
What Next for the Marriage Movement? A Strategic Discussion

At a conference cosponsored by Center of the American Experiment and the Institute for American Values in February 2002 in Washington, D.C., American Experiment president Mitch Pearlstein moderated a panel discussion on the future of the marriage movement. Following are excerpts from the panelists' presentations and their discussions with one another and with participants.

Making Better Matches

Norval D. Glenn

The marriage movement has done very well. Ten years ago—even three years ago—I would not have predicted that the movement could accomplish what it has accomplished so far, but there's a lot more we can do.

One relatively neglected aspect of marriage is getting the right people together in the first place. I hope that in the next few years, the marriage movement will shift its emphasis in the direction of furthering better marital matches than have occurred during the previous thirty years. I would hope that we would enable people who are seeking a spouse for the first time to do so

with a greater degree of wisdom, and that we would try to improve the institutional mechanisms for getting people together. Institutional mating mechanisms in our society have broken down, and this should be the next major emphasis of the marriage movement.

The goal is easy to state. Formulating even a broad strategy for accomplishing that goal is difficult.

Obviously, it's partially an educational goal. We need to sensitize people to the importance of marriage in their lives and to what we know about what constitutes a good marital match. The educational function will not be performed well by formal educational institutions; it will have to be performed primarily by organizations such

as the Institute for American Values and various other private, not specifically educational institutions.

Even if people are well informed about what constitutes a good marriage and a good marital match, we lack institutional mechanisms—like the old-fashioned courtship system—for getting people together. We no longer have the mechanisms that enable people to meet and get to know, beyond a superficial level, a large number of potential spouses before they become prematurely entangled with one person and get the train going toward marriage with that person before they have sufficiently tested their own preferences for the kind of spouse they want.

We need to pay more attention to this mating process and to give young people who are seeking spouses more guidance than they have at the moment. Young people who are on the marriage market—I apologize for the term—are pretty much on their own. Many people are marrying at a later age. They're away from their parents, their family, long-term friends. Many are pretty clueless in terms of what they should do, and they're not getting much help.

And so I hope that we would turn our attention and our imaginations to this very important task. We need to think about what kinds of mechanisms we can come up with to improve the circulation process and improve mating in general.

We're not going to reconstitute the old courtship system, but certain elements of that system should be resurrected. I am hopeful that if we

collectively turn our attention to this important task, we'll be able to come up with some good solutions.

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Preventing Teen Pregnancy

Isabel V. Sawhill

What two or three things does the marriage movement need to accomplish over the next five years? I have two short answers: We need to define the goal of the movement much more precisely than we have so far, and we need to be strategic about achieving that goal. Let me elaborate on each of these points.

Right now, the goal is rarely articulated in any refined way. It may be articulated in a somewhat sophisticated way at a meeting like this, but in a lot of the conversations that I've been privy to, it just sounds like a vague advocacy of more marriage—any kind of marriage for anyone, anywhere, anytime. The impression is that the goal is to encourage as many people as possible to marry. But when you think about that carefully, it makes little sense to have such an undifferentiated goal.

We're not talking about establishing a national dating service. Nor are we talking about encouraging marriage among people who are not yet ready to get married, such as teenagers who haven't finished school. I don't even think we're talking about encouraging marriage among all those twentysomethings with whom I work at Brookings who are still in graduate school or in

the early stages of their careers; they're not quite ready.

I took an informal survey of people under age thirty-five who work on my floor at Brookings, most of them research assistants and staff assistants. The majority are women, but there's a heavy component of men as well. This sample of course was small and unrepresentative. Virtually all of these people are currently unmarried. Virtually all of them said they expect to get married and to have children some time in the future. On average, they think the ideal age for people like themselves to get married is about twenty-nine. For many of them, it was well into their thirties.

I don't think anyone is talking about trying to get more people in their twenties to marry earlier; we know from the research that marriages tend to be more successful when people are a little older and a little more mature, and have had a little more experience. I think what we're really talking about is making sure that as many children as possible are born and raised in married-parent families. The primary goal, in other words, is to reduce unwed childbearing. Secondarily, we want to stabilize marriages in which young children are present.

I give primacy here to unwed childbearing over stabilizing existing marriages or preventing divorce for two reasons: unwed childbearing is currently the driving force behind the growth of single-parent families in our society, and it is the children born to very young unwed mothers who are most at

risk of poverty and a whole host of other problems. So I think we should emphasize reducing unwed childbearing—a much more focused and strategically articulated goal than the rather diffuse and undifferentiated call for more marriage.

How do we achieve this goal? First we need to strengthen the societal norm that childbearing belongs within marriage. There are young cohabiting couples these days who feel perfectly comfortable having a baby but don't feel like they're ready or financially stable enough to get married.

The norm of childbearing within marriage has clearly eroded. Almost half of Americans under the age of thirty-five believe that a single mother can bring up a child as well as a married couple can. Even in my very select sample of Brookings staff, a not inconsiderable number of the people who answered the survey said they would seriously consider having a child outside of marriage.

In many communities, unmarried motherhood is now the norm and is simply no big deal. The solution here has to be a concerted effort in schools, faith-based organizations, the media, and families to change that norm. That effort should be targeted to the young: those still in high school and junior high school, or even younger. This is the group that's most impressionable and whose future decisions matter most. This is also the group with whom we're likely to have the greatest success.

