

BROOKINGS

NO MORE SIDEWALKS

No More Sidewalks: Parenting Today
A podcast from the Brookings Institution

"Parenting in polarization: The future of family policy"

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Participants:

Abby McCloskey
Nonresident Fellow, Center on Economic Security and Opportunity
The Brookings Institution
Columnist, Bloomberg Opinion and the *Dallas Morning News*

Patrick T. Brown
Fellow, Life and Family Initiative
Ethics & Public Policy Center

Betsey Stevenson
Professor of Public Policy and Economics
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan

Episode Summary:

In this episode, host Abby McCloskey and guests Betsey Stevenson and Patrick Brown examine how the changing political landscape is impacting public programs that support children. Stevenson, a public policy professor at the University of Michigan, and Brown, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, explore everything from why parents fear their child marrying a person of an opposite political party and the changing demographics and fiscal realities in America and the differences and overlaps between the political parties when it comes to family policy.

STEVENSON: The world has changed a lot in terms of what we expect from families and parents and kids. And politics matters because it shapes the options that people have to respond to the ways expectations are shaping.

BROWN: We're seeing a growing number of policy advocates, politicians, thinkers on the right recognize that it's not just cultural issues that sort of fall into the family bucket, that it's about the cost of childcare, and raising family, and housing, all these sort of things that are sort of upstream of the decision to have kids in the first place.

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MCCLOSKEY: Welcome to *No More Sidewalks*, where we talk about parenting today. I'm Abby McCloskey.

We've been examining the massive structural changes to child-rearing in America, and certainly our political polarization is one of those changes. Polls show that more parents now fear their child marrying someone of an opposing political party than someone of a different religion.

The very act of having kids and how you raise them can feel like a partisan stamp. And family policy itself is in a time of significant transition, not just from the 2026 midterms. As our society ages, more care and resources are going to older Americans, leaving families with young children to compete for a smaller piece of the pie.

The labor market is changing, along with the economics of having a family. And we're in a season of historic polarization, wherein the political left and political right often have very different policy visions or goals for how to support families.

[1:28]

With us today to discuss the politics of parenting is Betsey Stevenson. If you've been an economics student any time in the last decades, you've probably been assigned her textbook. Betsey's a professor of economics at the University of Michigan. She previously served on President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers and as chief economist of the U.S. Department of Labor.

We also have with us Patrick Brown, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a widely published writer. Prior to joining EPPC, Patrick served as a senior policy advisor to Congress's Joint Economic Committee, and yes, he was assigned Dr. Stevenson's textbook.

Betsey and Patrick, welcome.

I want to start with the, the big picture which is how has politics changed what it means to be a parent today, or or has it? And Patrick, we'll start with you.

[2:18]

BROWN: Well, first of all, Abby, those are some big, big questions, and it's hard to even know how to describe the changes that we've seen from the polarization. Just one anecdote or one one snapshot is the very act of having a family, as you

mentioned, is becoming identified with partisanship in a way that traditionally hasn't been. People who identify as conservative have higher fertility, are more likely to get married, increasingly so today than compared to even a a decade or two ago.

And so, something about parenthood is changing in a way that I think is correlated with all these other things that are going on. This sense that it's become a more individualized pursuit. It's less the sort of norm that everybody goes along in their life, most people get married, most people have kids.

Now, it's really a decision you have to affirmatively opt into, to find a potential partner or spouse in the first place, and then once you're partnered, to have kids. And that is correlated with race, income, ethnicity, education, religiosity, all these sort of things that sort of skew conservative in a way that, again, is sort of new and and potentially problematic when we think about the politics of parenthood and family going forward.

[3:26]

But I think we're also seeing a recognition from my side of the aisle, the conservative side of the aisle, that the issues that we tend to think of as pro-family or sort of family values-oriented are more than just the sort of traditional church lady, 1990s religious right style version of of family values. Obviously, that's still very much a part of the right-of-center coalition.

