

**Effective Legitimizing Efforts for Issue-based Organizations: A Mixed Methods  
Examination of Paid Leave Advocacy**

**A Dissertation Presented for the  
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Degree  
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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have needed paid leave to care for a loved one and did not have access. I hope this dissertation provides some guidance for those doing the groundwork to improve paid leave policies.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For a comprehensive examination of paid leave advocacy, this dissertation includes three studies. The first manuscript is a content analysis of paid leave advocacy organization's Facebook pages to identify message strategy, engagement, and comment sentiment, based on legitimizing strategies used in the post. The second manuscript extends that analysis by using qualitative interviews to better understand the internal perspectives of workers at advocacy organizations regarding best practice strategies and suggested directions for advancing the movement. The third manuscript is an integrative, comprehensive overview of Study 1 and Study 2 to identify how the quantitative-driven results of Study 1 intersect with qualitative-driven results in Study 2. Results indicated that legitimacy literature in public relations should be expanded to consider a new concept of "legislative legitimacy" for issue-based organizations. The third study also recommends expanding issue advocacy partnerships to corporations – through corporate social advocacy – to appeal to economic stability and capitalistic values of legislators and their constituents. Applied and theoretical implications are discussed thoroughly in each study.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                                                     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....                                                                                                                                  | 1  |
| Issue Background.....                                                                                                                               | 1  |
| Disproportionate Impact and the Current State .....                                                                                                 | 2  |
| Paid Leave from the Business Perspective .....                                                                                                      | 4  |
| Applying Public Relations to Advocacy Efforts.....                                                                                                  | 5  |
| CHAPTER I: Legitimizing Strategies on Social Media: A Content Analysis of Strategy,<br>Engagement, and Sentiment in Paid Leave Advocacy Posts ..... | 7  |
| Abstract .....                                                                                                                                      | 8  |
| Introduction.....                                                                                                                                   | 9  |
| Literature Review.....                                                                                                                              | 10 |
| Public Relations and Advocacy Overview .....                                                                                                        | 10 |
| Legitimacy Theory.....                                                                                                                              | 13 |
| Strategic advocacy, institutional pressure and social contracts .....                                                                               | 17 |
| Methods.....                                                                                                                                        | 23 |
| Variables .....                                                                                                                                     | 24 |
| Intercoder Reliability .....                                                                                                                        | 26 |
| Analysis/Results.....                                                                                                                               | 29 |
| Discussion .....                                                                                                                                    | 35 |
| Theoretical Implications .....                                                                                                                      | 39 |
| Practical Implications.....                                                                                                                         | 41 |
| Limitations .....                                                                                                                                   | 42 |

|                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Conclusion .....                                                              | 43 |
| References .....                                                              | 45 |
| Appendices.....                                                               | 55 |
| CHAPTER II: Internal perspectives of advocacy organization practitioners:     |    |
| recommendations for best practice and advancing the paid leave movement ..... | 65 |
| Abstract .....                                                                | 66 |
| Positionality Statement .....                                                 | 66 |
| Introduction.....                                                             | 67 |
| Literature Review.....                                                        | 67 |
| Advocacy as Issue Management .....                                            | 67 |
| What is issues management .....                                               | 71 |
| Legitimacy Theory .....                                                       | 76 |
| Method .....                                                                  | 80 |
| Procedure .....                                                               | 80 |
| Data Collection .....                                                         | 80 |
| Sampling .....                                                                | 81 |
| Interview Procedure .....                                                     | 81 |
| Measures/Protocol.....                                                        | 81 |
| Data Analysis .....                                                           | 82 |
| Findings and Discussion .....                                                 | 83 |
| THEME 1- Lived Experience of Particular Constituents .....                    | 84 |
| THEME 2- Expansion of Paid Leave .....                                        | 91 |

|                                                                                 |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| THEME 3- Lack of Urgency .....                                                  | 95  |
| Implications.....                                                               | 100 |
| Provides Internal Perspectives on Challenges .....                              | 100 |
| Challenging Traditional Organizational Roles .....                              | 101 |
| Extending Legitimacy Theory .....                                               | 102 |
| Applied Contributions.....                                                      | 103 |
| Limitations .....                                                               | 105 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                | 106 |
| References.....                                                                 | 107 |
| Appendices.....                                                                 | 113 |
| CHAPTER III: Next Steps in Paid Leave Advocacy: Legislative Legitimacy Message  |     |
| Strategy and Opportunities for Leveraging Issues Advocacy with Corporate Social |     |
| Advocacy .....                                                                  | 120 |
| Abstract.....                                                                   | 121 |
| Introduction.....                                                               | 122 |
| Study 1: Advocacy Tactics and Legitimacy Strategies on Facebook .....           | 122 |
| Study 2: Internal Perspectives on Legitimizing Strategies .....                 | 125 |
| Integrating the Findings .....                                                  | 126 |
| Comparing the Results.....                                                      | 127 |
| Suggestions for Practitioners and Broader Change .....                          | 130 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                | 139 |
| References.....                                                                 | 141 |

|                 |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| CONCLUSION..... | 148 |
| VITA.....       | 149 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|                                                                                                                 |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Table 1.</b> Intercoder Reliability .....                                                                    | 27  |
| <b>Table 2.</b> Comment sentiment scores .....                                                                  | 33  |
| <b>Table 3.</b> Coefficients for Model Variables.....                                                           | 34  |
| <b>Table 4.</b> Following Count for the Largest U.S.-based Corporations Based on Market<br>Capitalization ..... | 135 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                                                                                                    |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Figure 1.</b> Burlea and Popa's (2013) Life Cycle of Legitimacy .....                           | 14  |
| <b>Figure 2.</b> Distribution of indirect and insider advocacy tactics .....                       | 30  |
| <b>Figure 3.</b> Example post from Google that could be shared on advocacy Facebook pages<br>..... | 136 |
| <b>Figure 4.</b> Example post from Apple that could be shared on advocacy Facebook pages<br>.....  | 137 |

## INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE STUDIES

### Issue Background

Paid leave has become a pertinent issue for many Americans. Several states-- such as New Jersey, California, Rhode Island, and New York—already offer paid leave programs that cover both time to bond with a newborn, newly adopted, or newly placed foster child and time to care for a loved one with a physical/mental health condition and/or cope with domestic/sexual violence (The State of New Jersey, n.d.). Other states rely on the Federal Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Covered employers under the FMLA include private-sector employers that meet certain requirements, public agencies, and local educational agencies (Wage and Hour Division, 2023). To qualify for FMLA, private-sector employees must have worked for the company for at least a year, worked at least 1,250 hours during the previous year, and worked at a location with at least 50 employees within a 75-mile radius (Guerin, 2014). States reserve the right to extend FMLA coverage; in the state of Tennessee, employers with at least 100 employees at the same location must give eligible employees up to four (unpaid) months off for pregnancy, childbirth, nursing an infant, and adoption (Guerin, 2014). Employees have the right to use FMLA intermittently or through a reduced schedule, but if this leave is to bond with a new child, intermittent or reduced-schedule leave must be approved by the supervisor (Wage and Hour Division, 2023). Only 24% of private sector workers in 2022 had access to paid leave through their employers (Women’s Bureau, 2024), and though the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows some employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave, it only covers about 60% of employees (MomsRising Together, 2024).

Effective Oct. 1, 2020, the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act (FEPLA) amended FMLA in Title 5 by providing Federal employees up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave when introducing a new child into a home through birth, adoption, or foster care (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Under FEPLA, federal employees' paid parental leave can begin on the date of birth or placement and requires employees to agree in writing to work for the agency for at least 12 weeks after leave ends (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Interestingly, the U.S. Postal Service and Postal Regulatory Commission employees do not currently qualify for FEPLA, but, if passed, the Comprehensive Paid Leave for Federal Employees Act (CPLFFEA) would amend this to include postal workers (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

### **Disproportionate Impact and the Current State**

There is also a notably disproportionate dispersal of paid leave, such as how “workers in blue-collar jobs are less likely to get paid parental leave than those with corporate jobs” (as quoted from a BBC article in Bailey, 2021). Among the lowest wage workers, which unfortunately encompasses primarily women and workers of color, 94% have no access to paid leave (Women's Bureau, 2024). Therefore, not only are lower income households more impacted by the lack of policy, but also it impacts BIPOC women and families more so than white families (Bailey, 2021). The inequities of paid leave are also apparent outside of the parental role as 80% of at-home care is provided by unpaid caregivers- mostly women (Saad-Lessler & Bahn, 2017). FMLA only provides unpaid leave and does not cover all employees (MomsRising Together, 2024). There are even inequities in access to *unpaid* leave. Bartel et al. (2019) highlighted “evidence that mothers from racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as less educated and unmarried mothers, are less likely to take *unpaid* leave such as that provided by the FMLA”

often because they cannot afford it. According to the Women's Bureau (2024), access to paid family and medical leave can increase equity because marginalized groups have "less access to paid leave than high-wage and white workers, so their caregiving demands can result in lower earnings, wealth building and retirement security" (p.2).

It is important to briefly note what family medical leave or family medical insurance (FMI) covers since caretaking needs are often overlooked by the general public until they themselves are acting as a caretaker for an ill family member or are themselves suffering from a disease. According to Saad-Lessler & Bahn (2017), "the public narrative ignores the many other reasons besides caring for a new child that require workers to take leave from their job" (p. 4). The total number of individuals 65 years and older are projected to increase by 47% between 2022 and 2050 (Mather & Scommegna, 2024), so it is also important to consider the resources available to care for loved ones as our population ages. This research considers leave for all of these caregiving purposes and investigates advocacy strategies and their subsequent engagement.

Though health issues have become increasingly politicized, in 2021, 82% of U.S. voters, across party lines, supported the implementation of a national family and medical paid leave policy (Bailey, 2021). The lack of available paid leave for many employees is especially confusing because of its many known benefits. Paid leave has been shown to reduce infant mortality by up to 20% (MomsRising Together, 2024). This is particularly relevant because, in 2020, the U.S. infant mortality rate was 5.44 deaths per 1,000 births—significantly higher than other developed countries like Sweden (2.15), Japan (1.82), and Australia (3.14) (World Population Review, 2024). Unfortunately, the U.S. infant mortality rate increased to 5.60 infant deaths in 1,000 in 2022 (Hagan, 2023). According to the Pew Research Center, the U.S. is the

only country of 41 First World nations in its report that does not mandate paid leave in some capacity for new parents (Livingston & Thomas, 2019).

### **Paid Leave from the Business Perspective**

From a business perspective, paid leave has also shown to improve worker retention and ultimately save employers money (MomsRising Together, 2024). One common concern of many is the practicality of paid leave for small businesses, but many small businesses actually advocate for paid leave policies to better support their employees and become more competitive with larger organizations (Small Business Majority, 2024). In California, PFL works based on partial wage replacement funded by mandatory payroll deductions (Employment Development Department- State of California, n.d.). This program is part of State Disability Insurance (SDI), which makes it more feasible for small businesses to provide paid leave to employees when necessary. On a business-level, paid leave can also be pertinent in addressing workplace stigma against women who are more likely to be unpaid caregivers, impacting their career development. According to Maya Rossin-Slater, an economist and associate professor of health policy in the School of Medicine at Stanford, paid parental leave may be a “silver bullet”—or easy solution—for women’s equality in the workplace, as this is dependent on a variety of factors, but it should be supported because of its general bettering of health and well-being as well as fiscal reasons (De Witte, 2022). Paid leave policies that include caretaking roles can similarly help equality in the workplace since women are the majority of unpaid caretakers (Saad-Lessler & Bahn, 2017). Many organizations have taken this issue into their own hands.

## **Applying Public Relations to Advocacy Efforts**

Paid leave has garnered support from a variety of existing nonprofit organizations and caused many new advocacy organizations to form. As these organizations advocate for new parents and those caregiving for their loved ones, they have adopted public relations tactics to achieve their goals. On March 18, 2024, more than 70 brands closed for the day to promote paid parental leave in partnership with the Paid Leave for All campaign (Gomez, 2024). This form of advocacy indicates a shift in the perspective of advocacy efforts as antagonistic to the public relations to advocacy efforts using public relations techniques to further their causes (Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright, 2019). This research focuses on the last dimension, as its target population of advocates are considered issues managers (Woods, 2022) through their use of public relations tactics to advocate for a variety of social issues-- including the current state of paid leave policies.

This study engages legitimacy theory to understand how these nonprofits support their “right to exist” (Waeraas, 2018). Where advocates were traditionally viewed as antagonistic to public relations efforts (Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright, 2019), now the two often complement each other toward social good and organizational goals. This research expands the legitimacy literature to advocacy groups to develop a list of best strategies for important policy change using public relations techniques. Thus, it will uncover how advocacy organizations supporting paid leave use public relations strategies to obtain and maintain legitimacy with various important stakeholders as well as to determine which strategies are most effective.

Study 1 conducts a content analysis to better understand advocacy legitimizing strategies and tactics. Using social media data pulled from Facebook for eight organizations advocating for stronger paid family leave policies, strategies were compared through engagement and comment sentiment scores. Facebook posts were collected in March 2024, because March is Women's History Month, and the lack of paid family leave has disproportionately impacted women (Women's Bureau, 2024). So, voices may be more active during that time. Recognizing who is partaking in advocacy as well as for whom they are representing is pertinent in uncovering the complexities of legitimation outside of the corporate world. Corporations are highly reliant on corporate social responsibility efforts to legitimize their primary business functions, starkly contrasting with issue-based organizations that are focused more on advocacy than profit. Study 2 uses interviews to collect in-depth information from the internal perspectives of those already on the ground working to pass paid leave policies, whether it be at the state or national level. It furthers this understanding of legitimizing efforts from an issue-based perspective. Finally, study 3 gives a comprehensive, integrative overview of how the socially-mediated perspective relates to the internal perceptions of strategy effectiveness from workers at issue-based organizations advocating for paid leave.

## **CHAPTER I**

# **Legitimizing Strategies on Social Media: A Content Analysis of Strategy, Engagement, and Sentiment in Paid Leave Advocacy Posts**

## **Abstract**

This study uses quantitative content analysis to measure how legitimizing strategies impact engagement and comment sentiment. Previous research has focused on legitimizing efforts from a corporate perspective, but this study expands the theoretical framework to advocacy organizations who have adopted public relations strategies to help achieve their goals. Advocacy strategies were adapted from Guo & Saxton (2010,2014) and legitimizing strategies were adapted from Suchman (1995) and Marschlich & Ingenhoff (2021). Results indicated that insider strategies received the most engagement via likes, shares, and comments. Similarly, even though positive sentiment did not greatly differ across strategies, regulative legitimizing strategies received the least negative sentiment. Implications for these results are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Paid leave has increasingly become an issue discussed to address problems of gender equality, workforce participation, and family well-being. Advocacy organizations supporting paid leave have adopted public relations strategies to develop support for the movement and influence policymaking. Many of these efforts rely on social media engagement to garner interest, educate people on the need for paid leave, and illustrate current legislative efforts. This study uses quantitative content analysis to measure how legitimizing strategies impact engagement and comment sentiment. The content analysis included 66 posts and subsequent comments from Facebook Pages owned by nonprofit organizations advocating for paid leave to determine best practices. Posts were collected from March 2024 because March is women's history month, and the lack of paid leave policies has historically disproportionately impacted women (Women's Bureau, 2024). During this period, it is also relevant to note that on March 18, 2024, more than 70 brands closed for the day to promote paid leave in partnership with the Paid Leave for All campaign (Gomez, 2024).

Legitimacy has been recognized as the alignment of organizational actions and the expectations of their stakeholders (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; and Diez-Martin, Prado-Roman, & Blanco-Gonzalez, 2013). Previous research has focused on legitimizing efforts from a corporate perspective, but this study expands the theoretical framework to advocacy organizations who have adopted public relations strategies to help achieve their goals. The results of this content analysis also inform practice by considering the unique challenges of issue-based organizations in their legitimizing efforts online. It also provides practical guidance for practitioners.

## **Literature Review**

### **Public Relations and Advocacy Overview**

Though often used synonymously, some scholars have distinguished between activism and advocacy. One helpful distinction comes from Choi & McKeever (2025); “[Where] advocates work within the system to promote change, activists generally push to dismantle what is wrong with the system itself” (p. 84). An advocacy organization can thus be defined as a coordinated effort to “influence the social and civic agenda” (Schmid et al, 2008, p. 582 as cited in Choi and McKeever, 2025). Since this particular study focuses on how organizations are working through the system to influence policy regarding paid parental and family medical leave, it is most appropriate to use the term “advocacy,” but since scholarship uses the term “activist” synonymously with advocacy, it is important to give a quick overview of how activism is situated in the public relations field.

Historically, activism has intersected with public relations in three ways: (1) Activists as antagonists to the organization and public relations efforts, (2) Public relations practitioners as activists within the organization, and (3) Activists using public relations techniques to further their causes (Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright, 2019). The first and second of these distinctions indicate what Choi and McKeever (2025) consider activism because they use “vigorous action in order to challenge oppressive power relations” (Ophélie, 2016, pp. 757–758). This is a logical position given that activists have traditionally gotten more attention as a public external to the organization rather than groups that use public relations techniques to push their issues forward (Ciszek, 2015).

The third intersection discussed by Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2019) and Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright (2019) is where many confuse advocacy and activism. Activists have been employing public relations techniques for centuries (Coombs & Holladay, 2007) by strategically communicating to build awareness and support. Groups such as abolitionists used tactics such as public speeches and other printed communication to inform and persuade people about social issues (Ciszek, 2015). Advocacy organizations, though, are issue-based collectives that work within the system, using public relations tactics to affect policy and garner further support for particular issues. Much of this advocacy now occurs in online communities, since messages can be quickly disseminated and shared. Thus, this study looks at how social media specifically has impacted advocacy efforts to legitimize nonprofit organizational existence and the legitimization of paid parental and family medical leave policies.

Rhetorical scholars in the public relations discipline consider advocacy “as submitting well-reasoned arguments that undergo appraisals of worth to inform collective decisions” (Heath, 2006, as cited in Aghazadeh, 2022, p. 257). Notably, this appraisal process can look different based on who is advocating and for what they are advocating (Aghazadeh, 2022). Historically, advocacy was “relegated to white, usually affluent, and non-disabled men” (Campbell, 1989, and Rooney, 2017, as cited in Aghazadeh, 2022, p. 261). Now, women lead the paid leave movement, probably because the lack of paid leave specifically has disproportionately impacted women (Women’s Bureau, 2024) as well as “workers in blue-collar jobs are less likely to get paid parental leave than those with corporate jobs” (as quoted from a BBC article in Bailey, 2021). Marginalized groups may struggle to gain legitimacy and assert authenticity, making their advocacy goals significantly more difficult to achieve (Aghazadeh, 2022). Culture’s role in a

fully functioning society – a common theoretical perspective in public relations – is central because it determines what is marginalized and what is accepted, thus influencing public decisions (Aghazadeh, 2022; Heath, 2006; Stokes, 2013; Toth, 2010). Hofstede (1984) defined culture as the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (p.21). America’s culture specifically has been recognized as highly individualistic, career-focused, and business-driven (Thakuria, 2025; Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023), which is an important frame through which to consider advocacy efforts that push for more family-centric policies.

Extensive research about advocacy in public relations literature centers around mobilization efforts, especially more recently on social media platforms. Xiong, Cho & Boatwright (2019) examined the framing of messages via hashtag activism- which is a form of support primarily connecting with people through hashtags to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media. Sommerfeldt (2013) analyzed mobilization resources available on environmental activism groups' websites, and Xu & Luttman (2020) studied the impact of socially mediated networks to gain support for the #NoDAPL protests in 2016. In the corporate world, however, legitimacy is often obtained and maintained through corporate social advocacy (CSA) or corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts, but advocacy is not the primary purpose of the organization. This is why there is criticism around what truly motivates for-profit organizations to participate in social issues. This study examines advocacy efforts from nonprofit organizational Facebook pages and viewers’ virtual responses. Considering how advocacy organizations obtain and maintain legitimacy when not functioning as a for-profit organization introduces some complexities as to how these nonprofits “need [to develop] legitimacy for the

issue (e.g. mental health), the organization or collective (e.g., advocacy organization/group), and a particular action or course of action” (Smith & Ferguson, 2018, and Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2014, as cited in Aghazadeh, 2024, p. 262). Therefore, a review of legitimacy theory is in order.

