

# The Divided State of Our Unions

FAMILY FORMATION IN (POST-)COVID-19 AMERICA

*October 2021*

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## Executive Summary

Where is the American family headed as COVID-19 finally seems to be abating? Focusing on family formation in the United States, this report considers three possibilities: (a) the “decadence-deepens scenario,” where marriage and fertility fall further in the wake of the pandemic; (b) the “renaissance scenario,” where men and women turn towards family formation in response to the existential questions and loneliness raised by the last year-and-a-half; and (c) the “family polarization scenario,” where economic, religious, and partisan divides in family formation deepen in post-COVID America.

Based on two new YouGov surveys by the Institute for Family Studies (IFS) and the Wheatley Institution, this report finds the most consistent evidence for the “family polarization scenario.” The “desire to marry” since the onset of COVID-19 ticked slightly upwards, by 2 percentage points overall, whereas the desire “to have a child” among all Americans ages 18-55 moved downwards, with just 10% reporting an increased desire for children, compared to 17% indicating a decreased desire. However, beyond these global shifts in family formation attitudes, which do not tell a consistent story in favor of either of the first two scenarios, there is marked polarization in desires related to marriage and childbearing by income, religious attendance, and partisanship as COVID-19 abates.

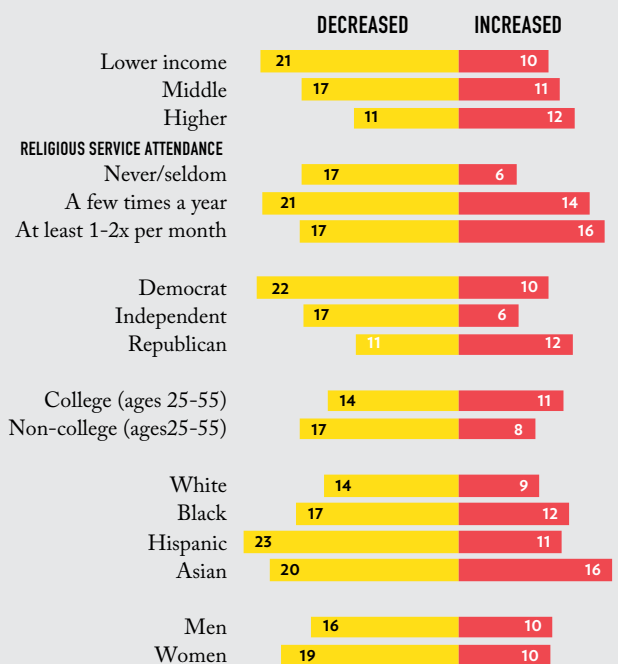
That’s because in a pandemic-haunted world where both marriage and fertility seem especially daunting or optional, three ingredients have emerged as signally important for family formation in the United States: money, hope, and a deep dedication to family. And the rich, the religious, and Republicans are generally more likely to possess one or more of these ingredients, compared to their lower-income, secular, and Democrat/Independent-affiliated fellow citizens. The family polarization documented here is especially striking because it augments fissures in American family life that have been growing over the last half century.

Specifically, this study documents five key findings about family formation in America for men and women ages 18-55 as the pandemic abates:

**1) Interest in family formation is higher among the rich.** The desire to marry has increased 9 percentage points overall among higher-income Americans who are not married, compared to just 4 percentage points among middle-income and 2 percentage points among lower-income Americans who are not married.

**Figure 1. Changing Desire to Have Children Since COVID-19**

*% saying since COVID-19 began last year, their desire to have a child has...*



*Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55. Response of “stayed the same” was not shown.*

*Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.*

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Likewise, the desire to have children has increased 1 percentage point overall among higher-income Americans but has decreased 6 percentage points among middle-income Americans, and 11 percentage points among lower-income Americans.

**2) Interest in family formation is higher among the religious.** The desire to marry has increased by 8 percentage points overall among unmarried Americans who regularly attend church, synagogue, temple, or a mosque, but has not increased among Americans who never/seldom attend religious services. Likewise, the desire to have children only fell by a net of 1 percentage point among Americans who attend religious services at least once a month but fell by a net of 11 percentage points for Americans who never/seldom attend services.

**3) Interest in family formation is higher among Republicans.** The desire to marry has increased by 5 percentage points overall among unmarried Republicans, but only 3 percentage points for Democrats—and it fell by 4 percentage points for Independents. Likewise, the desire to have children rose 1 percentage point overall among Republicans but fell 11 percentage points for Independents and 12 percentage points for Democrats.

**4) These orientations to family formation by religion and partisanship build upon growing gaps in marriage and childbearing from the 1970s to the present by religious attendance and partisanship.** For instance, in 2018, there was a 12-percentage point gap in being ever-married between Republicans and Democrats. Likewise, there was a 14-percentage point gap in childlessness between those who regularly attend church and those who never/seldom attend. COVID-19 seems likely to deepen these cultural divisions.

**5) When it comes to class, the story is more complex.** On the one hand, **COVID-19 seems likely to augment the growing class divide in marriage.** On the other hand, **COVID-19 appears likely to narrow the class divide in childbearing.** Historically, the poor have been more likely to have children than more educated and affluent Americans. But childlessness is rising among less-educated, lower-income men and women, a trend that COVID seems likely to amplify. This would bring childbearing trends among the poor closer to those of more educated and affluent Americans.

So, just as COVID-19 fueled polarization in attitudes towards public health, socializing, and politics, the pandemic also seems to have heightened differences between Americans when it comes to interest in forming families. As the pandemic lifts, the nation is likely to see a deepening divide between the affluent and everybody else, between the religious and the secular, and between Republicans and Democrats in their propensity to marry and have children.

## Introduction

The fortunes of the American family were falling when COVID-19 hit last year. Marriage and fertility rates were headed to new lows. A record share of today's young adults were projected to never marry and never have children.<sup>1</sup> In fact, partly because of the pandemic's fallout, marriage and fertility rates hit record lows in 2020. Last year, the marriage rate fell to 33 per 1,000 of the unmarried population and the total fertility rate fell to 1.64 per woman—levels never seen before in American history.<sup>2</sup>

But where is the American family headed as COVID-19 finally seems to be abating? On the one hand, the pandemic may have delivered yet another blow to American families already reeling from the economic and cultural forces of late modernity. The lives lost, the social and emotional fallout from the lockdowns, the economic dislocation, and the political turmoil of the last year-and-a-half have taken a toll on ordinary Americans. COVID-19's effect on socializing, jobs, and Americans' emotional equilibrium in the last year would seem to have undercut the social opportunities, cultural confidence, and economic resources required either to tie the knot or welcome new life. This is the “*decadence-deepens* scenario,” in the words of journalist Ross Douthat, where the “pandemic took trends inimical to family life and turbocharged them.”<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, family formation is likely to fall further in the wake of the pandemic.

On the other hand, in the face of trauma and tragedy, people often develop a new appreciation for family. We know, for instance, that millions of husbands and wives saw their commitment to one another deepen last year amidst COVID-19's darkest hours.<sup>4</sup> And when it comes to desiring marriage or a child, the existential and ontological questions raised by the pandemic may have raised the appeal of getting in the family way. Likewise, the sense of loneliness experienced by millions during COVID-19 lockdowns may have also made the prospect of getting married, or having a baby, more attractive or even necessary. There is a palpable thirst out there, in many quarters, for in-person, human connection. An alternate possibility, then, is that COVID-19 has jumpstarted people's interest in our most fundamental social institution, the family. This is the *renaissance* scenario, and it would lead us to expect family formation to spike in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

*The Divided State of Our Unions: Family Formation in (Post-)COVID-19 America* finds more evidence for the former thesis than the latter. On the one hand, interest in marriage among unmarried Americans looks stable and appears to have even ticked slightly upwards. According to a new IFS/Wheatley Family Survey conducted by YouGov in September of 2021, 14% of unmarried Americans ages 18-55 said their “desire to marry” has increased

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<sup>1</sup>Deirdre Bloome and Shannon Ang, “Marriage and Union Formation in the United States: Recent Trends Across Racial Groups and Economic Backgrounds,” *Demography* 57 (2020): 1753–1786; and Lyman Stone, “The Rise of Childless America,” *Institute for Family Studies*, July 4, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Wendy Wang, “The U.S. Divorce Rate Has Hit a 50-Year Low,” *Institute for Family Studies*, November 10, 2020; and Brady E. Hamilton, Joyce A. Martin, and Michelle J.K. Osterman, “Births: Provisional Data for 2020,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics System, Vital Statistics Rapid Release No. 12, May 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Ross Douthat, “The Home After the Plague: Family Formation in post-COVID-19 America,” Lecture (Charlottesville, VA, National Marriage Project: September 22, 2021).

