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Institute for
Family Studies

A Pro-Family Handbook for Georgia

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Introduction

Georgia is helping the Sun Belt become an economic powerhouse. With one of the nation's most dynamic major metro areas and population growth statewide, the Peach State continues to provide economic growth and limitless opportunity to its residents.

But a state is only as strong as its families. And while Georgia's economic, political, and fiscal picture is healthy, families in Georgia are not immune to the cultural and economic pressures that are making it harder for parents and would-be parents to have and raise a family in the manner they deem best. In 2021, the number of births in the state was over 20% lower than the number a decade and a half ago—despite the state as a whole enjoying population growth over 13%.

Supporting healthy families should be a primary focus area for Georgia lawmakers in 2024 and beyond. The Institute for Family Studies (IFS) and the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) recently commissioned a poll from YouGov, asking adults in five growing Sun Belt states about their views on policies that aim to support family life. This report focuses on policies for Georgia that are not just politically popular, but can meaningfully advance the goal of making it easier to start and raise a family.

The five pro-family policy priorities highlighted in this report are:

- (1) Create a state-level Child Tax Credit that promotes marriage**
- (2) Create a state commission on the well-being of men and boys**
- (3) Empower parents to better protect their kids online**
- (4) Expand early childhood and K-12 options for all parents**
- (5) Reorient school curricula to focus on long-term well-being**

Create a state-level Child Tax Credit that promotes marriage

Three-quarters of Georgia respondents support a state CTC aimed at working-class families

There is a fundamental asymmetry in the economics of family life: parents alone bear the cost of having a child, or children, while society as a whole benefits in the form of future taxpayers, entrepreneurs, and citizens. Recognizing the costs parents take on—from diapers to food to schoolbooks—should encourage policymakers to lift some of the burden from those doing the important work of raising the next generation.

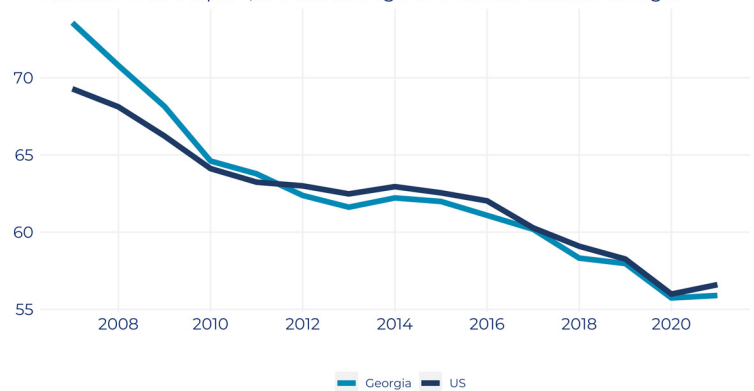
Georgia, which traditionally had higher fertility than the nation at large, has seen its number of births per 1,000 women of childbearing age fall by one-quarter since 2007, converging just below the national average. Some of this is due to declines in births out of wedlock, which have fallen slightly over that time frame. But the number of births to married parents has fallen much more steeply. In 2021, there were 21% fewer total babies born to married parents than in 2007. By contrast, the total number of babies

born to unmarried women fell by only 13%; as a result, the share of babies born out of wedlock in Georgia rose from 43.6% in 2007 to 46% in 2021.

This has long-lasting ramifications for the health of the state. And it underscores the importance of designing support for

Fertility Rates, 2007-2021

Number of births per 1,000 women age 15-44 in the U.S. and Georgia



Source: CDC WONDER-Nativity

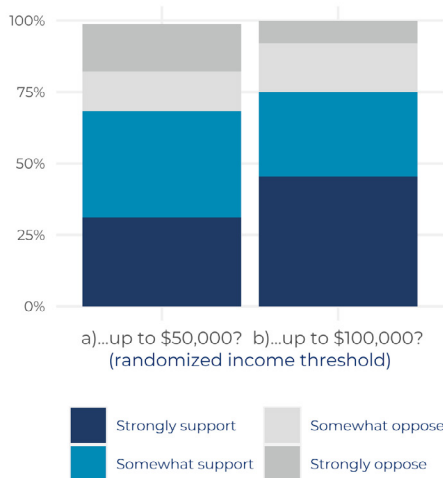
families that celebrates the advantage that two-parent households provide for kids. A state Child Tax Credit (CTC) could give parents meaningful support in raising their children while also rewarding the commitment made by married parents.

