

Focusing on America's child care crisis could help Democrats win the next election ^[1]

How caregiving became an election issue in Georgia — and beyond.

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EXCERPT

Caregivers in America are experiencing burnout on top of burnout.

Millions of children are attending school remotely, day care centers are at risk of closing, and many nursing homes have become dangerous for residents and staff alike. Getting affordable, high-quality care for children, elders, and others who need it has always been a struggle for American families. But with the arrival of the pandemic, it got even worse.

"If you personally are not experiencing a care crisis, you probably know someone who is," Lisa Guide, co-founder of the Women Effect Action Fund (WEAF), a group working on issues related to gender equity and economic justice, told Vox.

Add in the fact that many care workers make poverty-level wages — and now face the risk of Covid-19 on the job — and you have an issue that affects millions of Americans. It's one they can rally around — and one that could win elections. In fact, it may have helped Democrats turn the Senate blue on Wednesday.

Ahead of the Georgia runoffs, WEAF sponsored a canvassing campaign that saw volunteers knocking on the doors of about 50,000 voters. They got an earful, Guide said, as voters conveyed concerns about day care centers closing and child care bills that cost more than a monthly mortgage payment. Guide and others believe these issues will only further define elections in the years to come.

The availability of care "is becoming more central to the basic health and happiness of the American family," Guide said. That's a concept leaders need to take to heart — and a winning message for candidates in 2022 and beyond.

Polls show that care issues mattered in November. So advocates leaned into them in Georgia.

Even though it's been clear for some time that America's systems for child and elder care are badly broken, such issues haven't always been front and center come election season. That started to change in the run-up to 2020, when Sen. Elizabeth Warren made universal child care a key plank of her presidential campaign. When former Vice President Joe Biden became the Democratic nominee, he drew on some aspects of her proposal to announce his caregiving plan, which would provide subsidies for families to help them afford child care and raise wages for care workers, among other reforms.

Biden drew praise from many progressives for making a clear connection between care work and the health of both the economy and society overall. "When we usually talk about jobs packages, there's a big push on shovel-ready jobs," he said in a July 2020 speech. "But that's what care jobs are. ... The workers are ready now. These jobs can be filled now. Allowing millions of people, primarily women, to get back to work now."

And that kind of message resonated with voters. In a November poll conducted for WEAF across 10 battleground states, voters focused on "care economy" issues such as child care, elder care, and paid leave supported Biden over Donald Trump by a margin of 24 percentage points, 61 percent to 37 percent. Meanwhile, 54 percent of care economy voters backed Hillary Clinton in 2016, according to the poll, compared with 40 percent who backed Trump. Suburban voters, in particular, were highly supportive of Biden's care agenda, though it drew support from rural and urban voters as well.

"It's clear that running on care economy issues was critical to Biden's victory," wrote pollster Jill Normington in a memo announcing the results.

Ahead of the US Senate runoffs on January 5, WEAF took that message to Georgia, where they supported a canvassing program talking specifically about care issues with registered voters in the Atlanta suburbs — many of whom were eager to listen. "It's one of those things where there's so many people experiencing issues that they seem to be very amenable to talking about it," Guide said. Once canvassers got the voters talking, they would help them understand that while issues like a lack of child care are often still framed as personal problems that parents (most often moms) must fix on their own, "There's a role for our elected officials and leaders to engage and address this issue."

For many voters in Georgia, currently in the midst of a Covid-19 surge, care issues have never been more urgent. “A lot of care workers don’t have the luxury of staying at home, they don’t have the luxury of practicing social distancing, and they also don’t have a plan B for child care” for their own kids, Britney Whaley, a senior political strategist for the Working Families Party, told Vox. That’s especially true for parents of school-aged kids, many of whom need all-day care and educational support, since many districts in Georgia have shifted to all-remote learning due to the pandemic.

Elder care is another big issue — since many home health aides who work with seniors make very low wages, they can’t afford to see just one or two patients. But caring for more people raises the risk of contracting and spreading Covid-19. “You have the elderly who are in need of the care, and then you have the folks who are providing the care, and both are being exposed to a certain degree during a pandemic, when our hospitals are essentially near or at capacity,” Whaley said.

And WEAf was far from the only group in Georgia working on these issues. The group Care in Action, a sister organization of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, has been organizing voters in Georgia for years, as Sue Halpern reported at the New Yorker. The group, which works on behalf of care workers like home health aides and child care providers, among others, knocked on more than 900,000 doors in Georgia during the runoff campaign. “We’re really focussed on turning out Black women to vote, women who have voted infrequently, or even never before,” Jess Morales Rocketto, Care in Action’s executive director, told the New Yorker. “When they turn out, they have the ability to transform the electorate.”

Indeed, while voters in Georgia turned out for a host of reasons, advocates believe that focusing on care had an impact.

WEAF points to the Atlanta suburbs, where Republicans hoped incumbents Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue could beat Trump’s 2020 performance, according to CNN. Exit polls suggest that didn’t happen, with Perdue instead underperforming Trump in those areas. Suburban voters also turned out in numbers similar to that of the 2020 general election, bucking a trend of lower turnout in runoffs.

For many voters in Georgia, issues of child care, elder care, and fair pay for care work are part of a larger concern about their government’s handling of the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis, Dázon Dixon Diallo, founder and president of the reproductive justice group SisterLove, told Vox. It’s hard to separate care issues from the need for a living wage or health insurance, for example. “There’s so many fronts that people are facing,” Diallo said.

But candidates can and do make headway with voters when they present care issues as “core economic issues and not kind of a sideline ‘women’s issue,’” Guide said. It’s a message that’s grown louder as child care struggles during the pandemic impact the economic well-being of families, like when single moms have to drop out of the workforce to care for their children.

Democrats’ successes in Georgia could be a lesson for the future with regard to how candidates talk about care and how elected officials make policy that affects care workers and families. In the November WEAf poll, an overwhelming majority of voters backed policies to help families and care workers — 83 percent favored increasing support for in-home elder care, 77 percent favored investment in affordable child care, and 76 percent favored national paid leave. With these issues growing only more urgent, WEAf believes they can play a big role in 2022 and beyond — if candidates and elected officials embrace them.

“Issues around care are going to just continue to get more and more critical,” Guide said. “Electeds from either party would be politically serving themselves well by embracing the ability to help families with these core pieces of their day-to-day lives.”

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: election ^[4]

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