As important as it is to restore this norm and to restore a marriage culture

in our society, government has a limited ability to accomplish that objective. The most important thing the government can do is to support the non-governmental organizations that do the heavy lifting.

We also need to reduce early unintended pregnancies and births, especially to teens.

Bear in mind that **half of first unwed births are to teenagers**. Even if young people get the message about having children inside marriage and not outside, a lot of them will unintentionally get pregnant when they're very young and have babies before they're ready. And once they've had one child, they are far less likely ever to get married because they're not as marriageable anymore. They're also more likely to have additional children outside of marriage.

Some argue that we should be encouraging marriage among those who have already had a baby, especially if the parents are cohabiting and in some kind of relationship. I don't know of any successful programs that have accomplished this, and I remain skeptical that this would work as well as preventing births in the first place. I'm also concerned that providing special help to fragile cohabiting families would send a message that our society rewards unwed parenting.

We've had a long debate about whether government, by assisting unwed mothers, has encouraged more unwed motherhood. We should also be having a debate about whether, if we provide additional government assistance to

unwed fathers, we are going to encourage more unwed fatherhood. A focus on males is surely needed, but **before** they become fathers.

The good news here is that there are plenty of well-evaluated programs that work to prevent early pregnancy. They are not adequately funded right now, although they are a cost-effective means of reducing nonmarital childbearing.

The First Things First program in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has the right message: First, finish school. Second, get a job. Third, find a lifetime partner. Then think about having a baby.

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Getting Government Involved

Wade F. Horn

From my perspective, particularly where I sit today, the number one thing we have to do is to convince the nation that supporting marriage is, in fact, a legitimate function of government. Many people disagree. Some people think government has no role to play in marriage at all, and others think government should simply strive for neutrality when it comes to marriage.

My response to the neutrality argument is that government is neutral about some things but not others. It is neutral about whether you prefer strawberry ice cream to vanilla ice cream. The fact that more people choose vanilla ice cream does not prompt the government to subsidize strawberry ice

cream—because choosing strawberry ice cream does not materially affect the well-being of children, adults, or communities.

But government is *not* neutral about lots of things. Take, for example, home ownership. We know that communities of persons who own their own homes are safer, have less welfare dependency, and evidence fewer social pathologies than communities where a smaller percentage of people own their own homes. Hence, government subsidizes home ownership through such policies as the home mortgage interest deduction. That doesn't mean we throw renters in jail, but we do provide certain incentives and supports for home ownership.

It seems to me that the same should be true for marriage. Government ought to actively support the institution of marriage because it can be shown that marriage is beneficial to children, to adults, and to society.

How should government go about doing this? The first thing I have learned in this debate is the importance of clarifying what government ought *not* to do. Government should *not* coerce anyone to get married. Government should *not* run a federal dating service or get into the business of playing cupid. It should *not* trap people in abusive relationships. It should *not* withdraw supports for single mothers.

What, then, should it do? Let me provide a mission statement: Government support for marriage means helping couples who choose marriage for

themselves gain the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.

It's a great fallacy to believe that low-income couples have different values about marriage. New research suggests that low-income couples frequently are contemplating marriage, particularly at the point when a child is born out of wedlock. Why not help them achieve what many of them are saying they want—a healthy marriage?

Love, however, is not enough. Skills, too, are important. The good news is that we can teach the skills necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages. This is not about forcing anyone to use these services, but about making them available and affordable to low-income couples. It is about helping people form healthy marriages.

Once government is involved, we have to find out what actually works. We need to evaluate the kinds of initiatives government might be involved in, such as giving low-income couples vouchers for premarital education services; referring, where appropriate, married couples who have kids in Head Start programs to marriage enrichment programs; and helping make marriage therapy services available to couples involved in the child welfare system who are having difficulties with their kids because they're having trouble with each other. Many of us take for granted that we can get these services if we need them. Low-income couples may not know they exist or have the financial resources to use them even if they do.

It's astounding to me that this is even controversial. We ought to be able to say that this is a legitimate function of government—while government ought not to be in the love business, it can be in the skills business. To that end, President Bush recently announced a new \$100 million pot of money for research, demonstration, and technical assistance efforts around family formation and healthy marriage. If Congress agrees, the government will, for the first time, dedicate money to promoting healthy marriages. The National Conference on State Legislatures, a bipartisan group representing all fifty states and the U.S. territories, officially endorsed the president's proposal.

The really good news is that there is an extraordinary, though fragile, consensus about this. Ben Cardin—a Democrat and a lead in the U.S. House of Representatives on welfare reform—has essentially the same proposal in his bill, although his proposal would allow these funds to be used for broader purposes than just family formation and healthy marriage. If we don't do this carefully and thoughtfully, we may draw disagreement and conflict out of the jaws of consensus. That would be tragic.

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Offering Resources

Sharon Weston Broome

In Louisiana in 1997 we enacted a covenant marriage law. A covenant marriage is an optional form of marriage

(also offered in Arizona and Arkansas) in which couples agree to a more binding form of marriage by signing, after counseling, a "declaration of intent" about the seriousness of marriage and their intent that the marriage be life-long. At the time I was a coauthor I was not yet married, and then I went on to have a covenant marriage. It is one of the strongest marriage-strengthening efforts we have in Louisiana.