The design of a Child Tax Credit at the state level could feature any number of parameters. Two we will focus on here are eligibility—who should receive the credit—and how it should be structured. Our survey randomly assigned Georgia respondents to consider two different versions of a hypothetical: one that went to families with household incomes up to \$50,000, and one in which families making up to \$100,000 were eligible. Opposition was stronger to the more limited eligibility, whereas nearly half (46%) of Georgia residents “strongly supported” a CTC that would benefit working-class families up to \$100,000 in income.

In addition to the political support for a broader program, there are principled reasons to prefer this approach. Multiple polls have found that a plurality of new moms say that their “ideal” situation would be to work have one parent part-time or stay

Should Georgia introduce a Child Tax Credit...?

'For families with incomes...'



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

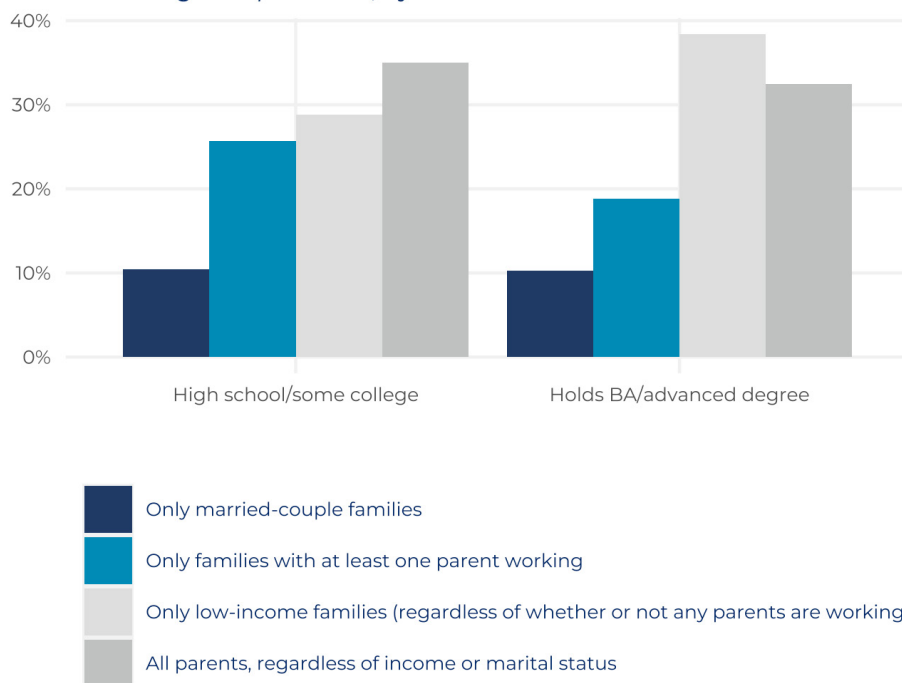
home, especially when their children are young.¹ A state CTC, or child benefit, would give parents more money in their pocket to determine the work-life balance that is best for them, and more time to ensure their young children have a healthy start to life. And states that have restricted eligibility to only low-income families, like California and New Jersey, have created systems that punish residents for seeking economic opportunity in the form of a higher wage or promotion, or increasing their household income by getting married.

Idaho, Oklahoma, and Utah offer non-refundable CTCs (i.e., the amount of the credit cannot exceed a households' tax liability), and 11 states have made the credit fully refundable, with various eligibility thresholds and credit amounts. No state, however,

has constructed its Child Tax Credit to recognize the importance of married households for child well-being. A CTC that provided each parent in a household \$600 per year would give twice the assistance to married families as to single ones, without turning a blind eye to the material needs of low-income parents. As our survey shows, solely targeting married parents was relatively unpopular; though voters without a bachelor's degree (or more) are more likely to want to see such a benefit connected to work. At 2021 levels, a version of this policy that targeted families making less than \$100,000 would provide meaningful assistance to most Georgia families with children under 18 for a total of \$573 million.

Who should receive a state Child Tax Credit?

% of Georgia respondents, by education



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

¹ Patrick T. Brown, *Five Pro-Family Priorities for the 118th Congress and Beyond: Policies and Public Opinion on Putting Families First*, Institute for Family Studies and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, February 2023.