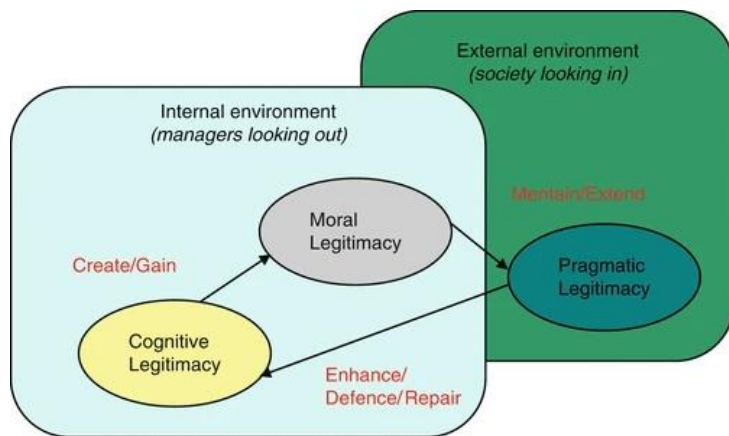
### **Legitimacy Theory**

Legitimacy theory is a highly engaged theoretical framework for examining how organizations navigate how to align with the expectations of stakeholders. According to Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021), “whatever corporations do, they do in response to their environment[s] to meet the societal demands and values” so they can be perceived as legitimate. Though this definition focuses on the corporate view, other scholars have conceptualized legitimacy for general organizations. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) and Diez-Martin, Prado-Roman, & Blanco-Gonzalez (2013) define legitimacy similarly, as the congruence between the actions of the organization and the expectations of their stakeholders. Suchman (1995) extends this to define legitimacy as the perception that an organization is acting appropriately based on a set of socially constructed norms. This means that legitimacy is primarily perceptual, and it is socially constructed by stakeholders. So, legitimacy is in turn granted by stakeholders. Waeraas (2018) cited the Weberian definition of legitimacy even more simply put as the “right to exist.” This point of view sees organizational goals/missions as more of a rationalization for existence rather than a functional tool to guide processes. In this study, legitimacy is defined as the acceptance of the organizational mission by viewers, because if stakeholders do not deem the organizational mission legitimate, they are less likely to support their efforts to change policy.

Suchman (1995) identifies three primary types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Pragmatic is based in self-interest and is commonly connected to exchange

relationships. Self-interest can extend beyond product/service exchange to more value-based exchanges. For example, by supporting the organizational goal of stronger paid leave policies, a stakeholder can benefit if a loved one is ill and requires care. The second type Suchman (1995) discussed is moral legitimacy, which relies on the normative value systems of the overall culture. This type of legitimacy is also based on right and wrong. For example, an advocacy organization might compare policies and outcomes across various countries or indicate how something “should” be. The last type of legitimacy Suchman (1995) discussed is cognitive, which is based on comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness. This is best recognized as an appeal to logos. For example, an organization might use national statistics to exemplify why viewers should support the organizational mission.

Burlea and Popa (2013) also provide a model (**Figure 1**) of the life cycle of legitimacy to clarify these three concepts. This model first separates the types of legitimacy based on internality and externality to the organization. They make the argument that cognitive and moral



**Figure 1**

*Burlea and Popa's (2013) Life Cycle of Legitimacy*

legitimacy are developed internally, while pragmatic is developed externally. According to this life cycle, cognitive appeals are used to create or gain legitimacy. Moral appeals are used to maintain and extend that legitimacy to connect with external publics. Lastly, pragmatic appeals enhance, defend, or repair legitimacy issues for organizations. Burlea and Popa (2013) emphasize how it is difficult to attain legitimacy but even more difficult to maintain legitimacy. Thus, organizations are constantly developing and improving legitimacy. Each type of legitimacy has its challenges. "If cognitive legitimacy is difficult to attain, then pragmatic legitimacy is difficult to control because of its external visibility, and moral legitimacy is difficult to overcome because of its normative evaluation," (Burlea and Popa, 2013, p. 1582). This life cycle is relevant to the current study because it provides guidance and conceptualization of the types of legitimacy being investigated.

According to Suchman (1995), each of these types of legitimacy is considered temporally as either episodic or continual. Episodic is a one-time or short-term criterion. For example, exchange would be categorized under this based on a one-time purchase that temporarily satisfies the buyer. Continual is more long-term and associated with deeper values than immediate satisfaction. It is expected that even though advocating for policy has a certain level of quid-pro-quo, it is more highly reliant on building long-term opinions and values. Suchman (1995) also considers whether types of legitimacy are categorized as action-based or essence-based. Action-based legitimacy considers the pragmatic exchange of an organization with its viewers while essence-based legitimacy is more connected to value orientation. While advocacy organizations are attempting to take actions like changing current policy, this is often a long-winded process in which the audience must rely more heavily on personal conviction of the

value of the organization. This is relevant for the current study since advocacy organizations rely on value congruence to gain support for paid family medical leave.

Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021) use moral and pragmatic legitimacy similar to Suchman (1995) but add regulative legitimacy. Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021) identify regulative legitimacy as “an organization’s ability to demonstrate compliance with regulations, standards, and expectations from government institutions” (p. 2). For example, an organization meeting with legislators to advocate for policy change. By organizations involving themselves in the legislative process, they indicate their adherence to regulation and their dedication to making foundational changes. While this type of legitimacy is particularly important in the corporate realm as a way to monitor or regulate actions of the organization, nonprofits are advocating for change by challenging current perceptions of policy. This makes the process a little more complicated. It is important to remember that all of these forms of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive and tend to overlap in the legitimization process.

“Legitimation is the process by which an organization obtains its legitimacy,” (Burlea and Popa, 2013, p. 1582). The legitimization process becomes much more complicated outside of the corporate sphere when the purpose of the organization is to question the legitimacy of other entities or policies, as is the case for advocacy organizations. Thus, existing concepts of legitimacy were adapted in this research to account for an advocacy point of view and determine best strategies for legitimizing social issues. Suchman (1995) specifically provides three primary strategies organizations use to maintain or obtain legitimacy: (1) conforming to the expectations of the stakeholder groups, (2) attempting to change the value systems of the stakeholders so it aligns with the organizations, and (3) connecting with identified symbols or people who already

have established legitimacy. These foundational strategies represent different approaches to advocating for paid leave nationwide. Each strategy might best be used with a specific stakeholder group. This will be discussed further below with social contracts.

In the corporate realm, where much of the legitimizing literature has focused, with a few exceptions (Van Oers, Boon, and Moors, 2018 and Sommerfeldt, 2013), corporate social responsibility has played a significant part in legitimizing the organization based on social and environmental standards and expectations. Advocacy groups are already centered around social and environmental issues, and thus scholars must consider how they develop legitimacy outside of this corporate perspective. Much of the previous literature focuses on legitimization strategies from a corporate perspective, but this study expands this approach to consider which strategies are actually successful for advocacy organizations, especially considering organizations need to account for various stakeholders and institutional factors in their strategic efforts.

### **Strategic advocacy, institutional pressure and social contracts**

Institutional theory provides an important framework for legitimacy because it recognizes that external factors play a major role in strategic decision making. Bebbington, Unerman, and O'Dwyer (2014) asserted that institutional theory encompasses everything legitimacy theory does and beyond but that legitimacy theory is more applicable to strategic management practices. This may be because it is less related to the effects of institutionalization and more to strategies organizations can use to develop trust and value congruence. Martens and Bui (2023) explain how legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and institutional theory are often conflated or pitted against one another, but they argue that these theories are more complementary than they are competitive. Bebbington, Unerman, and O'Dwyer (2014) argue for a mixed perspective that

includes strategic outlook and institutional pressures. The following study considers both institutional (by focusing on a politicized issue) and strategic factors (by considering how this advocacy organizations have to adjust their message to different stakeholders). Burlea and Popa (2013) also consider strategic and institutional pressures by indicating how legitimacy theory acts on two levels: strategic legitimacy theory (SLT) and institutional legitimacy theory (ILT). SLT focuses more on organizational or internal environments, while ILT considers the macro environment (Burlea and Popa, 2013). Strategic is conceptualized as more functional and goal-oriented, where institutional is more holistic and pays closer attention to situational/environmental factors. Historically, there has been more of a focus on strategic legitimacy, and advocate organizations are dealing with complex political issues that involve institutional pressures. Therefore, strategies must be adjusted based on which stakeholder advocates are communicating with.

Often discussions of stakeholders are limited to those deemed “legitimate” from the organizational perspective (Friedman and Miles, 2006); therefore, stakeholder theory is highly tied to legitimacy theory. Freeman (1984) established stakeholder theory to assert no stakeholder can be considered in isolation and is meant to be a theory of how business works at its best (Freeman et al, 2010). Stakeholder theory emerges out of the assumption that we can’t separate business and ethics decisions. Therefore, it calls us to consider who is impacted by organizational decisions and how. It also relies on the responsibility principle that states: “Most people, most of the time, want, and do, accept responsibility for the effects of their actions on others” (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 8). Ultimately, the difference between stakeholder theory and legitimacy comes down to a “social contract.” Social contracts are a highly discussed topic in

rhetorical and philosophical research. Ultimately, a social contract is an agreement between persons to conform to the ways in which they are expected to live (Friend, n.d.). Stakeholder theory pushes the bounds of social contracts since it assumes that no group is treated in isolation; thus, there would need to be various social contracts with various stakeholder groups. Now, especially in socially mediated spaces, social contracts are more difficult than ever to navigate. Therefore, the following section will delve into social media advocacy strategies and how they help develop or maintain social contracts with crucial stakeholders.

### ***Social Media and Advocacy***

Social media have transformed the public relations landscape by promoting dialogue and providing a digital space for dialogue between organizations and their publics (Capizzo, 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2013). This access has essentially made it easier for organizations to engage in two-way communication efforts with their publics (Grunig, 1992), but it has also introduced some challenges for organizations. Organizations are now tasked with new levels of immediacy and engagement via social platforms. For-profit organizations have thus seen an increased need to create proactive crisis strategies (Coombs, 2007), but advocacy groups are often already challenging the status quo of policy and thus live in a state of crisis. How then has the influx of social media truly impacted those organizations?

Socially-mediated communication has been studied through a variety of other theoretical frameworks, including, but not limited to: social capital, attribution theory, and uses and gratifications theory. Though this study primarily uses a legitimacy theory lens, it does tie into social capital. Social media allow organizations to interact with their publics in real-time to answer questions or address concerns, which can help build social capital- or “the value derived

from positive connections between people” (Mask, 2019). Social capital is the accumulation of available resources or support garnered from personal relationships (Poetze & Strauss, 2020), but social media have drastically altered personal relationships. Social media have expanded the reach of our personal relationships and narrowed many interactions to engagement metrics. Where advocacy organizations used to rely on in-person meetings or events to build social capital, social media introduces a more complex way of building social capital that depends on often asynchronous user interaction, such as comments, and two-way communication channels functioning faster than ever before.

According to Wong and Bottorff (2023), the average social media user is active on six to seven platforms each month, but Facebook was the most common globally. This is why the current study investigated posts on Facebook. Social networking sites have a variety of features, such as followers, hashtags, search bars, comments, and replies that enable users to build connections vital to mobilization efforts (Boyd, 2010). This is why socially-mediated spaces have become a hot-spot for advocacy efforts. According to West (2024), engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, are the top metrics to track on social media. According to Newberry (2025), “social media advocacy is the practice of using social platforms to advance causes like charitable campaigns, connecting with political leaders, or driving social change” (p.1).

Not only does social media allow practitioners to educate viewers on the current state of policy and engage in discussion, but, by focusing on engagement metrics, advocacy organizations are able to gauge support and sentiment. This social media monitoring is key and should also expand to social listening more broadly (Amaresan, 2024), which is outside the

scope of the current study. Monitoring engagement metrics are particularly valuable to advocacy because they can give actionable insights on how to improve the movement (Amaresan, 2024). These actionable insights can help avoid what some have referred to as “performative activism” (Nguyen, Geller & Williams, 2022), in which an organization is only taking part in issue-based work for social capital rather than genuine concern about the issue. While this claim is more relevant for CSR and CSA efforts, advocacy organizations should focus on authenticity and relationships that can be developed through engagement with viewers.

Social media has also become popular among nonprofits as a more affordable way to reach the masses (McLachlan, 2023). A study by Mazid (2020) explored the virality of various advocacy strategies (codes adapted from Guo and Saxton, 2014) for LGBTQ organizations. These strategies were divided into two categories: insider and indirect. While some studies have used different terminology, this study identifies and measures insider strategies as those that work “inside the system” focusing on the legislative angle while indirect strategies take an approach “outside” of legislation (Guo and Saxton, 2014). Results from Guo and Saxton (2014) indicated that most organizations used indirect strategies such as public education, media advocacy, and grassroots lobbying. These indirect strategies were more effective in generating comments and shares than other insider strategies such as direct lobbying or expert testimony. Both indirect and insider strategies (as adapted from Guo and Saxton, 2010, 2014) were more effective in generating likes, comments, and shares compared to the messages that did not use advocacy strategy on Facebook. These indirect and insider tactics are included in this study (H1 and H2) to provide a general idea of which tactics are most common in the paid leave movement. Legitimizing strategies are introduced separately in RQ1 and RQ2 to expand further on how

these organizations are authenticating both themselves and the issue of paid leave. Lastly, RQ3 focuses written engagement in the form of comments. It measures sentiment in relation to legitimizing strategy to see which is most well-received by viewers.

This study frames the following hypotheses and research questions:

**H1:** Indirect advocacy tactics, such as public education, are used more often than insider advocacy tactics, such as judicial advocacy, by organizations advocating for paid parental leave on Facebook.

**H2:** Indirect strategies will generate more engagement than insider strategies.

**H2a:** Indirect strategies will generate more likes than insider strategies.

**H2b:** Indirect strategies will generate more shares than insider strategies.

**H2c:** Indirect strategies will generate more comments than insider strategies.

**RQ1:** What is the most-common legitimizing strategy used to advocate for paid leave?

**RQ2:** What is the second most-common legitimizing strategy used to advocate for paid leave?

**RQ3:** What, if any, is the relationship between legitimacy strategy and sentiment of engagements, as measured by comments?

**RQ3a:** Which, if any, strategies were related more to negative comments?

**RQ3b:** Which, if any, strategies were related more to positive comments?

## Methods

Content analysis, which is a common method communication studies (Mazid, 2020; Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017), was used to examine advocacy strategies from nonprofits organizations supporting paid parental leave policies and how followers engaged with them. Organizations for analysis were chosen based on a Google search of nonprofit organizations that advocate for paid parental leave. Corporations and for-profit organizations were not included in this analysis given its focus on legitimizing strategies of advocacy groups. The authors' identifying information was deleted from any screenshots or comments used in the analysis to preserve confidentiality. Twelve qualifying organizations were identified from the Google search. Three of the organizations did not have Facebook pages, and one had a Facebook page but had not posted in the month of March 2024. So, the content analysis included eight organizations in total.

The units of analysis are Facebook posts and comments. Facebook posts and the comments they solicited were manually collected from each organization between the dates of March 1-31, 2024, because March is Women's History Month, and the lack of paid leave has disproportionately impacted women (Women's Bureau, 2024). So, audiences may be attuned to and engaged with this content. During this period, it is also relevant to note that on March 18, 2024, more than 70 brands closed for the day to promote paid parental leave in partnership with the Paid Leave for All campaign (Gomez, 2024). Only posts that included at least one specific reference to women in the workforce, moms in the workforce, or paid parental leave were included in this analysis. In total, there were 66 posts and 1,428 comments used in this analysis.

## Variables

Each post was manually coded. The study was deductive since the coding scheme for advocacy tactics was adapted from Guo & Saxton (2010, 2014). In each post, advocacy tactics were coded as present or not present across 11 categories: (1) Public events and activism, (2) Grassroots lobbying, (3) Media advocacy, (4) Coalition building, (5) Expert testimony, (6) Voter registration/education, (7) Research, (8) Public education, (9) Judicial advocacy, (10) Direct lobbying, and (11) Administrative lobbying. Based on Guo and Saxton's (2010, 2014) conceptualizations, *public events and activism* included any posts inviting viewers to attend in-person or virtual events. *Grassroots lobbying* included posts that asked viewers to contact their legislators directly. *Media advocacy* spanned posts that discussed increased coverage of paid leave or family medical leave. *Coalition building* was coded for any post that discussed or encouraged partnerships with other organizations. *Expert testimony* was identified as any post that mentioned organizational participation or a plan to participate in a committee hearing when invited by a legislative body but was expanded to include any post that expressly used the word "expert." *Voter registration and education* included any posts that discussed how to register to vote. *Research and public education* were both informative, but the research category explicitly cites research groups (for example, the Pew Research Center). The *public education* category was also expanded to include posts that provide links or articles meant to provide more information to viewers. *Judicial advocacy* was considered as any posts that mentioned the organization is working for change through the legal system. Posts were labeled as *direct lobbying* if they mentioned how the organization is meeting with legislators to influence policy. Lastly, posts were identified as *administrative lobbying* if they attempted to influence

administration by commenting on policy, rule-making, and building relationships with government officials. Through the coding process, coders found that administrative lobbying was not unique or distinguishable from other categories, and that code was dropped.

The coding scheme for legitimacy strategies was adapted from Suchman (1995), Burlea and Popa (2013), and Marschlich & Ingenhoff (2021). Posts that focused on self-interest of the viewer and commonly used words such as “I”, “you”, or “moms” were identified as pragmatic. For example, “Have *you* been forced to choose between staying home with your newborn and making a livable wage? New paid parental leave policies could help relieve this stress for Americans.” If a post focused on normative behaviors, right or wrong, or what we should or shouldn’t do, it was categorized as using a moral legitimacy strategy. For example, “*Compared to other first-world countries*, the US has the worst paid parental leave policies. The US *should* better support working parents as they nurture the next generation!” Posts coded as cognitive legitimacy used logical appeals including numbers and statistics such as, “Only 24% of private sector workers in 2022 had access to paid parental leave through their employers, making our mission more important than ever before.” Finally, any posts that discussed governmental involvement in advocacy efforts, such as “We have been meeting with lawmakers to discuss stronger paid parental leave policies,” were identified as regulative. See Appendix A for the full codebook.

Comments were categorized based on the type of legitimizing strategy (pragmatic, moral, cognitive, and/or regulative) used in the post and run through the Qualtrics system to generate sentiment scores. The sentiment scores were measured nominally as: 2 = Very Positive; 1 = Positive; 0 = Neutral/Mixed; -1 = Negative; -2 = Very Negative.

## Intercoder Reliability

To check inter-coder reliability, 10% of the sample (or approximately 7 posts) was coded by both coders. Inter-coder reliability was calculated for each variable using percent agreement. Cohen's Kappa calculations were not possible due to sample size. If there were more than two disagreements, or less than 70% agreement, then the coders met to review the criteria in the code book and clarify any discrepancies. After the second round of intercoder reliability testing, coding was still unreliable for primary and secondary strategy variables, the code book was revised to focus on presence or absence only. There were a total of five rounds of intercoder reliability testing, each including seven posts. After a couple of rounds, the coding scheme for legitimacy tactics was changed from one variable indicating which strategies were the most prominent and second most prominent to a "present" or "not present" scheme because it was too subjective. At this point the code of "Administrative Lobbying" was dropped because the coders had too much trouble differentiating from administrative lobbying and other types of lobbying in the code book. After a viable standard was established between coders, the remaining data was divided for coding. The results of the intercoder reliability testing are presented in **Table 1**.

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a text analysis tool used in other studies (Reich & Pittman, 2020) to create word clouds, generate frequencies, and other functions. In this study, LIWC was used to create word clouds to represent primary themes across the various legitimizing strategies. Results from statistical analyses and the LIWC program are discussed in the following section.

**Table 1**  
*Intercoder Reliability*

| Variable                         | Percent Agreement Round 1 | Percent Agreement Round 2 | Percent Agreement Round 3 | Percent Agreement Round 4 | Percent Agreement Round 5 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| T1- Public events and activism   | 7/7 = 100%                | 1/7= 14.29%               | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 7/7 = 100%                | 6/7 = 85.7%               |
| T2- Grassroots lobbying          | 5/7 = 71.43%              | 5/7= 71.43%               | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 3/7 = 42.9 %              | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T3- Media advocacy               | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T4- Coalition building           | 6/7 = 85.71%              | 7/7 = 100%                | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T5- Expert testimony             | 7/7 = 100%                | 5/7 = 71.43%              | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 5/7 = 71.4%               |
| T6- Voter registration/education | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T7- Research                     | 7/7 = 100%                | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 7/7 = 100%                | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T8- Public education             | 4/7 = 57.14%              | 6/7= 85.7%                | 3/7 = 42.9%               | 4/7 = 57.1%               | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T9- Judicial advocacy            | 7/7 = 100%                | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 4/7 = 57.1%               | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T10- Direct lobbying             | 6/7= 85.71%               | 6/7 = 85.7%               | 5/7 = 71.4 %              | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |
| T11- Administrative lobbying     | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                | 7/7 = 100%                |

**Table 1**  
Continued

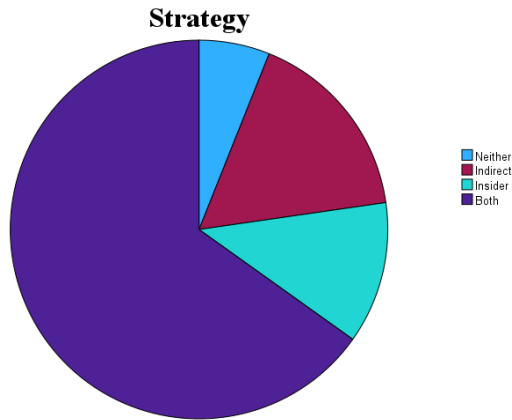
|                           |              |              |             |             |             |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| S1- Pragmatic legitimacy  | 3/7 = 42.86% | 3/7 = 42.86% | 4/7 = 57.1% | 5/7 = 71.4% | 6/7 = 85.7% |
| S2- Moral legitimacy      | 1/7= 14.29%  | 4/7 = 57.14% | 4/7 = 57.1% | 6/7 = 85.7% | 6/7 = 85.7% |
| S3- Cognitive legitimacy  | N/A          | N/A          | 5/7 = 71.4% | 4/7 = 57.1% | 7/7 = 100%  |
| S4- Regulative legitimacy | N/A          | N/A          | 2/7 = 28.6% | 6/7 = 85.7  | 7/7 = 100%  |

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## Analysis/Results

Sixty-six posts made by 8 organizations and public reactions to them were examined. First, the study investigates general advocacy tactics and legitimizing strategies used in the posts. Then, content analysis was used to categorize comments based on message strategies to indicate which had the most engagement. Lastly, based on the legitimizing strategies of the posts, sentiment analysis of comments was conducted to determine the sentiment of the engagement (positive or negative).