The Louisiana Marriage and Family Commission was established to offer resources and programs to strengthen and preserve marriages across our state. To promote marriages, the scholars here today have affirmed, is an important social good associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults. To complement what the president has done, our governor has committed money in his executive budget for marriage-strengthening programs.

Another primary objective of our commission is to support and complement the family-formation goals. It is not our intention to try to force or mandate marriage among disadvantaged populations, who for the most part highly esteem and value marriage. We can remove some systemic barriers. One is an economic barrier. Why not provide noncustodial fathers job training and employment assistance? The government failed us by spending years elevating and promoting programs that penalized and turned their backs on two-parent households.

Now it's time for the government to turn the tables and make men more marriageable. If we agree that finances

can be an enormous strain on a marriage, we should expand job training and employment assistance to two-parent families. One of the initiatives we have in Louisiana—a microenterprise initiative—is Project Succeed, which uses TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] dollars to help low-income families gain economic empowerment.

We can offer entrepreneurial training, technical assistance, financial assistance. The top graduates go into small-business incubators. This is just one example of what we can do.

Louisiana unfortunately ranks third in the country for out-of-wedlock births. Merely telling people that they need to get married is not enough to reduce this statistic, yet an aggressive outreach and support initiative from community leadership—churches, government, civic organizations, school community groups offering educational services—can have a tremendous impact. Leadership is the key to turning all of this around. If we want what's best for our children, then leadership must move this issue to the top of the public agenda.

We are the sum total of the choices we make in our lives. It is our commission's role and it is government's role to see to it that we equip people with the information and resources they need to make informed decisions about marriage and family.

Sharon Weston Broome is a member of the Louisiana legislature.

Recapturing the Theological Voice

W. Bradford Wilcox

Alexis de Tocqueville accorded religion a crucial place in democratic life. In his view, religious institutions cultivate the habits of restraint that keep a free people from abusing their liberty.

He worried that the decline of religious life and its attendant habits of restraint would inevitably mean the rise of a soft despotism in which government takes on an ever larger set of responsibilities because citizens have stopped fulfilling their own responsibilities.

The very fact that we're having this discussion today, and the fact that public policy figures so prominently in it, suggests how far we may be traveling down Tocqueville's road to Leviathan. Since the 1960s, the nation has witnessed dramatic increases in illegitimacy and divorce. Nearly half of all marriages now end in divorce, and a third of all children are born outside of wedlock. These demographic trends underline the fact that churches, traditionally the nation's most important institutional custodians of marriage, have been both unable and unwilling to foster the beliefs and virtues that make for a strong marriage culture.

Religious institutions have been unable to stem the tide of family breakdown insofar as secularization has left them without ready access to a substantial portion of the population. In the past thirty years, the percentage of

Americans who attend church several times a month or more has gone from 50 to 40. Congregations can't help people who don't darken the door of a church or a synagogue or a mosque on the average Sunday or Saturday or Friday.

Two recent studies suggest that regular religious attendance does offer substantial help for marriage. A University of Wisconsin study indicates that married Americans who attend services weekly are 35 percent less likely to divorce than those who don't. Church attendance is even more valuable in our nation's urban centers, where the marriage culture is exceptionally fragile. My own research indicates that urban children are 120 percent more likely to be born into a married home if their parents attend church several times a month or more.

Churches strengthen the institution of marriage by offering social and spiritual support that helps individuals cope with the challenges and stresses of family life and work life. Religious rituals and sermons endow marriage with transcendent significance. Religious congregations offer family-oriented social networks that reinforce the norm of lifelong marriage. The very fact that secularization is taking people away from regular churchgoing helps to explain why religious institutions have been unable to hold back the tidal wave of family change that swept the nation in the 1960s and 1970s.

But all too often, religious institutions have also been unwilling to confront the cultural and social forces that undercut marriage. Mainline Protestant churches that pride themselves on

their commitment to children also offer a pronounced rhetoric of inclusion for family diversity that obscures the social and moral consequences of family breakdown for children. Many Catholic clergy worry about provoking debate and dissent in their churches and don't even attempt to articulate Catholic teaching on marriage and divorce. Black Protestant churches are reluctant to address marriage because the family behavior of their members is in such tension with their theologically conservative outlook. Even evangelical Protestant churches, which devote more attention to married life, tend to take a sentimental or therapeutic view of marriage that doesn't prepare their members for the practical challenges of married life.

By and large, America's largest religious traditions have failed to plumb their own rich sacramental and covenantal theologies of marriage to offer their adherents reasons to sacrifice in service of the wedding vow and to steer clear of divorce court. One indication of this failure is that very few churches offer anything in the way of marriage ministry. Using data from the national congregation survey, I find that only 7 percent of Catholic mainline and evangelical Protestant churches offer some kind of formal group dedicated to marriage preparation or support in their own congregations. It's even worse in the black churches, where virtually no congregations offer such ministries.

This failure is particularly tragic because a religiously informed commitment to the institution of marriage can be one of the most powerful sources of

marital stability and happiness. The Wisconsin study found that Americans who strongly oppose divorce and affirm the importance of marriage are 40 percent less likely to divorce than those who do not.