Create a state commission on the well-being of men and boys

87% of Georgia residents support blue-ribbon panel to study outcomes for men

Young men are now less likely to graduate from high school or college than women.² Men, especially single or divorced men, are more likely to die from suicide or opioid-related causes.³ And these social dynamics contribute to delayed marriage, deferred parenthood, lower labor force participation,⁴ and a rising share of young men⁵ who are categorized as neither working, nor in education or training.

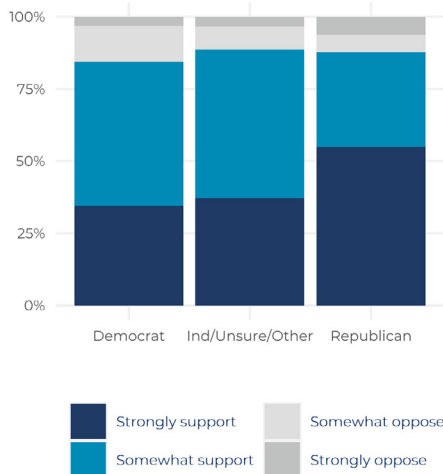
The cultural and economic factors driving these trends can't be solved overnight. But a state Commission on Men and Boys would offer a focused, serious effort to rejuvenate policy and cultural efforts

aimed at helping at-risk young men mature into their place in society.

This approach is widely popular—87% of Georgia respondents strongly or somewhat supported a state commission on the well-being of men and boys. Republican respondents were more likely to “strongly” support

Establish state commission on well-being of men and boys

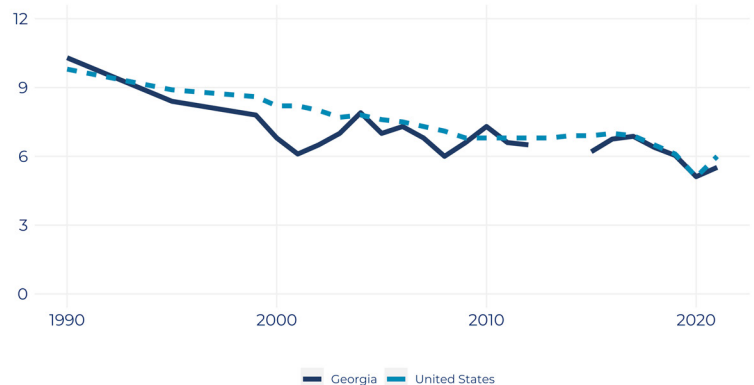
% of Georgia respondents, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

Marriage in Georgia, 1990-2021

Rates per 1,000 total population



Georgia data unavailable for 2013-2014. Source: CDC National Vital Statistics System

the idea, but it received super-majority support across the political spectrum. Respondents without a four-year degree were especially likely to support the idea of a commission (90%, compared to 80% of those with a bachelor's degree or more.)

The Commission would look across the lifespan but focus on young and middle-aged adults who are struggling the most today. It would focus on cultural, educational, job, and social supports, and address policy issues such as reforming child support and alimony. Its efforts would include programs to reduce the number of absentee fathers, working with religious and non-profit organizations to develop outreach efforts to ensure dads have a relationship with their children. It would also be tasked with identifying opportunities to realign and re-envision

² Richard Reeves and Ember Smith, “The Male College Crisis is Not Just in Enrollment but Completion,” The Brookings Institution, October 8, 2021.

³ Patrick T. Brown, “Opioids and the Unattached Male,” *City Journal*, January 14, 2022.

⁴ Nirupama Rao, Jason Furman, & Sandra Black, “The long-term decline in U.S. Prime-age Male Labor Force Participation,” *VOX EU/CEPR*, July 6, 2016.

⁵ *Inactive, Disconnected, and Ailing*, Social Capital Project: Joint Economic Committee-Republicans, September 2018.

career and technical education, often referred to as vocational ed, to ensure that all high school students, even those who don't attend college or university, are given the tools they need to build a pathway to the middle class.