<sup>4</sup>W. Bradford Wilcox, Lyman Stone, and Wendy Wang, “The Good and Bad News About Marriage in the Time of COVID-19,” *Institute for Family Studies*, September 22, 2020; and W. Bradford Wilcox, “Marriage with Family at Its Center,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2020.

since the onset of COVID-19, compared to 12% who said it decreased. On the other hand, the share of Americans aged 18-55 reporting that their desire “to have a child” in the wake of COVID-19 moved downwards, with just 10% reporting an increased desire for children compared to 17% indicating their desire fell.

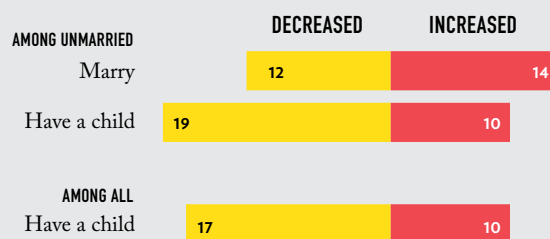
At least in the near term, then, COVID-19 seems to have made many Americans less inclined to welcome a baby in a world turned upside down by a global pandemic. A straightforward interpretation of these changes is that COVID-19 made people more deeply appreciate both the importance of the community inherent in family life (marriage), as well as its challenges (raising children). So no consistent evidence emerges in favor of the decadence-deepens or renaissance scenarios.

Beyond COVID-19’s overall effect on family formation in the United States, the pandemic may have also poured fuel on the family divides that preceded the pandemic. In a world where both marriage and fertility have become increasingly seen as unattainable or optional, three ingredients have emerged as signally important for family formation in the United States: money, hope, and a deep dedication to family—what we call “familism.” (Familism is the idea that marriage, childbearing, and family life are fundamental, and require a willingness on the part of individuals to sacrifice their own desires for the needs of their families.) Given the importance of money, hope, and familism, we also explore how interest in family formation varies by income, religion, and partisanship. In other words, we look at the possibility that a *family polarization* scenario is deepening, where COVID-19 is magnifying differences by class, religiosity, and partisanship in family formation. In this scenario, we would see a deepening divide between the affluent and everybody else, between the religious and the secular, and between Republicans and Democrats in their propensity to marry and have children.

In this report, we find plenty of evidence in favor of this scenario. There are striking differences among Americans in both how COVID-19 has re-oriented their interest in marriage and childbearing, as well as who has specific plans to get married or have a baby. In short, it appears that the tumult and turmoil occasioned by COVID-19 has only deepened the relatively greater propensity of the Rich, the Religious, and Republicans to move forward with marriage. Likewise, interest in having children has also been further polarized along religious and partisan lines. But we also see evidence that interest in having children has declined more among the poor, possibly reflecting greater concern among them about the financial uncertainty unleashed by the pandemic. This would depolarize trends in parenthood since the poor have traditionally been more likely to have children than other Americans. But in most ways, as this report makes clear, COVID-19 appears to have amplified pre-existing family fissures in the American landscape.

## Figure 2. Desire for Children Decreased, But Not Marriage

% saying since COVID-19 began last year, their desire to ... has...



Notes: Based on unmarried adults ages 18 to 55. Responses of “stayed the same” are not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

## About the Data

### SURVEYS

The Institute for Family Studies/Wheatley Institution Family Survey was conducted by YouGov between September 3 and 14 (the September survey), with a representative sample of 2,500 adults ages 18 to 55 living in the United States. The survey focuses on the changes in respondents' desire for marrying or having children because of COVID-19. A total of 2,596 interviews were completed and then matched down to a sample of 2,500 to produce the final dataset.

The September survey was an update from the IFS/Wheatley survey conducted between May 28 and June 10, 2021 (the May-June survey), where a broader range of family-related questions were asked (see more details in this [report](#)). A total of 2,709 interviews were completed and then matched down to a sample of 2500 to produce the final dataset.

The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The characteristics of the final weighted sample mirror those of the general population ages 18-55 in the U.S.

For historical comparison, we use data from the General Social Survey (GSS) on partisanship, religious service attendance, race and Hispanic ethnicity, and education, collapsing variables into the same categories used in the IFS/Wheatley surveys, to estimate marital status and childlessness in the long run. Data from the GSS 1972-2018 were pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes in all years and provide smoother estimates of trends. Standard GSS weights were used. Only respondents ages 18-55 are included, or ages 25-55 for analysis related to education.

### A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

“Lower income” refers to family income under \$50K in 2020, “Middle income” ranges from \$50K to under \$100K in family income, and “Higher income” means \$100K or more in family income.

Whites, blacks, and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.

“Democrats” and “Republicans” include those who lean Democrat or Republican.



## Who Turned Toward Family After COVID-19?

The medical, financial, and emotional toll associated with the pandemic did not affect all Americans equally. To be sure, lower- and middle-income Americans did benefit from government stimulus, unemployment benefits, and child tax credits. But economically, lower- and middle-class Americans were hit harder, both because they were more likely to have lost jobs and required to do in-person work.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the so-called “Zoom class,” i.e., educated and affluent Americans, were much more likely to have been able to work from home and to report their financial situation improved. For instance, 70% of upper-income Americans reported working from home after COVID-19 hit, compared to just 58% of middle-income and 51% of lower-income Americans.<sup>6</sup> In these ways, COVID-19, then, has reinforced long-running trends that have showered a disproportionate share of the blessings of today’s new economy on the top third.<sup>7</sup>

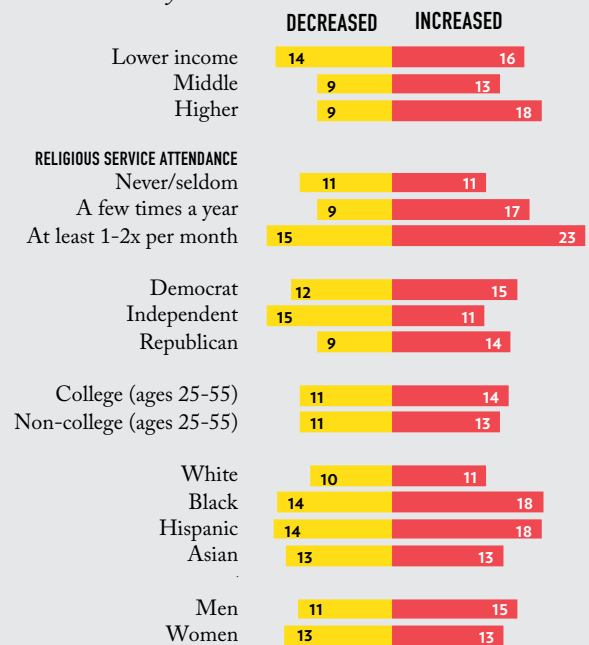
### THE RICH

Increased income and greater work flexibility may help explain why the Zoom class emerged from a year-and-a-half of battling COVID-19 with the greatest increase in interest in marrying. Specifically, 18% of higher-income, (family incomes of \$100,000 or higher) unmarried adults saw their desire for marriage spike and only 9% saw their desire for marriage decline—so, a net increase of 9% in the desire to wed. By contrast, the net increase was only 4% for middle-income (\$50,000–\$100,000) and 2% for lower-income Americans (less than \$50,000) when it comes to tying the knot.