But we're seeing a growing number of policy advocates, politicians, thinkers on the right recognize that it's not just cultural issues that sort of fall into the family bucket, that it's about the cost of childcare, and raising family, and housing, all these sort of things that are sort of upstream of the decision to have kids in the first place. And that policymakers might have an easier time playing with around the margins in ways that aren't just the traditional sort of hot button, culture war issues that, that we've come to know and love.

[4:17]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, and I want to get into all of that more, Patrick. But Betsey, same question to you. Has politics and our polarization changed what it means to parent today?

[4:27]

STEVENSON: What I've learned from studying parents is that families for a very long time, maybe I would say at least a century, probably more, have been changing and adapting in terms of what it means to be a mother or what it means to be a father. What are the expectations we have? What are the goals we have? What are the goals for our children, and what does it even mean to be a child?

You can look at things like children at work and, you know, 100 years ago would have been very normal for a 13-year-old to be at work. Today, that would be very weird. It happens. There're teens that still work. But even among 16 and 17-year-olds, you know, I I had a teen who worked this summer, at my, at my urging and her finding the right opportunity. But she was one in three 16- and 17-year-olds that actually held a summer job.

So, the the world has changed a lot in terms of of what we expect from families and parents and kids. And politics matters because it shapes the options that people have to respond to the ways expectations are shaping.

So, there there is this huge polarization that has gone on in the United States that I think has been very dramatic and very different over the last, say, you know, 10 to 15 years, where people have really started to align so much with their party that they forget about the issues.

[5:57]

And when we we look at research on how people feel about particular policy issues, you know, they move much more closely to their party if you ask them to identify their party affiliation before you ask them a question like, "How do you feel about childcare?" Because it's sort of this sports team metaphor. It's like asking me if I like the University of Michigan football or Michigan State football.

And that's, I think, sort of what's happened to our politics. But at, at the end of the day, that, that's, we all actually want the same thing, which is to raise kids in a safe community where we can feel confident that our kids are gonna grow up and have useful, productive, joyful lives. That's not a party issue. That's a human issue.

[6:40]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, and I'm glad you brought up the changing expectations, not just on parents, but what it means to be a kid, and that when you're in a family, you're not just in your own vacuum, you're part of a broader system of societal expectations and norms and policies.

And a lot of those things, not just expectations, but structurally, we're seeing big changes which are impacting what it's like to have a family. And I want to start with you, Betsey, on this one. I think the, the biggest demographic shift we're seeing, to me, is, and it plays into the falling fertility rate, is just that our population is aging.

Because our population is aging, that changes where our money goes. That impacts what happens for families with kids. How is that playing out at the family policy level, our our changing demographics and aging population?

[7:29]

STEVENSON: Well, I mean, when it it comes to the politics and policy, one of the things that worries me is that our aging population, when they're sort of post-fertility, post-children, are just less interested in making any kind of sacrifices in order to support, you know, a next generation that is so far behind them. And, you know, you see that in things like that, you know, the federal government spends very very little on children and spends a lot on our aging population.

Now, Patrick might push right back on me and say, "But wait, all that money on children spent at the state and local level," and and that's good because it allows the state and local governments to be very responsive to what parents in their community need.

But I do think that it does highlight sort of more broadly that the federal government does not see their role as advancing the needs and purpose of the next generation. And that's why I'd like to see a switch in that direction. I love families having control. I like there being some choices across communities and what you, what you get for your kids.

But I would like to see the federal government understand that our job is to build a world for the next generation, not to serve the needs of the old population that we currently have.

[8:56]

You know, there there is a positive thing we could do, which is, I think older people should be more involved in childcare and child rearing, and I say that because it's good for them. You know, the-- one of the greatest things about being a professor is that for as long as I want, I will have trapped young people who have to listen to what I think. Long after you have turned the podcast off, I will have 18-year-olds who are forced to be in the classroom with me. Don't be skeptical about higher ed. We get rid of people who aren't investing.

But there is something that is really joyful. And I certainly learn a lot from my students. We could do more to bring our older population into these roles, both with their own grandkids and great-grandkids, but also within the community more broadly.

