

Conservative birthrate panic: Our hope for better work/family policies?^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The ladies aren't having enough babies and conservatives are sad. That was basically the gist of Ross Douthat's column this weekend, which riffed off of new birthrate numbers from Pew showing that we're at a record low. Douthat's primary concern seems to be the false notion that demography is destiny—that our "demographic edge" means we can pwn all fellow nations and without it, a more fruitful nation is eating our lunch. (If this were true, Niger, which has the world's highest birthrate, would have enslaved us all. We clock in at a meager 124.) But there is good reason for conservatives and progressives alike to be concerned about a falling birthrate. Many of our public policies, most notably the social safety net, are designed to have one generation support the older one—but that gets mighty top heavy with a declining number of people doing the supporting. As Douthat puts it, "Today's babies are tomorrow's taxpayers and workers and entrepreneurs." That's real. Nancy Folbre even calculates that a parent who raises a child contributes \$200,000 more to net taxes than a nonparent, given what that child will pay when it grows up.

So what can we do about bringing that rate up? Douthat goes off the rails when attributing the decline in births to a cultural "decadence" in which women can't get beyond themselves to think about the future. But what's exciting about Douthat's column is that parts of it expose a place of common interest between liberals and conservatives that could further the feminist project of implementing real work/family policies in America.

After all, Douthat admits: "America has no real family policy to speak of at the moment." While it feels like quite the understatement, he's absolutely right. In a previous column he even recognized that "our policies and our institutions are increasingly out of date: they're built for a world in which two-parent, single-breadwinner families were a near-universal norm, and they don't take enough account of the mass entrance of women into the work force, or the mounting economic pressures on the American family."

So now that we're all in agreement that some government intervention is needed, where can we look for guidance? Douthat himself points across the pond, naming Sweden and France as places that have had success in bringing up their birthrates through public policy. But he can't quite bring himself to spell out what that policy actually looks like.

Let's take a close look at France's example. Claire Lundberg, currently living in that country, wrote a dispatch for Slate outlining the entirety of France's childcare policies. She explains, "In brief, the French government provides: 1) inexpensive municipal daycare, 2) tax breaks for families employing in-home child care workers, and 3) universal free preschool beginning at age 3." It's really a remarkable system. First, parents can enroll their children in a crèche, a government-run day care center that takes children starting at three months, is open during the entire work day and adheres to high standards set by the government in which at least half of the workers are required to have a specialized diploma. The cost is rock bottom: it's on a sliding scale based on income, costing just .26 euros an hour for the poorest families.

But what about the families who don't want to use a center? For them, the French government has a system of tax breaks for parents who hire a licensed nanny overseen by the government or another childcare worker. The rebates "often amount to about one-third of the total cost of care," Lundberg reports.

Once the kids reach age 3, they are guaranteed a place in the country's universal preschool system, which is open from 8:30-4:30 but often also offers daycare service afterward. While it's not mandatory, the high quality and low cost mean that over 95 percent of eligible children attend.

What's promising about such policies is that they have the effects desired by both the left and the right. The right, concerned about declining population (reasonable from a policy standpoint, unreasonable from a racial fear standpoint) sees births rise. Douthat notes that France is having more babies than we are right now. In fact, as Michelle Goldberg has pointed out, birthrates are basically doing just fine in countries like France that have these policies in place. "The societies where birthrates have plunged to dangerous levels—Russia, Catholic countries like Poland, Spain and Italy, as well as Japan and Singapore—are all places that make it very difficult for women to combine work and family," she writes.

And that combination of work and family isn't just good for babies. It's really good for moms. Lundberg notes that France initially just paid women to stay home with their children, but in 2004 it shifted policy with the understanding that mothers wanted to go to work. These policies have made that an extremely viable option. Over 80 percent of mothers with one child are in the workforce, and even half of those

with three or more children are able to get to the office.

This bipartisan spirit may not have gripped our lawmakers yet, but there's more good news on that front: they have some serious support from the electorate, including Republicans. A new poll, out this week from Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group for the National Partnership for Women & Families, found that over 85 percent of voters think it's important for lawmakers to consider taking action on family friendly policies, such as paid sick days and family and medical leave insurance, "to help keep families financially secure." Almost two-thirds say it's very important. This cuts across party lines. Nearly three-quarters of Republicans felt this way, as did 87 percent of independents and 96 percent of Democrats.

It's not surprising that average Americans are in favor of these policies. Nothing could hit closer to home. The same poll found that about three-quarters of voters have experienced work/family challenges.

If we're going to finally see movement on policies that change the childcare care/work equation from a private struggle to a public concern, it's going to take support from both progressives and conservatives. But it really shouldn't be hard to bring the two together to push for policies that reflect the realities of our family structures and workforce makeup. We exist with two truths: Women want to work and families want to have children. If we don't have policies that make it viable to do both, we present our citizens with an impossible choice. The outcome of that choice might make conservatives very nervous.

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