Likewise, regarding childbearing, the richest Americans were the only income group to see their interest hold steady. Twelve percent of upper-income Americans saw their interest in kids rise, whereas 11% reported a decreased desire. By contrast, net desire for kids fell 6% among middle-income Americans and 11% among lower-income Americans. Overall, then, only among the rich did interest in having kids remain fairly constant.

**Figure 3. Changing Desire to Marry Since COVID-19**

% saying since COVID-19 began last year, their desire to marry has...



Notes: Based on unmarried adults ages 18 to 55.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

<sup>5</sup> Raj Chetty, John N. Freeman, Nathaniel Hendren, and Michael Stepner, “How Did COVID-19 and Stabilizing Policies Affect Spending and Employment? A New Real-Time Economic Tracker Based on Private Sector Data,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper No. 27431, June 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jeremy C. Pope, “The 2021 American Family Survey,” *YouGov* and *Deseret News*.

<sup>7</sup> Richard V. Reeves and Christopher Pulliam, “Middle-class incomes have fallen behind and not set to catch up says CBO,” *The Brookings Institution*, December 20, 2019.



## THE RELIGIOUS

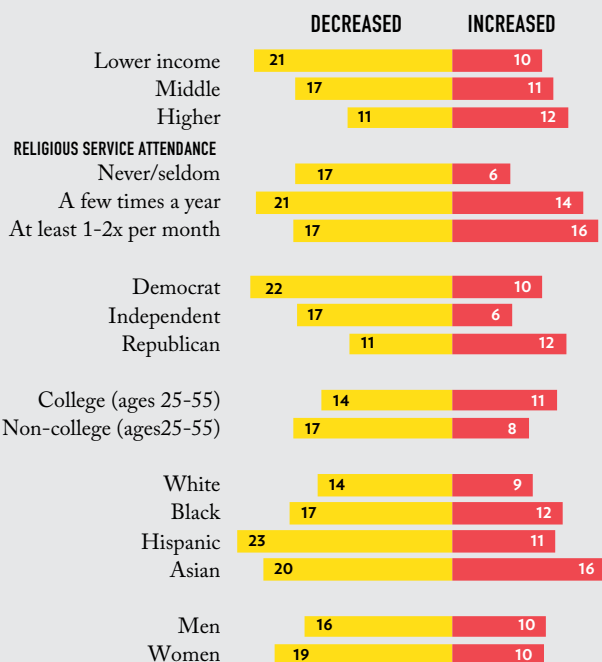
Religious Americans navigated the trials and tribulations of COVID-19 better than Americans with no ties to organized religion, at least on the emotional and social fronts. The social sustenance and religious meaning furnished by churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques was a lifeline for many religious attendees. Gallup data, for instance, indicate that COVID-19-related declines in emotional well-being in 2020 were non-existent among men and women who were religiously active, but large among those who attended infrequently or never during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> This fact, combined with the underlying familism of religion, means that religious men and women may be especially primed to start a family as COVID-19 lifts.

Indeed, unmarried Americans who regularly attend religious services were most likely to have seen their desire to marry spike—by 8 percentage points overall. By contrast, there was no net increase in interest in marriage among Americans who never or seldom attend church. The nominally religious paralleled the more religious, with an 8-percentage point overall spike. Clearly, then, unmarried Americans with some religious ties are the ones most likely to see their interest in heading to the altar rise in the wake of COVID-19.

A similar story applies to childbearing. Americans who frequently attend religious services saw their desire to have children decline the least in the wake of COVID-19. Fully 16% of religious Americans said their desire for kids increased, compared to 17% who said it declined. For Americans who are nominally religious or secular, their desire for kids was much more likely to have fallen than risen after COVID-19 hit. Among secular Americans, for instance, the desire to have children fell by 11 percentage points overall.

**Figure 4. Changing Desire to Have Children Since COVID-19**

% saying since COVID-19 began last year, their desire to have a child has...



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55. Response of "stayed the same" was not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

<sup>8</sup>Megan Brenan, "Americans' Mental Health Ratings Sink to New Low," *GALLUP News*, December 7, 2020; and Landon Schnabel and Scott Scheiman, "Religion Protected Mental Health but Constrained Crisis Response During Crucial Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2021): 1–14.

## REPUBLICANS

The response to COVID-19 was deeply polarized by partisanship and ideology. Conservatives and Republicans often ended up taking a more laissez-faire approach to COVID-19, whereas liberals and Democrats often ended up being very cautious.<sup>9</sup> While Republicans' less cautious attitude may have elevated their risk of getting COVID-19,<sup>10</sup> it also left them at a social and emotional advantage. Republicans have been more open to socializing since COVID-19 struck, likely making it easier for the unmarried in their ranks to date.<sup>11</sup> And there is evidence they weathered COVID-19 somewhat better emotionally.<sup>12</sup> We find, for instance, that 16% of Republicans reported being sad most of or all the time, compared to 19% of Independents and 20% of Democrats aged 18-55, according to the IFS/Wheatley May-June survey.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, Republicans may be more ready to move forward with marriage and childbearing. What's more, because Republicans tend to be more familistic than Independents and Democrats,<sup>14</sup> they may be more likely to turn to wedlock or childbearing in response to the existential and ontological challenges raised by COVID-19.

Indeed, since COVID-19 hit, Republicans have witnessed a greater increase in their desire to marry than Democrats and Independents. Specifically, the net increase in the desire to marry was 5 percentage points for unmarried Republicans, compared to 3 percentage points for Democrats, and a net decline of 4 percentage points for Independents.

When it comes to having kids, Republicans are the only partisan group whose desire to have children didn't decline in the wake of COVID-19. Twelve percent of Republicans expressed an increased desire to have children, whereas just 11% said their desire declined, for a modest net increase. By contrast, both Independents and Democrats were markedly more likely to say their interest in children fell than rose. For example, the desire to have children fell 12 percentage points among Democrats, overall.

Interest in marriage also ticked upwards most among the college educated, Blacks, Hispanics, and men. Net interest in childbearing fell most among the less educated, Hispanics, and women.

The bottom line is that Rich, Republican and especially Religious Americans emerged from COVID-19 with a relatively greater interest in marrying and having children. By contrast, the middle-class and the poor were relatively less interested in family formation. Likewise, Americans who identify as Democrats or Independents, and those with no religious ties were less interested in forming a family after COVID-19 hit—especially when it came to having a baby.

<sup>9</sup> In a joint IFS/Wheatley Institution September 2020 survey, we found that 10% of Republicans were very worried about COVID-19, compared with 14% of Independents and 31% of Democrats aged 18-55. See Jean N. Twenge et al., "Teens in Quarantine Survey," Institute for Family Studies and Wheatley Institution, May-July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> J. Eden et al., "Associations of presidential voting preference and gubernatorial control with county-level COVID-19 case and death rates in the continental United States," *Public Health* 198 (2021): 161-163.

<sup>11</sup> Jingjing Gao and Benjamin J. Radford, "Death by political party: The relationship between COVID-19 deaths and political party affiliation in the United States," *World Medical & Health Policy* 13, no. 2 (2021): 224-249; Anton Gollwitzer et al., "Partisan Differences in Physical Distancing Predict Infections and Mortality During the Coronavirus Pandemic," SSRN, May 24, 2020; and Landon Schnabel and Scott Schieman, "Religion Protected Mental Health but Constrained Crisis Response During Crucial Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 0, no. 00 (2021): 1-14

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Schnabel and Schieman.