[9:45]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah. Thanks for that, Betsey. And Patrick, same to you. I mean, the share of resources available at the state and local level are just smaller than what could be available at the federal level. And how do you see the aging population and then the voter pressure on Washington? How is that impacting family policy?

[10:08]

BROWN: Yeah, I mean, we made the decision back in the 1930s and then again in the 1960s to help socialize the cost of old age because a huge problem was senior poverty, people dying, you know, pre-prematurely because they didn't have money to pay for their retirement and, and healthcare bills and all the rest.

And so, through Social Security and Medicare, we kind of took that on collectively. We're gonna commit to doing this at a federal level in a way that we have never traditionally done. As Betsey mentions, the sort of health and education and welfare kind of programs were traditionally understood to be the province of the states. And that works pretty well, so long as you have a population that's able to sustain itself.

But as Social Security and some of these other old age entitlements start to look less like a generational compact and more like, you know, some people would call it a Ponzi scheme, that's not exactly correct. But it starts to look that way when you have so few warm bodies able to pay into the system today to provide for for yesterday's workers, today's retirees. Something's gotta change.

And so, because we've taken on those burdens at the federal level, you know, some would say, "Well, why don't we just socialize the cost of childbearing and family life in the same way that we did?"

I think there's... I'm open to exploring that possibility, but we're also up against $40 trillion in budget deficits and some some fiscal pressures that make it really challenging to think about taking on a much larger federal role for some of these things.

I think prudence and and, you know, sort of incremental change is probably gonna be the name of the game in the future when it comes to things like the Child Tax Credit and other ways of supporting family life.

[11:37]

And what worries me is at the state level, yes, it's traditionally been the case that states are are responsible for providing for K-12 education, even, you know, some, some childcare programs and that sort of thing, although that there's federal money involved there too. But we're seeing a growing Boomer tax revolt, especially in the most recent election, midterm election in states like North Carolina, Florida, other places, are now sort of building in sort of protection for seniors and and, you know, older Americans against property and income taxes with the idea that, oh, you paid into the system. We deserve to, you know, watch out for those guys.

But it's like, to your point, Abby, seniors vote and and babies don't. Right? And so, if we're not trying to carve out political pressure for a family agenda because, again, those are the people who are oftentimes the most sort of pinched. Younger families have a lot less net worth in the bank than an older, you know, empty nest couple that might be sitting on a house they're getting ready to sell.

That generational imbalance is not gonna go away anytime soon, and so if we do think, hey, states, you gotta be on the front line of supporting families, you can't be cutting them out of the knees with some of this fiscal policy that we're seeing sort of become a trend.

[12:46]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, and you know, I guess someone could say, "Look, America has never had a paid parental leave policy. We've never had a robust child allowance. We've never had these things. Why do we need them now?" But is it the case, this question is for both of you, have the economics of having a family changed? Like, is there more of a need for those types of supports than there might have been before? Or the older generation was able to soldier right on through without a generous safety net for families, and thus, you know, this generation should be able to also.

Betsey, do you want to start us off on that? I see you ready to jump in.

[13:21]

STEVENSON: We can muddle through all sorts of things. That doesn't mean we wouldn't have been better off with more parental leave, with ... I'm Gen X. We're the

latchkey generation. And so, you know, when I was a kid, the view was, "You're eight years old. We'll tie this key around your neck so that you don't lose it, and you can let yourself into the house, and, you know, don't use the stove."

I think we do need these things. Look, we're getting richer as a country. we're having these conversations while, like, we're also talking about an AI boom, AI potential massive productivity gains, and we should be asking, like, what do we want to do with all these gains? Like, what is it that we want to use them for?

And I think we have to work on building belonging in our communities. And that a way to build belonging in our communities is to make sure that people have time, whether it's time off to bond with their baby when they first bring a child into the home, whether it's time off to meet with their teachers and go to the parent-teacher day. You know, there's lots of things that we need to be able to participate in in our community to build community and nurture our kids.

[14:31]

And I I really do fundamentally think we can afford these things, but we have to be willing and able to have hard conversations.

