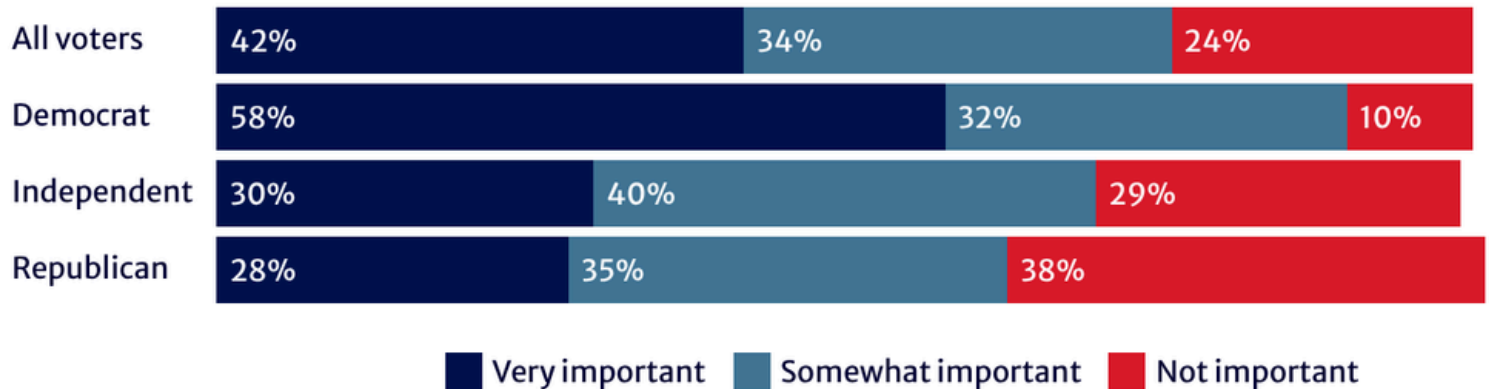
Congress should set a floor(s) for paid time off from work with regard to access and generosity. The policy landscape could be formulated in myriad ways. It might be a PTO policy that is designed for a specific use or generalized PTO that may be utilized for any reason. A set of policies would be best and would become a monumental addition, via amendment, to the Fair Labor Standards Act. A good start would be to strengthen FMLA (the Family and Medical Leave Act).

Three-in-Four Americans Support Federally Mandated Paid Family and Medical Leave

Currently, the Family and Medical Leave Act provides eligible employees up to 12 workweeks of *unpaid* leave a year. But many workers are not eligible for unpaid family leave and just fourteen states have paid FMLA laws. FMLA in the US pales in terms of time allotted and generosity of pay compared to our counterparts across the world — most notably with regard to paid parental leave.

Overwhelming Support for National Paid Family and Medical Leave

"How important is it that Congress creates a national paid family and medical leave program?"



Source: Navigator Research nationwide surveys of registered voters, August 22–25, 2024. Some shares may not total 100% due to rounding.



The figure gives the attitude of Americans regarding just one type of PTO which is not sufficient to address various leave needs of workers. For example, without paid sick (or general) leave, many workers who are sick or injured will keep working as they cannot afford the financial burden of paying for their own time away from work. The US has some of the most productive hard-working people in the world, and they all need the benefits of PTO — including to regenerate and relax — which is why a set of policies at the federal level are warranted.

Resources:

- [Access to Selected Paid Leave Benefits \(Table 6\)](#), **US Bureau of Labor Statistics**, March 2025.
- [Employee Benefits in the United States](#), **US Bureau of Labor Statistics**, March 2025.
- [State Policies on Paid Family and Sick Leave](#), **KFF**.
- [OECD Family Database. PF2.1 Parental Leave Systems](#), **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**, 2024.
- [Access to Paid Sick Leave Continues to Grow but Remains Highly Unequal by Geography and Wage Level](#), Elise Gould, **Economic Policy Institute**, October 7, 2025.
- [New Survey Reveals Countries with Most Paid Time Off—And What It's Worth](#), Duncan Madden, **Forbes**, November 12, 2025.
- [A Federal Guarantee for Earned Paid Time Off](#). Betsey Stevenson, **Brookings Institution**, October 2024.
- [Paid Leave Means a Stronger Nation](#), **National Partnership for Women & Families**, February 2025.
- [Paid Maternity Leave by State 2026](#), **World Population Review**.