<sup>13</sup> Likewise, 19% of Republicans reported they were lonely, compared to 23% of Independents or Democrats aged 18-55, according to the IFS/Wheatley May-June Survey. Twenge et al., "Teens in Quarantine Survey."

<sup>14</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Vijay Menon, "No, Republicans Aren't Hypocrites on Family Values," *Politico Magazine*, November 28, 2017; and Lyman Stone, "The Conservative Fertility Advantage," *Institute for Family Studies*, November 18, 2020.

## The Marrying Kind

In May and June of 2021, after the first wave of vaccinations rolled out, IFS and Wheatley conducted a survey to check in with Americans on a range of family-related topics. We found marked underlying differences in interest in marrying by income, religion, and partisanship among the unmarried—as well as by education, race, and ethnicity.

Take money. When it comes to marriage, 60% of higher-income unmarried adults wish to marry. By contrast, just 45% of lower-income unmarried adults wish to tie the knot. This class divide in marriage interest provides more evidence that marriage is increasingly seen as out of reach or undesired for lower- and middle-income Americans in the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> These differences are especially striking because the ranks of the married are already disproportionately made up of the affluent.<sup>16</sup>

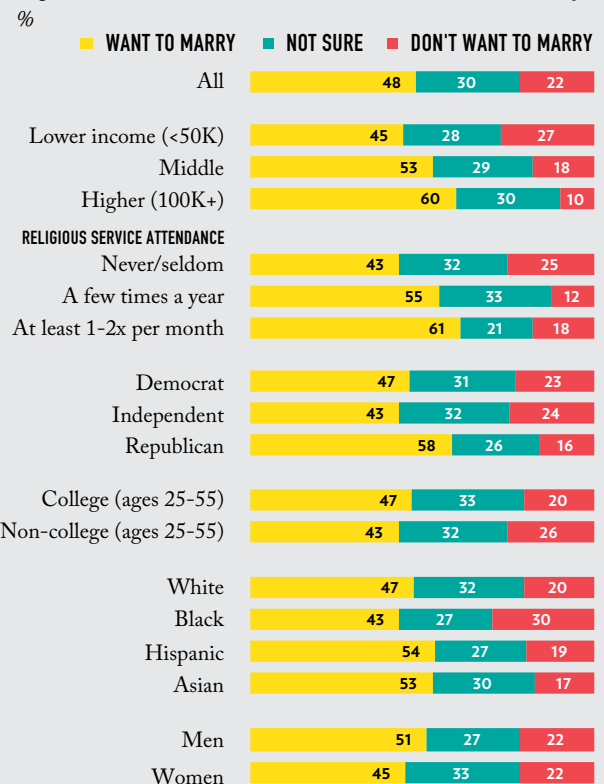
Or take religion. Among those regularly attending services at churches, temples, synagogues, or mosques, fully 61% of unmarried men and women ages 18-55 wish to be married. That compares to 55% of those who attend services infrequently and just 43% of those who never or seldom attend religious services. Moreover, a clear majority of the religiously active who are unmarried desire marriage, whereas only a minority of those who are not religiously active would like to tie the knot. These differences in aspirations, of course, are likely to amplify existing religious differences in who is married, with the religiously active being markedly more likely to be married (*see sidebar*).

Differences by partisanship are also noteworthy. Only a minority of unmarried Independents and Democrats wish to marry one day, whereas a majority of Republicans (58%) hope to put a ring on it. Again, these partisan differences amplify existing partisan differences in marriage, with Republicans being more likely to have already tied the knot (*see sidebar*).

Aspiring to marriage is more common among whites, Hispanics, and Asians, and less common among African Americans for those who are not married. It's also more common for college-educated Americans, which again underlines the “marriage divide” in America that operates along class lines.<sup>17</sup>

The overall picture, then, that emerges here is that marriage as an aspirational way of life is shaped not just by class but also by culture. The marrying kind are much more likely to be found among the affluent, as well as the religious and Republicans.

**Figure 5. Would You Like to Get Married Someday?**



Notes: Based on unmarried adults ages 18 to 55.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, May-June 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010); and W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (New York: Institute for American Values and National Marriage Project, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Mark J. Perry, “Explaining US income inequality by household demographics, 2020 update,” *Carpe Diem*, American Enterprise Institute, September 19, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, *The Marriage Divide: How and why working-class families are more fragile today*, (Opportunity America, American Enterprise Institute, and Brookings Institution, September 25, 2017).

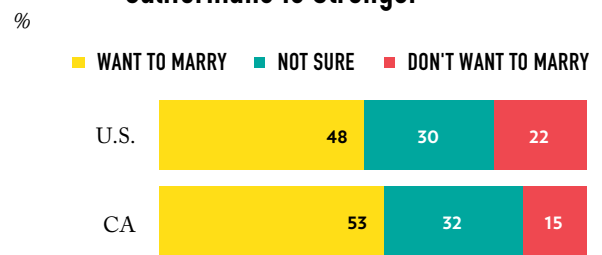
## SIDEBAR: A Note About California

Being the most populous state in the U.S. and home to Hollywood and Silicon Valley, California is unique in its cultural influence on lifestyle in the U.S. and the globe. Even though the Golden State is a force for expressive individualism, it has a more stable family structure than the nation as whole.<sup>18</sup> In the new IFS/Wheatley survey, we find that unmarried Californians also have a stronger desire for marriage than their peers countrywide. More than half of unmarried Californians ages 18-55 (53%) said they would like to marry one day, compared with 48% of unmarried U.S. adults of the same age. In contrast, only 15% of unmarried Californians said they are not interested in marriage, compared with 22% of unmarried adults nationwide.

At the same time, the share of unmarried Californians who said their desire to marry has increased since COVID-19 is also higher than the national average (16% vs. 14%), and the share saying their marriage desire has decreased is lower in California than the country (8% vs. 12%), according to our September 2021 survey.

The reason why Californians are more marriage-minded than Americans on average can be partly attributed to California's diverse population, especially the large share of immigrants. Hispanic Americans make up 39% of state residents and are the largest ethnic group in the state (Whites are 36%). The share of Asian or Pacific islanders is 15% in California, double the share of the national average (about 7%).<sup>19</sup> Both Hispanic and Asian Americans tend to have more familistic values regarding marriage and family than average Americans.<sup>20</sup> In the new IFS/Wheatley survey, unmarried Hispanic (54%) or Asian adults ages 18-55 (53%) were more likely than white (47%) or black adults (43%) to say they would like to get married someday.

**Figure 6. Interest for Marriage Among Californians Is Stronger**



Notes: Based on unmarried adults ages 18 to 55.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, May-June 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

<sup>18</sup> Wendy Wang & Brad Wilcox, *State of Contradiction: Progressive Family Culture, Traditional Family Structure in California* (Charlottesville: Institute for Family Studies, January 2020).

<sup>19</sup> California's population fact sheet, Public Policy Institute of California, March 2021. See also: Pew Research Center, "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," April 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Wang & Brad Wilcox, *State of Contradiction: Progressive Family Culture, Traditional Family Structure in California*.

