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Women's Groups Press Congress on Parental Leave

Politicians Warned to Pay Attention to 'Family Issues' or Pay the Price on Election Day

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A coalition of women's groups mobilized on Capitol Hill yesterday to secure passage of legislation to guarantee American workers unpaid medical and parental leave, warning politicians of both parties that they would pay a price at the polls for opposing the measure.

Speaking at a news conference, National Women's Political Caucus chairwoman Irene Natividad reminded lawmakers and the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees of what she called the "looming shadow" cast by the so-

called gender gap, citing studies that indicate 10 million more women than men may vote in November. "No one can get elected without us, not to the Senate, not to the House and certainly not to the presidency," she said.

The Family and Medical Leave Act, tentatively scheduled for a House vote next week, is one of several "family issues" that had been expected to be at the top of this year's political agenda but that may founder as Congress rushes to adjourn for the year next month.

House Democratic leaders yesterday said that they would bring "the measure to the floor only if

they are convinced it can pass, and that there are not yet enough votes to guarantee passage. In addition,

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—Rep. Tony Coelho

the parental and medical leave bill is competing for space on the calendar with separate legislation, awaiting

consideration in the Senate, to boost federal day-care assistance.

"We will not schedule a vote if the votes aren't there," said House Majority Whip Tony Coelho (D-Calif.). "The issue is if you have the House going for parental leave and the Senate going for day care, are you defeating both."

With just eight weeks left before the general election, congressional leaders are under pressure from moderate and conservative members to not force votes on too many bills considered pro-labor. Besides the day-care and parental-leave measures, labor also has pushed for an increase in the minimum wage.

House and Senate leaders are meeting this week to determine which of the bills will take priority. One Senate aide predicted that the child-care bill could take precedence if Republicans and Democrats can compromise on competing proposals and if it is clear there are not enough votes in the House to pass the parental-leave legislation.

Business interests led by the National Federation of Independent Business are fighting hard to defeat the parental-leave bill, arguing that a mandated leave benefit would impose an unnecessary and expensive burden on small businesses.

The Reagan administration also is opposed to the bill, which would require employers with more than 50 workers to permit employees to take up to 10 weeks of unpaid leave to care for newborn or seriously ill children, or parents requiring care.

Arguing that voters overwhelmingly support the concept of unpaid parental and medical leave, leaders of women's groups ranging from the American Association of University Women to the National Federation of Business and Professional Women also called on presidential and vice presidential nominees to push for enactment of the measure.

"If politicians truly want to capture women's votes, they must go beyond pro-family rhetoric and photo opportunities," said Judith Lichtman, president of the Women's Legal Defense Fund.

Natividad noted that Democratic presidential nominee Michael S. Dukakis supports the bill, but called on him to "show leadership" on the issue by helping to get it passed. She also urged Republican presidential nominee George Bush to drop his opposition.

1-22