Part of this commission's work would include a focus on the state of marriage in Georgia. The number of marriages per 1,000 Georgia adults has fallen by half over the past three decades, and as we have seen, recent demographic patterns have led to a rising share of babies born outside of two-parent households. This has long-term ramifications, particularly for young men who are more likely to grow up without a positive male role model in the home. Kids who grow up without two parents present are at risk for higher rates of academic struggles, health complications,

involvement with the justice system, poverty, and other factors associated with social breakdown.⁶

Part of the commission could also be tasked with evaluating the extent to which marriage penalties in state safety-net programs are discouraging young men from marrying. Fully solving marriage penalties is expensive and best pursued at the federal level. But the state could explore taking steps towards reducing the impact of marriage penalties on low-income households by, where possible, easing the sharp cliffs that make getting married a financial loser for too many parents. Offering a honeymoon period, where newly-married couples are able to maintain safety-net program eligibility for a year or two after marriage, could also help families adjust without abruptly cutting them off of benefits.

⁶ Melissa S. Kearney, *The Two-Parent Privilege* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

Empower parents to better protect their kids online

Over three-quarters of Georgia respondents support requiring age verification for sexually-explicit material

Parents of all political stripes agree it is too easy for children to find sexually explicit content online, and many parents worry about the long-term impact of a childhood intermediated by screens. In a national poll conducted last year, 86% of parents agreed it is “too easy” for kids to find explicit content online.

Across our five spotlight states, 88% of Republican parents and 83% of Democratic ones agreed with a proposal to require users to verify their age before accessing websites that host sexually explicit content. Over three-quarters of all Georgia adults somewhat or strongly supported the idea.

Georgia could require third-party verification that an individual is 18 years of age or older before being permitted to access a website that is predominantly used to host prurient or explicit content; a step that could assuage concerns about privacy online could be introducing a “zero-knowledge proof” approach, which relies on a cryptographic method

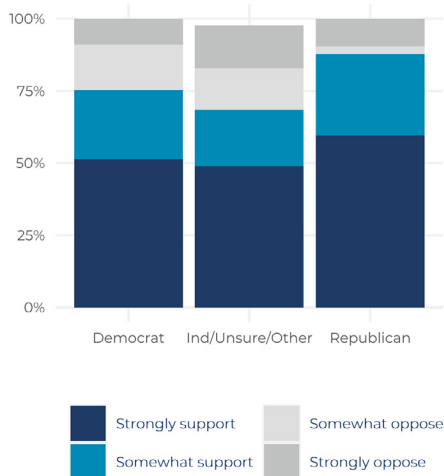
that reveals no information about the user.⁷ This idea has been pioneered by states like Louisiana, Arkansas, Virginia, and Utah, which have passed age-verification laws.⁸ Many are currently pending legal review, but have already led to direct action even without fully taking effect. Pornhub, the 12th most visited website in the world in June, voluntarily blocked access to users in certain states in protest of the new law.⁹

Apart from the topic of pornography online, parents continue to wrestle with how to ensure their kids are engaging with social media and the Internet in healthy, not destructive, ways. Prior work has shown that many parents feel overwhelmed by concerns over cyberbullying, mental health threats, and the broader negative effects of a childhood intermediated by screens. Championing legislation to strengthen parents’ ability to protect their children online should be a top priority.

Asking individual parents to be an expert on the plethora of user settings, filters, and options for keeping age-inappropriate content away from their kids places an undue burden on families. Policymakers should reset the status quo around kids and tech with a comprehensive approach to giving parents more power to protect their kids online. The backlash against Big Tech has led many policymakers to re-evaluate what principles should be governing their approach to legislation. But beyond the ongoing philosophical realignment about tech’s place in society, prioritizing strong legislation that

Require age verification to access pornography online

% of Georgia respondents, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

⁷ John Ehrett and Clare Morell, *Age Verification: Policy Ideas for States*, Institute for Family Studies and Ethics and Public Policy Center, August 2023.

⁸ House Bill 142 (enacted), Louisiana State Legislature, 2022 Regular Session.

⁹ Bradley Saacks, “Inside Pornhub’s Finances,” *Semafor*, July 27, 2023.

gives parents more power is a winning political issue that cuts across partisan lines.

Lawmakers could require that all social media platforms and other websites that allow minors to open profiles first obtain the explicit and verified consent of a parent or legal guardian. They could also require that all social media platforms give parents administrator-level access to view what content their children are watching, and who they are communicating with.