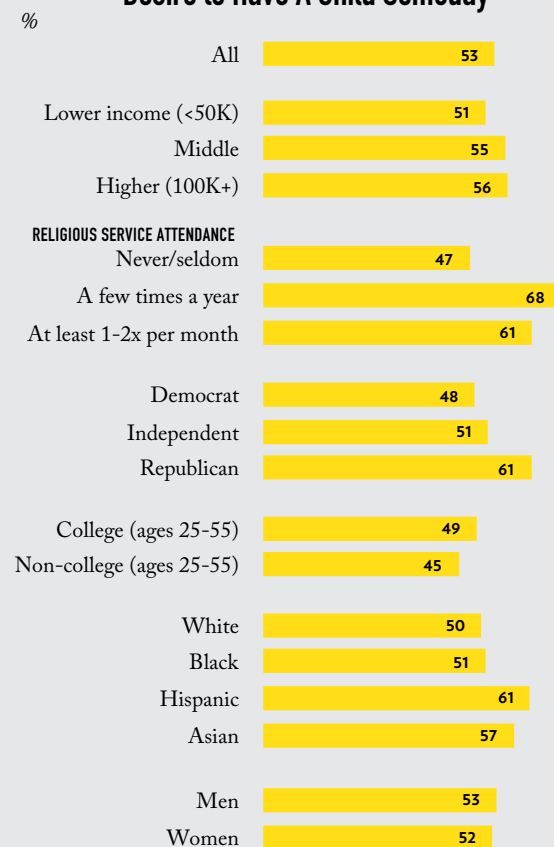
## CHILD FRIENDLY

Among those who are childless, who most wishes to welcome or feels like they can afford to have children some day? The educated, those with more money, the religious, and Republicans, but also Hispanics. By contrast, the IFS/Wheatley May-June Survey suggests that childless men and women aged 18-55 with less money, no ties to a religious congregation, or who hold a progressive political orientation are more likely to be uninterested in having children.

It has been true for a long time that lower income is, paradoxically, linked to higher fertility and lower levels of childlessness. However, in recent decades, the fertility gap between the rich and the poor has narrowed, and childlessness is rising more rapidly among the poor and least educated (*see sidebar*).<sup>21</sup> In Northern Europe, for instance, the ranks of the childless are now highest among less-educated and lower-income adults.<sup>22</sup> From the IFS/Wheatley May-June survey, we see evidence that suggests the United States may be headed in a similar direction. Childless Americans ages 18-55 with more money and education are slightly more likely to desire children, whereas less-educated and poor Americans are now more likely to say they do not want to have children. For instance, 49% of lower-income childless adults ages 18-55 reported not wanting children, compared to 44% of upper-income Americans. This dynamic is particularly true for low-income childless men, who are especially likely to report wishing not to have children (51%).<sup>23</sup> Given the expense of raising children today, and the difficulty of finding a reliable mate, lower-income Americans may be coming to the view that having children is increasingly out of reach for them.

Americans who attend churches, temples, synagogues, or mosques are markedly more likely to have children or want them. More than 60% of childless attendees said they want children, compared to 47% of those who never attend religious services. These findings are especially noteworthy because religious Americans are already more likely to be parents (*see sidebar*).

**Figure 7. Share of Childless Adults Who Desire to Have A Child Someday**



Notes: Based on childless adults ages 18 to 55. Percentages of those who do not desire to have a child are not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, May-June 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

<sup>21</sup> Michael Bar et al., "Why did rich families increase their fertility? Inequality and marketization of childcare," *Journal of Economic Growth* 23 (2018): 427-463.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Kolk, "The relationship between life-course accumulated income and childbearing of Swedish men and women born 1940-1970," *Stockholm Research Reports in Demography* (2019); and Anna Rotkirch, "Childlessness in Finland," in *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences*, ed. Michaela Kreyenfeld and Dirk Konietzka (Berlin: Springer Open, 2017), 139-158.

<sup>23</sup> Rosemary L. Hopcroft, "High income men have high value as long-term mates in the U.S.: personal income and the probability of marriage, divorce, and childbearing in the U.S.," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 42, no. 5 (2021): 409-417.

The same goes for childless Republicans, who are about 10 percentage points more likely to desire children, compared to Independents and Democrats. Again, these findings are notable because Republicans are already more likely to have kids (*see sidebar*).

Finally, the IFS/Wheatley May-June survey reveals that compared with other racial groups, childless Hispanics are the most likely to want children in contemporary America. This dovetails with the more pronatalist orientation of Hispanics.<sup>24</sup> So, again, when it comes to this fundamental aspect of family life—being a parent—both class and culture seem to matter. Among the childless, it is the educated, those with more money, the religious, Republicans, and Hispanics who are the most likely to want to be in the family way.

## Wedding Bells in 2021–2022

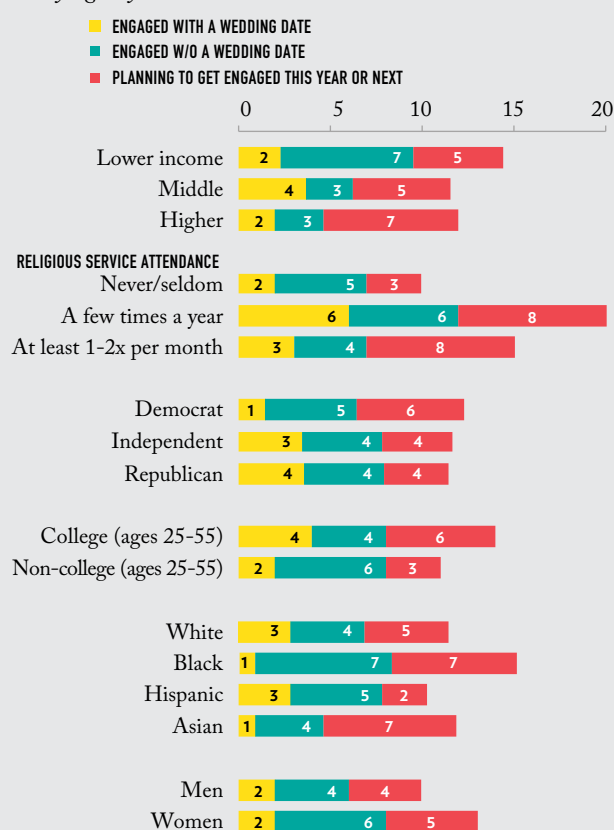
In September 2021, after the rollout of vaccines but in the midst of the Delta wave of the virus, who was planning on tying the knot? Overall, the share of unmarried adults who are engaged or planning to get engaged is small. Only 7% of unmarried adults said they are currently engaged with or without a wedding date, and 5% said they plan on getting engaged this year or next. Here, the story only partly parallels the rest of the report. Religion and partisanship largely structure wedding plans in ways that we would expect, but not income.

When it comes to money, the IFS/Wheatley September survey finds a surprisingly large share of lower-income unmarried adults ages 18–55 report that they are engaged, either with or without a wedding date. Poor unmarried men and women are almost twice as likely to report engagements (9%), compared to higher-income Americans (5%). Higher-income unmarried Americans only led the way, when it came to wedding plans, for unions planned in this year or 2022. Some 7% of unmarried adults with higher incomes said they are planning to get engaged this year or next, compared with 5% of adults with middle or lower incomes.

But reports of engagement among the poor may not be a completely accurate indicator of actual plans for marriage. In *Promises I Can Keep*, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas note that some of the poor women they studied used engagement as a long-term way of signifying

**Figure 8. Plan to Get Married**

% saying they are...



Notes: Based on unmarried adults ages 18 to 55. Responses of "Hope to marry someday" and "not interested in marriage" are not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley



commitment without marrying because they worried about getting divorced.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, there are no differences between low- and high-income unmarried adults when it comes to reports of engagement with an actual wedding date.

Engagement plans correspond to religion and partisanship in ways that are largely consistent with the rest of the report. Religiously active Americans ages 18-55 are more likely to report that they are engaged or plan to get engaged by 2022—with 15% reporting wedding plans, compared to 10% among those who rarely or never attend services. Unmarried adults who attend religious services a few times a year are more likely than their peers to report having wedding plans, as one in five said they are either engaged or planning to get engaged by 2022.

Likewise, unmarried Republicans are 3 percentage points more likely than Democrats to report an engagement with a wedding date, but overall wedding plans do not vary by partisanship. Immediate plans for a wedding may also be related to a greater willingness on the part of Republicans and religious Americans to socialize during the pandemic, which could have afforded them greater opportunities to pursue a romantic relationship. Wedding plans with a date are also somewhat higher among the college-educated, whites, and Hispanics.