Since each tactic was coded separately, the researcher first had to recode the data into indirect and direct strategy variables (**Figure 2**). The posts were originally coded based on tactic type. Indirect strategies included public events and action, grassroots lobbying, media advocacy, coalition building, voter registration/education, research, and public education. Insider strategies included expert testimony, judicial advocacy, direct lobbying, and administrative lobbying. Each of these tactics is detailed in the variables section of the methods, but it is important to recategorize them as indirect and insider because it distinguishes strategies of working inside and outside the system to achieve strategic goals (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Insider advocacy tactics (including direct lobbying, expert testimony, judicial advocacy, and administrative lobbying) were used 51 times (77.3%), and indirect tactics (including public education, media advocacy, grassroots lobbying, public events/actions, voter registration/education, research, and coalition building) were used 54 times (81.8%) collectively in the analyzed posts. Forty-three of the posts (65.15%) used both indirect and insider strategies. Therefore, indirect tactics (that involved external publics) were used more frequently than insider tactics, but it was most common to use them in conjunction with one another (H1).



**Figure 2**

*Distribution of indirect and insider advocacy tactics.*

Regarding positive engagement (H2a), posts that used insider strategies received more likes ( $M = 165.92$ ,  $SD = 335.91$ ) than indirect strategies ( $M = 137.13$ ,  $SD = 301.79$ ). This trend continued when measuring other engagement metrics such as number of shares (H2b) and number of comments (H2c). Insider strategies had a slightly higher mean for number of shares ( $M = 19.86$ ,  $SD = 50.71$ ) than indirect strategies ( $M = 18.22$ ,  $SD = 45.34$ ), which means people were slightly more likely to share a post with others when an insider tactic was used. Similarly, insider strategies generated a higher number of comments ( $M = 83.80$ ,  $SD = 329.37$ ) than indirect strategies ( $M = 54.13$ ,  $SD = 263.11$ ). Again, viewers were more likely to comment on posts that used insider strategies.

The researcher recoded the indirect and direct variables into one strategy variable, in which 1=neither, 2=indirect, 3=insider, and 4=both, to reveal trends when strategies were used together. In SPSS, the researcher selected cases that used both strategies. Then a crosstab equation calculated means and standard deviations. When using both indirect and insider strategies, there were still fewer likes ( $M=139.04$ ,  $SD=309.05$ ) than using insider strategies

exclusively. This was also consistent with the number of shares ( $M=17.47$ ,  $SD=47.51$ ) and comments ( $M=65.53$ ,  $SD=294.21$ ). Overall, using insider strategies exclusively received the most engagement.

To examine the difference in strategy use and engagement, an ANOVA was used. The research ran a One-Way ANOVA and found a significant Levene's value which violates the assumptions of the homogeneity of variances. To account for this, the researcher ran a Welch statistic which revealed no significant effect of the tactic type on the number of likes,  $F(3,62) = 0.85$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (.08). ANOVAs were also conducted for shares and comments and their Levene value was nonsignificant, meaning that assumptions of homogeneity were accounted for. The ANOVA revealed no significant effect of the tactic type on the number of shares,  $F(3,62) = 0.45$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (.72), nor the comments,  $F(3,62) = 0.61$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (.61). Though the ANOVAs did not reveal a significant effect, descriptive statistics can still provide helpful information about general patterns of behavior.

To test Research Questions 1 and 2, the researcher ran frequencies for each legitimizing strategy: pragmatic, moral, cognitive, and regulative. Based on the results, the most common legitimizing strategy was regulative legitimacy ( $n=50$ ), and the second most common was moral legitimacy ( $n=41$ ). This indicates that posts most often discussed policy and/or encouraged readers to consider what is ethical.

Before examining sentiment of comments, visual data was collected for advocacy posts. Though visuals were not explicitly connected with the research questions, in the analysis process the researcher noted the presence of images and videos in advocacy posts. In total, images/graphics were included in 32 of the 66 posts, and videos were used in 12 of the 66 posts.

Of the 33 posts coded as pragmatic, 18 (54.55%) of those included images/graphics, and six (18.18%) included videos. Of the 41 posts coded as moral legitimacy, 16 (39.02%) of those included images/graphics, and eight (19.51%) included videos. Of the 39 posts coded as implementing cognitive legitimacy strategies, 17 (43.59%) of those included images/graphics, and three (7.69%) included videos. Lastly, of the 50 posts coded as regulative, 24 (48%) of those included images/graphics, and six (12%) included videos.

Finally, to test research question 3, the researcher used Qualtrics to generate a sentiment score of the comments. The data were converted from an Excel sheet to CSV format and was imported into Qualtrics 'data' for a survey. Each comment was allocated a sentiment score from -2 to 2 (with -2 being Very Negative and 2 being Very Positive). There was a total of 1,430 comments on the posts analyzed. Data were cleaned to remove comments that used the original coding schemes, leaving 742 comments for analysis. Some comments only included images or gifs, which were not recognized by the Qualtrics sentiment software. Thus, those comments were not awarded a sentiment score. The number of comments on a post for each advocating strategy was as follows: pragmatic legitimacy (674), moral legitimacy (690), cognitive legitimacy (710), and regulative legitimacy (241). These categories were not mutually exclusive. Based on results, posts using a cognitive legitimacy approach had the most engagement of the comments. Comments provide sentiment information, so it is important to delve into the actual content of the comments for each strategy. Though comment sentiment overall leaned more negative, **Table 2** is color-coded to indicate the frequency for each sentiment category.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare sentiment between pragmatic legitimacy appeal (present) and no legitimacy appeal (not present) conditions. Significant

**Table 2**  
*Comment sentiment scores*

| Sentiment Category | Frequency for Pragmatic | Frequency for Moral | Frequency for Cognitive | Frequency for Regulative |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very negative      | 189                     | 193                 | 198                     | 62                       |
| Negative           | 153                     | 156                 | 160                     | 80                       |
| Neutral            | 142                     | 145                 | 150                     | 49                       |
| Positive           | 31                      | 38                  | 43                      | 21                       |
| Very positive      | 23                      | 24                  | 24                      | 10                       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | 538                     | 556                 | 575                     | 222                      |

differences were observed in sentiment scores for pragmatic legitimacy appeal ( $M=-0.84$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ) and no pragmatic legitimacy ( $M=-0.17$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ) conditions;  $t(600)=4.56$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, sentiment scores differed significantly between the moral legitimacy appeal ( $M=-0.82$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ) and no moral legitimacy appeals ( $M=-0.20$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) conditions;  $t(600)=3.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . There was a comparable difference found in sentiment scores for cognitive legitimacy appeal ( $M=-0.81$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ) and no cognitive legitimacy appeals ( $M=0$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ) conditions;  $t(600)=3.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . However, no significant difference was observed in sentiment scores for regulative legitimacy appeal ( $M=-0.73$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ) and no regulative legitimacy appeals ( $M=-0.79$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) conditions;  $t(600)= -0.63$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (0.53).

Standard multiple regression was conducted to determine the accuracy of the independent variables (pragmatic legitimacy strategies [Pragmatic]; moral legitimacy strategies [Moral]; cognitive legitimacy strategies [Cognitive]; regulative legitimacy strategies [Regulative])

predicting comment sentiment. Evaluation of linearity led to the natural log transformation of Pragmatic, Moral, Cognitive, and Regulative. Regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicts comment sentiment,  $R^2=.045$ ,  $R^2_{adj}=.039$ ,  $F(4,597) = 7.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . This model accounts for 5% of the variance in comment sentiment. A summary of regression coefficients is presented in **Table 3**, which indicates that only two (Pragmatic and Cognitive) of the four variables significantly contributed to the model.

LIWC created word clouds for each categorization of legitimacy. These word clouds provided another way for the researcher to analyze a large volume of data and identify consistent themes (WorldCloud.app, n.d.). The word clouds indicated that the most commonly commented words for posts using pragmatic legitimacy strategies were “women,” “vote,” “blue,” “people,” and “democrats.” The words most commented for posts identified as using moral legitimacy strategies were “imagine,” “women,” “people,” “country,” “vote,” and “president.” Similarly, the most commented words for posts using cognitive strategies were “women,” “vote,” “people,” “blue,” and “democrats.” Lastly, the most commented words for posts that used regulative strategies were “imagine,” “people,” “president,” “women,” “pay,” and “country. Each of these word clouds is available in the Appendices.

**Table 3**  
*Coefficients for Model Variables*

|            | <i>B</i> | <i>β</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>Bivariate r</i> | <i>Partial r</i> |
|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------------------|------------------|
| Pragmatic  | -.534    | -.145    | -2.336   | .020     | -.183              | -.095            |
| Moral      | -.140    | -.033    | -.557    | .578     | -.147              | -.023            |
| Cognitive  | -.569    | -.104    | .014     | .014     | -.148              | -.100            |
| Regulative | -.125    | -.053    | -1.236   | .217     | .026               | -.051            |

In conclusion, indirect tactics were used more frequently than insider tactics, but it was most common to use them in conjunction with one another. Interestingly, insider strategies garnered more engagement via likes, shares, and comments, which is inconsistent with previous findings (Guo and Saxton, 2014). Regarding RQ1 and RQ2, the most common legitimizing strategy was regulative legitimacy ( $n=50$ ), and the second most common was moral legitimacy ( $n=41$ ). Comment sentiment overall leaned more negative, and pragmatic and cognitive were the only two strategies that indicated a significant (though small) impact on comment sentiment. These findings are discussed at length in the following section.

### **Discussion**

This study investigated the legitimizing efforts of nonprofit organizations advocating for paid leave policies in socially mediated spaces. While earlier studies have explored legitimizing efforts from a corporate perspective, they have not explicitly addressed how non-corporate organizations develop legitimacy for an issue, for the organization itself, and for a particular course of action (Smith & Ferguson, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2014 as cited in Aghazadeh, 2025). This content analysis identifies which types of legitimacy and advocacy tactics garner positive and/or negative engagement. The hypotheses (H1 and H2) predict that indirect tactics will be used more often and generate more engagement (likes, shares, comments). The research questions (RQ1-RQ3) ask which legitimacy strategies are employed the most often as well as which strategies generate the most positive sentiment in comment responses. Understanding the audience consumption of advocacy tactics and legitimacy strategies in online spaces to informing practitioners efforts to communicate more effectively with stakeholders.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that indirect advocacy tactics are used more often than insider advocacy tactics by organizations advocating for paid leave on Facebook based on prior research (Guo and Saxton, 2010, 2014). Findings supported this hypothesis; advocacy organizations were more likely to use indirect tactics (that involved external publics) than insider tactics, but it was most common to use them in conjunction. In Guo and Saxton's (2014) content analysis of tweets from advocacy organizations, "public education" was the most common tactic, followed by "grassroots lobbying." In the current study of advocacy organizations' Facebook posts, "public education" ranked as the second most common tactic, just behind "judicial advocacy," and "grassroots lobbying" was the third most frequently used tactic. Therefore, "public education" is one of the top message strategies in both studies. This indicates that advocacy organizations are highly education-driven in their campaigns, focusing on building awareness, mobilizing resources, and developing long-term support for the issue to survive and advance the organizational mission.

Hypotheses 2a-2c predicted that indirect strategies will generate more social media engagement (likes, shares, comments) than insider strategies. Though the ANOVAs were not significant, it is still worth considering the descriptive results in analysis. H2a-H2c, which predicted indirect tactics would garner more likes, shares, and comments, were not supported because posts that used insider strategies received more likes than indirect strategies. Interestingly, these findings are not consistent with those of Guo and Saxton (2014), as insider strategies received the most engagement overall. This finding reveals people engaged more with posts on how the organization is changing policies through internal channels and suggests

practitioners should use insider strategies to demonstrate their involvement in policy advocacy to resonate with publics.

It is important to note that reactions (likes/loves/etc.) are viewed as vanity metrics (McLachlan, 2023), meaning that they “[look] impressive at a glance but [don’t] necessarily indicate a company’s overall success in reaching its goals” (p.3). Vanity metrics often lack the context necessary for an organization to accurately gauge current engagement and its impact. Shares and comments, while not always the best metrics for tracking organizational success, are considered stronger engagement metrics because writing a comment or sharing a post requires more time and commitment. Engagement metrics are particularly valuable to advocacy organizations because of their actionability and their ability to gauge perceptions of authenticity (Amaresan, 2024). Despite the different levels of involvement these metrics reveal, insider strategies yielded the most engagement overall.

Insider tactics may receive more engagement simply because they are more shareable. Brandwatch (n.d.) defines shareable content simply as “stuff people want to share” (p.1) and provides some criteria, including: useful, entertaining, inspiring, timely, thought-provoking, and relatable. For example, a post that shares testimonies given to law-makers might be evaluated as more shareable because it is timely and relatable. Shareable content comes in many forms, such as memes or visuals that grab the audience’s attention as well as user-generated content that highlights viewers’ personal experiences (Brandwatch, n.d.). It is important to also recognize that shareability can differ based on platform. Insider strategies may resonate more with Facebook audiences because the goal of insider strategies is to demonstrate action and gather support, and

Facebook groups and pages create a sense of community in which organizations can involve and mobilize their publics.

In light of this, Research Questions 1 and 2 examine which legitimacy strategy is the most common and which is the second most common when advocating for paid leave on Facebook. Based on the results, regulative legitimacy was the most common, and moral legitimacy was the second most commonly used legitimizing strategy. This finding suggests that regulative and moral appeals may be considered more important for developing legitimacy with key stakeholders. Regulative appeals highlight how organizations are attempting to change policy through various lobbying and educational tactics. Advocacy organizations are not only promoting dialogue on social media (Wright & Hinson, 2013; Capizzo, 2018) but also often asking viewers to take part in advocacy efforts by contacting local legislators or learning more about policies in place. It is understandable that they would be one of the most common strategies since the purpose of advocacy organizations is often to challenge current policies. Sharing these efforts on social media also makes sense as a way to garner support for actions such as contacting legislators or outlining politicians' plans regarding important social issues. These advocacy organizations are involved in legislation, but, in states with paid leave policies already in place, they are also engaged in the regulation and implementation of these policies.

Not only are the strategies used important to examine, but also the response to each strategy is illuminating. Research question 3 asked if there was a relationship between legitimacy strategy used in a post and the sentiment of comments in response. Pragmatic, moral, and cognitive strategies, but not regulative, were significant in difference for sentiment between present or absent. Posts that used regulative strategies received less negative interaction overall

(see Table 2). Of valid cases, about 28% of total regulative comments were “very negative” as compared to 34% of cognitive, 35% of moral, and 35% of pragmatic comments. Regulative strategies had about 6-7 % less “very negative” engagement. On the opposite end of the scale, about 4.5% of comments coded as regulative were coded “very positive” as compared with 4.27% for pragmatic, 4.32% for moral, and 4.17% for cognitive. There was little variance in the percentages of “very positive” feedback overall. The lack of variance in positive sentiment generated by legitimizing strategy indicates that practitioners should instead focus efforts on mediating the negative feedback.

Only two (Pragmatic and Cognitive) of the four variables significantly contributed to the model analyzing the relationship between strategy and sentiment. Pragmatic and cognitive strategies were significantly related to more negative sentiment. This finding is interesting because it suggests that strategies focused on self-interest and education led to negative engagement. Potentially, these strategies could also lead to more polarized responses as they yielded more negative sentiment, while moral and regulative strategies attracted more neutral feedback. Since this was an explorative study to apply legitimacy theory to the advocacy space, the results provide a starting point for future researchers to examine the legitimizing strategies of other issue-based organizations.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study extends existing research on advocacy tactics and counters previous findings by showing that insider tactics garnered more engagement via likes, shares, and comments. This distinction may suggest that engagement metrics in advocacy efforts serve different purposes and reflect varying levels of support. Future research should explore the distinct purposes of these

metrics in the advocacy space and could potentially consider the impact of visuals in conjunction with the advocacy tactics in this study. Research could also be expanded to other social media platforms, given differences in nature and purposes of engagement (West, 2024). In addition to its findings on advocacy tactics, this study also contributes to research on legitimacy by applying an advocacy lens.

The results show that advocacy organizations more commonly use regulative and moral approaches in their social media post. These appeals focus on policy-influencing tactics, such as lobbying, and normative tactics, such as asserting what should be. Regulative legitimacy tactics specifically often promote grassroots lobbying efforts that encourage dialogue with the organization and with local legislators and may also highlight organizational meetings with legislators to provide testimony. On the other hand, moral legitimacy focuses on normative behaviors, such as family values. As a platform, Facebook acts as a community-building platform for advocacy organizations to encourage increased dialogue with politicians and often posit what should be. Findings indicated that posts that use pragmatic and cognitive strategies significantly predicted a more negative response. This is an interesting contribution to the literature as it recommends that practitioners in the advocacy landscape should appeal to normative behaviors and involvement with policy making and regulation. Though the overall sentiment was negative, it is interesting that strategies such as appealing to personal self-interest and education had a more negative sentiment. Perhaps for this issue, viewers of the Facebook pages already recognized the need for leave and felt adequately educated on this issue, which would support that social media echo chambers attract individuals who are already involved or connected to the organization in some way. This is an important foundation for future theoretical

research as it provides a legitimizing direction in the advocacy space which has not been the primary focus of previous research.

### **Practical Implications**

This study offers practical insights into both social media and advocacy strategies. Usually, practitioners should be cautious of vanity metrics (such as likes), because metrics, such as comments and shares, demonstrate higher engagement with content. In this case, the engagement level with posts using insider strategies had the most likes as well as shares and comments. Thus, practitioners should prioritize insider advocacy strategies in their social media content, including tactics like expert testimony, judicial advocacy, and direct lobbying. Among the legitimizing strategies used, regulative and moral legitimizing approaches were the most prevalent in this sample. The standard multiple regression indicated that legitimizing strategy explained 5% of the difference of sentiment scores, specifically designating that pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy strategy garnered more negative sentiment. Sentiment did not vary greatly then between strategies, but regulative strategies received about 6-7% less “very negative” feedback. These results suggest to practitioners that viewers appreciated seeing the organization’s direct involvement with policy-making.

Since the variance of positive sentiment between strategy was so low, it may instead be worth discussing how to moderate negative feedback in the comment section. From a for-profit perspective, Sprinklr (2024) suggested moderating negative comments by: never ignoring them, responding quickly, being apologetic, giving a solution privately, and not deleting them. This becomes more complicated for issue-based organizations that are engaged in controversial discussions to change policy. Thus, these organizations need their own unique suggestions to

manage negative comments. Issue-based organizations should focus on ignoring trolls, establishing transparency, inviting further dialogue if appropriate, clarifying misunderstandings, and educating about organizational values (U7 SOLUTIONS, 2024). Much of this involves brainstorming with the team to determine most likely negative comments and creating templates to respond to those situations as well as using analytic tools can also help practitioners identify comments that receive the most engagement so they can proactively address those concerns before they escalate (U7 SOLUTIONS, 2024). For instance, recognizing concerns that appear in comments and addressing those concerns in a future post may provide neutral to correct misconceptions rather than getting involved in a long comment chain.

While Facebook pages naturally encourage echo chambers, interestingly, there was still a significant amount of negative feedback on comments. Since advocacy organizations are also faced with political polarization that may be amplified by algorithmic gatekeepers (White & Boatwright, 2020), it is also important to consider how to overcome social media algorithms. Though White & Boatwright (2020) recommended that practitioners critically consider both the costs and benefits of Facebook, particularly the fact that algorithms impact who sees organizational messages, many issue-based organizations have limited funding and rely on social media. Therefore, one area of future research to consider is how to minimize the impacts of social media algorithms.

## **Limitations**

The main limitation of this study is its focus on Facebook. However, the engagement metrics used (likes, shares, comments) were chosen to remain consistent across multiple social media platforms, ensuring that the advocacy tactics and legitimizing could be compared across

contexts. In these mediated spaces, alternative opinions to the majority are not often expressed, leading to the formation of echo chambers. Another limitation is missing data resulting from an adjustment in the coding procedure. Specifically, the first 20 data points were coded on a primary and secondary basis, rather than a present/not present basis. This change was necessary because many posts used multiple legitimizing strategies, making it too subjective to determine which one was most prominent. Another limitation with intercoder reliability was that with such a small sample of posts, in retrospect, it was feasible for coders to code the entire sample. Finally, the study relies on sentiment scores generated by an AI-powered system, which may misinterpret slang or colloquial language.