And I will tell you, like, I remember when a Democratic policy advisor suggested, "Well, why don't we just let people borrow out of their Social Security?" Because, you know, when I was a 30-something new mom, I would have rather had my Social Security payments for six months then and forgo having them, you know, when I'm a little bit older.

And, you know, Democrats were, like, very upset that a Democrat would suggest such a thing. That's a hard conversation. I understand why Democrats might not want to do that. I'm not saying it's the best idea out there, but I'm saying we gotta have the hard conversations.

[15:18]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah. Well then that perfectly segues us into this conversation about kind of what does the left tend to want, and I understand there's different factions within that, and what does the right tend to want, and then where are there potential places of overlap? Where are there really big differences? I think talking about, I mean, you both have said it, a massive potential return from AI and also $40 trillion in debt. So, are we wealthy or, or not?

But I want to talk about the politics of the left, especially coming out of a massive blue tsunami in the 2026 midterms, that Democrats are in charge of Congress, and also for the first time in a long time, the majority of people will be under a state that has Democratic leadership.

And Betsey, when you look at this, the aging population, the changes in expectations, the changes in economics, from a person who's historically sat on the left, what do progressives, liberals, moderates on that side of the aisle... Can you help flesh out, like, what they want to do to help support families?

[16:23]

STEVENSON: So, people have very different starting points, right? Some people start with child poverty, some start with women's opportunities, some start with, you know, thinking about income inequality or wealth inequality, and they're all different starting points.

My starting point is a family trying to make daily life work. And I think a lot of the Democrats who recently won, that was their starting point. And that's how you actually can start to bridge a gap between left, right, and independents. A family just trying to make daily life work, and then we need to ask what that family needs, whether our policies are making it easier or harder for them to to make their preferred arrangement work.

And that, that is a much more general position. But even people far on the left, like, Mamdani really does seem to start from that point of view of what do people need. I think that's what's making him successful.

Then it's it's up to the people in the community to really try to influence... if a politician can start with what do the people that I'm representing need, and how is policy either making that more or less possible, I think that's when they reach the most people, and then the-- because the answers really depend on what people want.

[17:44]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, and I mean, you've sat at high positions at the national level. What is Betsey Stevenson's take of what a family who's not deeply impoverished, but who is working, trying to make it work, what do they need?

[17:59]

STEVENSON: I think one of the challenges is that people are waiting longer to have children because that's what's working for them as individuals. They want to wait till they feel ready, they've achieved some of their own goals, and personally, I think it's useful to wait until you're really ready to make a lot of personal sacrifices.

What do they need? Well, they need to know then that their personal sacrifices won't be huge. Right? They won't have to leave work. They can take time off. And that they won't be faced with, you know, problems like a kid who's sick so they need to stay home, and yet a boss threatening to fire them if they don't come in. Or, you know, somebody who says, "I, you know, I need to be there for my family. I'm gonna have to take two days off." It just shouldn't, it shouldn't be a fireable offense for a man or a woman.

So, I think that, that it's the flexibility to fit their family in while still being a good worker is really missing. And some of that comes from just, you know, people talk a lot about paid time off. Why does it matter that it's paid? So, I made a policy proposal called Earned Time Off. It would be paid. But the main thing about it is, is just it's not disruptive when it's earned time off. Right? So, if every 40 hours I work I'm earning one hour I can take off, then when I have that kid who's sick, when I have that school

parent-teacher meeting, I can say, "I'm gonna use my earned time off to go do this thing."

So, I think we have to change the social norms. And as I said, it's not completely about the pay. For many people it is. But it's also about whether the expectation is that you have a right to take two hours out in the afternoon to meet with a schoolteacher or work from home for eight hours because your kid's throwing up and you can't send them to childcare.

[19:57]

And then I think that they also need to be able to figure out an affordable, trustworthy form of childcare. And what that looks like differs for everyone. And so, it's hard to come up with that one answer. I can tell you what I think is the best. I also understand not every parent has my same values.