In the wake of COVID-19, there has been a slight uptick in interest in getting married, perhaps in part because many Americans have developed a new appreciation for the value of having a spouse in the wake of lonely lockdowns and the pandemic's other dislocations. Unmarried adults who have higher income, and those who are religious or Republicans are more likely than others to say their desire to marry has increased since COVID-19. However, when it comes to detailed plans to get married, the economic, religious, and partisan patterns observed in the desire to marry do not always translate into plans for a wedding in the near term.

## Full Cradles in 2021-2022

Although COVID-19 appears to have pushed interest in having kids further down, the desire to have a child in the next two years varies by class, religious service attendance, and partisanship. When it comes to immediate plans for having a baby—that is, reporting that they are likely to have a baby this year or in 2022—11% of Americans ages 18-55 said they are planning on a baby. Those with more money are more likely to say a baby is in their immediate future, according to the IFS/Wheatley September survey. Specifically, 14% of higher-income men and women ages 18-55 said that it is likely they will have a baby in 2021 or 2022, compared to 10% of lower- and middle-income Americans.

The differences in immediate childbearing plans by religion are larger. American men and women who are regular religious attendees are three times as likely to say they plan to have a baby in 2021 or 2022 (18%) compared to their peers who are secular (6%). The sense of hope, community, and focus on family—not to mention higher rates of marriage (*see sidebar*)—found in religious congregations across America seem to translate into large differences in intended childbearing by religiosity.

<sup>25</sup> Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (London: University of California Press, 2005).



Partisanship is also tied to plans for a baby. Republicans are four percentage points more likely to report plans for a baby in 2021 or 2022 (13%) compared to Democrats (9%) and Independents (9%). No doubt this corresponds in part to higher rates of marriage and familism among Republicans.

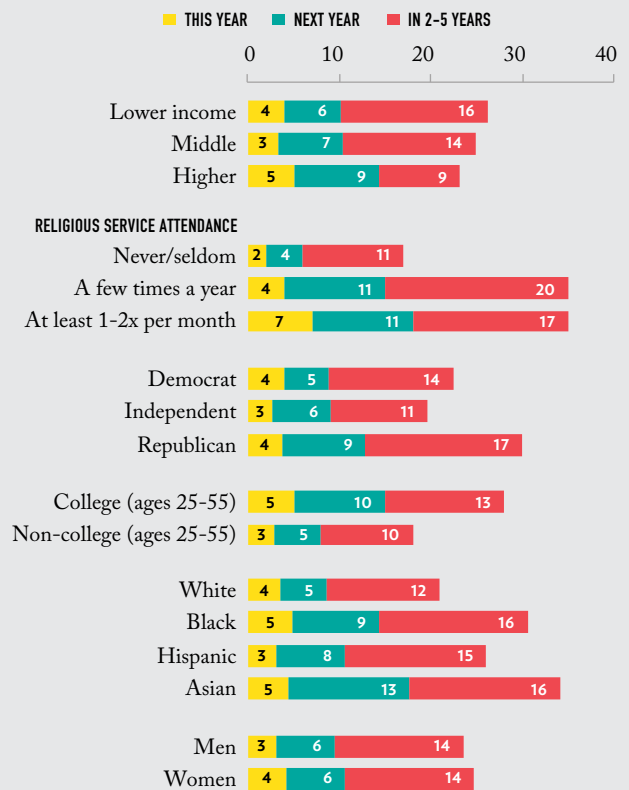
We also observe that college-educated, Black, and Asian Americans report a greater likelihood of having a child soon.

Childbearing plans are consistent with the idea that men and women's interest in having kids coming out of COVID-19 is highest for those with more money, a sense of hope, and a more conservative perspective on family life. In other words, in the wake of COVID-19, although overall interest in childbearing may have declined, births are likely to be more common among some subgroups in 2021 and 2022, especially the rich, Republicans, and the religious.



## Figure 9. Plan to Have Children

% expecting to have a child ...



Notes: Based on all adults ages 18 to 55. Responses of "Do not expect to have a child in the near future" are not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution Family Survey, Sep 2021.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

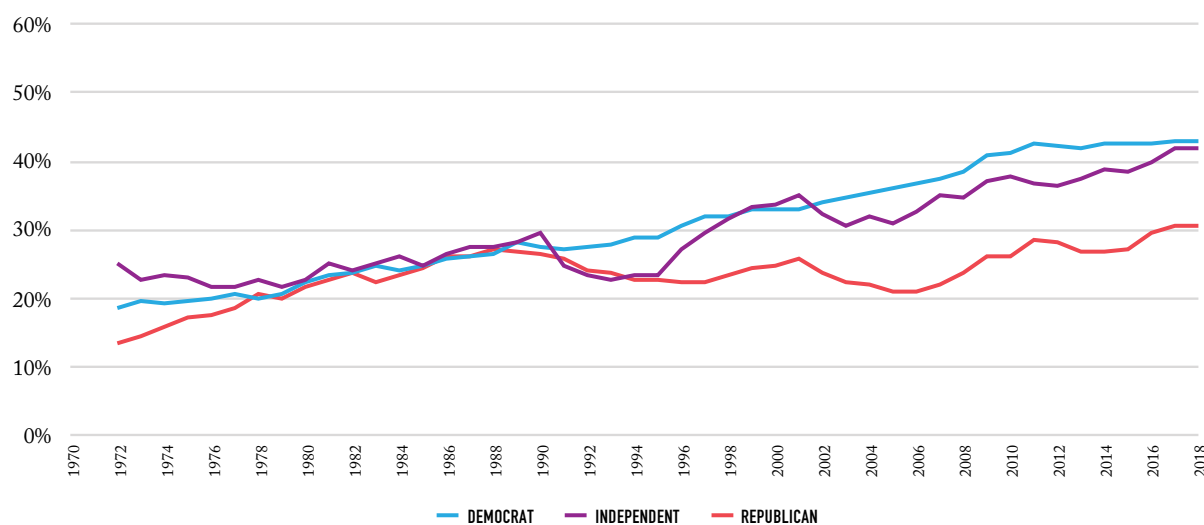
## SIDEBAR: Historic Trends in Childlessness and Marriage

To put these attitudes toward family formation in historic perspective, we also calculated the share of men and women ages 18-55 (the same age range as the surveys in this report) who reported never having had any children or never having been married in the General Social Survey from 1972 to 2018. In some areas, there have been growing divides across the same social and cultural gaps identified in our survey, and thus COVID-19 appears likely to intensify the process of cultural polarization of the family. In other cases, the pandemic may end up moderating some differences.

When it comes to partisanship, there has been a persistently growing divide in marriage and childbearing between Democrats and Republicans. Over time, Democrats are getting married later and less, and have become less likely to have children. Republicans, on the other hand, have seen their marriage and childbearing rates remain largely stable. These trends match the reported changes we found in our two survey waves: Republicans had more positive desires for marriage and childbearing as a result of COVID than Democrats. Thus, it seems likely that COVID will intensify family-model differences across political lines. The events of the last 18 months have motivated partisans on both sides to lean into their prior social models more heavily: Republicans by becoming even more familistic and marriage-minded, Democrats by becoming more cautious about embarking on these life decisions.