My own research indicates that religious men who are highly committed to the institution of marriage are more likely to sacrifice for their marriages and to have happily married wives. If more Americans were exposed to a strong theologically grounded message about marriage and against divorce, we would undoubtedly see higher rates of marital stability and happiness.

We've been asked to offer strategic advice today, but religious institutions need to be careful about taking a strategic posture. For much of the past century, so-called strategic thinking has led to bureaucratic initiatives in churches that tend to mimic the secular assumptions and techniques of our society's dominant institutions—particularly the state and helping professions. So I would say that, instead of being strategic, religious institutions need to recapture their distinctive theological voice on marriage. They need to show men and women how marriage is a lifelong vocation of service to God, to their spouses, and to their children.

The challenge here is that efforts to speak theologically cannot be articulated in the authoritative tone of an earlier era. Churches must articulate their message about marriage in terms that are attractive to an undercatechized and individualistic laity. In short, churches must present their teaching as

a gift that will enrich and challenge the lives of their members.

To the extent that efforts on behalf of marriage take explicit institutional form, they have to be careful about adopting national programs based on therapeutic and utilitarian assumptions that are inimical to seeing marriage as a vocation endowed with transcendent significance. They should be organized locally in the context of specific congregations and seminaries with their own language, their own rituals, and their own theological vision. Programs should be run by lay couples who themselves have strong marriages because such couples have a unique ability to impart marital knowledge derived from the school of ordinary life.

Religious institutions have lost their status as the preeminent custodians of marriage, and they're not likely to recapture that position anytime soon in this society. If we want to strengthen marriages in the twenty-first century, I doubt that we'll be able to do it without churches, synagogues, and mosques that connect their theological heritage to the contemporary challenges of married life.

The alternative, as Tocqueville would have predicted, is an increasing reliance on Leviathan to prop up marriage and to take responsibility for the growing number of children scarred by a broken home. The choice is ours.

W. Bradford Wilcox, a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study of Religion at Yale, joins the sociology department at the University of Virginia in the fall.

Explaining Government's Interest

Maggie Gallagher

If I were to try to articulate the one big idea, one that not everyone in the marriage movement may agree with, it would be this: Marriage is more than a personal way of life; marriage is even more than a social good. Marriage is, in fact, a key social institution. Marriage is like private property, education, and the rule of law—one of a small number of key institutions essential to creating and sustaining any society, but especially a free and democratic society.

The big challenge for the marriage movement is to answer this question: Why is marriage a legitimate subject of public interest and even government interest? An old friend recently asked me this question. I hadn't seen him in five years, and I was telling him about some of the things that I do for a living. He paused, sat back, and remarked: "You know, increasingly I wonder why the state is involved in marriage at all. Why does the state get involved in these kinds of moral issues?"

This is the problem in a nutshell: marriage is increasingly privatized in our society. Even as support for marriage as a personal choice remains strong, our understanding of marriage as a social institution weakens. As it happens, I had an answer for him, an answer that we in the marriage movement have to articulate. There are at least two ways of answering the question of why government is involved in moral issues such as marriage.

The first is to attack the simplistic idea that there is one set of issues called government issues and another, entirely separate, set of issues called moral issues. Think about it: If I borrow money from you and I promise to pay it back and I don't, isn't that a moral issue? If someone comes into your house and takes your property without asking you—isn't that a moral issue? Yet we have laws enforcing contracts and barring theft even though these are moral issues.

While there are limits to what government should become involved in, there is not a big dividing line with one set of issues over here called moral that the government doesn't get involved with and another set of issues called nonmoral that is the legitimate business of government. Most government policies involve preferences for certain kinds of values, behaviors, and actions over others. And any government that is founded on the idea of rights is founded on the idea of right and wrong.

The second answer is simpler: the state has a compelling interest in the well-being of this social institution called marriage. There are many reasons different sectors and people—families, individuals, faith communities—get involved in marriages. I'm not denigrating any of these purposes of marriage. But the state's interest in marriage is essentially twofold. First of all, children are dependent beings who require care and protection. One fundamental purpose of marriage as a public institution is to try to see that as

many children as possible grow up with their own two married parents. Marriage is a way of ensuring that as many children as possible have the protection of a committed mother and father.

Another public purpose of marriage is seldom discussed these days: societies need babies if they are to survive. Very sophisticated cosmopolitan societies often forget this. We can argue about what the optimum level of baby-making is, but a supply of babies is necessary if any society is going to continue.

One of the functions of marriage is to try to channel a prudent and appropriate amount of erotic energy into this relatively narrow channel of lifelong family-making activity called marriage. We support and honor marriage not because we don't value people who are not married or because we think we should punish people who are not married, but because we recognize that the people who undertake the task of marriage are doing something that's important not just to them, but also to the society at large.

Critics of the marriage movement often imply that honoring marriage implies denigrating people who aren't married. I do not think so. Do we usually think about social honors in this either/or fashion? If we honor firefighters, does that mean we despise journalists or stockbrokers? In fact, those of us who are journalists are happy that there are people willing to be firefighters and undertake that kind of socially honored role, most especially if we personally don't happen to want to do it. Similarly, even people who are not

married and even those who never want to marry have a stake in the success of marriage as a social institution, assuming they care about the well-being of children and the future of their society. Marriage is not a special interest; it is a public good.