But they do need to know that there's a place where their kid can go for care. And then they also need to be able to afford a stable living environment because people are really reluctant to bring children into, you know, a situation where they're like, "There's not enough space in my apartment, and I don't know if I'll get kicked out. I don't know how long the lease will last."

And so, these things all come together to just be really big barriers, and they cause people to continue to put off having children.

[20:46]

MCCLOSKEY: Right. I want to press on one area, and then Patrick, I'm so excited to get to you and your perspective on this from the political right. Betsey, one push across the aisle in a lot of discussions over the years that I think Democrats get from Republicans or liberals get from conservatives is, well, the focus even on childcare feels like it is, threatens the not insignificant number of parents who stay home, and why would we be putting taxpayer dollars that, you know, this family earns where only one person's in the labor force to support another family where two people are in the labor force and probably making more money. I feel like childcare has felt divisive. How do you think about that?

[21:31]

STEVENSON: So, I think that this comes out of the fact that we're one of the few countries to have a household-based tax system where you really benefit if you have a stay-at-home spouse. . If we didn't have that, then I think it would be easy to say, you know, let's give families money to, whether it's to support a stay-at-home spouse or to support someone to go work in the labor force.

The problem is that we actually do have a system where, you said people have a lot more money, but they have a lot less time. And they pay more in taxes because, you know, both people's income are taxed, and then they're paying, you know, for their childcare out of taxed money.

You know, I always joked that if we really got into a pinch, what we needed to do was find a nanny that my husband could marry instead, and we'd save so much

money. You know that that's, it shouldn't be like that. Right? And I don't mean we would save money because we would pay her less, but just his tax bill would go down by so much.

[22:38]

And and that, that's where I think we create an illusion of there being a tension between the two. What we ought to do is look at the tax savings that a household with a stay-at-home spouse gets, and then think about how to give some equivalent benefit to a household with two earners that's facing caregiving costs.

And there's different ways, as I said, to do that. But but I think that that's that's where we get this boogeyman idea that we're somehow not caring about the families where women stay home.

I get asked this by people on the left, I should tell you, all the time as well, and they say to me, " it's, it's so unfair. These women stay home and they work so hard and they provide all these services for value in their family, and they don't get paid for them." And I'm like, and they don't get taxed on them either. Right? So, like, if you're gonna produce $80,000 worth of services for your family that is tax-free, that's an advantage that we're giving to stay-at-home moms.

[23:42]

MCCLOSKEY: Wow, you're really kicking over the hot takes right to Patrick. Patrick, your choice if you want to respond directly to Betsey and then go to the bigger picture, and I would like to hear your response to Betsey, and I would also like to hear your bigger picture point of view of how the right wants to support families, understanding there's a lot of different visions on the right too under that umbrella for meeting the needs that that families have.

[24:07]

BROWN: Yeah, no, there's a lot to get into there and and maybe, you know, Betsey inadvertently kind of illustrated where the right and the left differ maybe on that, because if you are approaching it from a, you know, treating the family as as mostly as sort of this economically rational organization and you're producing these goods that are not being taxed, yeah, there's an argument, I, you know, it's efficient or whatever, I, I don't know.

But if you're approaching it instead as there are some commitments and some institutions that I could, you know, you'd argue, let's say, preexist the state or certainly come before the the political order in, in, from a conservative point of view in terms of importance. Right? In the family, religion, sort of our, our community bonds and those sort of things.

We don't want to treat them as just economic organizations or arrangements. These are commitments that people make to each other and obviously, you know, you don't charge your kids rent because, not because it's logistically complicated, but because that's something that we expect we have an obligation to do. And maybe once they leave the house and come back as 20-year-olds you can charge them rent.

But at least when they're, when they're under your care you're not... it's not a market transaction because families exist prior to the market, prior to politics.

[25:15]

And so, from that point of view, conservatives look at our declining fertility rate, our declining marriage rate, and say, "What does it say about a society in which it's become so hard to settle down and have kids?" You know, Betsey ticked down a, a few of those. I would put housing much higher to the top of my list in terms of when you feel like you can't afford a place to call home and you're moving apartments or it feels, you know, astronomically out of reach to afford a down payment, then you feel less likely to want to commit and and put down roots and, and have have have kids.