### Trends in Marriage and Childlessness, by Partisanship and Religious Attendance

**Figure 10. Share Never Married By Partisanship** (Men and women ages 18-55)

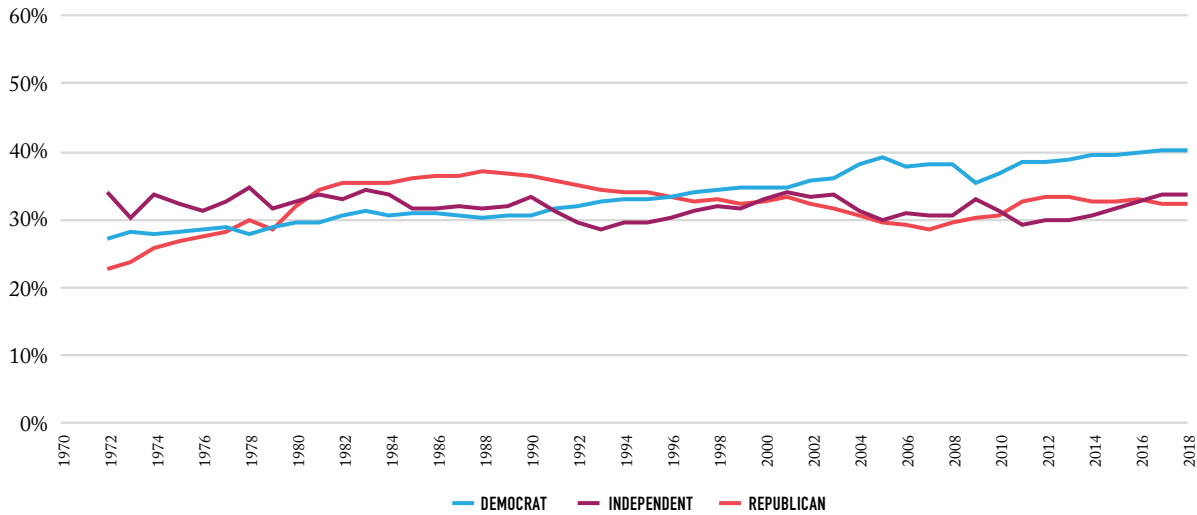


Note: Each data point was pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes.

Source: The General Social Survey, 1972-2018.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

**Figure 11. Childlessness By Partisanship** (Men and women ages 18-55)

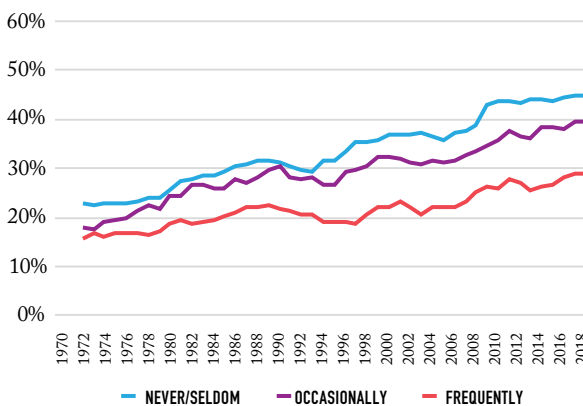


Note: Each data point was pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes.  
Source: The General Social Survey, 1972-2018.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

Turning to religion, there is evidence of a similar intensification of pre-existing trends. For decades, there have been large differences in marriage and childbearing behavior between Americans with different religious behaviors, with those differences growing larger recently. More religious people get married earlier and are more likely to have ever been married later in life. They also tend to have more children. In the 1970s and 1980s, these differences were much smaller

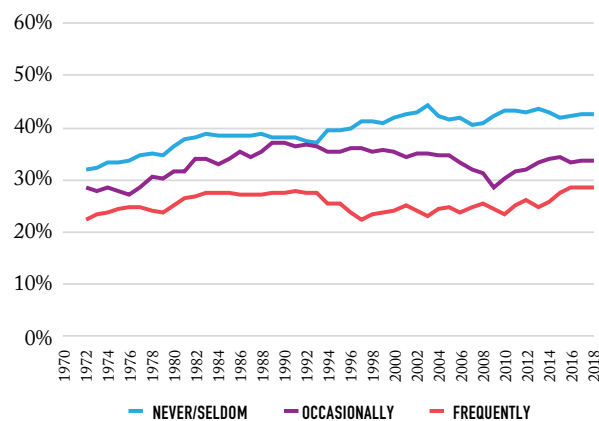
**Figure 12.**  
**Share Never Married By Religious Service Attendance**  
(Men and women ages 18-55)



Note: Each data point was pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes.  
Source: The General Social Survey, 1972-2018.

AEI/IFS/Wheatley

**Figure 13.**  
**Childlessness By Religious Service Attendance**  
(Men and women ages 18-55)



than they have been since 2000. Our survey indicates these differences are likely to get even larger, as religious people respond to the challenges of the last 18 months by doubling down on the stable-in-times-of-chaos bonds of marriage and family, even as more secular Americans usually see chaotic times as bad times to start a marriage or family.

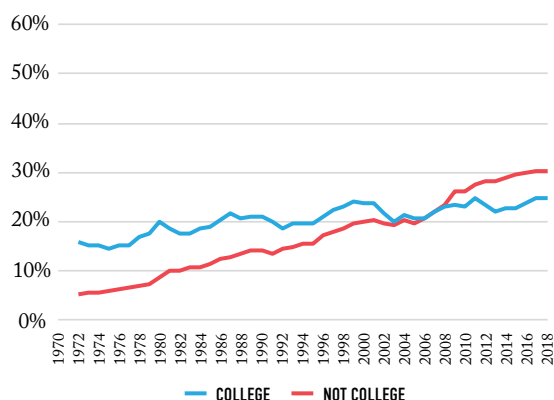
## Trends in Marriage and Childlessness, by Education

Whereas we found increasing polarization along religious and partisan lines, we find a more mixed story along educational or class lines. Since the 1970s, working-class Americans have changed from being more likely to marry to becoming less likely to marry than college-educated Americans. COVID-19 may intensify that divide, as Zoom-class workers use their newfound flexibility to start married lives, while “essential workers” on the frontlines deal with deteriorating work environments and greater risk of infection. But college-educated Americans have also tended to have fewer or no children. Still, childlessness has almost doubled among the less educated from the 1970s to the present, and the fallout of COVID-19 seems more likely to drive childlessness higher among those with the least resources. This might further reduce the parenthood gap between blue-collar and digital workers.

**Figure 14.**

### Share Never Married By Education

(Men and women ages 18–55)



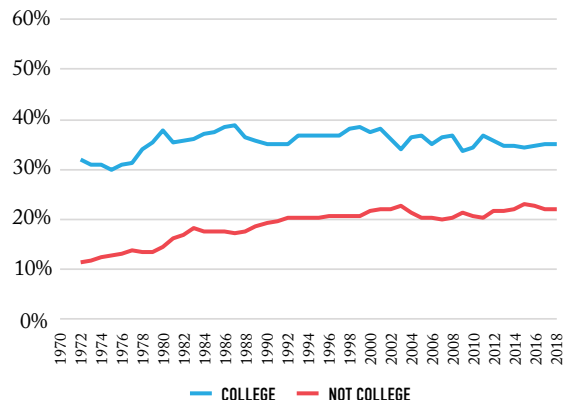
Note: Each data point was pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes.

Source: The General Social Survey, 1972–2018.

**Figure 15.**

### Childlessness By Education

(Men and women ages 18–55)



AEI/IFS/Wheatley

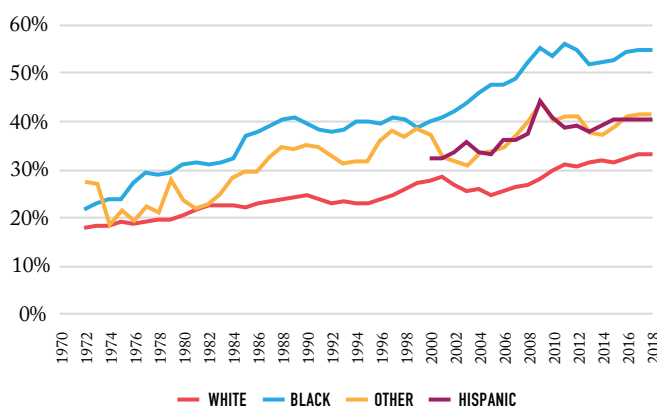
## Trends in Marriage and Childlessness, By Race and Ethnicity

