

Family Policy during the Clinton Years

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The accomplishments of the Clinton administration have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives since it departed from the White House on January 20, 2001, but rarely has it been assessed from the vantage point of family policy. That is, to what extent did Clinton focus on issues concerning women, children, and families and what family-oriented policies in particular can be classified as successes and failures?

The purpose of this paper is fourfold. First, to review Clinton's "Eight-Point Plan on the Family" that he introduced during the 1992 Democratic primaries and campaigned on during the 1992 election. Second to discuss the issue of family values and how it was used and abused by both parties during the 1992 and 1996 elections. Third, to summarize family-oriented policies that Clinton put forth during his presidency and to specify those that were adopted by Congress by the end of his term. And fourth, to focus on three policies in particular that affected families: The Family and Medical Leave Act, the Defense of Marriage Act, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act.

The Family and Medical Leave Act was the very first bill signed by President Bill Clinton after assuming office in 1993. Twice vetoed by former President George H.W. Bush, the FMLA offers 12 weeks of unpaid leave to employees of companies of 50 or more workers to give birth, adopt a child, or to care for a family member. Clinton also issued an executive order in 1998 calling upon the Department of Labor to encourage states to use unemployment insurance trust funds to cover paid leave. This order was rescinded by President George W. Bush within the first two years of his term.

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was passed in 1996 by a Republican-controlled Congress, which had two objectives in mind. One, to stop a growing same-sex marriage movement by defining marriage as a man and a woman. And two, to empower states with the right to adopt similar DOMA laws that permitted them to not recognize same sex unions performed in other states. Clinton, wounded severely by the Democratic loss of both houses of Congress in 1994 and fighting for his political life in the middle of a re-election campaign, signed the measure despite protests from civil rights activists.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (PRWOA) of 1996 was also passed in the heat of Clinton's re-election bid. Designed by a Republican Congress, PRWOA represented the most sweeping example of welfare reform since the New Deal. By designing it as a block grant, states were empowered to establish work requirements, set time limits, and determine funding allocations for Food Stamps, Medicaid, child care and other social services. States also had the option to deny cash assistance for children born to families receiving welfare checks and to deny welfare checks for children born out of wedlock to a mother under age 18. Opponents of the law argued strongly that its passage would be particularly harmful to poor children. Clinton signed the bill.