### **Conclusion**

This study employed content analysis to explore the advocacy strategies of nonprofit organizations supporting paid family leave policies and to examine how their followers responded to these strategies. It contributes to a contemporary theoretical perspective in which advocates use public relations techniques to further their causes (Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright, 2019). Specifically, it investigates how these advocacy organizations adapt these strategies for a socially mediated environment. Insider tactics garnered the highest engagement through likes, shares, and comments. Among the strategies used, regulative and moral legitimizing approaches were the most prevalent in this sample. Standard multiple regression revealed that the overall model significantly predicted comment sentiment, explaining 5% of the variance. Regression coefficients indicated that both pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy were significant contributors to the model. Social media proves to be a crucial tool for organizations to advance issues like paid leave policies, and results from this

study suggest that strategies focus on internal efforts to change policy yield the most positive engagement. Future research should broaden the analysis to investigate different platforms and further explore the impact of visuals (images/videos) used in conjunction with these strategies and their effects on engagement outcomes.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A- Code book**

#### **UNIT OF ANALYSIS = POST**

##### **Descriptive Information**

Name of Organization:

Link to post:

Post ID number:

Date posted to account:

Was it shared from another account: yes/no

Image present: yes/no

Video present: yes/no

##### **Engagement**

Number of each reaction:

Number of shares:

Number of comments:

## Tactics

Tactics within *post content* adapted from Guo and Saxton (2010, 2014).

| 0 = Not Present<br>1= Present | Code                     | Description of code                                                                                                                                                            | Example of code                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                               | Public events and action | Post that calls publics to engage in strikes, rallies, processions, protests, marches, and other actions. Mentions a recent public event.                                      | “Come out to our rally tomorrow in Uptown Charlotte to support paid parental leave policies in N.C.! Events start at 10 a.m.”                                                 |
|                               | Grassroots lobbying      | Post that wants to mobilize publics to support or reject legislation. This includes signing petitions or having viewers reach out to politicians directly.                     | “Are you struggling as a working parent? Contact your local legislators today to advocate for paid parental leave. Find out how to contact your local legislators at xyz.com” |
|                               | Media advocacy           | Post about policy changes using press releases, building connections with journalists and editors, writing opinion/ed pieces, talking to reporters, and letters to the editor. | “Parental leave has garnered much media attention this week as 70 + corporations closed for the day in protest of current paid parental leave policies across the nation.”    |
|                               | Coalition building       | Post that is linked to building a coalition with other organizations for policy changes. Uses words such as “Partner” or “Partnerships”                                        | “Our organization is partnering with XYZ to advocate for paid parental leave in America.”                                                                                     |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Expert Testimony             | Mentions that organization participated or plan to participate in a committee hearing, testimony when invited by a legislative body. Uses the word “Expert.”                            | “Today, members of our organization were delighted to be invited by _____ to attend a committee hearing about instituting paid parental leave policies in our state!” |
| Voter registration/education | Post that encourages publics to vote in elections, registers for voting, educates about voting issues, and endorses pro-equality candidates.                                            | “Make your voice heard! You can sign up to vote on important policies such as paid parental leave by visiting xyz.com.”                                               |
| Research                     | Post that mentions research findings or analysis of research about policy and social issues.                                                                                            | “The Pew Research Center has found that among 41 developed countries, only the U.S. lacks paid parental leave.”                                                       |
| Public education             | Post that educates and informs publics about public policy. Informing or using a logical approach. This includes providing links to articles or informing the public about politicians. | “On average, organizations in the US give employees 4 weeks of paid leave.”                                                                                           |
| Judicial advocacy            | Mentions that organizations are working for social change through the legal system. Mention of judicial advocacy or work to change policy.                                              | “Leaders in our organization were in court yesterday advocating for paid parental leave policies in Tennessee.”                                                       |
| Direct lobbying              | Persuade politicians, elected officials, or staff of elected officials to influence legislation. Meeting politicians to influence policy.                                               | “Yesterday, we met with Senator _____ to advocate for stronger paid parental leave policies in NY!”                                                                   |

Administrative  
lobbying

Attempts to influence  
administration by  
commenting on policy, rule-  
making, and building  
relationships with  
government officials.

Catholic shrine declines  
\$750 “tourism” grant from  
NY county thanks to a  
complaint from Americans  
United.”

---

## Legitimizing strategies

| 0 = Not present<br>1 = Present | Code                  | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Example                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                | Pragmatic legitimacy  | Self-interest and based on exchange. Look for words like “Moms,” “I,” and “you.”                                                                                                                                                              | “Have you been forced to choose between staying home with your newborn and making a livable wage? New paid parental leave policies could help relieve this stress for Americans. |
|                                | Moral legitimacy      | Normative value systems/ What’s the right thing to do? How to make better policy. Focuses on ethicality. “We should” or “we should not.”                                                                                                      | Compared to other first-world countries, the US has the worst paid parental leave policies. The US should better support working parents as they nurture the next generation!    |
|                                | Cognitive legitimacy  | Comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness. Logical appeals. For any post that identifies either the “public education” or “research” tactic should also be marked as cognitive legitimacy.                                                  | Only 24% of private sector workers in 2022 had access to paid parental leave through their employers, making our mission more important than ever before.                        |
|                                | Regulative legitimacy | <p>“an organization’s ability to demonstrate compliance with regulations, standards, and expectations from government institutions”</p> <p>Any post that is marked as “judicial advocacy” should also be marked as regulative legitimacy.</p> | We have been meeting with lawmakers to discuss stronger paid parental leave policies.                                                                                            |

## **UNIT OF ANALYSIS = COMMENTS**

### **Descriptive**

Name of organization:

Link to original post:

Post ID number:

Date posted:

Number of likes:

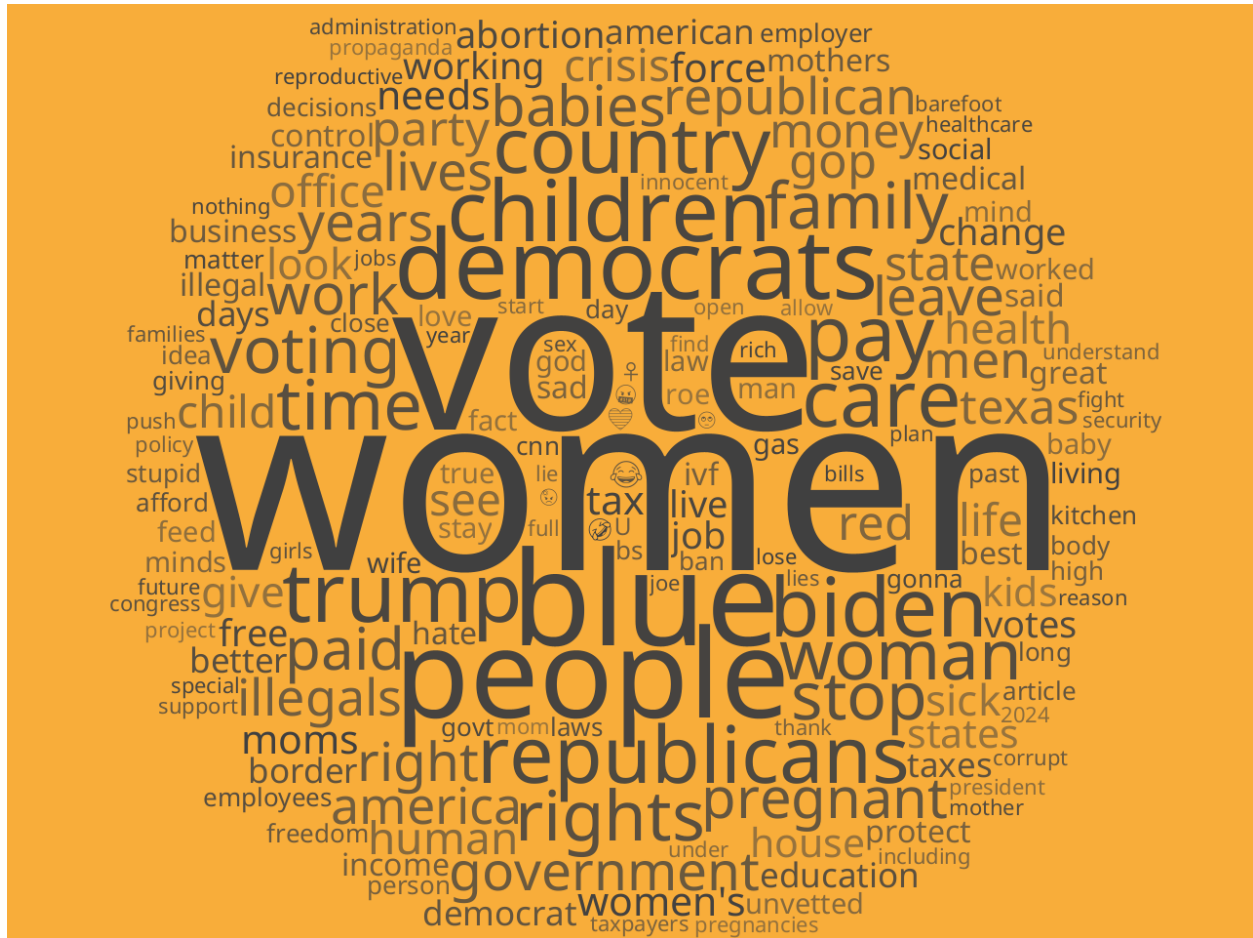
Number of dislikes:

Number of replies:

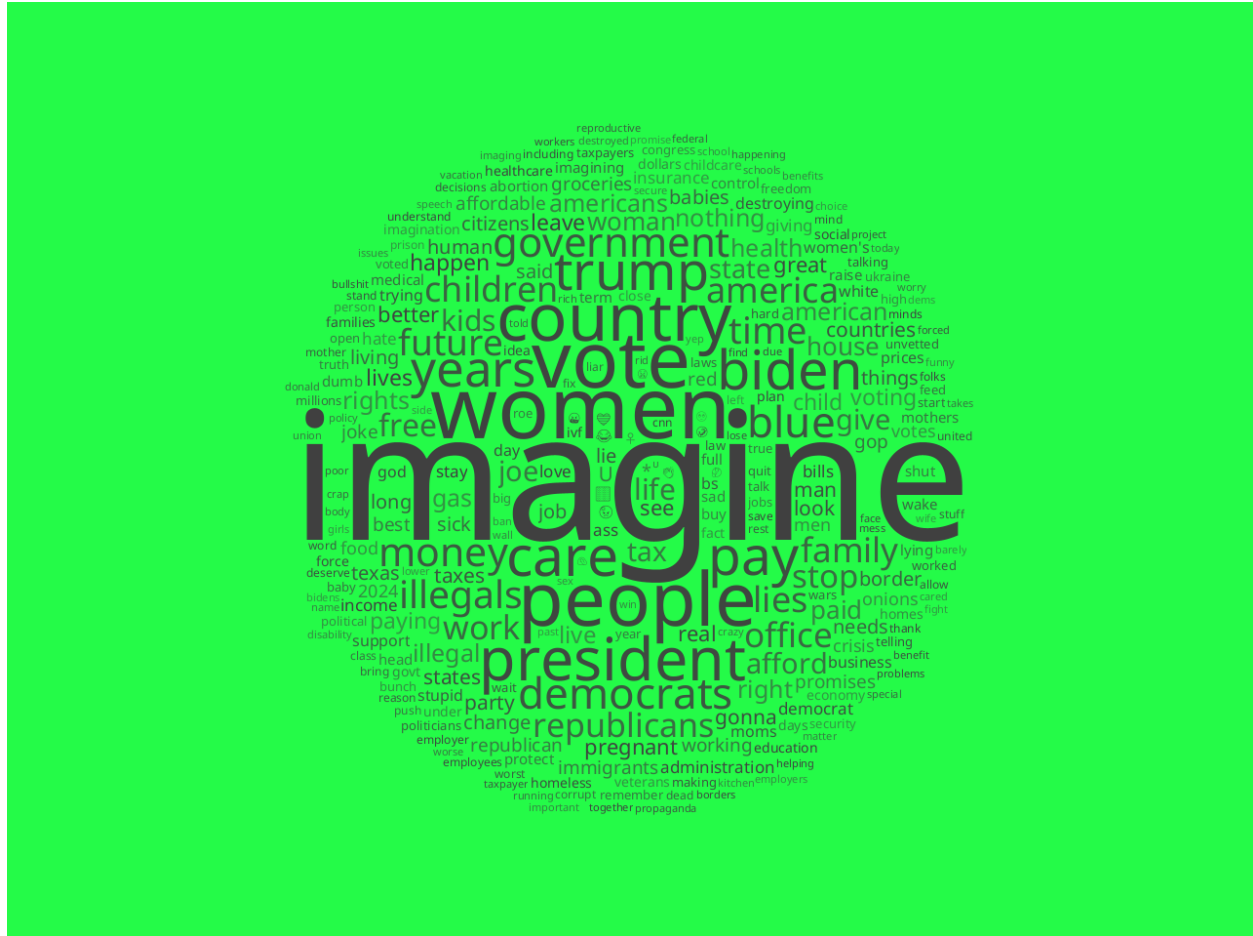
### **Engagement**

Sentiment and descriptives identified via the LIWC system.

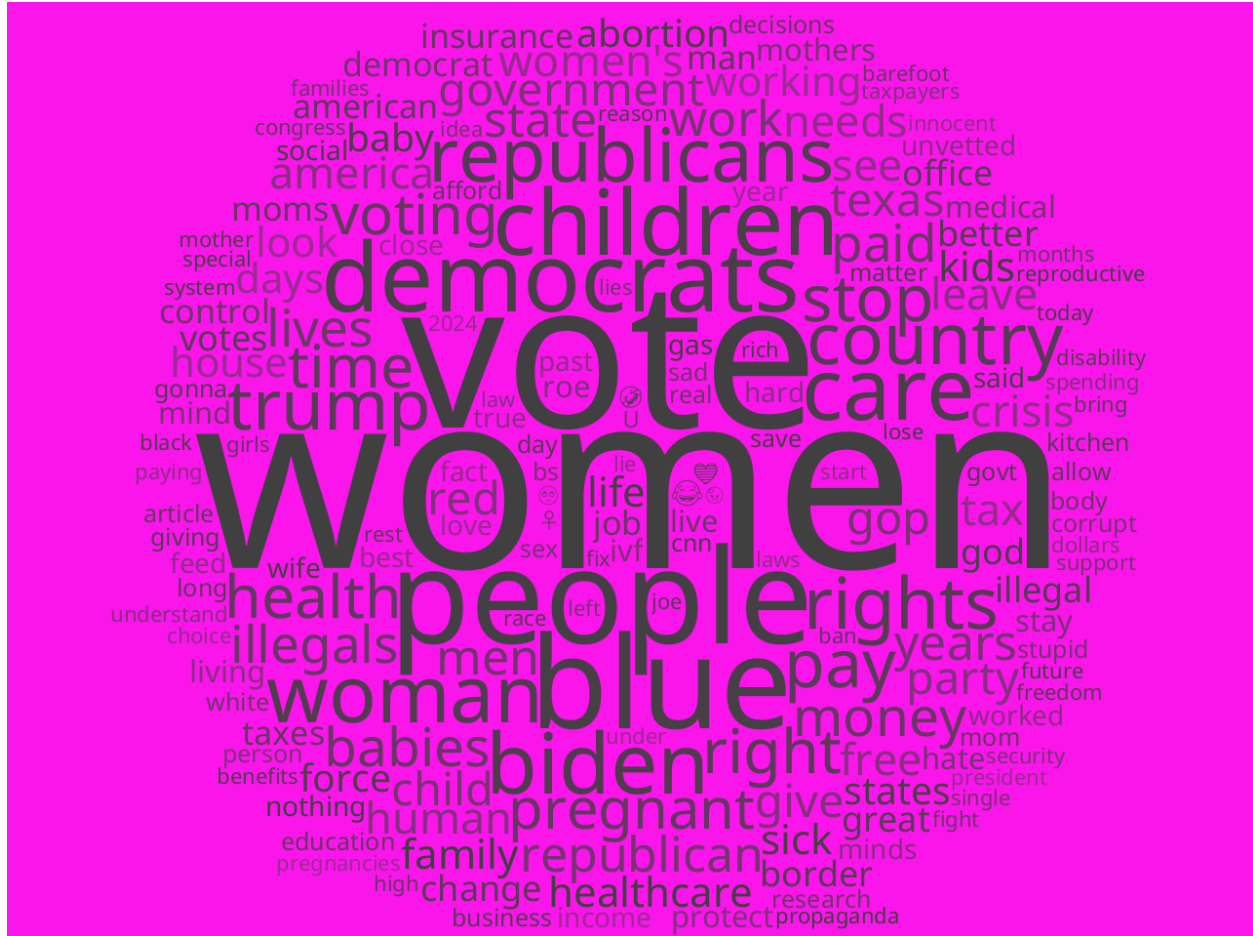
## Appendix B- Word Cloud of Comments on Posts Using Pragmatic Legitimacy



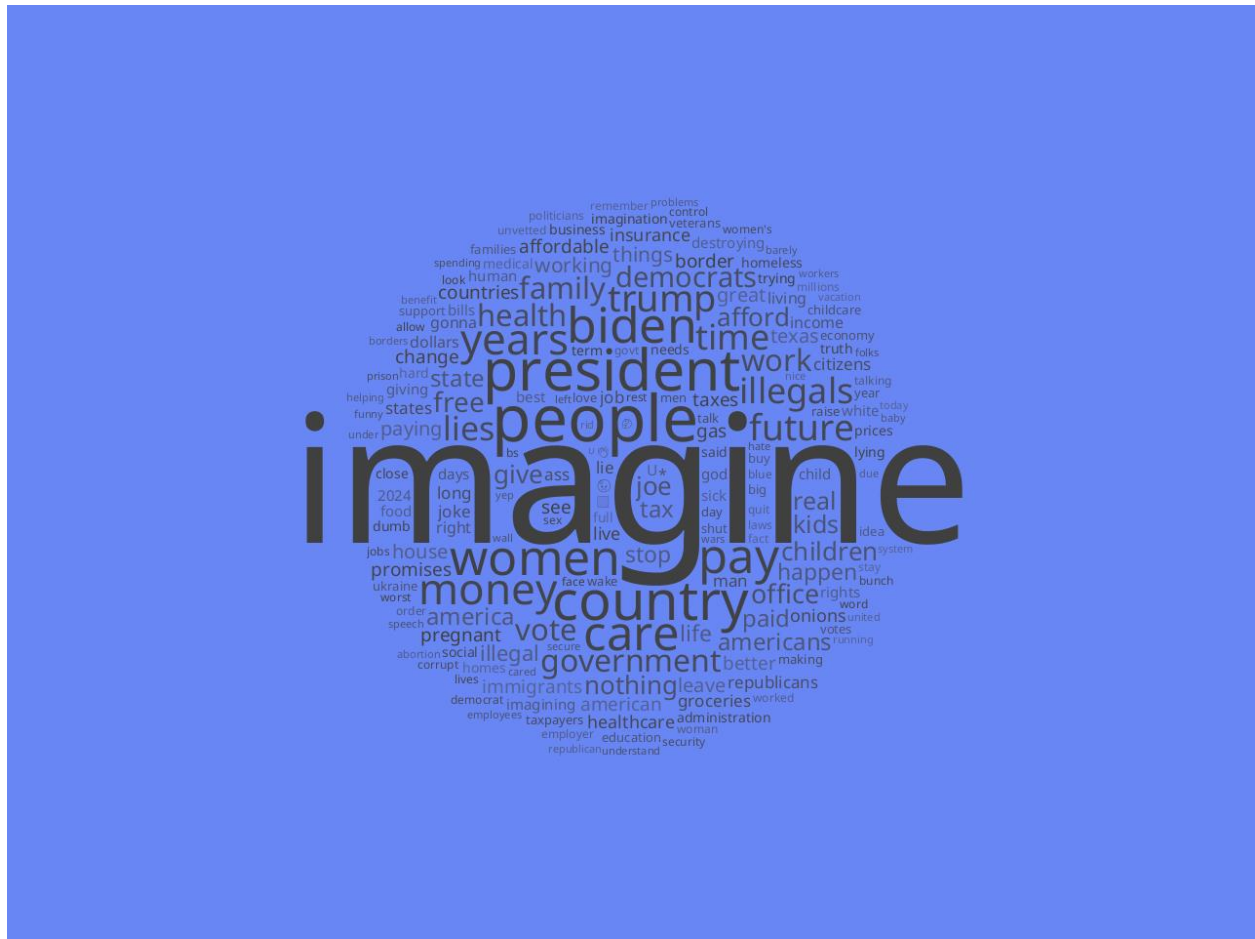
## Appendix C- Word Cloud of Comments on Posts Using Moral Legitimacy



#### Appendix D- Word Cloud of Comments on Posts Using Cognitive Legitimacy



## Appendix E- Word Cloud of Comments on Posts Using Regulative Legitimacy



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Internal perspectives of advocacy organization practitioners: recommendations for best practice and advancing the paid leave movement**

## **Abstract**

This study uses qualitative interviews to gauge the effectiveness of legitimizing strategies used by issue-based organizations advocating for paid leave. Previous research has focused on legitimizing efforts from a corporate perspective, but this study expands the theoretical framework to advocacy organizations who have adopted public relations strategies to help achieve their goals. Twelve workers from organizations advocating for paid leave were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis was used to identify themes from these interviews. The analysis revealed three primary themes: lived experiences of particular constituents, expansion of paid leave, and lack of urgency. Implications are discussed.