Parents were largely split between prioritizing measures that would require a parent's permission before children could open a social media account or requiring tech companies to give parents more tools to filter or limit access to certain content. But of the parents we polled across the five states, only 17%—and 12% of Republican-leaning parents—said the problem of helping navigate kids and tech use was “not a problem government should try to solve.”

Expand early childhood and K–12 options for all parents

85% of Georgia respondents would like to see action on child care affordability

Georgia has laid the groundwork for empowering parental choice around their children's education. Continuing to build on that momentum could take a number of different approaches, most straightforwardly with a universal expansion of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). This approach, which has been adopted by states such as Florida,

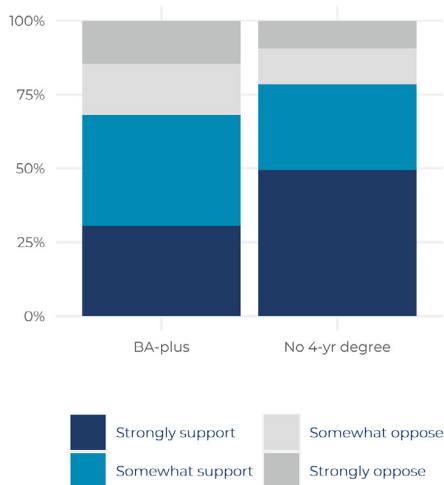
Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah, gives parents the option of finding the educational arrangement that works best for their child, be it traditional public school, private school, academic tutoring, home—or micro-schooling—or some combination or alternate approach.

We asked respondents in Georgia about ESAs. Our survey was randomly divided into two groups—one was asked about a hypothetical \$5,000 educational savings account for Georgia students, the other about a \$10,000 account. Overall, support for the \$5,000 amount was higher than the \$10,000 option by about six percentage points (though the level of “strong” support was higher for the larger amount.) Our survey wasn't large enough to reliably say which amount was supported by larger numbers of parents on the right or left, but the larger amounts did appear to have higher levels of strong support among parents without a college degree.

The same principle of prioritizing parental choice, along with a new grant aimed at helping organizations launch or expand operations, could ensure a diversity of early childhood options across the state. Voters would like to see proactive steps; only 15% of Georgia residents said child care affordability was a *not* a problem that required policy action. Georgia's existing universal pre-K program provides options to families with 4-year-olds who would like an early start to school, but a broader approach to care in early childhood must start from the recognition

Education Savings Accounts

% of Georgia respondents by educational attainment



Half of the responses were shown an ESA amount of \$5,000
Source: IFS/EPCC/YouGov poll; n=287 Georgia residents

that parents of young children have preferences that can vary widely.

Some families prefer to have a parent at home full time, others prefer to have a relative or neighbor watch their children while parents work full or part time, still others prefer a faith-based or for-profit child care center. Therefore, to the greatest extent possible, policymakers should try to expand parents' options in early childhood, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

According to a national poll conducted in late 2020 by the Bipartisan Policy Center, 31% of working-parent households used center-based care, and of those, 53% used one that was affiliated with a faith organization. One-third of parents participating in center-based care said the religious orientation of the facility was "somewhat" or "very" important in their decision, according to a government survey.¹⁰ Therefore, any discussion of child care in Georgia should include a focus on ensuring that faith-based providers are an essential part of the delivery system.

Additional grants to non-profit and religious organizations to get a child care program off the ground or technical assistance to ensure compliance with regulations and requirements could help

them build out enough capacity to break even.¹¹ Similarly, churches or community groups interested in expanding K–12 education could benefit from a start-up grant or technical assistance for ensuring that true choice is available to more families. This attempt at capacity building would help ensure a pluralistic landscape for Georgia parents to find the early childhood and K–12 option that is right for them, without putting a thumb on the scale of center-based child care or other options.

An early childhood and primary education capital expansion grant would grant non-profit and community organizations a three-year, partially-forgivable grant aimed at retrofitting or expanding existing physical spaces (not new construction), covering teacher training or certification, acquiring technology or other approved capital expenses. They would not be intended to cover normal operating expenses, but to provide religious and non-profit providers access to capital to help launch their new or expanded early childhood, elementary, middle, or high school educational offerings. The grant should be made available to facilities that serve children across all age groups, though a portion of funds could be allocated specifically to child care if desired.