I want to step back a bit and talk about the way I envision the law and public policy being involved in the task of sustaining marriage because I think many of the ways people talk about this on the right or the left are seriously limited.

Part of the problem is that our understanding of the relationship between marriage and the state was worked out between five hundred and a thousand years ago. When it comes under challenge, a lot of this language and understanding and the ideas behind the legal regulation of marriage are no longer at our fingertips.

These days, we tend to understand the way law could potentially help or hurt marriage in terms of either incentives or punishment: either we bribe people with government money to do things that they might not otherwise want to do, or we punish people who aren't behaving properly in various financial or legal ways. Neither incentives nor punishment capture the likely ways for the law and public policy to support marriage.

The big function of marriage law is normative. Its basic function is to signal that there's something special about a particular kind of union that merits recognition and support. Cross-culturally, this is the big idea associated

with marriage. Marriage is publicly acknowledged and supported; it's not simply a private union or idea. The ultimate public goal of marriage is to ensure the reproduction of the society and the well-being and protection of children. The marriage movement has had to overcome a lot of false dichotomies. Remember the old debate between people who said it's not marriage but poverty that matters? The people who said it's not family structure but family process that matters? Gradually, we've come to realize that it doesn't have to be either/or, it can be both/and. Marriage matters and poverty matters too.

In the same way, the dichotomy between moral/culture and government/public policy is a false dichotomy. Yes, government has limits and we need prudence in policy. But marriage has always been a legal as well as a moral, cultural, and religious institution in America.

I can easily think of three areas in which the law and public policy can help. One strategy is to boost rates of legitimation—the likelihood that a single pregnant woman will decide to marry before the child's birth. This does not mean badgering couples who already have children into getting married. As Isabel Sawhill said, it involves telling the next generation what we know to be true: that it's a good idea to wait until you're grown, educated, **and married** to have children. We have a large network of teen pregnancy programs that have done great work, but they primarily tell our young people that they should wait until they've

graduated from high school or maybe college, or until they turn twenty, before they have a child out of wedlock.

When I last looked at the data, it struck me powerfully that teens seem to have listened. We have successfully cut the rates of teen pregnancy, yet the rates of pregnancy and childbearing among women in their early twenties have continued to increase. So perhaps instead of thinking about how we can punish or bribe unwed moms, we could simply say out loud what almost all Americans believe and the data show: all things being equal, it would be a good idea to wait until you're grown, educated, **and married** before you have a child.

A second very simple idea: when a single mother applies for government assistance, we could ask her if she is interested in or considering marriage. Simply asking about marriage in itself sends an important social signal. If she says no, we don't do anything. If she says yes, we offer to refer that woman and her partner to community and faith-based marriage education that the couple might find useful. We might support them in their idea that there's something important about marriage, that a baby is a good reason to consider marrying someone you love. In fact, making a happy family is one of the best reasons in the world to get married.

A third idea is to look at the tax code. We've had long debates about whether the tax code should be friendly, neutral, or indifferent to marriage. Isabel Sawhill suggested in *American Experiment Quarterly* (Summer 2001) that we increase the dependent exemption for the first five years of a child's

life for married couples who have a baby. It's not the one policy that will solve everything, but it's an example of a policy that is directly targeted to the marriage problem: reaffirming for married couples the value of their union, the value of childbearing, and giving cohabiting couples a concrete reason to get married. It would also relieve some of the burdens that childbearing imposes on young married couples.

Finally, I want to mention divorce and family law reform. Increasingly, if you look at the intellectual stream in family law journals it becomes distressingly clear: family lawyers and family law scholars don't have any clue why we have marriage at all, or what possible potential public purposes it serves, so they make up purposes for marriage law that involve essentially regulating friendship. It would be extremely useful for people who care about marriage and who understand its purposes to take a look at how the law can support and affirm the marriage commitment, from inserting a preference—not a requirement, but a preference—for married couples in adoption law to new divorce mediation programs targeted at reducing the number of divorces. We have lots of government-funded, even mandatory court-ordered divorce mediation and education programs, but their stated goals are limited to reducing acrimony and reducing litigation. State or federal programs in divorce mediation and divorce education that had reducing unnecessary divorce as an additional goal would be a great advance. Then let's provide the resources to develop

and evaluate which programs actually succeed in that goal.

There are many things that we could do to support marriage, both in the government and in other social institutions, once we were sure that this was a good thing to do.

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Discussion

Mitch Pearlstein: Is there anything any panelist would like to add—particularly a specific strategy or aim that we should seek over the next several years? Or has anyone said something that you want to respond to?

Wade Horn: One of the things Maggie said that struck me is that there isn't a clear line of demarcation between what the government does and what the culture does. An example is the way we treat couples at the moment a child is born out of wedlock. I oversee, at the federal level, child-support enforcement, which in turn oversees a network of paternity-establishment programs in hospitals. This is the way the conversation often goes with an unwed father at the time a child is born:

The social worker goes up to the father and says, "This is real exciting, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's terrific."

"I'll bet you want the best for your baby."

"You bet I do."

“And you really care for the mother too.”