## **Positionality Statement**

I am a 27-year-old, married, white woman with no children. I was born and raised in the United States. I hold a Bachelor of Science in Communication, a Master of Science in Communication and Information, and am currently a doctoral candidate at a university in the Southeast. I acknowledge the privileges associated with my identity and the access to resources that I have, which are not available to everyone. In conducting my research, I strive to remain humble and mindful of my privilege, and I actively seek to listen to and learn from those with different lived experiences.

## **Introduction**

Paid leave policies have gained considerable momentum in recent years, as governments, businesses, and advocacy organizations work to address issues of gender equality, workforce participation, and family well-being. As efforts for the movement have increased, advocacy organizations have become key players in the policymaking process. In the first study, several insights emerged from the content analysis that necessitated a deeper exploration through interviews. Study 2 engages in-depth interviews to understand workers' perspectives on which legitimizing strategies have been most effective in fostering support for paid leave. This is meant to provide an internal perspective to provide valuable insights into the impact of certain strategies - such as public education campaigns, coalition building, and direct lobbying.

This study will contribute to extant theory by expanding legitimacy theory outside the corporate perspective providing guidance for practitioners on best strategies. Legitimacy theory, which focuses on the alignment of the organization with public expectations (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; and Diez-Martin, Prado-Roman, & Blanco-Gonzalez, 2013), is an appropriate theoretical framework as paid leave is a sociopolitical issue that relies on the support of their publics. The results of these interviews also inform practice by providing suggestions of how to overcome common challenges identified by interviewees.

## **Literature Review**

### **Advocacy as Issue Management**

As discussed in Study 1, whereas conceptualizations of activism and advocacy are often conflated, scholars (Choi & McKeever, 2025; Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019) have made important distinctions between the two and

advanced research to explicate those differences. Advocates work within existing systems to influence change, while activists typically aim to challenge and dismantle these systems (Choi & McKeever, 2025, p. 84). As the focus of this research is how organizations navigate the system to influence policy, “advocacy” is the more appropriate conceptual framework. Advocacy organizations, for example, seek “novel, bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to local contexts and the interests and values of the communities involved” (Seyfang & Smith, 2007, p. 585). Over time, advocacy research in public relations has evolved; initially, advocates were often viewed as antagonists or as practitioners only promoting the best interests of their own companies. The contemporary scholarly focus has evolved to examining how advocacy organizations engage public relations strategies to legitimize their issues in the public eye (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2019; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019).

While traditional public relations tactics have long been used by advocates (Coombs & Holladay, 2007), academic research on that practice has expanded and evolved mainly over the last decade. Many scholars, including Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright (2019) and Sommerfeldt (2013), have made significant contributions to this area of research. This study extends this work by collecting qualitative data through in-depth interviews that explores the organizational approach to advocacy. Whereas Study 1 focused on socially mediated strategies and engagement with stakeholders, Study 2 delves deeper into the personal accounts of individuals within organizations advocating for paid leave in order to provide valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of advocacy efforts, specifically in the area of paid leave advocacy.

Rhetorical scholars in public relations define advocacy as presenting well-reasoned arguments to influence collective decisions. However, the nature of that process varies

depending on who is advocating and what cause the advocates represent (Aghazadeh, 2022). This distinction is particularly important for sensitive policy issues, such as paid leave, in which marginalized communities are often disproportionately impacted. In public health literature, social determinants of health have highlighted some of the underrecognized variables of community health. The social determinants of health are closely related to the distribution of power and political decisions. Upstream political decisions have inequitable impact on public health outcomes for various populations (Arcaya et al, 2015). The social determinants framework also challenges the idea of health as simply the absence of disease. The Healthy People 2030 campaign identifies the social determinants of health as follows: economic status, educational status, locality and neighborhood, social situation, and healthcare. More than one of these determinants is impacted by the lack of paid leave for many Americans. Factors such as race, class, and gender, along with broader cultural norms, affect who is most affected by the lack of paid leave. For example, research shows that women, particularly women of color, face significant barriers in accessing paid leave (Bailey, 2021), and these inequities are compounded by societal norms that often place caregiving responsibilities on women (Saad-Lessler & Bahn, 2017).

Social determinants of health are further impacted by the current political landscape and reaffirmed through the silencing of voices. For example, if a single mother of five children cannot find a babysitter and does not have a car or walkable access to public transportation, her voice will not be heard through her vote on important political issues such as paid leave. Though access to paid leave does not only impact women, it has disproportionately impacted them (Women's Bureau, 2024). Internationally, women's health issues have been undermined through

a process referred to as norm spoiling. Sanders and Jenkins (2022) define norm spoiling as the opportunity to discredit important efforts in the promotion of women's health primarily through a process they refer to as "control, alt, delete." The control tactic identifies how discussions about women's health are quite literally controlled. A perfect example of this is the "global gag order," originally created by the Reagan administration and reinstituted by the Trump administration during his first term as president. The "global gag order" prevented NGOs from discussing issues about women's reproductive health or risk losing governmental funding. When it was reinstituted, it imposed even harsher repercussions for violators by cutting off funding not only for family planning but also for more general issues like malaria treatments (Sanders & Jenkins, 2022). The altering ("alt") tactic reframes women's rights movements as antithetical to traditional, religious values (Sanders and Jenkins, 2022). Similarly, the deleting tactic refers to how many nations still avoid voting positively on anything that uses terms related to sexual orientation or reproductive rights. These tactics all serve to disrupt discussions of women's health- hence the "control, alt, delete" metaphor. It prevents discussion of issues disproportionately impacting marginalized groups from gaining much traction. Advocacy organizations must then consider how to provide support to promote these marginalized issues in various spaces. Though paid leave is an international issue, this study particularly focuses on the U.S.

This study offers a unique perspective on advocacy by examining the strategies and efforts of organizations advocating for paid leave, an issue with wide-ranging implications for families across the country. Ultimately, it frames advocates as issue managers; these practitioners

not only raise awareness of important issues but also navigate the challenges of legitimizing and advocating for policy change within the existing system.

### **What is issues management?**

Issues management has been studied extensively in public relations research. According to Dougall (2008) from the Institute for Public Relations, “issues management is an anticipatory, strategic management process that helps organizations detect and respond appropriately to emerging trends or changes in the sociopolitical environment” (p. 1). Issues differ from risks temporally. Risks are early-identified problems that could impact the organization whereas issues have already been identified and tracked. Essentially, risks can mature into issues, especially without proper management. Issues management differs from risk and crisis management due to the longevity of the situation. Crises are catastrophic, sudden events that caused detrimental harm, such as employee injury, that typically rely on strategies ranging from defensive to more apologetic responses (Coombs, 2007). An issue, however, has the potential to cause great harm, and in the corporate world it becomes a crisis when the everyday functions and reputation of the organization are threatened (Coombs, 2007). However, with nonprofit advocacy organizations, the impacts on everyday functionality of the organization is less relevant as these organizations formed around controversial issues. While routine business is important to nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups form to address larger social issues and subsequently adopt public relations strategies to achieve their goals.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of social determinants of health, political and cultural factors can complicate issues management. Social issues are inherently connected with political issues because advocacy efforts often challenge current policies through engagement

with legislators. Shaping public policy is the “dominant and original objective” of issues management (Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2015)—especially for nonprofit advocacy organizations. Advocacy practitioners at nonprofits might survey their communities on important policy opinions or lobby legislators to influence their votes. Advocacy organizations also commonly donate money to political candidates who support certain issues. For example, in 2022, after the reversal of *Roe v Wade*, Planned Parenthood funneled \$50 million into Democratic candidates in the midterm elections (CBS News, 2017). Policies such as paid leave also impact the general public directly. Additionally, policies are directly influenced by U.S. culture; cultural norms also influence issue development and advocacy strategies. American culture is often seen as highly individualistic and career-driven (Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023; Thakuria, 2025). The lack of collectivism and the focus on personal success further complicate efforts to promote and enact family-centric policies.

These environmental factors impact the maturation of issues and require constant attention. Issues are often identified and monitored through a process known as environmental scanning. According to Heath (2013), environmental scanning is a continuous research method of collecting information from the environment to inform organizational decision-making. Essentially, this process identifies, monitors, and addresses emerging issues. Although environmental scanning began as a research method for business management, these core strategies remain essential to public relations efforts supporting various types of organizations. As quoted in Heath (2006), environmental scanning in the context of public relations involves gathering information about public opinion of the organization and gauging alignment between organizational values and those of their stakeholders (Dozier, 1986). This includes internal and

external publics as well as the environmental changes that impact them. For example, scanning for technological advances could lead to the adoption of telehealth services to reach people in rural areas who need to see specialists but live hours away and lack transportation. Scanning requires the organization to identify the issue, take action to minimize its impact, and continuously monitor the issue.

Environmental scanning in public relations helps maintain homeostasis between an organization and its stakeholders (Ciszek, 2015). Scanners for any organization must have deep insight into the systems in which they operate (Heath, 2006). Scanners for advocacy organizations might consult with experts, community leaders, advisory boards, and those involved with their coalition to gather important information or access pertinent resources; the process is increasingly complex, though. Scanning efforts were once easily compartmentalized between industry lines and because of a limited news cycle. Now boundaries are less clear because of digital access and the 24/7 news cycle (Heath, 2006). Scanning requires highly-trained staff familiar with their industry and is often aided by specialized software like Sprout Social—a social media monitoring tool. Overall, environmental scanning is a highly specialized skill that requires funding, time, skilled workers, and resources. Environmental scanning involves engaging in dialogue, building relationships, and understanding the intricacies of organizational stakeholders. These are all theoretical foundations of issues management and public relations as a practice.

Theoretically, issue management supports elements of dialogue, relationship management, and stakeholder theory. The dialogic approach was designed to foster the co-creation of meaning and engage stakeholders in important conversations that help organizations

participate in civil society (Coombs, 2006). However, dialogic theory has been critiqued for lacking consideration of power dynamics, particularly regarding who has access, knowledge, and/or the capacity to participate (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Still, dialogue can help build relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory recognizes that organizations have many different stakeholders, and scholars must take those differences into account to engage in ethical and effective communication (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders are commonly grouped so that communication tactics can be strategic and stakeholder-specific. Stakeholders have traditionally been segmented in various ways. According to the situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1968), a foundational theory in public relations research, publics are often grouped based on their level of engagement with the organization—either active or passive. This classification depends on problem recognition (knowing there is a problem), constraint recognition (perception of obstacles and how they limit what publics can do), and level of involvement (how connected people feel to the organization/situation). This segmentation method traditionally served as a predictor of activism (Ciszek, 2015), often treating activists and advocacy efforts as a threat to the organization. Through a more critical approach to public relations, Dutta (2009) articulates the shift in perspective from viewing advocacy as a threat to public relations to recognizing advocates as public relations practitioners. This perspective shift is also intended to amplify voices that challenge the current power structures at play. While this segmentation method has evolved since its inception, problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement remain helpful predictors of engagement.

Other conceptualizations of stakeholders further recognize the complexities of audience segmentation. Stakeholders such as customers, employees, communities, and legislators influence the management of issues. Each of these stakeholders is uniquely linked to the organization (Rawlins, 2006). Stakeholders like stockholders, members of Congress, state legislators, regulators, and boards of directors represent enabling links because they have some level of control over the organization itself (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In the context of paid leave in the current study, primary stakeholders that provide enabling links include legislators and government regulators. Many advocacy groups work directly to change policy and must connect with lawmakers to discuss changes to policies impacting their communities. Other stakeholders, such as employees, suppliers, consumers, and retailers, act as functional links that are essential to day-to-day tasks and processes (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Stakeholders that are functionally linked to the organization are also essential in issue management because they control access to necessary resources. While advocacy groups do not typically have consumers, they rely on the work of employees who work daily to achieve organizational objectives. Stakeholders like competitors and professional societies represent normative linkages because they share common interests with the organization and can help identify/regulate industry standards (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Paid leave advocacy is not exactly an industry, but it functions as a larger coalition; therefore, stakeholders that provide normative linkages could include other organizations within the coalition. Organizations within the paid leave coalition rely on each other for resources, connections, and support to build policies that work cohesively together. Lastly, stakeholders, like NGOs and activists, who do not usually interact with the organization but become involved based on organizational behavior represent diffused linkages (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Advocacy

organizations themselves can act as diffused linkages to corporations, such as those involved in the “Big Formula” controversy (De Shay, 2024), in which some organizations in the billion-dollar formula industry advocate against paid leave since it is better for their bottom line. These stakeholders engage with the issue management process in different ways.

Navigating the needs of various stakeholders is a common challenge faced by organizations, especially if there are conflicting stakeholder interests. Despite varying stakeholder needs and uncontrollable environments, organizations need to demonstrate that their values and interests align with those they serve. This alignment helps legitimize the organization’s existence as well as any issues it supports. Therefore, legitimacy emerges as an appropriate theoretical perspective through which to study advocacy efforts.

### **Legitimacy Theory**

Legitimacy theory provides a robust framework for understanding how organizations navigate and align with the expectations of their stakeholders. Leading scholars in legitimacy theory define it as the alignment of stakeholder expectations with the actions of the organization (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2021; Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; and Diez-Martin, Prado-Roman, & Blanco-Gonzalez, 2013). Suchman (1995) identified three main types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on self-interest, while moral legitimacy relies on normative beliefs about right and wrong. Cognitive legitimacy, on the other hand, appeals to logic and the ability to make sense of something. In 2021, Marschlich and Ingenhoff expanded on this model by introducing a fourth type, regulative legitimacy. According to Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021), regulative legitimacy refers to “an organization’s ability to demonstrate compliance with regulations, standards, and expectations from government

institutions” (p. 2). These four types of legitimacy guided the interviews for this study of nonprofit advocacy organizations; examples of each strategy are provided below.

Legitimacy strategies have primarily been studied from the corporate perspective, with corporate social responsibility (CSR) often playing a key role in legitimizing organizations by demonstrating congruence between the organization’s values and those of their publics. For example, Texas Instruments partnered with Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas and provided calculators to the Scouts while also teaching them basic coding skills. This initiative was particularly noteworthy because it introduced young girls to a male-dominated field (Needle, 2024). This demonstrated alignment between stakeholders who value women in STEM programs and organizational actions that provided girls the resources to succeed therein. Most likely, this CSR campaign began with practitioners scanning the environment to identify not only threats but also potential opportunities. This strategic process is continuous and can help identify legitimacy gaps—when organizational actions violate expectations held by their key publics (Sethi, 1977)—as well as external or institutional factors that impact organizational objectives. The current study illuminates and expands the understanding of the complexities of legitimizing strategies for nonprofit advocacy organizations. Advocacy organizations are already issue-centered and often address controversial matters. Formal advocacy efforts rely on a committed membership base from which to draw further resources and support (Sommerfeldt, 2013). This means these organizations have the increasing need to maintain- or, for newer organizations, create- loyalty with those members (Gamson, 1975). Establishing loyalty and developing relationships with stakeholders is key for advocacy groups to function effectively and legitimize their organizational goals.

Suchman (1995) offered some general strategic advice indicating that legitimacy can be developed by (1) adapting to conform to expectations, (2) attempting to change expectations of stakeholders to align with what you are already doing, or (3) attempting to become identified with important symbols, values, or institutions that have already been deemed legitimate. The current study extends this understanding and examines strategies for specific legitimacy types outlined by Suchman (1995) and Marchlich & Ingenhoff (2021): pragmatic, moral, cognitive, and regulative. As mentioned earlier, pragmatic legitimacy relies on elements of self-interest and develops an exchange relationship between the organization and the stakeholders. Ultimately, it focuses on how the stakeholders can benefit from interaction. For-profit organizations might emphasize product exchange and what their audience can get from purchasing, but nonprofit advocacy organizations are more concerned with supporting policy change and how it can impact the publics they serve directly, such as giving them the chance to care for a sick parent in the future through access to paid leave.

Moral legitimacy involves evaluatory judgments of organizational activities based on socially constructed ideas of what is right and wrong (Burlea & Popa, 2013). This type of legitimacy is granted to an organization when it “deliberate[s] rather than manipulate[s] their public (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006)” (as cited in Burlea & Popa, 2013, p.1588). Moral legitimacy highlights the importance of dialogue, trust, and loyalty for an organization. For example, Patagonia supports environmental sustainability efforts to align with ethical principles of protecting the environment and supporting future generations. This work increases conversation about important issues and demonstrates that the organization not only cares about selling products but also to do social good by protecting nature. Cognitive legitimacy includes both

comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness (Suchman, 1995). This research primarily focuses on comprehensibility, which exhibits coherency and understanding of organizational actions (Burlea and Popa, 2013). Communication is a receiver phenomenon, so if audiences are not understanding the information or what is being asked of them, true dialogue is not occurring. The last type of legitimacy this study focuses on is regulative legitimacy. Regulative legitimacy means the organization is demonstrating compliance with regulations and standards (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). While corporations focus on monitoring and regulation, nonprofits aim to challenge existing policy. For example, by engaging with legislators to advocate for policy change, advocacy organizations demonstrate their commitment to regulation. This type of dialogue particularly needs take power dynamics into account, as building relationships with legislators and understanding them as a unique stakeholder is inherent in the process. These types of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive but provide insight into organizational strategy.

Advocacy organizations addressing complex political issues must strategically adapt their approaches to balance both strategic and institutional pressures. When advocating for a politicized issue like paid leave, these organizations must navigate the challenges of legitimacy—both in terms of institutional legitimacy (how they align with existing political frameworks) and strategic legitimacy (how their messages resonate with different stakeholders). The current study considers both institutional factors, focusing on the highly politicized issue of paid leave, and strategic factors, examining how advocacy organizations adjust their messages for different stakeholders. To further understand the intricacies of advocacy strategies in a political environment, qualitative methods are necessary to provide richness through the analysis of descriptive participant experiences (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) – specifically, experiences

those that work at advocacy organizations whether it be in policy building or community-level gathering. Advocacy organizations have historically challenged current policies through a variety of strategies, such as grassroots lobbying and educational materials, but this issue is unique in that many people agree the need for paid leave is apparent, but how to support such policies is not as apparent. Paid leave advocacy organizations are only a few decades old and continue to gain traction as more states pass leave policies. Individuals working at these advocacy organizations take on a variety of titles depending on their specialty area including legal experts, community partners, and communication specialists. Each role and each organization bring an interesting frame to the overall movement. Thus, the following question guides this research:

**RQ: How do practitioners at organizations advocating for paid leave perceive the effectiveness of various legitimizing strategies?**

### **Method**

This study conducted qualitative interviews to collect primary data from practitioners at advocacy organizations currently advocating for paid leave. These data are used to explore legitimizing strategies of advocacy organizations.

### **Procedure**

**Data Collection.** Organizations were chosen by internet searches of organizations that advocate for paid leave across the U.S.; for-profit organizations were not included in this analysis, as the researcher aims to fill the gap of legitimizing strategies of advocacy groups specifically. Following IRB-approved processes, recruitment involved contacting organizations via email and in some cases follow-ups by phone, using information provided on their websites.

To accommodate different contact methods, the researcher wrote an email and phone script for purposes of recruitment. Recruitment materials are available in Appendix C.

**Sampling.** To qualify for this study, research participants had to work in a public relations or closely related function for a nonprofit advocating for paid leave and be over the age of 18. The researcher recruited participants using publicly available contact information available on websites of organizations advocating for paid leave policies. Additionally, the researcher used snowball sampling, as this population is highly connected, which helped increase the sample size for the study. The sample of the study included a total of 12 participants of various organizational positions. Nine participants were female (75%), and three were male (25%), with one self-identifying as transgender. Of the organizations in this study, six were nationally based (50%), five were state or community based (41.67%), and one was global (0.08%). Participants were offered a \$40 Amazon gift card as an incentive.

**Interview Procedure.** Interviews were conducted between November 2024 and March 2025. The interviews took place via Zoom because of the wide geography of participants, with an average duration of 1 hour per interview. All interviews were video-recorded with the participants' consent (consent form is available in Appendix A) and transcribed using OtterAI, followed by manual edits. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants.

**Measures/Protocol.** The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were consistently covered across participants. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the internal point of view in advocacy efforts. For example, participants were asked

“How, if at all, does your organization appeal to global norms?” and “What, if any, strategies does your organization use to make the message understandable?” These questions were developed based on a review of the literature on advocacy strategies and legitimacy theory. Touring questions were used to develop a sense of comfort with the participants and establish some background information. Other questions covered key areas such as advocacy successes and failures, organizational structure, and various legitimizing strategies. Probing questions (Robinson, 2023) were used to gain deeper insights into the nuances of participants' experiences and to encourage elaboration on their responses. The full interview guide is presented in the appendices (Appendix B).