We can see this in the empirical data. It makes intuitive sense too. So, I think if you're sort of pro-family on the right or on the left, you have to really be pro-YIMBY in the sense of building more housing because without that, life just feels really expensive, as we've seen in the last couple elections.

But also is this sense that, kind of tying into our earlier conversation about entitlements and and our obligations to seniors that we've taken on, we we've socialized those costs in a way that we haven't for kids, so therefore parents are expected to bear the cost of raising kids individually, even though the the benefits of raising happy, well-adjusted, productive members of society flow to future generations in the form of, you know, future, job creators and entrepreneurs or whatever else, taxpayers.

That's, you know, from my my memory of Professor Stevenson's textbooks way back in the day, that's a, that's a positive externality that we're not recognizing. Right? In the sense of, like, families are are generating this value for society, but we're we're asking parents to pay up front, essentially, for the future earnings of their kids.

And so, if there's a way to kind of address that continuum, that, that, to smooth some of those burdens so you're not having to do it alone. And obviously the easiest way to do that is through a direct cash transfer, like, you know, the child tax credit. But also other ways.

And we talked about is the latchkey generation, but other sort of ways that we've sort of raised the bar both politically but also culturally in terms of what it takes to raise kids today, asking parents to do it all on their own. You have to be your own tech support if you want to protect your kid from inappropriate material online or with the rise of AI chatbots and all the rest.

We're really putting the onus on parents to be, you know, when you, you've lost that sort of sense that we're all in this together. That, yeah, you just, you know, you have to kind of chart your own path and you're on your own, kid. That makes it a lot harder for parents and more people are are more reluctant.

[27:32]

And then there, yeah, the economics of it all, the the time off and that sort of thing. I think, you know, people want flexibility, they also want stability. Right?

I think there's fruitful room for common ground to talk about, especially for low-income workers, like, predictable scheduling and and time off and that sort of thing. When your schedule's being directed by the algorithm and you can't arrange childcare at short notice for for low-income parents especially, that's really difficult.

And so, yeah, there's some labor market stuff I'd be happy to kind of play around with. But I think for conservatives, it starts with that idea of families are sort of the building block of a healthy society. If we don't have strong families, all the government programs in the world aren't gonna be able to fix the the problems that, that we see.

And so, what can we be doing to kind of incentivize and strengthen and give parents a wider choice set of options to be able to build the kind of world that that they want and the the community that they want to raise kids in?

[28:22]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, and Patrick, some of the narrative against conservatives is you talk a big game about being a pro-family party. Pro-lifers were congregated in the conservative side of the aisle, and this is a lot of rhetoric about the importance of families and making sure pregnant women go all the way through to childbirth, but then things kind of drop off.

And yes, you know, conservatives have given a thousand more dollars here and there in the child tax credit, or a little bit more in other types of obscure credits like the CDCTC and else. But, you know, when it comes down to it, they haven't put money behind these priorities. What's, what's that about, Patrick?

[29:00]

BROWN: Abby, we could talk for another hour about my frustrations with the conservative movement on that front. But I I mean, I think realistically it is a coalition that's made up of both social conservatives like myself, who may be coming at this from a more religious or traditionalist understanding of the importance of family, and then those for whom the highest good is, you know, not to be too pejorative, but low corporate tax rates, or or a strong national defense, or, you know, some of these other coalitions that make up the Republican Party.

And traditionally, the religious or social conservative faction of the Republican Party and... or the conservative movement, however you want to frame it, has just never had the juice to be able to lean on the more corporate-friendly or the more interventionist, you know, comrades in arms, so to speak, on the Republican side of the aisle.

To the degree that you do have this, you know, easy attack line that, the old George Carlin line about, well, you only carry the baby until until it's born. And I mean, uh, that's, that's a, you know, caricature obviously, but, you know, Republicans could also do a much better job of of defending against that. And we've seen drips and drabs, to your point, you know, uh, is anybody gonna have a child?