¹⁰ Patrick T. Brown, *Child Care Pluralism*, Niskanen Center, June 2021.

¹¹ New York, Utah, Texas, and Rhode Island have all offered similar grants to help new child care facilities with start-up and licensing costs. See: Hailey Gibbs, "Increasing America's Child Care Supply," Center for American Progress, August 23, 2022.

Reorient school curricula to focus on long-term well-being

80% of Georgia residents favor teaching the ‘Success Sequence’

A state commission examining a potential crisis for men and a New Parent Credit designed to provide a meaningful bonus to new parents are both designed to recognize the importance of marriage. But falling marriage rates in Georgia require a longer-term effort. As young people increasingly delay, defer, and opt out of marriage, studies find commensurably lower levels of happiness, and higher rates of loneliness, depression, and suicide.

Preparing students in the Peach State for the economy of the 21st century is, but it is even more important to equip them to think about building strong families and healthy futures in an environment that is increasingly hostile to family life.

As social scientists have pointed out, certain habits and decisions are associated with long-term flourishing. Specifically, young adults are “60% less

likely to be poor if they put marriage before the baby carriage.” Likewise, “97% of young adults who get at least a high school degree, work full time, and marry before having children avoid

poverty in their late 20s and early 30s.”¹² To help its citizens flourish, the state of Georgia should embrace its responsibility to inform young people about these statistics, and encourage them to think about the long-term trajectory of their lives in ways that go beyond just career readiness.

The Georgia Department of Education could be directed to require that state educational programs incorporate a family life standard into curriculum standards that would teach that:

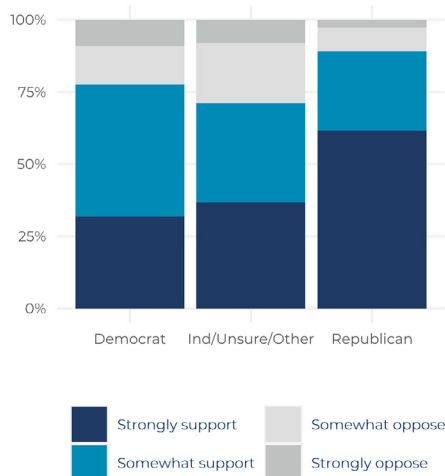
- A high school diploma, full-time work, and having children after marriage are linked to less poverty and greater prosperity for adults.
- Sequencing marriage before parenthood is associated with greater family (and thus financial) stability
- A stable, married family is linked to better educational, social, and emotional outcomes for parents and children, many of which are associated with more positive financial outcomes.

Such an agenda was popular across the political spectrum. Fewer than 10% of Georgia respondents “strongly” opposed the idea of the success sequence being taught, while 83% of residents without a college degree “strongly” or “somewhat” supported the concept.

It could also include basic facts about fertility, work-life balance, home economics, happiness, and human flourishing. These topics could be incorporated into health and safety high school graduation requirements or supplementing required

Teach ‘Success Sequence’ in public schools

% of Georgia respondents, by party ID

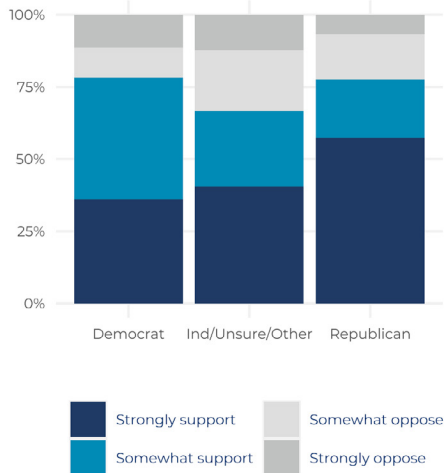


Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

¹² Brad Wilcox, Jenet Erickson, and Patrick T. Brown. *The Utah Family Miracle*, Institute for Family Studies and Sutherland Institute, 2023.

Prohibit smartphone use during class periods

% of Georgia respondents, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=287 Georgia residents

units of career-focused electives. And informing students in high school about fetal development, such as when a heartbeat is detectable or when a fetus' fingerprints form, could help underscore the state's commitment to protecting the value of every human life.

School districts could also be directed to collect student academic data by family structure, in addition to race and other demographic

characteristics, to give researchers better insights into the value of a stable home environment on student achievement.

