

Is Marriage Still Popular?

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social capital project

A project of the Joint Economic Committee – Republicans | Chairman, Sen. Mike Lee
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Although family life in America has become less stable over the last several decades, the majority of the American population still agrees that marriage provides value to individuals and society. Yet based on results from the 2018 [American Family Survey](#), marriage and parenting fall low on the list of what respondents considered essential to a fulfilling life. And while Americans overall seem to think that childbearing should take place within marriage, marriage does not seem to be as important a prerequisite to becoming a parent as are other factors. While college-educated adults are often achieving their own preferred ideal—gaining a good education, earning a good living, building a rewarding career, and also marrying and having children within marriage—many in the rest of the population (particularly the non-college educated) are not.

Most Americans agree that marriage benefits individuals and society. The survey, conducted by the *Deseret News* and Brigham Young University’s Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy in collaboration with YouGov, examines a variety of issues pertaining to relationships, family, and cultural and political issues.¹ Although marriage in the United States might be weaker than it was in the past—indeed, family life has changed dramatically, with fewer people married than ever before and many children born outside of marriage²—the results of this study indicate that the majority of Americans have a positive view of marriage.

For example, 64 percent of respondents agreed that marriage makes people better off financially; 59 percent agreed that marriage is necessary to create strong families; 53 percent agreed that society is better off when more people are married; and only 14 percent agreed that marriage is more of a burden than a benefit or that it is old-fashioned.³ Those figures represent little change from previous years of the survey.

Furthermore, when asked about the ideal sequence of relationships and childbearing, respondents overall said that childbearing should take place after marriage. Participants were asked to rank their *ideal* relationship sequence (including marriage, cohabitation, sex, and childbearing), as well as their *actual* relationship sequence. Although there were some differences among subgroups regarding the ideal ordering of sex, cohabitation, and marriage, all subgroups placed childbearing as ideally taking place after marriage.⁴

Despite generally positive views of the benefits of marriage, however, marriage did not rank highly in terms of what is essential to a fulfilling life when respondents were presented with a list of seven items.⁵ In fact, it ranked second to last, with only “having children” ranking below it. When asked what is essential to a fulfilling life, the top three ranked items overall were “making a good living” (77 percent), “gaining a good education” (71 percent), and “having a rewarding career or job” (65 percent). Thus, while the majority of the population agrees that marriage is beneficial, they do not necessarily view it as a priority for a fulfilling life. However, most Americans are married or say they would like to get married.⁶

And when respondents who were in a relationship or had a child were asked about what their most important identities are, they were most likely to name “parent” and “spouse” as “extremely important” or “very important.”

It may be that this finding regarding marriage’s place among life priorities is more reflective of how marriage has come to be seen as a “capstone” of adulthood, rather than a “cornerstone” as it used to be; whereas marriage used to be a part of the path to achieving a stable life, today marriage is viewed as something that should happen only after people have established their careers and are financially secure.⁷ Still, when respondents were specifically asked whether “getting married is more important to me than having a successful career,” only 19 percent agreed, while over half, 52 percent, disagreed (29 percent were ambivalent).

When it comes to having children, the American Family Survey shows that marriage did not top the list of “extremely important” prerequisites, despite respondents indicating that childbearing would ideally take place in marriage when asked about ideal relationship sequence. Out of eight potential “extremely important” prerequisites to becoming a parent, marriage ranked fourth among women and fifth among men. Once again, “financial stability” was high on the list—first for men and second for women. Among women, “being in a committed relationship” (not necessarily married) was the number one extremely important prerequisite to becoming a parent, and it was second among men. Also, among 18-29-year-old childless adults, “the cost of raising a child” was ranked as the top consideration in deciding to have a child, followed by relationship status.⁸ Relatedly, a 2013 Gallup poll found that fewer Americans consider marriage important “when an unmarried man and woman have a child together,” with the percentage agreeing marriage was very or somewhat important in this case declining from 76 percent to 64 percent between 2006 and 2013.⁹