You know, a- and it's, so, you know... Anyway, I don't want to give my whole history of the Republican movement here.

But I think we're starting to see younger politicians talk about this in more meaningful ways. You look at Vice President Vance's debate with Governor Walz in 2024. He talked very eloquently about needing a pluralistic approach to childcare, recognizing that one size doesn't fit all.

You know, that's hard to, that's hard to realize if your only tool in the toolbox is, "Oh, we have a a tax-deferred savings account," or Trump accounts that you can put money in, and your when your child is 20 they can access it. Oh, or 18. That's great for two decades down the road, but what does it actually do for me right now when I'm thinking about having a baby? Not much. Right?

And so, conservatives and Republicans are still working through that, but maybe this most recent election cycle has shown that, you know, rhetoric doesn't fill the gap between what an actual policy vision should and could look like.

[31:02]

STEVENSON: I wonder if we're right at a moment where a certain section of conservatives and a certain section of of liberals can actually come together to improve family policy. Because look, if you look at the Republican Party, and there's a lot of concern about fertility, but then, you know, the answer is Elon Musk will have babies with 15 different women and just populate the country for us. And I don't think conservatives or liberals want that. I think what we want is, you know, your standard, two-parent family with two to six kids—

MCCLOSKEY: —six kids!

STEVENSON: Well, my my spouse is is one of six, so I don't want to offend his mom. But I think everybody has this kind of vision of the family, and that doesn't mean that there aren't other really successful family formations. And Patrick, you sounded a little bit left there because it sounded like you were saying it takes a village for a while, and that's, you know, and Hillary Clinton really got doxxed for that. But in a lot of ways, you know, it does.

And and I have a, a member of my family who became a single mom. And I've seen it play out very differently because her sister and her sister's wife, who didn't have any children, rose to the occasion. She became close, close friends with the father of the baby, and then the the father's wife when he finally married. And this kid has been raised with more adults than most kids have.

So that, there are alternative successful ways, and I don't want anybody to think I'm not saying that. But we don't want Elon Musk fertility. We want families where people come together with the shared purpose of loving and supporting a child and nurturing it through to adulthood. And I think there's a lot of rooms for liberals and conservatives to agree on that.

[32:57]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, Patrick, let's hear from you on this, and then let's talk about specifics of what there could be agreement on here in this next two years. Patrick?

[33:04]

BROWN: Yeah, I was just gonna say, I do think I share a little bit of that optimism, too. I think the conversation around family issues, even in the last decade, has actually started to converge in a really productive place with greater attention to the recognition that, hey, not all families need childcare. We need a more pluralistic point of view that's not just funding center-based care, but abuela down the street and other other sort of non-traditional forms of care.

That yes, it's you know, we have a good body of empirical research summarized by Melissa Kearney's recent book on the importance of having two parents in the household.

A lot of these things that I think we're starting to kind of put away some of the crazy ideas on both sides that maybe a a a new spirit of bipartisanship could actually point us towards.

[33:44]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, maybe more polarization has actually created a middle, which is a bit of a controversial point. But should there be such an agreement, Betsey and Patrick, between folks kind of on the center right and center left of how to support families, to bring us to a close, where do you think some of those areas of bipartisanship exist for supporting families?

[34:06]

STEVENSON: You know, I already mentioned the idea of earned time off, and that's my Hamilton Project policy proposal, so I know I'm just tooting my own ideas. But one of the reasons I came up with that was I wanted to find something that I thought conservatives could get behind.

And, you know, I'm not gonna tell you how to use your time off. I'm gonna use it for my family. I hope other people do, too. But, you know, once we can start to create policies that benefit the majority of people, I think we bring the country along, and that's where I think we we need to start. And so, giving people the right to take time off to meet their their personal family obligations, you know, to whom I think is is a crucial first starting point

[34:52]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, I love that. Patrick?