Addressing students' long-term flourishing also means taking action on distractions in the classroom. Elected officials are increasingly recognizing that phones can distract students from classroom instructions, and make it harder for teachers to create a focused learning environment. Lawmakers could also direct the Georgia Department of Education to require that public schools create policies that restrict students from being on their phone in class. Such a plan could include requiring schools to furnish a safe location for smartphones to be stored during class periods, or simply specifying that students may not be allowed to use phones during class periods without a teacher's permission and empowering school districts to implement various strategies of enforcing such a ban. This approach was supported by respondents across the political spectrum.

Grounding Our Understanding of Pro-Family Policy

Discussions of "pro-family policy" rub some observers the wrong way. On the left, some would prefer to "abolish" the nuclear family; on the right, some believe that active intervention on behalf of families is a distortion of the free market and a precursor to government intervention elsewhere.

But strong families are the cornerstone of a healthy society. From Alexis de Tocqueville onwards, many have observed that the success of the American experiment itself can be said to depend, in no small part, on strong and stable families.

Strong families are correlated with lower crime rates, lower rates of interpersonal violence, increased academic achievement, higher lifetime earnings, and a whole host of positive social indicators. Indeed, recent research tells us that nothing better predicts the health of the American Dream, at the community level, than the share of two-parent families in a community. Likewise, other recent research finds that nothing better explains the declining share of men and women succeeding in that quintessential American pursuit—"the pursuit of happiness"—than the falling marriage rate. As the family goes, so goes the United States.

The aim of family policy, then, should be to strengthen and stabilize American family life. Among the principles a robust pro-family agenda that Georgia ought to advance include:

- Seeking to strengthen **the institution of marriage** and the enduring relationship between mothers, fathers, and their children that forms the core of family life.
- Ensuring that children and their parents receive the **care and social support** they deserve to ensure a healthy start to life.

- Acknowledging the out-of-pocket and opportunity costs associated with becoming a parent, and advancing policies that would make having children **more affordable and achievable**.
- Developing policies that **create flexibility** for parents without jeopardizing their financial security, allowing more families to find the work-life balance that is right for them.
- Remediating imbalances in tax and safety net policies, recognizing the family as an economic institution, and **ensuring married families are not penalized** relative to single or cohabiting parents.
- Respecting and promoting the fundamental right of parents to **raise their children** according to their faith, values, and beliefs.

Starting with the family as a core and integral building block that makes up a flourishing society means recognizing that no two families are alike; parents face a variety of trade-offs, different preferences, and changing work and household situations. Parents with a college degree, for example, are much more likely to favor center-based child care compared to those without; but some approaches to child care presume center-based care should be the preferred model for all. Government policies that prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to questions of work-life balance or the care of young children misunderstand the heterogeneity of parents' preferences and can ultimately undermine the autonomy of the family.

This means standing up for families against universalist approaches that assume the state should take over the responsibilities that parents bear. But it also means standing up for families against the pressures of a market economy. Pro-family policy does not mean making families more accessible to employers, or assuming the highest goal is increasing labor-force participation. Many parents, especially when their children are young, prefer to work part time, or to take some time out of the labor force. But many proposed social programs are structured in a way that assumes both parents will be full-time workers, or are sold as resulting in greater attachment to the labor force. Policymakers must become comfortable with the idea of creating space for families—particularly those who have just given birth—away from the demands of the market, and recognize that, at times, that will require prioritizing the needs of the family over the needs of the labor market.

Policies that expand choices for parents, giving them more options and ability to raise their children in the way they deem best, are authentically pro-family. So, too, are policies that seek to shore up the institution of marriage and increase the share of children raised by two parents. Policies that treat family structure as incidental, or that seek to outsource the responsibility of caring and raising children to the institutions of the market or state to the greatest extent possible, do not merit that definition.

About the Author

Patrick T. Brown is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in the Life and Family Initiative, where his work focuses on developing a robust pro-family economic agenda and supporting families as the cornerstone of a healthy and flourishing society. His writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *National Review*, *Politico*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, and he has previously published reports on paid leave and family policy with the Institute for Family Studies. Prior to joining EPPC, he served as a senior policy advisor to Congress' Joint Economic Committee. He and his wife Jessica have four young children and live in Columbia, S.C.