That marriage was not as important a prerequisite to having children compared to other factors is not too surprising, considering nearly 40 percent of children in the United States are born outside of marriage.¹⁰ However, among highly-educated adults being married before becoming a parent is by far the general rule, considering that about 90 percent of births to highly-educated women are within marriage.¹¹ On the other hand, among women with less education, over half of all births occur outside of marriage.¹² Highly-educated adults, overall, are more likely to marry and to have stable marriages, compared to their peers with less education.¹³

Americans overall still appear to place value on marriage and recognize its benefits. While the results of this study seem to indicate that the desire for marriage has declined relative to other, more individualistic wants and needs, other research suggests Americans still prioritize it.¹⁴ Indeed, most Americans still marry or hope to marry. However, marriage ranks relatively low on the list of necessary prerequisites for childbearing, and the nation’s high rate of unwed births is an indication of the disconnection between marriage and children.

Nonetheless, as noted, there is a stark economic divide when it comes to unwed childbearing, with the college educated rarely having children outside of marriage, while it is the norm among those with less education for children to be born to unmarried parents. Thus, it seems that many, the most vulnerable American oftentimes, are failing to reap the benefits that many recognize marriage can provide.

ENDNOTES

1. The American Family Survey, “2018 Summary Report: Identities, Opportunities and Challenges,” <https://www.deseretnews.com/american-family-survey/2018>, accessed January 28, 2019.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, “Men’s marital status,” Historical Marital Status Tables Figure MS-1a, and “Women’s marital status” Figure MS-1b, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>; Child Trends, “Births to Unmarried Women,” <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/births-to-unmarried-women>, accessed January 28, 2019.
3. The American Family Survey, Figure 3.
4. Note: Subgroups included political party, race, and age group. See Figures 13 & 14, pp. 30-31.
5. Ibid., Table 15, p. 33
6. Frank Newport and Joy Wilke, “Most in U.S. Want Marriage, but Its Importance has Dropped,” *Gallup*, August 2, 2013, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/163802/marriage-importance-dropped.aspx>.
7. See Andrew J. Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 4 (November 2004): 848-861, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3600162.pdf>, accessed January 28, 2019.
8. American Family Survey, Table 10, p. 26.
9. Frank Newport and Joy Wilke, “Most in U.S. Want Marriage, but Its Importance has Dropped.”
10. Social Capital Project, “What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America, May 15, 2017, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=82AEEDDA-B550-481E-BA31-9623B85A20D6>, p. 19.
11. Social Capital Project, “Rising Unwed Pregnancy and Childbearing across Educational and Racial Groups,” February 14, 2018, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=A075A2E2-5CD0-406B-86B8-E44BB7A8FD6B>, see Figure 1.
12. Ibid.
13. Kim Parker and Renee Stepler, Pew Research Center, “As U.S. marriage rate hovers at 50%, education gap in marital status widens,” September 14, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>, accessed February 6, 2019; Wendy Wang, Pew Research Center, “The link between a college education and a lasting marriage,” December 4, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/04/education-and-marriage/>, accessed February 6, 2019.

14. Findings from the Pew Research Center show that having a successful marriage and being a good parent steadily topped the list of most important life goals, both in 1997 and in 2010, well outranking other potential priorities, including “being successful in a high-paying career or profession,” “having a job or career that benefits society,” “becoming famous,” and “owning your own home.” In 1997, 95 percent of Americans said that “being a good parent” is one of the most important things in life or at least very important, with nearly the same amount, 94 percent, saying the same in 2010. In 1997, 86 percent of Americans said that “having a successful marriage” is one of the most important things in life or at least very important, with 85 percent responding similarly in 2010. See Pew Research Center, “Young, Underemployed and Optimistic: Coming of Age, Slowly, in a Tough Economy,” February 9, 2010, <http://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2012/02/young-underemployed-and-optimistic.pdf>, accessed January 31, 2019.
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