“Absolutely.”

“So here’s my suggestion. We’re not going to talk about getting married, because, well, that’s something we’re not going to talk about. But if you want to be a *good* father, you should sign this paternity affidavit.”

The goal of this conversation is to get him to sign a piece of paper acknowledging his paternity. But it also communicates that there is something unspeakable about another choice called marriage. It sends a cultural message that there is something fundamentally wrong with the institution of marriage—that marriage is so bad that we’re not even going to bring it up, particularly with vulnerable couples who are having kids out of wedlock.

We are doing more harm to the institution of marriage with that approach than if we simply, as Maggie says, ask the question, “Have the two of you considered getting married?” If the answer is no, you go on to establishing paternity. If the answer is yes, you have a different conversation. In the old days, we would have called that good casework. But you can’t get there unless you first acknowledge or accept that marriage is a legitimate thing for government to be involved in.

The interplay between culture and government is complex. It’s not possible to say that this is only a cultural and social issue, so government should take no position. By taking no position, you convey a message that marriage is destructive to both children and adults.

Isabel Sawhill: It’s true that where government stands on these issues matters. George Will put it this way: statecraft is soulcraft. Messages the government sends through its policies matter.

I would make a distinction, though, between the messages government sends through its policies and the impact of specific programs. We often think about a specific government program and whether it works versus whether its messages matter. It’s an important distinction.

I’m not sure how to send the messages without doing something programmatically. You can’t just say the Bush administration cares about marriage and then not put some programmatic money behind that statement. I can continue to be skeptical about whether the programs will work but support the idea that the government should be speaking out about values and that this is a public good, a social good, not just a private one.

On a more optimistic front, data show that the proportion of children born out of wedlock leveled off in the late 1990s for the first time in decades and that the proportion of people with children who are married is going up. It’s not a big increase yet, but some new trends—probably related to this change in the general culture, which government can certainly support if not create—look promising.

On a slightly different topic, I want to address what Maggie said, and many people say, about the problem with teen pregnancy programs being that they want to get you to age twenty.

The implication is that as long as you delay childbearing, it's fine to have a child outside of marriage. We should agree that teen pregnancy prevention programs should not only tell young people to delay pregnancy and childbearing, but also tell them what they're waiting for: a lifetime partner they can marry and raise children with.

By the same token, people in the "marriage movement" have not talked enough about what marriage is most importantly for: the bearing and raising of children.

Maggie Gallagher: I don't at all mean to imply that we should have less support for our existing teen pregnancy programs. In fact, I'm arguing that we should build on and extend their success by adding an explicit marriage message.

Isabel Sawhill: They're necessary if not sufficient.

Maggie Gallagher: Yes. And we might even dedicate a small stream of new funding to marriage-oriented teen pregnancy prevention, to see if making the case that waiting until marriage makes teen pregnancy prevention more effective. I think it would. It makes more sense than telling teens to wait and not telling them what to wait *for*.

W. Bradford Wilcox: One of the challenges for public policy vis-à-vis marriage is how government talks about the nature and purpose of marriage. We don't have a good way of speaking about marriage in the public square. We tend to use utilitarian and therapeutic language about marriage,

and even use them in programmatic efforts to promote marriage. High school relationship curricula are a good example of this pattern.

This is dangerous for two reasons: because most people are not going to get married and stay married for utilitarian and therapeutic reasons, and because these ways of approaching life can be profoundly contrary to the religious convictions of many Americans. The challenge is to develop a language that allows notions of virtue to enter into it.

I'm reluctant to use a term like "healthy marriage," which has all sorts of therapeutic connotations. Talking about good marriages is more in keeping both with a strong marriage culture and with the religious perspectives that many Americans hold deeply.

Questions and Answers

Heather Higgins: We're looking at what's next in the marriage movement: if the chief purpose of the family is the social job of raising children, and if the American Academy of Pediatrics has just decreed that same-sex couples raise children just as well as the normative-marriage family, what does that say about the future of marriage?

Maggie Gallagher: Obviously, people in the marriage movement disagree on the same-sex marriage issue, and we often try to just avoid that whole contentious bundle. But I do think that the specific contention of gay marriage advocates we are increasingly hearing—which is that there's a body of social science literature that proves

that children don't really need mothers and fathers—must be rebutted. It's going to be very difficult to have a strong and healthy marriage movement if this other idea is accepted and institutionalized as the truth. It would be very difficult to have a strong and healthy marriage culture where gay marriage has been legitimized. Either children need mothers and fathers, or they do not. Either adults conform their desires to children's needs, or children adjust to what adults prefer. One of those two ideas eventually is going to be acknowledged as true.

Kevin Offner: I'd like to address Dr. Glenn's concern about mate selection and institutional mechanisms for encouraging mate selection. In the evangelical tradition, an older person mentors a younger person in the faith. An elder in my church asked me if I thought I had the gift of celibacy, and I said no. So he said, "Do you think you'll be getting married?" and I said yes. "Well," he said, "what are you doing about it? Are you praying about it? Are you going to where the older single women are? Are you asking other people to help you find someone?" And I basically wasn't.

He said, "Kevin, you're not twenty-two anymore. You're thirty-four, and you need to start pursuing women."