### **Data Analysis**

Since this study is building on existing theoretical concepts, a grounded theory approach was not appropriate. According to Wutich, Beresford, & Bernard (2024), when using Braun and Clarke's reflexive style analysis, there is no minimum sample size, and researchers should rely on the PRICE model to establish saturation. The PRICE model uses steps for perspectivation, recapitulation, integration, crystallization, and edification to identify a point of saturation (Naeem et al., 2024, as cited in Wutich, Beresford, & Bernard, 2024). Once interviews were transcribed, responses from the participants' answers were manually coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which includes six phases: familiarization with data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and production of the report. The researcher began by familiarizing with the data during collection. This means the researcher recorded notes for coding ideas and repeatedly read the transcripts. To generate initial codes, the researcher informally, yet systematically, analyzed the data to write notes and highlight concepts to revisit. This is meant to inform phase three –

identifying themes. By sorting different codes into potential themes, the researcher can organize the data to look for main recurring concepts. This data is then visually represented to help identify which themes are most significant and allow the researcher to separate primary themes, and sub themes. These themes were then refined in phase four by verifying the codes categorized into each theme to form coherent patterns and ensuring individual themes accurately reflect the data set. These are solidified in phase five, when the themes were officially defined and named. Lastly, the consolidated report tells the story of the data through thematic analysis.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis, the researcher began by thoroughly familiarizing herself with the data. The transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to generate initial codes, such as story-telling, universality, and urgency—concepts that were repeated throughout the interviews. These codes offer insight into overarching patterns, contributing to a deeper understanding of advocacy strategies for paid leave. By evaluating a national issue, the researcher reveals the legitimizing strategies used by issue-based organizations and contributes to previous issues management literature. Additionally, this analysis offers practical guidance to practitioners within these organizations, which have formed because, as one participant stated, “the laws do not yet reflect the reality of our lives” (Participant A). The following sections detail the themes identified through the categorization of these codes, offering an overview of the strategies and challenges faced by practitioners at these advocacy organizations.

## **THEME 1: Lived Experiences of Particular Constituents**

It is no surprise that advocates rely heavily on storytelling that is highly based on passion. This strategy was consistent across all interviews and emerged as a key approach used by organizations to influence shifts in public opinion and policy, which is supported by Participant B's statement:

“I think storytelling is probably one of our strongest advocacy tools...like when leaders are hearing from their own constituents just how desperately they need these policies, it becomes a really different conversation than if it's us coming in and having these conversations.”

Participant E directly said, “we really try to promote lived experiences.” Similarly, Participant A stated that:

“...data and research [are] important, but we also need to leverage the personal stories and commitment and passion and fire and lived experiences of those folks who have either had, or more often have not had, access to the kind of policies that can really make or break a family's economic security....And so we exist to help bring forward those stories and lived experiences to help educate folks that this was not an epidemic of personal failing. This is a structure problem, and a structure problem can be fixed, and so we can kind of all play a role in helping make that happen and put the real human face and urgency and passion behind what it takes to change the narrative and make things happen.”

This type of storytelling provides information on the downstream effects of upstream policies and the stigma that accompanies them, aligning with Arcaya et al (2015), who argue that

upstream political decisions have inequitable impact on public health outcomes for various populations. Specifically, forms of upstream stigma—such as sexism, racism, and classism—shape how individuals are impacted by national policies. Systems are based in these stigmas and affect important aspects of Americans’ lives. Participant K provided support for the formative nature of such policies, illustrating the downstream impacts that widen the gap between different socioeconomic groups.

“The life course is really impacted by policy and our systems... For example, access to safe and stable housing, safe neighborhoods, those kinds of things as well that can be really formative, especially in the early childhood years, and really shape the way that the brain develops and sees the world and responds to stress and those kinds of things.”

(Participant K)

In this case, the absence of a national paid leave standard disproportionately impacts women, women of color, lower socioeconomic communities, and other marginalized groups. For example, women represent the majority of unpaid caretakers (Saad-Lessler & Bahn, 2017), and many need to take time from work to take care of loved ones. This not only stunts their career advancement but also contributes to economic hardship.

Some of the participants indicated they were affected by a lack of paid leave available. For example, Participant A shared: “I had very little paid leave and medical leave myself to use when my baby was born. I did have a little bit of time, but not enough. And I also had gotten caught up in that 2009-2010 great recession.” Rhetorically, considering who is advocating for whom is important in considering how the message is interpreted (Aghazadeh, 2022). Individuals faced with disproportionate access to paid leave naturally feel more understood by those who

have also faced similar issues, helping them connect with the organization and their mission. Though the movement is made up many, moms, women in general, fathers, and small business owners have led the way often based on their own experiences. Some personal experiences led to advocates at these organizations also providing testimony, such as Participant G who said,

“I was able to share my personal story during the campaign, of when I needed paid leave, I was randomly jumped and assaulted and these strangers broke my jaw and I like, had my jaw wired. I have plates in my face now. So you know, it felt powerful for me to be able to say, to talk about it to my legislators, like, this is why we need paid leave.”

Since many of these advocates have firsthand experience needing paid leave, they are able to relate to those in their communities as they look for compelling anecdotes and evidence to share with lawmakers. These stories are key components of the advocacy strategy, as indicated by Participant I:

“Now, there's a lot of very smart people [here], but the things that they can't articulate are the lived experiences of the people that are dealing with the policies that are written in a place like DC or in big cities around the country and so anytime we're looking for spokespeople, anytime we're looking for somebody to share their story, we look for somebody that, you know, is directly impacted by the issue that we're talking about.”

This can be difficult because:

“The idea of paid family leave seems like such a luxury to those that are most deeply impacted by the lack of access to paid leave that it's not even on their radar, not even really being talked about at that level. And so it really takes folks that are in these upper echelons of leadership, I guess, to really sort of trickle down and say, this is something

that is it is possible. It's not impossible. It's something that we could invest in.”

(Participant K)

Sharing these stories allows organizations to “[represent] often underrepresented people in terms of getting their stories and their voices heard by lawmakers and policymakers and legislators” (Participant F). This view is echoed by Participant G, who emphasized that “people sharing their personal stories is really what moves legislators, and it moves other people into action.” Specifically, “personal stories from constituents” (Participant G) within that legislator's district are most impactful. Therefore, it is crucial to identify stories that reflect the local or state perspective for each legislator. This was reflected by Participant J when they stated that they do “not [need] random stories, like, my personal story is not going to move somebody who is not my member of Congress or is not, you know, interested from the jump” and reinforced by Participant H:

“What was difficult is to try it and get stories from the exact like districts or places where we might have, you know, specific members who we are really trying to convince or target. I think often we would end up getting stories from districts and places where the members were already supportive and so, so powerful. But you know, it's hard to say, you know, we need to find a story from this district in this state, you know, to try and convince this member to vote this way. So, so that was definitely difficult...we collected a lot of stories, but not always the ones we needed at the time.”

Although finding constituent voices and stories from the most affected, disparate communities can be challenging, it is essential to illustrate the lived realities to politicians. These shared experiences are compelling because: (1) personal stories help establish a connection

between politicians and their constituents, and (2) legislators must weigh the impact of their actions on the communities they represent, as their political future is directly tied to the well-being of those communities. Ultimately, this process empowers individuals by highlighting their influence on shaping political outcomes, because “everyone is an advocate. Everyone has their own story to tell” (Participant K).

Participant A indicated that these stories do not often follow the traditional structure of storytelling, in that “we don't always have the right villain when you're telling the story, right, because we've moved over time from people saying, ‘This is a private issue, you should just figure it out.’ Like, you don't hear that so much anymore. You'll hear more of like, ‘we just don't know how we want to pay for it,’ or ‘we think that there's different strategies for paying for it,’ but there seems to be less of a question about whether or not this is a thing that is needed, and more of a question of, like, how do we get it done?”

“Having the right villain” for a story entails having an antagonist pushing the issue into the limelight and forcing people to prioritize this issue. As a bipartisan issue, paid leave often doesn't have a specific villain, as indicated in “the last several presidential elections, [in which] both major party candidates have talked about the need for paid family and medical leave. They [just] had different ways of approaching it and different limitations on it.” (Participant A).

Another participant identified their organization specifically as “bipartisan” (Participant K), perhaps trying to avoid political polarization. Without a specific, overall “villain” of someone advocating against paid leave policy, many people do not have a specific target for blame or discussion. Perhaps this lack of a specific villain also compromises a sense of accountability regarding the issue.

Another essential aspect of storytelling is recognizing that these are often difficult stories to tell because you “need [paid leave] for the moments that break your heart and the moments that fill your heart with joy” (Participant A). Given the intimate nature of these stories, not all stakeholders will feel comfortable sharing them. Some organizations indicated they provide programs and staff dedicated to helping people feel comfortable sharing their stories. For example, Participant K said:

“So, you know, that messaging is different in that we're talking to parents that are living these realities right here and now, the unaffordability of childcare, for example, a lot of those families that are in our network are feeling the real effects of that in here and now. And so our messaging to them is just different in that we recognize they are they are truly feeling the need, and so therefore our aim is to not only help them to build comfort in the advocacy process, but also to give them opportunities that feel attainable, or help to build their skills so that they can use their voice and their experiences to speak truth to power, basically, and give them help to support them, and give them that platform where they can build that comfort and being able to raise the issues they're experiencing to the top.”

It is important to note that these advocacy organizations have two primary stakeholders: individuals directly impacted by the policies (in the effort to gather personal testimonies) and the legislators they want to influence by sharing these stories. When recruiting individuals to share their stories, participants indicated the use of tools, such as hotlines and grassroots emailing, to support their communities and gather testimonies. Notably, individuals often reached out to the organization after facing personal hardships due to the lack of paid leave, wanting to share their story and prevent others from having to face what they did. Alternatively, when working with

legislators, practitioners had to consider that some offices prefer different types of evidence, so it is worth researching that particular office and its leaders. This was indicated by Participant H who said you “get to know [that] this office really wants to have X, Y and Z data, whereas this office really kind of prefers more the more human storytelling side of things” (Participant H). Another participant indicated that “we partner our storytellers with the research papers so that you can see, you know, both the data and the impact that this has in a really specific human way” (Participant A).

The telling of personal life experiences by constituents contributes to the issues management literature by illuminating legislators’ accountability as they see how their policies directly impact those they serve. Stories are a compelling persuasive tool for constituents to challenge the current individualistic norms (Thakuria, 2025; Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023), and when constituents with stories are mobilized and supported by advocacy organizations, they can share their lived experience with policymakers who have the power to move the needle. The challenging of norms appeals to moral legitimacy, while testimonies educate legislators and other stakeholders, appealing to both cognitive and regulative legitimacy. Ultimately, the sharing of these life experiences should enhance dialogue and often makes the advocacy organization the moderator between two important stakeholders – legislators and their constituents – which fosters the cocreation of meaning (Coombs, 2006). Using stories of individuals most impacted by policies challenges power dynamics, which dialogic theory has been critiqued overlooking in previous research (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Recognizing that advocacy organizations and the communities that they connect with are ultimately using public relations strategies to challenge power structures at play (Dutta, 2009) provides a more critical interpretation of public relations

and how its strategies can be used in the future to impact policies. A significant part of these stories involves understanding a more comprehensive need for paid leave, which is the focus of the next section.

## **THEME 2: Expansion of Paid Leave**

When asking participants how they legitimize the existence of their organizations, many indicated it was simple: because everyone would experience the need for paid leave in some capacity at some point during their lifetime or know someone who does. Many participants identified paid leave as a truly universal need. Specifically, Participant C said, “The kinds of needs that people have to take leave for are things that we will, every single one of us, experience.” Another piece of this universal need is the expansion of the definition of paid leave.

“People often think about the arrival of a new child, and that is very, very important, of course, but ... more especially with an aging population, we see folks need to use it more often for their own serious health condition or medical emergency, or increasingly, to provide care for a loved one who is depending on them...And so the leave looks different, because I think we’ve as a country, been able to wrap our minds around the idea of a new child coming into your life, whether that’s through foster, adoption or birth, and we just kind of imagine those three months...which most people don’t actually use because they can’t afford it or they’re not covered by it. But the caregiving that you might need yourself might be more episodic or situational. The caregiving that you might need to provide to a loved one who’s leaning on you is also potentially more episodic, and not necessarily those 12 weeks consecutively” (Participant A).

Episodic and/or situational caregiving might be based on emergent medical situations and demonstrate that caregiving needs are not linear. Where parental leave might be easier to narrow to one time block, other types of caregiving leave could be reliant on treatments, appointments, traveling, and severity of the illness. For example, a daughter caring for her mother with kidney disease might need a couple weeks off in January as her mother undergoes surgery, but her mother may need another surgery in August. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that paid leave needs to extend beyond just parental leave to consider other caregiving needs and personal situations.

Other participants also indicated the need to extend leave policies to include chosen family, rather than just immediate family, which has caused some hesitancy. For example,

“You know, some legislators would have pushed back about making family definition more inclusive, with this fear that it'll like really increase the rate of caregiving claims, and, you know, somehow affect the solvency of the fund, where the data pretty consistently shows that family caregiving claims is like the lowest rate of application claims...and even in the states that have a more inclusive definition of family where, like, someone can use, can file a claim for chosen family, the rates of people using that is still really, really low too.” (Participant G)

Expanding the definition of family to include chosen family is particularly useful in nontraditional relationships or family structures. The current family definition in many states does not even include siblings as caretakers, which some organizations have centered their advocacy efforts on, such as Participant H:

“We endorse legislation that expands that definition of family for us, one of the biggest pieces of that definition is siblings. Um, siblings are currently not able to access federal

FMLA, so they do not have any job protections, I mean, let alone payment. We're talking the floor here. Of like, don't lose my job if I need to take time off to care for siblings. And siblings are the largest growing coalition of caregivers as you know, as we enter, you know, kind of the boomer generation beginning to age. We have a lot more siblings who are needing to take care both of their aging parents, but then, as their parents age and can't take care of their siblings, they become the primary caregivers of their siblings with disabilities.”

Another aspect of expanding leave is safe leave, which provides time away from work for those who have suffered physical or emotional abuse. Participant G indicated that this is another time that people may not have considered the need for leave, whether it is to recover from physical injuries, receive emotional care, or find a safe location.

Many participants used their own experiences with paid leave to drive their advocacy to expand the definition of family such as Participant G who talk about how “Sometimes it can be really challenging in the paid leave space as like a trans person, just because talking about babies and parenting is so gendered” or Participant H who discussed their own need for paid leave expansion because they are “actually myself, am a sibling. My brother has autism and some other disabilities, and so, like, I will eventually become, you know, his primary caregiver. And so this work is, you know, also pretty personal to me.” Many organizations interviewed situated themselves within the larger paid leave coalition but focused on a specific lens- such as early childhood, women’s justice, or fatherhood. Even when participants indicated their support through a specific frame of leave, they still recognized the importance of various types of leave:

“The work that we have done has been really focused on parental leave or paid family leave...I certainly recognize that there are other intersecting aspects of leave that are extremely important when supporting whole families. However, [our organization], our sphere of influence, our stakeholders, is in that early childhood space.” (Participant K)

It was apparent in these interviews that “in order to make our economy work more for working families, we need to talk about the comprehensive need for paid leave” (Participant A). Developing a more comprehensive definition of paid leave expands the issue from what many consider simply a parental issue to a human issue. It redefines the issue itself. While broadening the definition of family and exemplifying the need to expand leave, it can also complicate the process. Thus, this is why many organizations had a specific leave focus but still functioned within the larger paid leave coalition that supports many types of leave.

These expansions of the parameters of paid leave challenge individualistic norms of American culture (Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023; Thakuria, 2025), identifying the need for leave as systemic issue rather than a just personal one. It also challenges other norms of who is identified as family, which is especially important for individuals who are not a part of a traditional nuclear family or for those who may not have immediate family they can rely on for care. Thus, developing moral legitimacy surrounding paid leave is further complicated because many strategies challenge individualism in the U.S. Participants noted that using global statistics did not seem to do much beyond garnering initial interest. For example, Participant G said, “Sometimes we talk about [global norms of paid leave], but American Exceptionalism is just like, really hard to break. So it moves some people, but we've noticed it doesn't really move legislators as much.”

While expanding the definition of family may complicate some strategic efforts, it also formed in response to environmental scanning efforts of practitioners that went to speak with individuals in communities served. By scanning the communities in which they serve, many of these organizations were able to gauge alignment between organizational direction and values of their stakeholders (Dozier, 1986). This type of scanning allowed the organizations to identify both the depth and breadth of the issue, then take action to address issues identified by community members. Ultimately, this theme expands the issue but does so in response to the needs of stakeholders. Though the recognition of the breadth of the need was prominent in interviews, many interviewees also indicated the slow-moving legislative process was problematic and challenged efforts to expand family definitions and provide a comprehensive paid leave program at the national level. This is discussed in length in the third thematic analysis.

### **THEME 3: Lack of Urgency- State to Federal or Federal to State**

While it is important to engage “narrative[s] or norm shift[s] approaches working through the media, [it is also necessary to [accompany] that with, if possible, structural shifts in law reform or institutional reforms to match that” (Participant D). Though paid leave has been established as something most individuals will need during their lifetime, it is not always a priority for lawmakers. Participant A indicated that, “Everybody can imagine a time when they're going to need to use it at some point, but it's not necessarily front of mind. So it's been an urgency question.” Urgency means there is consistent pressure for “focused and timely action” (Stewart, 2015). A lack of urgency has been an issue in paid leave as many people don't think about it until they need it. So, it is not a top-10 issue that many voters are focusing on.

Interestingly, urgency at the federal level is impacted by efforts at the state level, though it is still

a slow process. This is supported by Participant A, who said, “It can take Congress a very long time to catch up with policy that’s been enacted at the state level.” Focusing on the state level often provides more achievable goals. This was exemplified by Participant K’s statement that, “We’re really focused at the state level. We are- just because of recent changes in federal leadership, we’re watching how those things might trickle down into the states and impact the work that we’re doing here. Traditionally, our primary lens, though, is really at the state level.”

Providing proof that these policies are working in states where paid leave policies are in place can also disband some misconceptions of the policy. For example: “It turns out that people have concerns about waste, fraud, and abuse, but there is very little waste fraud and abuse in the states that have passed paid family and medical leave laws, and they have built-in accountability mechanisms to handle that” (Participant A). This type of evidence may aid in illustrating how the policy could work on a federal level. Alternatively, federal policy also relies on a certain level of agreement across state lines, and many states have drastically different needs and experiences, making it more challenging to push a national paid leave policy. This is exemplified by Participant G, who said:

“So, there’s all those state by state differences. You also have each coalition that you’re working with. They have their own dynamics around what should be, sort of like the deal breakers in policy. So sometimes us, as nationals, do have to sort of negotiate with our state-based partners about, like, what is the deal breaker policy that we would say, like, you have to stop this bill over. That’s actually a conversation that we’re having more intentionally.”

Negotiating the different needs across states is complicated, indicating that perhaps the national standard of paid leave may be reliant on more states adopting state-level policies to pave the way for a national policy. Notably, “Some states are influenced by other states...And when you point to other states being more progressive than them, they're like, oh no. They feel shame” (Participant G). This means that peer pressure can also impact some state-level, and maybe even federal, decision-making. For instance, Participant A indicated that “it's the way we talk about it...if the states can do it, the Feds certainly can as well.”

Ultimately, “the proof points are in the States, [but] we also know that not every state is going to be able to pass or sustain a paid family and medical leave program... and that you know, with more and more states coming on board to the corporate point, it is more efficient for multi-state employers or multinational employers to be able to [have] a baseline that they can work with across the country, as opposed to having to, you know, do state specific policies, state by state by state, and if we could set a baseline, that would be really, really helpful, not just for individuals, but also corporate employers as well” (Participant A).

Though there are certainly strong efforts to establish a national standard for paid leave, the terms and conditions are more difficult to agree upon at the federal level than at the state level because states each maintain their own subculture within U.S. culture. Determining “the how” of national program is also difficult to establish as shown by Participant G:

“Which specific congressional mechanisms can we [use to] pass paid family medical leave has been a complicated challenge because of the payroll tax component.

Specifically, 14 of the paid family medical leave laws are funded through a payroll

contribution or tax or whatever. But congressionally, it's like you can't feasibly pass a payroll tax, so we have to find other mechanisms to fund a national paid family medical leave program, and that's been a big challenge.”

Conversations especially around taxes are highly political even if the issue of paid leave is receiving, for the most part, bipartisan support. The first battle is helping the public understand what paid leave policies would look like. To make the concept more understandable (or develop cognitive legitimacy), Participant G said, “Sometimes we make the comparison to like health insurance or car insurance that paid family medical leave operates as a social insurance fund where lots of people contribute a little bit so that people can get close to their full paycheck when they need it.” But, where some might refer to this as a social insurance program “kind of similar to Social Security” (Participant A), others are turned off by that, asking how much this will cost them. Some participants indicated that they try to work with legislators to indicate the need for such policies. For instance,

“And so there was a bill in the last general assembly that was like a tax incentive for paid leave. And so we went and spoke with those, the sponsors and the co-sponsors of the bill, just to provide education, share a report, you know, talk about the things that we know about how paid leave impacts young children.” (Participant K).

This kind of involvement indicates strategies are central to increasing understanding between legislators and the communities they serve. While many caretakers are willing to share testimony with legislators, there is still what Participant L termed the “deep invisibility of caregiving” that may prevent people who are not caregivers from understanding the true need of

paid leave- thus making the issue seem less urgent in comparison to other hot-button women's issues, such as abortion.

