

Child care has bipartisan support. But the culture war could wreck that ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

President Biden's call to expand public support of child care in his joint address to Congress puts a spotlight on an issue that has been a subject of growing bipartisan cooperation. In recent decades, Republicans have increasingly embraced the idea that government can play a greater role in providing quality child care for working families, responding to the reality that nearly two-thirds of U.S. households have no stay-at-home parent. As Missouri Gov. Mike Parson put it in his January State of the State address, "Our children are the workforce of tomorrow . . . if we are to truly make a difference in their lives, it starts with early childhood development." Two of the first states to adopt broad public preschool for 4-year-olds were Georgia and Oklahoma, in the 1990s, and the state with the highest-rated system, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, is Alabama.

But the country now faces a realignment of the politics of child care. Two paths await: On one, the economic and educational imperative of child care integrates itself into the American psyche, expanding gender equity and ensuring that public funding of the early years becomes just as expected as public funding of the schooling years. On the other, child care becomes another front in the culture wars, as one camp bucks against perceived government intrusion into the private realm and onetime allies retreat into their respective corners.

The threat of a breakdown became clear soon after Biden's address, when author and rumored Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance tweeted that " 'universal day care' is class war against normal people" — the "normal people" being those who prefer a care arrangement involving a parent. Vance was then on Tucker Carlson's show repeating these claims to a wide audience.

This is not fringe posturing. In the GOP response to Biden's address, Sen. Tim Scott (S.C.) warned that the president's plan would "put Washington even more in the middle of your life — from the cradle to college." Scott's Senate colleague Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) was less coy when she tweeted an old article about the Soviet Union's child-care system with the comment "You know who else liked universal day care." In March, Idaho rejected a \$6 million federal child-care grant — over the objections of business groups — partially because state lawmakers expressed concern over children being indoctrinated by the government.

This view is a throwback to the so-called "traditional values" loudly espoused by conservatives decades ago. In 1971, President Richard Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have created a national day-care system, saying that it "would commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing [and] against the family-centered approach."

Richard Nixon bears responsibility for the pandemic's child-care crisis

Since the turn of the millennium, however, two threads pulled the parties closer together on the issue. The first was acceptance of the fact that, like it or not, mothers of young children had entered the workforce in large numbers and were not going anywhere. While certain populations of American women have always worked, less than 40 percent of mothers with children under age 5 were in the labor force around the time of Nixon's veto; since the late 1990s, that figure has hovered around two-thirds.

The second thread was emerging brain science showing that early childhood experiences, including child care, are foundational to later academic and life outcomes. Republicans were therefore able to back increased child-care funding on economic grounds: The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been a vocal supporter, and the Trump White House held a high-profile child-care summit in December 2019.

While Republicans face a question of whether to abandon these positions now that a Democratic president has embraced the issue, Democrats must reckon with the question of choice when it comes to stay-at-home parents.

Americans do, in fact, want a dizzying variety of care setups: secular child-care centers, faith-based options, home-based day cares, public prekindergarten, minding by relatives, care from a parent. These preferences can shift with children's ages and family circumstances, and vary among demographics. While Biden's child-care proposals are optional and inclusive of all types of external care, they are silent on stay-at-home parents.

The significant share of families that want a degree of parental care — and the fact that many families struggle financially because they

have traded child-care costs for reduced income — has led some on both sides of the aisle to call for a home-care allowance (on top of the recently expanded child tax credit, which is untethered to care). Paying stay-at-home parents is a concept with left-wing roots, although it has been a source of controversy in feminist circles because so much of the pressure to stay home is likely to fall on women. Nordic nations such as Finland and Sweden have used home-care payments for parents who opt out of publicly supported child care. If Democrats incorporated such an option into their plans, it would probably deflect some of their opponents' criticism.

The reality for the Republican Party, however, is that it is already badly underwater with women. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated the pain — borne particularly by mothers — of the lack of affordable child care. Expanded public support of child care is massively popular: An April Yahoo News/YouGov survey found 58 percent of Americans in favor of providing universal pre-K for all children. And 60 percent — including 64 percent of women and 41 percent of Republicans — supported increasing subsidies to reduce the cost of child care. While those numbers would surely drop under a sustained messaging assault, the support for child care appears both broad and deep.

Some conservatives, like Vance and Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), have endorsed direct financial support for parents as an alternative to child-care spending. While such payments could help with general child-rearing costs, Hawley's proposal of \$12,000 annually for married couples (and \$6,000 for single parents) is not enough to address many parents' struggles. Group care is necessarily expensive because the child-to-adult ratios must be low; experts calculate that the cost of quality care averages \$15,000 to \$30,000 annually per child, depending on age and location. The lack of money flowing into the child-care sector explains parents' difficulty in finding slots, even before the pandemic, as well as the workforce's persistently low wages and high turnover. These schemes could carry political risk for conservative Republicans who oppose expanding social services by nudging parents to stay home.

For the past two decades, the child-care debate has largely lingered below the surface as American politics became more polarized. While presidents mentioned the issue, it was not a centerpiece of any agenda, and the plans on offer were limited. The ground has now shifted, and how policymakers react will determine the politics of child care for the 2020s and beyond.

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