I got married four years later, and as a married man, now I do the same thing for younger men. They tell me they appreciate a gentle kick in the pants. A lot of the single women we work with in our ministry have told us they appreciate it when a man takes

the initiative and pursues them.

I'd like to ask you this: Are there ways in which we can encourage men especially to take the initiative? A lot of the men I've talked with say they fear rejection and fear being considered chauvinist—a lot of feminists don't want them to come on too strong. Are there ways in which we can without embarrassment say, "Men, if you're single and you think you're going to get married, we need to help you institutionally or personally to start taking initiatives towards women"?

Norval Glenn: Just waiting and seeing what happens is very common. There seems to be a great deal of passivity on the part of men that I think has been engendered by a number of different influences. One is the feminist movement and the idea that there should be an equal degree of initiation of relationships by men and by women. Men have retreated somewhat from taking the initiative. And of course it goes beyond that: legal issues of sexual harassment have intimidated men in terms of taking the initiative.

But in the case of both men and women, what I encounter and what some of the more systematic evidence seems to indicate is that people have the attitude that sooner or later, something is going to happen and I don't have to do anything to bring it about. That's wishful thinking. Unless people start doing something proactive to get into relationships, it's probably not going to happen—or at least not very quickly, and when it does happen, it may not be a very good match.

Maggie Gallagher: My unscientific opinion, in reading *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (Institute for American Values, 2001), the courtship report by Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, is that far from being sexual predators, guys on campus are kind of lying around on dark couches waiting for some girls to leap into their arms and take off their clothes.

Norval Glenn: Which they do sometimes.

Maggie Gallagher: Which they do sometimes. Often enough, I guess. I think this has something to do with making asking people out on a date a gender-neutral activity. My impression of both life and research is that if you label any particular activity a male activity, men do it more often than if you label something a human or gender-neutral activity.

But it's equally true that in terms of marriage, elite young women are somewhat passive about marriage, even reluctant to admit they want to get married. To say that you want to get married is to declare that you need something from somebody else, which means that you're not independent—which means you're dependent, which means you're weak, which means you're not the ideal woman. So one gets this impression of both sexes waiting for love and marriage to happen. Perhaps the next generation could use more prodding from adults of both genders: if marriage is something that you

want, like anything else, you have to go out and make it happen.

Brian Kane: A follow-up on Professor Wilcox's comment about the utilitarian language of the marriage movement: I teach a course in the theology of marriage at DeSales University, and although we give students helpful factual information on what makes a successful marriage, I'm not sure that utility alone is going to create the kinds of marriages that we really want.

Historically, a sense of obligation binds people to this relationship. At one point it was the family, at another point the state. We're left with the issue of trying to create that obligation anew. My question is directed to Maggie Gallagher: Are you suggesting that that obligation is really the civic duty for useful reproductive sex?

Maggie Gallagher: No, what I'm saying is that the state as an actor in marriage has a particular interest in the successful reproduction of the society. I do not mean to imply the state's interests in marriage are the only set of interests involved, or even necessarily the most important one.

The law of marriage, which reflects the state's interests, is not apt to be very good at expressing deep theological ideas. However, I don't know of any major theological tradition that rejects the idea that marriage is related to protecting children, to the idea that kids need mothers and fathers, or that making a family is an important purpose of marriage. I don't consider that a utilitarian argument. There's a deep, rich

erotic drama hidden in that statement, but the language of law isn't good at pulling out that side of things.

Don Browning and others have raised this issue of the relationship between the language of health and utility and the language of sacrifice and obligation. I don't think that people are going to read, for example, the new Institute for American Values booklet titled *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences* and say, "Oh, my life expectancy will be increased by ten years if I stay married. Better rip up that divorce filing." It doesn't work like that.

Here is how I think it does work. The scientific data reflect a truth that religious theology used to teach: marriage is good for people. I hope the scientific data embolden all of the custodians of marriage, both religious and secular, to work harder and more effectively to sustain marriages.

I had a friend who was actively considering divorce. He walked into his pediatrician's office with his sick baby and there on the wall was an article from *Parenting* magazine with evidence from Professor Linda J. Waite: divorce is really hard on your children, but if you stay married, things usually get a lot better for you too.

Messages like that coming from all different directions **do** have an impact. When you're unhappily married, the worst message to get from others is that nobody cares whether or not your marriage lasts. Both secular/scientific and faith-based streams of conversation are an important part of achieving the good of marriage.

Mike McManus: One quick suggestion for Wade Horn: You might consider getting back into the business of counting the number of marriages and divorces in the country. That's something that somehow stopped. We don't have credible data past 1997.

When Wade was at the National Fatherhood Initiative, he made it possible for a grant to be made for research to be done on the effectiveness of community marriage policies, which are designed to bring down the divorce rate in a city by getting the clergy of that area to take proven steps to prepare couples for a lifelong marriage, strengthen existing marriages, or save troubled ones. The results are just coming out from the Institute for Research and Evaluation in Salt Lake City. They took a look at, for example, El Paso, and a trend of divorces dropping in El Paso before a community marriage policy was established. In 1989 there were 2,900 divorces; in 1996, the year they signed the policy, there were 1,905. By 2000, the number went down to 630 divorces. The number of divorces dropped about 30 percent in seven years and then dropped 70 percent in five years. That's remarkable. Other cities: Peoria's divorce rate is down 25 percent in a decade, and in six years, divorces have plunged 34 percent in Austin, Texas, and 43 percent in Kansas City.