Individualistic norms also may impact how the need for paid leave policies is perceived. For example, when asked why some people might not be as adamant about pushing paid leave policies forward, Participant L indicated "I think it's like we live in such an individualistic culture that it's like, you have a baby, take care of them yourself, like not my problem." Culture is ingrained and difficult to change on a mass scale, especially with such political instability, because, when political offices have so much movement, practitioners often have to "[start] back at the basics and [build] awareness of the work that we do, why we matter, why they you know, how they can engage with us. Just you know that ever evolving relationship building process as well as relationship maintenance over time, is really important. And so I would say that just that up and down is one of the most challenging things that we face" (Participant K).

Building urgency for paid leave policies is a balancing act of individual experiences, legislative motives, and political instability. While working at the state-level, many participants indicated they would still like to see a national standard, but others considered that "in this political environment, I think it's pretty fair to say that nothing's happening anytime on paid leave, yeah, or nothing good" (Participant J). A national paid leave policy is dependent on "making this rise to the level of urgency with members of Congress who feel like maybe they had more pressing things to do" (Participant A). Gathering stories of lived experience, expanding the definition of family/paid leave, and developing urgency around the issue are all relevant themes to paid leave advocacy efforts, and implications are discussed in the following section.

## **Implications**

This study has implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, this study provides internal perspectives of strategies for issue-based organizations, challenges traditional organizational roles, and extends legitimacy theory to be applied in a non-corporate setting.

### **Provides Internal Perspectives on Challenges**

The internal perspectives of practitioners highlighted that problem recognition did not emerge as the primary issue; rather constraint recognition (perception of obstacles and how they limit what publics can do), and level of involvement (how connected people feel to the organization/situation) (Grunig, 1968) were barriers in their work advocating for paid leave. Participants provided rich insight into institutional challenges such as political instability. They identified legislator-specific strategies based on research of their political office, but, when political positions are in a state of constant movement, it is difficult to develop impactful, ongoing relationships with legislators who could support their cause. Another constraint identified by participants was challenging normative, individualistic characteristics of U.S. culture. Moral legitimacy has traditionally been obtained by adhering to normative values and expectations of their stakeholders (Suchman, 1995), so this has been particularly challenging for those advocating for paid leave policies that aim to take a systemic approach to what some identify as a personal issue. Another constraint in advocacy for establishing a national standard of paid leave is that states each have unique cultures and needs, meaning obtaining widespread agreement on a national policy is much more difficult. Each of these constraints impacts the way the general public feels they can get involved in the overall movement, and practitioners must strategically empower their audiences to feel both equipped and motivated to advocate.

## **Challenging Traditional Organizational Roles**

Stakeholders in this case only somewhat aligned with Grunig & Hunt's (1984) classification of linkages. Where Grunig & Hunt (1984) identified that stakeholders are linked to the organization either through enabling linkages, functional linkages, normative linkages, or diffused linkages, this study extends those linkages to include moderating linkages. In the case of issue-based organizations, legislators are not serving as enabling linkages since these groups are aiming to change policy. Employees still act as functional linkages to the organization since they lead advocacy efforts for social change and complete day-to-day tasks. Participants indicated that even though they do not have industry standards that represent normative linkages, they still rely on feedback and resources of those within the larger coalition of paid leave advocacy. The biggest shift in Grunig & Hunt's (1984) conceptualization of linkages identified by this analysis ultimately is that rather than managing diffused linkages, such as NGOs and activists, these issue-based organizations are acting as diffused linkages for corporations and federal policy; issue-based organizations in this study serve the unique role of connecting publics with their legislators. For instance, participants indicated that sharing life experiences of constituents is a particularly important strategy for persuading legislators. Appealing to the self-interest (pragmatic legitimacy) of the legislators by identifying compelling narratives from their constituents, who ultimately have control over whether they remain in office, is an important strategy. This advocacy approach challenges power structures, indicating that legislators can lose if they do not support policies important to their electorate. Stories from constituents give power to marginalized voices which provide personalized stories of the impact of systemic policies. Sharing their stories also empowers constituents to vote for legislators that listen and take action

to better the circumstances of their communities. Since these advocacy organizations often function as moderators between community members and legislators, they are inevitably involved in policy-making, but, since many states have not passed paid leave policies, their roles do not extend to regulator, meaning researchers must reconsider how elements of legitimacy theory are applied to issue-based organizations.

### **Extending Legitimacy Theory**

Theoretically, these results indicate that legitimizing strategies are transferable to the practice of advocacy but suggest an adjustment of Marschlich & Ingenhoff's (2021) concept of regulative legitimacy to legislative legitimacy. Whereas corporations build regulative legitimacy by acting in compliance with law and industry standards, advocacy groups are influencing law. For an advocacy group to establish legislative legitimacy, it gets involved with lobbying and policy education efforts to tell the stories of constituents. Practitioners at advocacy organizations are then not often focused on building legitimacy for their organizations but instead for the issue as a whole and the specific frame through which the organizations address the issue.

Perhaps this recognition of legislative strategies also reveals the difference between activism and advocacy. Choi & McKeever (2025) differentiated between the two as “advocates work[ing] within the system to promote change, [and] activists generally push[ing] to dismantle what is wrong with the system itself” (p. 84). This distinction is furthered by this study as it explores how advocates are trying to change the system through developing legislation- thus in a sense following the rules to change policies. Legislative legitimacy is not necessarily the same as regulative legitimacy developed by corporations, but it does indicate alignment through legislative procedures as opposed to activists who may take more extreme measures to dismantle

the system. Thus, a new type of legitimacy is necessary that considers the nature of advocacy organizations – legislative legitimacy. Legislative legitimacy encompasses efforts to change policy through lobbying, voter education, and testimony, illustrating they are trying to change the law through official channels.

### **Applied Contributions**

The results from these interviews provide practical guidance for practitioners by indicating how to overcome constraints and develop legislative legitimacy with primary stakeholders. Practitioners are already developing legislative legitimacy through lobbying efforts and gathering testimonials from the area in which they are advocating or working with legislators. Sharing the lived experiences of constituents encourages accountability of legislators to their constituents as well as indicates the need to expand paid leave policies. These lived experiences are crucial to the movement, but there are still many challenges to overcome in the legislative space.

While practitioners will not be able to address the issue of political instability that creates constant movement in offices, they can develop “comprehensive strategies that promote good governance, social justice, and economic equity” (Ahmad, 2024, p.5). According to the Pew Research Center (2024), strengthening the economy is the top political priority of Americans. While storytelling was obviously crucial for participants, perhaps appealing to the need for economic security may be more impactful for the movement. If these issue-based organizations collaborated with large, American-based corporations focusing on the economic angle, they may be able to convince more critical stakeholders of the importance of these policies and how they may ultimately be financially beneficial. This idea was informed by Participant D who indicated

their organization is “increasingly working with the private sector to reform the corporate sector, basically so to work on gender equality and cultures of equity and care within workplaces.”

Practitioners advocating for paid leave can message out that companies with strong paid leave policies experience improve worker retention and ultimately save employers money (MomsRising Together, 2024). Economic points like this can provide a top-down approach to paid leave, whereas many previous efforts were working from the ground up. Collaborations with big business could also exemplify the reality of paid leave policies to legislators providing further evidence of worker retention and putting heat on legislators to solidify the need for national-level policies.

Additionally, many practitioners indicated they are working at the state-level, but focusing on economic benefits might help acceptance of paid leave in expanding to the national level as nationwide businesses need blanket policies across all states. Individualistic culture is another challenge for practitioners, but perhaps focusing on the business-benefits of paid leave will help develop collective importance as an economic model. This could appeal to the traditionally masculine values (Hofstede, 2003) of American culture – specifically the competitive nature of big business.

Ultimately, the practitioners interviewed are the true experts here, but, based on the results of this study, some of these efforts need to expand to meet American political culture where it already is – which is highly focused on capitalistic values. Collaborating with large corporations may develop stronger credibility with politicians that stand in opposition to paid leave to exemplify “the how” and thus yield more vast results. These types of collaborations may provide an opportunity for corporations to be deemed “the most progressive” and might also

create a competitive edge for other corporations who want to also be deemed progressive, supported by the fact that participants indicated that some states are peer-pressured into paid leave policies by wanting to be considered more progressive than others. This type of collaboration will not be easy to develop but could be the key in overcoming the constraints that are currently preventing the movement from developing urgency in legislation. There is increased pressure for for-profit organizations to get involved with corporate social advocacy efforts (Dhanesh, 2025), meaning this type of collaboration is already being established regarding other advocacy issues. Paid leave that has garnered bipartisan support could be an issue to engage in with minimal backlash. Collaborations with large corporations could help further legislative legitimacy in the eyes of legislators standing in opposition to paid leave by representing the needs of a vast majority of Americans and representing its economic feasibility. It could also alleviate some of the constraints regarding the general public's viability of the policy – empowering the American public to feel more motivated to advocate for paid leave.

### **Limitations**

Though this study has a small sample size, data was collected until the point of saturation, which was attained when the codes and themes become redundant. Another limitation is that, interpersonally, conducting interviews and analyzing that data can be impacted by personal biases in analysis and the social desirability of participants. Throughout the interview process, the researcher adjusted the questionnaire as needed to ask about recurring concepts. However, to minimize this limitation, the study uses Tracy's (2010) qualitative criteria of rich rigor and meaningful coherence.

## **Conclusion**

This study used interviews to collect experiential data from individuals involved in strategic communication and policy advocacy for organizations promoting paid leave policies in the United States. Results identified three primary themes including: lived experiences of particular constituents, expansion of paid leave, and lack of urgency. Results also provided internal perspectives on barriers to moving policy forward as well as suggestions of how to minimize the effects of these barriers. The study also introduced the organizational role of moderator between legislators and their constituents. It contributes to the legitimacy literature from the issue-based organization viewpoint by illustrating how legitimacy theory was transferable to issue-based organizations but suggested an adjustment of Marschlich & Ingenhoff's (2021) concept of regulative legitimacy to legislative legitimacy. Future research should continue conducting critical studies that inform on power imbalances as well as further exploring how legislative legitimacy could be interpreted with other sociopolitical issues. In this case, partnerships with large organizations could provide some economic credibility to the movement in the eyes of legislators, but future research could investigate the legislators' point of view to determine the efficacy of such strategies.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Consent for Research Participation

**Research Study Title:**

**Researcher(s):** Shelby Luttman Rios, M.S.- Doctoral Candidate at University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I am asking you to be in this research study because you work at a nonprofit organization currently advocating for paid parental leave. Information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

**Why is the research being done?**

The purpose of the research study is to further understand legitimizing strategies and tactics used by advocacy organizations in the pursuit of policy change and issue management.

**What will I do in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, you take part in a 1-hour, Zoom interview.

**Can I say “No”?**

Being in this study is up to you. You can stop up until the interview is complete, as the recording will then be transcribed, deleted, and referred to by pseudonym for the duration of the study.

**Are there any risks to me?**

You will not experience any more risk than what you experience in everyday life.

**What are the potential benefits for taking part in this study?**

The potential benefits for taking part in this study include informing future advocacy efforts and fulfilling a duty of public service for those impacted by policies.

**What will happen with the information collected for this study?**

The screen-recording will be saved as a video file in a secure drive on a computer in which only the researcher has the password, and that computer will be stored behind a locked door for the protection of interviewees identities.

During the process of each interview, the researcher will first ask if they can video record the session to later create a transcript. Post each interview, the researcher will transcribe the interview. Interviewer’s recordings and transcriptions are to be saved in a secure drive

on a computer for which only the researcher has the password, and that computer will be stored behind a locked door for the protection of interviewees identities.

Information collected for this study will be published and possibly presented at scientific meetings. No identifying information will be included.

### **What will happen to your data in the future?**

Your data will be transcribed within 48 hours of the interview, at which point the entire recording will be permanently deleted. The transcription will be assigned a pseudonym and will be henceforth identified as such. These recordings will not be released in any form. Any identifiable information from the transcript will not be used.

### **Will I be paid for being in this research study?**

There will be no monetary compensation for taking part in this study.

### **Who can answer my questions about this research study?**

If you have questions or concerns about this study or have experienced a research-related problem or injury, contact one of the researchers

- Shelby Luttman Rios: [shelbyrios@utk.edu](mailto:shelbyrios@utk.edu)
- Dr. Beth Foster (dissertation advisor): [bethaveryfoster@utk.edu](mailto:bethaveryfoster@utk.edu)

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Phone: 865-974-7697  
Email: [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu)

### **How will this consent form be stored?**

This consent form will be saved in a secure drive on a computer in which only the researcher has the password, and that computer will be stored behind a locked door for the protection of interviewees identities.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact.

By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Adult Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Semi-structured interview questions

A sample of the semi-structured interview guide is provided below, but questions will also depend on the results from the content analysis in Study 1.

1. TOUR QUESTION: How would you describe your organization?
2. TOUR QUESTION: Can you tell me about your experience working at your current organization?
3. In your own words, why does your organization exist?
4. What kind of advocacy strategies has your organization used in the past?
5. In your experience, what advocating strategies have you found the most effective? What strategies were most ineffective?
6. How do you change up strategies for different groups?
7. What kind of political factors impact how you advocate to your publics?
8. How, if at all, does politics impact organizational level policies?
9. Is your organization highly organized or loosely structured? Why do you say this?
10. How many of your decisions depend on those higher up in your organization?
11. Legitimacy questions are broken up by strategy type:
  - i. Pragmatic legitimacy (exchange)
    - a) What, if any, strategies does your organization use to appeal to the self-interest of a viewer? Do you feel these are effective?
    - b) From your point of view, is there a give-and-take that occurs between you and your viewers? What is expected of you? What do you expect of your viewers?
  - ii. Moral legitimacy (norms)
    - a) How, if at all, does your organization appeal to religion?
    - b) How, if at all, does your organization appeal to global norms?

iii. Cognitive legitimacy (understandability)

- a) What, if any, strategies does your organization use to make the message understandable?

iv. Regulative legitimacy (follows regulation)

- a) Is it difficult to comply with regulation while also challenging current policies? If so, please explain.
- b) How do you, if at all, indicate your compliance with the policy procedure to your viewers?

12. When asked, how do you explain the importance of paid parental leave?

13. When asked, how do you validate your organization's goals?

14. What are some challenges your organization faces?

15. Is there anything else we did not cover that you would like to share with me?

## Appendix C

The recruitment email will be as follows:

*Good morning, (insert name here)!*

*My name is Shelby Luttman Rios, and I am emailing you as a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to ask for your participation in an interview for my dissertation. I found your contact information through your organization's website. I am looking for nonprofit organizations currently advocating for paid parental leave to some extent.*

*Your expertise and participation in the interview would help inform best strategies for the future advocacy efforts.*

*The interview would take about 1 hour and would be completed via Zoom. Please let me know if you would be willing to participate. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study.*

*Thank you for your time!*

*Shelby*

If needed, the researcher will send a follow up email. The follow up email would look like this:

*Good morning, (insert name here)!*

*I reached out to you a few weeks ago about potentially participating in an interview about advocacy strategies for my dissertation. I am still looking to interview people working for nonprofit organizations currently advocating for paid parental leave. The interview would take about 1 hour and would be completed via Zoom.*

*I would really appreciate your participation, considering your expertise could help inform best strategies for the future advocacy efforts.*

*Please contact me if you have any questions about the study.*

*Thank you for your time!*

*Shelby*

If needed, a phone script is provided below:

*Good morning! My name is Shelby Luttmann Rios, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. I was hoping to schedule an interview with someone on your team about advocacy strategies for my dissertation.*

*I am looking for nonprofit organizations currently advocating for paid parental leave to some extent. The interview would take about 1 hour and would be completed via Zoom.*

*I would really appreciate your participation considering your expertise could help inform best strategies for the future advocacy efforts.*

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Next Steps in Paid Leave Advocacy: Legislative Legitimacy Message Strategy and Opportunities for Leveraging Issues Advocacy with Corporate Social Advocacy**

## **Abstract**

The final manuscript of this dissertation integrates the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 in a comprehensive review of social media engagement and internal perspectives. From that holistic examination, important theoretical and applied contributions are made. This study then uses those findings to create research-based recommendations to inform issues advocacy in public relations. Through social media content analysis and interviews with the practitioners working in this space, a rich set of best practices emerge as well as opportunities for collaboration to broaden the reach and impact of issue advocacy.

## **Introduction**

Manuscript 3 of this dissertation is a comprehensive, integrative extension of Study 1 and Study 2. The essay reviews how the quantitative-driven results of Study 1 intersect with the results in Study 2 from qualitative interviews and how, in concert, they extend advocacy literature in public relations both theoretically and in practice. This examination sheds light on how organizations can utilize research-based tactics to generate engagement and how internal organizational perspectives influence the perceived effectiveness of those tactics. This study opens with a brief review of Study 1 and Study 2 then considers the findings of each holistically. Results indicate the need to overcome several barriers such as American norms of individualism (Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023; Thakuria, 2025), upstream stigma (Arcaya et al, 2015), and political polarization (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2019) by expanding the movement to engage corporate social advocacy efforts. Developing partnerships with corporations advances the movement—in this case paid leave advocacy—on the basis of economic stability, appealing to benefits to employers and the needs of employees.

### **Study 1: Advocacy Tactics and Legitimacy Strategies on Facebook**

Study 1 focuses on the comparison between indirect and insider advocacy tactics as well as the exploration of legitimacy strategies in an advocacy environment. A content analysis examines how followers engaged with advocacy organizations on social media – specifically Facebook. Posts and comments were collected from advocacy groups' Facebook pages between March 1-31, 2024 during Women's History Month, as the lack of paid leave has disproportionately impacted women (Women's Bureau, 2024). A total of 66 posts and 1,428 comments were included in the sample. The study used a deductive coding scheme adapted from

Guo & Saxton (2010, 2014) to categorize 11 different types of advocacy tactics, such as public events, grassroots lobbying, media advocacy, etc. Posts were also coded based on their legitimacy strategies, adapted from Suchman (1995) and Marschlich & Ingenhoff (2021), with categories including pragmatic, moral, cognitive, and regulative legitimacy. Comments were categorized based on the legitimacy strategy used in the post, and sentiment scores were generated using Qualtrics with a 5-point scale ranging from very positive to very negative.

The results of this study indicated it was common to use indirect and insider strategies together, but indirect tactics were used more frequently than insider tactics. Insider tactics generated more engagement, with posts receiving more likes, shares, and comments compared to posts using only indirect tactics. However, posts using the strategies together had slightly lower engagement than those using only insider tactics. Based on the results, the most common legitimizing strategy was regulative legitimacy ( $n=50$ ), and the second most common was moral legitimacy ( $n=41$ ). This indicates that posts most often discussed policy and/or encouraged readers to consider what is ethical regarding paid leave policies. A standard multiple regression indicated that the overall model significantly predicted comment sentiment, explaining 5% of the variance. Regression coefficients indicated that both pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy significantly contributed to the model, resulting in more negative comment sentiment.

Results from this study suggested that organizations that focused on insider and regulative strategies to change policy yielded the most positive engagement. Posts that used pragmatic and cognitive strategies may have less positive engagement since many people in these Facebook groups, acting as online echo chambers, already recognized the need for paid leave or perhaps already feel educated as to the importance of paid leave policies. Since the

purpose of these organizations is often to challenge current policies, or lack thereof, it follows that posts highlighting their work with law-makers would have more neutral to positive engagement.

Insider strategies may receive more engagement simply because they are more shareable since they provide something useful, entertaining, inspiring, timely, thought-provoking, and/or relatable (Brandwatch, n.d.). Though shareability varies based on platform, insider strategies might work best on Facebook since the goal is to gather support, and Facebook groups act as a community for advocacy groups to mobilize their publics. Posts that used regulative strategies received less negative interaction overall. There was little variance in the percentages of “very positive” feedback – meaning practitioners should instead focus efforts on mediating the negative feedback. Though the regression model indicated that pragmatic and cognitive legitimizing strategies significantly predicted more negative sentiment, it only explained 5% of the variance. This means that overall, there was a small effect on sentiment based on strategies used.

These findings counter previous findings (Guo & Saxton, 2014) by showing that insider tactics garnered more engagement via likes, shares, and comments. These results suggest practitioners should prioritize insider advocacy strategies in their social media content, including tactics like expert testimony, judicial advocacy, and direct lobbying. Similarly, comment sentiment analysis indicated that viewers engaged more neutrally with posts that used moral and regulative strategies. These results suggest to practitioners that viewers appreciated seeing the organization’s direct involvement with policy-making. Overall, these findings provide practical

advice to practitioners and can be applied and tested in a broader range of social media advocacy efforts.

### **Study 2: Internal Perspectives on Legitimizing Strategies**

Study 2 investigated how practitioners at organizations advocating for paid leave perceive the effectiveness of various legitimizing strategies. Conducting interviews with these participants provided nuanced insight into the effectiveness of various advocacy strategies through experiential data. There were 12 study participants working in public relations or related functions in nonprofit organizations advocating for paid leave. Interviews took place via Zoom between November 2024 and March 2025, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour. The interviews were conducted during the 2024 presidential election and 2025 inauguration, thus the analysis had to take into account how the political transition impacted advocacy efforts as well.