Finally, when it comes to racial and ethnic divides, the story may be one of reduced polarization. Black and Hispanic women are most likely to report that COVID-19 increased their desire to wed, and they are also among the most likely to have never been married. COVID-19 may in fact nudge different racial and ethnic groups slightly closer together in terms of their marriage behaviors. In terms of childbearing desires,

**Figure 16.**

### Share Never Married By Racial or Ethnic Group

(Men and women ages 18–55; before the late-1990s, Hispanics were included in "Other")



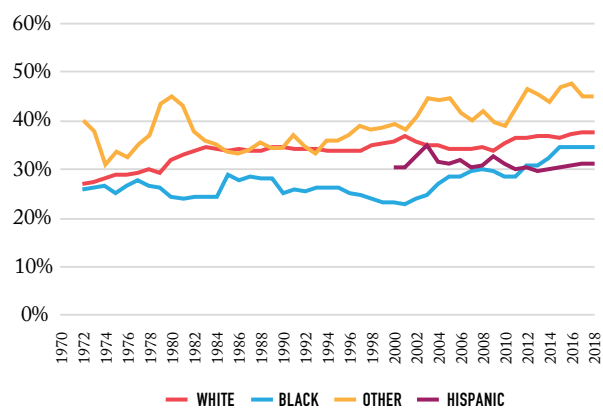
Note: Each data point was pooled across 5-year periods to ensure sufficient sample sizes.

Source: The General Social Survey, 1972–2018.

**Figure 17.**

### Childlessness By Racial or Ethnic Group

(Men and women ages 18–55; before the late-1990s, Hispanics were included in "Other")



AEI/IFS/Wheatley

Hispanics had the largest decline due to COVID-19, but also already had the lowest childlessness, which could again serve to reduce the gap in childlessness between Hispanics and Americans of other ethnic groups.

Thus, COVID-19 likely intensified family differences between religious and political groups that have been growing in recent decades. But the story is more complicated when we turn to class, race, and ethnicity. Across socioeconomic class, marriage differences seem likely to grow in line with recent history, while differences in childbearing may shrink. But among racial and ethnic groups, COVID-19 may have ended up reducing the extent of difference in family aspirations. Broadly, these changes speak to the extent to which American society is realigning itself, with disputes about essentially cultural, religious, or ideological views becoming more socially salient. By contrast, differences along racial, ethnic, and class lines may be muddying.



## In Conclusion: The Divided State of Our Unions

In many domains of life, it turns out the trauma and turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—economic uncertainty, social distancing, emotional suffering, and political polarization—served to reinforce pre-existing trends in the United States. Family life is no different. We do not see much evidence that COVID-19 will lead to a “renaissance scenario” in American family life, where marriage and childbearing reverse their long-running slide and surge as the pandemic lifts. To be sure, interest in marriage looks steady, according to this report. But the declining interest in childbearing among Americans documented here is not consistent with that scenario.

When it comes to fertility, to quote a recent lecture by The New York Times’ Ross Douhat, we may

*look back and recognize that the pandemic [advanced] trends inimical to family life with the possible consequence that milestones delayed will become milestones foregone—an extra dose of postponement for a generation that was already postponing marriage and childbearing to the edge of its reproductive years could have ripple effects long after the pandemic is finished.*<sup>26</sup>



When it comes to childbearing, this report finds evidence for the “deepening-decadence scenario.” To wit, the emotional, financial, and political uncertainties introduced by the pandemic seem likely to keep U.S. fertility rates near recent historic lows.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, COVID-19 seems to have fueled not just polarization around the ways in which Americans deal with the pandemic, racial justice, and patterns of work but also around family formation. This report documents a number of ways in which the pandemic advanced the “family polarization scenario,” deepening pre-existing fissures in marriage and childbearing in America. This is because, as marriage and childbearing have become

<sup>26</sup> Douhat, “The Home After the Plague: Family Formation in post-COVID-19 America.”

<sup>27</sup> However, as COVID-19 abates, there may be a temporary uptick in fertility as men and women recoup childbearing foregone in 2020.

increasingly selective, those who have the means and/or the motivation will be overrepresented among the ranks of those who marry and have children. The ways in which marriage is divided are well known, but this report documents an incipient phenomenon that is less well understood: the parenthood divide. Here, we expect that the fertility gap between those with a worldview centered around faith and family and those who tend to find meaning in career or other values will continue to widen.

When it comes to marriage, the rich, the religious, and Republicans are most likely to report the pandemic has deepened their desire to marry. For example, Republicans were four times more likely than Democrats to report being engaged with a wedding date. Moreover, ancillary analyses indicate that income, religion, and partisanship are all independently associated with greater odds of desiring marriage for those who are unmarried, net of controls for race/ethnicity, gender, and age.<sup>28</sup> COVID-19 appears likely to deepen pre-existing class and cultural divides in the state of our unions.

Likewise, when it comes to childbearing, COVID-19 seems to have made family fissures along religious and partisan lines more pronounced. Religious and Republican Americans were already more likely to have children heading into the pandemic, but their relatively higher childbearing here appears likely to grow, given declines in interest in having children among secular Americans and Democrats. We find, for instance, that actively religious attendees were three times more likely to report plans to have a child this year or next, compared to their peers who never or rarely darken the door of a church.

On the other hand, the pandemic's fallout may reduce class and ethnic differences in parenthood. Hispanics and lower-income Americans were more likely than whites and higher-income Americans to report their desire to have children fell in response to COVID-19. For instance, the poor were almost twice as likely to say their desire to have children declined, compared to the rich. This is noteworthy because childlessness among the poor has traditionally been lower than the rich. Rates of childlessness (and fertility) may be headed towards greater convergence along class lines in the wake of COVID-19. Indeed, ancillary analyses indicate that income is not significantly associated with a desire for children among the childless, whereas religion and partisanship are, once we control for factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age.<sup>29</sup>

But in most ways, the portrait painted by this report is of a nation headed towards more of the family polarization scenario. Married families with children are disproportionately found among Americans who are affluent, actively religious, or affiliated with the Republican Party. By contrast, poor Americans, secularists, and Democrats and Independents are much more likely to delay or forego marriage or children.

<sup>28</sup> The regression model also controls for cohabitation status. Results suggest that the odds of wanting to marry among higher-income unmarried adults ages 15-55 are 50% higher than it is among their lower-income counterparts. And being a Republican increases the odds of wanting to marry by about 60% (vs. being a Democrat), while attending religious services frequently (vs. secular) doubles the odds of wanting to marry, net of all the controls.

<sup>29</sup> The multivariate regression analysis suggests that after controlling for race/ethnicity, gender, age and cohabitation status, being a Republican (vs. a Democrat) doubles the odds of wanting to have a child among childless adults ages 18-55. And attending religious services frequently (vs. secular) increases the odds of wanting children by about 70%, net of all the controls.



Of course, given the increasingly progressive cast of the “Zoom class,” this means there will be plenty of stably married families in affluent neighborhoods who vote blue across America. Likewise, in struggling working-class towns across America that have turned red in recent years, there may be plenty of family instability going forward. But, overall, in metropolitan enclaves dominated by secular progressives, especially on the East and West Coasts, look to see fewer families. By contrast, in places that tilt religious and conservative, especially in the nation’s interior, expect to see relatively more married families with children. That’s because, if anything, the political, social, economic, and emotional fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have deepened many of the class and cultural divides in American family life.

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## Acknowledgements

This report benefited from the programmatic leadership of Paul Edwards and Michael Toscano, the editorial assistance of Alysse ElHage, and the design work of Brad Uhl and Brandon Wooten at ID Company. Patrick Brown and Peyton Roth provided research assistance and substantive feedback on the report. Needless to say, they do not necessarily agree with our conclusions and any errors are our own.

This report is part of the Home Economics Project, a research effort of the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies that explores the reciprocal relationship between economics and family life in the United States. The project also examines the role, if any, that marriage and family play in increasing individual opportunity and strengthening free enterprise at home and abroad, as well as their implications for public policy.

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