By way of comparison, in Fort Worth, Texas, which had no community marriage policy, there were 7,700 divorces in 1989, and 7,500 in 2000. Nationally, divorces fell only 1.5 percent between 1979, when there were 1,181,000, and 1,163,000 in 1997.

This initiative of getting the churches to do exactly what Brad Wilcox was saying, to consciously come together and build a consensus on doing a better job of making marriage a priority in our congregations, does in fact work. Now we are going back into El Paso and other cities where the clergy just simply signed an agreement, and take additional steps. We hope to train hundreds of couples who will become mentor couples in their churches. I think we'll drive the divorce rate down even further.

Many of you made the valid criticism that there was no independent research providing evidence that community marriage policies do in fact reduce divorce rates. Now we're getting the research, and we couldn't have had it without your help, Wade. I thank you very much.

Amy Kass: My question is directed primarily to Norval Glenn. Finding the right person to marry requires a certain kind of education about what marriage is, as well as an education in taste and tact, and in recognizing how to read character. Why is it that you don't want to include that in a liberal arts curriculum? True, the church is surely needed for help and support, but why not the academy as well? Why wouldn't liberal arts colleges be a prime place for such education?

Norval Glenn: When I said I didn't think it was going to happen within the formal educational institutions, I didn't mean to say I didn't think it should. I'm just not optimistic. If I had my way, I would incorporate marriage

preparation and education into high schools and into college and university liberal arts curriculums—I just don't think it's going to happen

Wade Horn: If promoting marriage is to become a legitimate function of government, we will need a cadre of marriage experts within government. To that end, we are about to embark on training a core group of federal career employees in marriage. We've put together a course, and, over the next six months, we're going to train between 150 and 200 federal employees who never before even thought it would be acceptable to utter the word *marriage*. They're going to become more expert on this issue than anybody. The idea is to empower them to think creatively about how to get this message into a variety of different programs.

If we define marriage as yet another problem that demands yet another funding stream, we lose. If we do it in a broader way, we will get to the kinds of broader-scale messages that Isabel Sawhill was talking about that can then permeate the culture. My hope is that that's where we'll see the actual behavioral changes, and not as a function solely of specific programs.

W. Bradford Wilcox: I don't think that the health and utilitarian ways of talking about marriage should be excluded from the conversation, but they tend to crowd out other ways of speaking about marriage that are either religious or moral in some way—or social, for that matter. Also, children are put outside the picture when the

terms refer only to the relationship between two adults. And you often lose sight of some of the broader functions of marriage in our society.

In *The Death of Character*, James Davison Hunter evaluates different forms of character education and finds that programs for young people that stress primarily utilitarian or therapeutic modes of moral action are much less effective than programs that stress moral or theological modes of justifying moral behavior. That's something to bear in mind.

William Berkson: I would love to see the marriage movement discuss this question: If marriage laws were focused on what is best for children, what would those laws and policies look like?

I propose, for example, that couples who are getting married make an explicit promise to raise to adulthood the children who will be born of their marriage. Professor [James Q.] Wilson's saying [in a speech at the conference] that the state can't intervene effectively in these private matters is a completely wrong-headed idea.

Professor [Judith] Wallerstein says [in a PBS documentary on marriage] that the no-fault divorce law was enacted with the best intentions but ended up hurting children. The point is: there's a constantly changing climate of law around the marriage issue. It's important that the marriage movement be a participant in those changes and try to direct them in a way that will help the most vulnerable members of the family: children.

The consequences of changes in the law are often totally different from what are intended. It's important to have a wide discussion of these issues so that something that seems like a good idea doesn't have exactly the opposite result, which is what happened with the no-fault divorce law.

Wade Horn: Go back to my mission statement. I didn't say acquire the skills only. I said acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage. Each of those words was chosen for a purpose. The necessary knowledge includes commitment to the ideal of marital permanence and to the idea that marriage is about taking care of others. When we walk down the aisle, we don't promise to stay together as long as we're happy. We promise to take care of the other in sickness and in health.

This is fundamentally different from the contract in cohabitation. The contract in cohabitation is: Can you make me happy?

Those who cohabit before marriage have higher divorce rates later on. In my view, that's because it's virtually impossible to switch from the test of cohabitation to a test of marriage without an explicit understanding that you're making this switch. Very few people ever even have this conversation. They don't say, "Well, in cohabitation, you wanted to make sure that this person was still making you happy, but now you have a new deal. Every day you have to ask yourself, Are *you* making *that person* happy?"

On my wedding day, my grandmother said, "You're going to hear that the secret of a happy marriage is that it's 50-50. Don't believe it. If you think that marriage is 50-50, you will be miserable for the rest of your life because as soon as you think you're doing 51 percent, you're going to think you're being slighted. The secret to marriage

is to put in 75 percent and expect only 25 percent. If each of you believes that, it will be virtually impossible for you to feel slighted."

It's what you put into it. That is how my radical feminist lefty mother has stayed married for fifty years to my right-wing conservative venture capitalist father. ■