The interview questions explore internal perspectives of advocacy efforts. Questions asked about organizational strategies, successes, and challenges as well as external factors that impact communication tactics. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, three themes outlined the strategic efforts of individuals working at advocacy organizations as well as their perceived effectiveness. These themes included lived experiences of particular constituents, expansion of paid leave, and lack of urgency. These results provided internal perspectives on challenges such as breaking through cultural norms of individualism as well as political instability. Results also identified a moderating role for practitioners as they act as the conduit between legislators and their constituents. Finally, results indicated that legitimacy theory was transferable to issue-based organizations but supported an adaptation of Marschlich &

Ingenhoff's (2021) concept of regulative legitimacy to legislative legitimacy. Where corporations act in compliance with law and industry standards, advocacy groups aim to influence law. Given the vast difference in missions, there is the need to introduce legislative legitimacy as a concept in public relations theory to identify how advocacy organizations illustrate alignment with official legislative procedures, acting in conjunction with the system, as opposed to some of the more extreme actions of activists to dismantle the system as a whole. This finding indicates that issue-based organizations may benefit from partnerships with large, American-based corporations to appeal to economic development, perhaps aiding advocacy organizations in convincing more critical stakeholders of the importance of these policies and how paid leave can improve worker retention and ultimately save employers money (MomsRising Together, 2024). Collaborations with big businesses may also sustain interest in the issue despite political instability- appealing to American capitalistic values instead of trying to simply challenge individualistic values. These types of partnerships pressure legislators to pass a national paid leave policy.

### **Integrating the Findings**

It is important to consider how the external, public-facing social media strategies and the reactions to those strategies in Study 1 differ or remain consistent with the internal perspectives of workers in Study 2. It is also important to consider the different time frames in which the studies were conducted. Study 1 analyzed content from March 2024, in which former President Joe Biden was in office. Biden openly supported a national paid leave policy in his March 2024 State of the Union address (Mayer, 2024). Study 2 was conducted from November 2024-March 2025, in which current President Donald Trump was inducted into office. The Trump

administration has not openly supported a national paid leave policy and has focused on border control and foreign policy (Rubio, 2025). Therefore, integrating these findings must be considered as the current political state does impact how these organizations can and do advocate for policy change.

### **Comparing the Results**

There was some connection in findings such as how regulative strategies initiated about 6-7% less “very negative” feedback in Study 1, and Study 2 revealed that these regulative strategies are regarded by practitioners as their most impactful, specifically when sharing testimonials of those impacted by the lack of paid leave policy with legislators. Both studies were conceptually based on Marschlich & Ingenhoff’s (2021, p.2) definition of regulative legitimacy – “an organization’s ability to demonstrate compliance with regulations, standards, and expectations from government institutions.” Analysis for both studies clarified that this type of legitimacy was not necessarily applicable to issue-based organizations, as they are often challenging, not conforming, to current policy. Where corporations have industry regulations, advocacy organizations do not. Thus, the coding structure and the interview guide were adapted to reflect the mission of these organizations – to establish a state-wide policy or national standard through legislation – thus developing the concept of legislative legitimacy.

Regarding other forms of legitimacy, a linear regression in Study 1 demonstrated that pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy significantly resulted in more negative sentiment. Interviews in Study 2 found that pragmatic legitimacy was a key message strategy among practitioners because most everyone would need leave at some point in their lives either to care for themselves or for loved ones. Practitioners identified cognitive legitimacy as prominent to their strategy

through the use of resource hubs, infographics, and storytelling. This demonstrates possible misalignment between what practitioners think is effective and what actually is in term of audience reception. This discrepancy could also result from targeting different stakeholders on social media v. in-person lobbying, supporting the foundations of stakeholder theory by representing unique approaches based on the needs and expectations of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984).

Testimonials were used in both mediated and interpersonal channels, but social media specifically did not seem to target legislators. Instead, it seemed like this channel was used to educate the general public about current efforts to advocate for paid leave. Many of the participants in Study 2 focused more on direct conversations or meetings with legislators. Taken together, results from both studies indicate that there is likely not one “best fit” approach for both social media and the real world, especially since social media does not specifically target engagement of legislators. For instance, socially mediated spaces, such as Facebook pages, encourage collaboration and promote dialogue among community members (Capizzo, 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2013) but can often result in echo chambers. According to the results in Study 1, it seemed as though some of the Facebook groups actually drew the attention of people who did not support paid leave policies. According to White & Boatwright (2020), this phenomenon may occur because of algorithms that act as gatekeepers and may encourage polarization. Of course, this polarization is still present in a physical environment, but algorithms do not determine who is a part of this in-person conversation.

As found in Study 2, the moderating role of advocacy organizations helped ameliorate this type of polarization by bringing a variety of voices to the forefront to increase legislators’

sense of urgency regarding the issue. So, even though social media has a variety of features used to mobilize advocacy efforts (Boyd, 2010), these efforts have not traditionally targeted legislators, thus practitioners rely on relationship building and in-person communication illustrating the downstream effects of these policies and using legislator-specific tactics. Those working at advocacy organizations have deep insight into the issues for which they advocate and their position in broader systems (Heath, 2006), which was apparent as many interviewees shared their personal experiences needing access to paid leave as well as how they have visited communities in their districts to better understand the needs of stakeholders at the ground level. This type of dialogue and relationship management is foundational to issues management. Where dialogic theory has been critiqued for lacking consideration of power dynamics (Dutta-Bergman, 2005), these studies indicated how issue-based organizations increase participation from underrepresented groups in effort to challenge the current political system and indicate the need for paid leave to various stakeholders.

Legitimizing efforts for issue-based organizations include developing legitimacy for the issue, for the organization itself, and for a particular course of action (Smith & Ferguson, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2014 as cited in Aghazadeh, 2025). The results from Study 1 and Study 2 indicated that developing legitimacy for the issue itself in turn developed legitimacy for the organizational mission, but developing legitimacy for a particular course of action in this case proves to be more complicated. Based on the interviews, many people indicated that the need for leave is apparent or understandable, demonstrating high problem recognition overall (Grunig, 1968), but how to provide that leave is what becomes more complicated, reinforcing that people experience political and cultural obstacles that may impact the level of involvement. Thus,

developing legitimacy for the course of action – in this case, policy change – is complicated even though shaping public policy is the “dominant and original objective” of issues management (Coombs, 1992, as cited in Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2015, p.187). Specifically, American norms of individualism (Weissbourd & Murphy, 2023; Thakuria, 2025), upstream stigma (Arcaya et al, 2015), and political polarization (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2019) pose challenges to changing current paid leave policies. The following section outlines suggestions of how to overcome these challenges on social media, as well as with physical efforts of issue-based organizations.

### **Suggestions for Practitioners and Broader Change**

Results of this study offer rich insights for practitioners working in advocacy, particularly surrounding opportunities for broadening reach and impact through corporate social advocacy. Corporate social advocacy (CSA) is the “corporate practice of publicly engaging in controversial socio-political issues” (Lee & Chung, 2023, p.2). For the paid leave movement, partnering with corporations may be foundational in changing policy based on the current state of American politics, which are highly based on capitalistic values. While the work conducted by advocacy organizations amplifies the voices of marginalized groups, practitioners still face significant barriers such as political instability and career-centered values. Study 2 outlined how collaborating with large, American-based corporations to develop support for the movement could also appeal to the economic priorities of politicians, especially since the Pew Research Center (2024) identified that strengthening the economy is the top political priority for Americans. Currently, practitioners are engaging with other issue-based organizations in the paid leave coalition through interpersonal as well as socially mediated communication channels, but stepping outside of the coalition’s usual networks to develop corporate partnerships motivated by

the economic benefits of leave policy could put increased pressure on legislators to pass a national paid leave standard.

According to CompaniesMarketCap.com (2025), the largest U.S. corporations based on market capitalization include Apple, NVIDIA, Microsoft, Amazon, and Alphabet (Google). These organizations are already involved in various corporate social responsibility and corporate social advocacy campaigns. For instance, Apple is involved in advocacy efforts such as its Racial Equity and Justice Initiative (REJI) and provides new mothers with four weeks of paid leave before giving birth and 14 weeks of maternity leave afterward (Mirmotahari, 2022). At Apple, fathers and non-birth parents are also able to take six weeks of paid leave (Mirmotahari, 2022). In an NVIDIA Sustainability Report (2024), pay and promotion equity were primary areas of focus, specifically saying “in FY24, as we promoted many in our workforce, women continue to be promoted at an approximately equal rate to men” (p.16). NVIDIA also offers up to 22 weeks of fully paid leave for a birth mother and up to 12 weeks of fully paid leave to non-birth parents (including adoptive parents and fathers), but its website did not provide specific details on other types of medical or caretaking leave (NVIDIA, n.d.). Microsoft’s website (n.d.) outlines its commitment to promoting human rights globally, specifically indicating how, through technology, it aims “to improve the health and wellbeing of people everywhere.” In 2018, Microsoft announced the expansion of its already impressive company paid parental leave policy to work with its U.S. suppliers, requiring them to offer employees a minimum of 12 weeks paid parental leave, up to \$1,000 per week (Stahlkopf, 2025).

Amazon’s 2023 Sustainability Report included a section on human rights saying, “We believe everyone should be treated with fundamental dignity and respect and provided an equal

opportunity to thrive, which is why at Amazon, respecting human rights is everyone's responsibility—one we are always working to embed into the business decisions we make every day” (p.7). Amazon also offers six weeks of Paid Parental Leave to eligible employees with a year or more of continuous employment as well as a leave share program for spouses who are not offered paid leave through their employers (Amazon, n.d.). Finally, Alphabet (Google) specifically outlines its dedication to employees by “promoting desirable work conditions that benefit employees at work and outside the workplace” (Meyer, 2024, p.4). Google offers 24 weeks of paid leave for birthing parents, 18 weeks for non-birthing parents, and eight weeks for those caring for a seriously ill loved one- “carer’s leave” (Shumway, 2022). Therefore, each of these large corporations is explicit about its dedication to addressing human rights issues or to supporting employees in more comprehensive ways. Notably, their paid leave policies focus on parental leave rather than other medical and caretaking leave needs – offering room for these policies to expand to be more inclusive and to broaden the definition of paid leave. Partnerships between issue advocacy organizations and corporation can generate that awareness and, hopefully, enact change. The need to expand leave to consider other type beyond parental also provides motivation for these corporations to support a national policy, as it would supplement their employee support. These examples of partnerships can also provide motivation and best practice models for issue advocacy organizations to develop connections with smaller corporations who may be more accessible to practitioners at issue-based organizations. Examples given here provide a model for practitioners to use to develop value alignment with corporations through strategic proposals highlighting the opportunities and benefits.

The results of this research indicate that issue-based organizations should develop proposals to solicit corporate partnerships to fully leverage their reach and efforts. For example, as NVIDIA advocated for equity for women to be promoted professionally comparably to men, a platform for organizations advocating for paid leave could be on how the majority of unpaid caregivers are women, often forcing them to leave their careers or preventing upward movement within the company. Supporting paid leave policies that cover caregiving needs would enable and empower women at their organizations. Another example, using Google's values, might include messaging that emphasizes how paid leave promotes positive working conditions that support employees at work and outside of the workplace. When developing partnerships with smaller corporations, it could also be helpful to encourage them with the model of other corporations who are providing paid leave for employees from their own pockets and the return on that investment. For example, Google's progressive policies have led to a Best Company Culture Award, and, according to Forbes Magazine (2024), one of the primary reasons it earned the recognition is its alignment with employees' wants and needs. Another example includes Adobe, where if an employee is taking FMLA-qualifying paid parental leave, they receive 100% of their salary for up to 16 weeks (Adobe, 2025). Practitioners at issue-based organizations might include statistics on how paid leave increases worker satisfaction and retention. Such as how, according to a Great Place to Work Global Engagement Study (2021), 89% of Adobe employees say it is a great place to work compared to the average 57% for other U.S.-based companies; 91% of employees reported they were able to time off from work when it was necessary.

Practitioners might also include statistics in their messaging on how paid leave policies can save employers money, considering that “when employees choose to leave work to care for

family, turnover costs for businesses average around 20% of the employee's annual salary” (Clark-Fox Policy Institute, 2024, p.4). A federal paid leave policy might be especially attractive to corporations since it could provide a blanket policy for employee benefits for leave. These motivations appeal to the self-interest of a company as well as serve their employees.

While not all corporations can afford to provide paid leave to their employees from their own pockets, using these organizations as examples for the benefits of paid leave could help garner support from other corporations in advocating for paid leave policies on a national level. For companies who are already providing paid leave through company policy, some may be concerned about this affecting their ability to attract top employees if others offer it as well, but ultimately, many of the leave policies still need expansion to include other caretaking needs as well as an extended definition of family that qualifies for leave. By partnering with organizations advocating for paid leave, corporations, such as the ones listed above, can demonstrate their dedication to worker rights for their own employees as well as American citizens in general.

Since paid leave is ultimately a bipartisan issue (Bailey, 2021), the primary issue is less political divide and more how to enact. Messages to these organizations can also include a breakdown of how leave insurance programs work in states that have already passed paid leave policies. For example, messages might highlight how in New Jersey the absolute maximum employees can contribute for Family Leave Insurance in 2021 was about \$7.45 a week or \$386.96 a year (Department of Labor and Workforce Development, n.d.). The average salary in New Jersey is \$67,120 (The New Jersey Department of Labor, 2022), meaning that paid leave policies on average only cost employees about 0.58% of their annual wages. Considering most people will need to take leave in some capacity during their careers, the return on investment is

high. By including a model of how paid leave could operate nationally and demonstrating its return on investment, organizations advocating for paid leave can refute common misconceptions about paid leave.

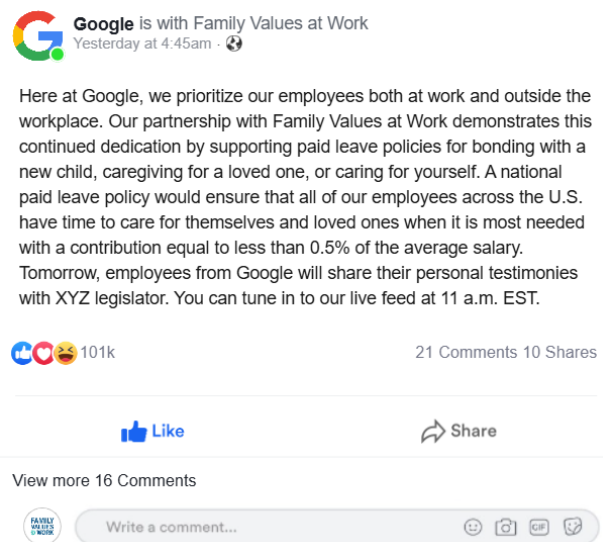
Notably, many of these corporations also have a large social media following (**see Table 4**). These socially active organizations and their large following on social media may not be accessible for practitioners, but their models and reach reveal the significant opportunity for partnerships with smaller corporations that could expand the reach of the paid leave movement and help disband its misconceptions critical stakeholders.

Once partnerships with corporations are established, it is important to consider how organizations are communicating alignment of their values with a paid leave policy to their employees as well as how they advocate for these policies in socially mediated spaces and through lobbying efforts. Corporate social media messaging could indicate how paid leave supports their organizational values as well as address misconceptions of paid leave as they detail their investment and involvement therein. This kind of involvement can strengthen

**Table 4**  
*Following Count for the Largest U.S.-based Corporations Based on Market Capitalization*

| <b>Corporation</b> | <b># of Followers on Facebook</b> | <b># of Followers on Instagram</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Apple              | 14M                               | 34M                                |
| NVIDIA             | 2.4M                              | 2M                                 |
| Microsoft          | 13M                               | 4M                                 |
| Amazon             | 29M                               | 6M                                 |
| Alphabet (Google)  | 34M                               | 15M                                |

legislative legitimacy of issue-based organizations by supporting “the how” of a national paid leave policy and indicating that the policy has support from big businesses. Results from MS1 indicated that insider strategies received the most engagement, and posts that used legislative (previously regulative) legitimacy strategies resulted in slightly more positive sentiment. Thus, if corporations are involved in legislative efforts and share that involvement on social media, issue-based organizations could be verified by sources outside of their current coalition. Issue-based organizations should then share these posts on their own pages to increase engagement (**Figures 3 and 4**). Social media messages from collaborating corporations could look like:



**Figure 3**  
*Example post from Google that could be shared on advocacy Facebook pages.*

Or:



**Figure 4**

*Example post from Apple that could be shared on advocacy Facebook pages.*

Ultimately, these collaborations on social media and through in-person lobbying efforts inform advocacy groups' engagement with their two primary stakeholders: community members and legislators. It helps them engage with community members on social media who may be critical of the policy by demonstrating how these policies are economically mutually beneficial for the organization and its employees and are supported by successful corporations. It also enables corporations to build stronger connections with their stakeholders, such as employees or consumers. When big businesses thrive and workers feel supported financially and emotionally, they both better contribute to the economy. Economic stability is the primary concern for Americans (Pew Research Center, 2024), making it a primary concern of legislators – further legitimizing the legislative efforts of organizations advocating for paid leave. While these issue-

based organizations are already doing the groundwork to support their communities and amplify marginalized voices, practitioners for these advocacy organizations connecting with corporate social advocacy could provide a more holistic approach across the political spectrum.

Theoretically, this advice extends Marschlich & Ingenhoff's (2021) regulative legitimacy outside of the for-profit perspective by exemplifying the mutually beneficial aspects of corporate social advocacy efforts since legislators are increasingly moved to action by economic factors. Where corporations have involved themselves in CSA efforts and partnered with issue-based organizations to demonstrate their alignment with the views of important stakeholders, issue-based organizations alternatively can partner with corporations to demonstrate economic alignment with their important stakeholders- legislators. The findings reframe corporate social advocacy as a corporate tool to build legitimacy, to a tool for issue-based organizations to garner support and develop legislative legitimacy.

Legislative legitimacy was deemed an important tool by participants in Study 2, and most participants indicated that they demonstrate alignment to legislators through storytelling efforts, particularly from those who have not had access to paid leave when they needed it. Corporate partnerships could expand the storytelling effort, especially if the partnering corporation already provides paid leave in some capacity to employees. Stories from corporate employees who had access to leave during critical times can also illustrate how paid leave contributes to long-term economic stability and employee retention. This can be done in conjunction with current testimonies from constituents that did not have paid leave during a crucial time as well as with testimonies from smaller businesses that cannot afford to provide paid leave out of pocket to employees, ultimately making them less competitive with larger corporations. Though some

participants in Study 2 indicated they also include testimonies by some in states where paid leave policies have already passed, corporate employee testimonies can expand this conversation beyond a state-by-state basis. Though some states provide the option to purchase paid leave insurance through private companies (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2024), testimonies from corporate employees in conjunction with other constituents who may not be able to afford to purchase paid leave insurance through a private entity can demonstrate that this model is not effective for most U.S. employees.

Additionally, descriptives in Study 1 indicated that Facebook posts that communicated organizational efforts advocating with legislators received the most engagement and overall fewer negative comments. Therefore, developing these relationships further on social media in conjunction with in-person efforts could expand the conversation and help issue-based organizations develop social capital or “the value derived from positive connections between people” (Mask, 2019) which can increase available resources or support (Poecze & Strauss, 2020) for the organizational mission. Thus, this study contributes to legitimacy literature by expanding efforts to develop social capital and illustrate economic feasibility and needs.

### **Conclusion**

This comprehensive review of social media and practitioner experience provides practical guidance to create broader change through enhanced message strategy and a best practice model for establishing corporate partners. These results suggest the adoption of a new form of legitimacy for issue-based organizations in which regulative legitimacy does not apply- legislative legitimacy. This type of legitimacy recognizes that while there are no industry standards for issue-based organizations, there are official channels through which to advocate for

change. Study 3 reveals how legislative legitimacy strategy can be enacted on social media and in practice, as modeled above in social media post from Google and Apple. The integrative results also indicate the opportunity for advocacy organizations to partner with corporations and build a more holistic movement. Future research should test the efficacy of such partnerships to changing attitudes and actions both from the legislator point of view and from the point of view of voters. It is also necessary to determine if developing legislative legitimacy by appealing to economic values would be effective regarding other sociopolitical issues.

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## **CONCLUSION**

This dissertation uses paid leave mixed-method study to extend legitimacy literature to inform the practice of advocacy organizations. Overall, Study 1 details the effectiveness of advocacy and legitimizing strategies on Facebook to determine which strategies received the most engagement and the most positive sentiment. Study 2 provides the internal perspectives of practitioners working at issue-based organizations advocating for paid leave. The results of the studies are culminated in an integrative review – Study 3 – to illustrate how these organizations can overcome challenges like political instability to further their movement. The primary theoretical contribution includes expanding legitimacy literature to an advocacy framework by considering legislative legitimacy as well as the moderating role of practitioners between legislators and their constituents. Practical contributions recommend that issue-based organizations expand their partnerships to corporations – leaning into the concept of corporate social advocacy. Collaborations with big business could help refute concerns of economic stability and appeal to the capitalistic values of American culture.

## **VITA**

Shelby Luttman Rios grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina. After high school, she attended Appalachian State University and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Relations. After her undergraduate program, she earned a Master of Science in Communication and Information from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Now, she is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her research interests include health issues management and advocacy efforts.