[34:54]

BROWN: I'll talk quickly because I got a lot of ideas and I also have to my own- meet my own personal family obligations as soon as we get off this call. But the first, I

think, is is childcare, that we've talked a little bit about. I think we're seeing a lot of innovative ideas come out of people like Representative Ro Khanna, the Project 2029 document that was recently released by a bunch of Democratic-leaning advisors in D.C.

This idea of, like, let's just try to, again, expand the choice there for parents, put some money into childcare, but also if parents want to take a slice of that money home as a a kind of care allowance, I think that has a lot of potential. It just costs money. You gotta figure out a way to pay for it.

Another one is sort of family healthcare, things like the cost of childbirth or Medicare for kids. I don't know if that has political legs, but you're gonna hear a lot of Democrats talking about that over the next couple years. Kids are pretty easy to insure from an actuarial point of view, and Republicans aren't gonna love it, but I could see it happen.

[35:47]

The last thing is, if you're concerned about low fertility, it's a primarily a cause downstream of declining marriage. And so, if you're worried about having more babies, it's because people aren't pairing off. Why aren't they pairing off? Well, you look at the fortunes of, you know, middle class and lower men, they're not bringing a lot to the table in a a lot of cases. And some of that's labor market stuff, some of that's, you know, vocational ed. We can talk about that all day if you want to.

But I think one area of increasing convergence, and maybe this is something of the the excesses of the current administration is actually negatively polarizing some on the left to take seriously, is the rise of the vice industries in terms of sports betting, the commercialization of marijuana, you know, the the excesses of of porn and some of these other things that really prey on young men and turn them into worse versions of themselves, make it harder to be able to bring people to the table.

You look at people like Jake Auchincloss and retiring Representative Jared Golden. They've they've really talked about the struggles facing young men, not just in an economic sense, but in a social sense. And if you're worried about declining fertility, I think helping young men find those guardrails to become people worth marrying, that'll actually make a huge difference.

[36:53]

STEVENSON: First of all, I was waiting for Patrick to talk about his baby bonus idea because I really love the idea of a baby bonus, so...

BROWN: I just take that for granted. Everybody should love it.

MCCLOSKEY: Just this, tell us really quick what it is though, Patrick, for the listeners who aren't aware of your brilliance.

[37:06]

BROWN: Yeah, sure. It's not just mine. Other people have had this too. But basically, the problem with the current child tax credit is that you only get the money

the following tax season after you have the baby. And we have to figure out a way to make sure that when you bring baby home from the hospital, and you get the Social Security card in the in the mail, it comes attached with a nice big check. I love $2,000, $4,000, something like that.

But parents experience a really high level of income volatility around childbirth, and if we can get money upfront rather than make them wait for up to a year afterwards, I think that could actually... maybe it wouldn't increase fertility at all. I actually think it might have a little bit of an impact, but it would just give parents more stability and peace of mind around a really fragile time.

[37:44]

STEVENSON: I I just want to share also the human side of that, which is I think we don't do enough to tell people, "We're so glad that you brought this baby home. We're so glad that you have made this decision, and we support you as a community."

And so, that baby bonus check, like Patrick, you accused me of giving the efficiency. You just gave an efficiency argument for it. I think it's an inclusion and a belonging argument. Like, we want to welcome the baby. We really do. And I I think that's why baby bonuses are just incredibly important.

And I just want to say one last thing on, Patrick, your point about young men. Look, I will tell you, after the 2024 election, women on college campuses, undergrad and graduate students, would say to me all the time, "Well, I'm on the opposite side of the young men around here, and I'm not even talking to them." I think it was a real challenge for dating. I think we've, that the swing here to back towards Democrats is at least useful for the dating market, and I'm hoping we get a baby boom out of it.

MCCLOSKEY: Well, we'll check back in in nine months about that. But Betsy, Patrick, thank you so much for being with me today. I appreciate it.

STEVENSON: Thank you. Good talking with you both.

BROWN: It was fun. Thanks so much.

[music]

MCCLOSKEY: I'm Abby McCloskey from the Brookings Institution, and this is *No More Sidewalks: Parenting Today*. This podcast is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network and the Center for Economic Security and Opportunity at Brookings.

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