

# Rhetoric and Reality: The Role of Family Issues in Politician and Party Support

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**Rottem Sagi<sup>1</sup> and Catherine Bolzendahl<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Despite evidence of the political salience of family issues, little work has been done to understand how Americans link family issues to their support of various parties and politicians. This study examines whether respondents think party/politician views on family issues are important and asks respondents to provide examples of relevant family issues. Using data from the 2003 *Constructing the Family* telephone survey conducted at the Indiana University Center for Survey Research, we find that most respondents claim that a party's/politician's views on family issues are important to them. Further analysis reveals that, among people who believe family issues are important, the belief is explained differently, with the sample split between a focus on the characteristics of policymakers as compared to the policy itself. The authors conclude that these differing approaches to family issues may stem from the patchwork system of legislation for families in the United States.

## **Keywords**

family policy, family issues, public opinion, politics

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<sup>1</sup>University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

### **Corresponding Author:**

Catherine Bolzendahl, Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, 3151 Social Science Plaza, Irvine, CA 92697, USA.

Email: [cbolzend@uci.edu](mailto:cbolzend@uci.edu)

## Introduction

“Family issues” have long been important to academics and policymakers. Politicians use family words and images in at least one third of all politicians’ public addresses (speeches, statements, tributes, etc.; Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010), and a review found substantial increase in family policy initiatives at both the state and federal levels during the 1990s (Bogenschneider, 2000). Though legislatures have paid more attention to the family in recent years, this policy area remains highly disorganized (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). Government policies are a shifting landscape of carrots and sticks influencing marital choices, parenting and child care strategies, and insurance and inheritance decisions (Avishai, Heath, & Randles, 2012; Heath, 2012; Weigt, 2010). Family issues are often left to be decided by the uncertainties of the market rather than being institutionalized within government agencies and through consistent laws (Aldous, 1990; Marks, 1997; O’Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999; Orloff, 2001; Stokes & Ellison, 2010).

Given the politically ambivalent status of “family issues” in politics, we seek to discover how average Americans view family issues when allocating their political support. Specifically, in this article, we analyze a unique combination of quantitative and qualitative data to investigate whether politicians’ and parties’ views on family issues matter to our respondents and what respondents define as being a family issue they care about. Below, we review prior research on family and public opinion and the role of family in politics before moving on to present results from our quantitative and qualitative analysis. We conclude with an emphasis on the diversity of political family issues and implications for partisan differences and political campaigns.

## The Political Salience of Family Issues

Researchers have contributed much to our understanding of the availability, meaning, and usage of various family policies and issues (e.g., Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Burstein, Bricher, & Einwohner, 1995; Haney & March, 2003; McLanahan, 2000). Yet our understanding of the political salience of family issues for average Americans and how Americans define such issues is somewhat limited. A study by Brooks (2002) examined whether Americans thought family decline was the most important issue facing the country. Results showed that concern rose from less than 1% in 1980 to nearly 10% in 1996. These findings suggest that concerns over family issues may be growing but only include respondents who claim family decline as the most important problem, potentially underestimating family issue salience. Furthermore, family issues are defined a priori, in this case divorce, single-parenthood, and

child poverty. Whereas some recent research suggests that Americans have a much broader and more diverse conceptualization of family than such a focus would suggest (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010), Brooks's (2002) study of family decline is nevertheless more inclusive than other research that has focused on specific issues within the family domain, for example, abortion (Abramowitz, 1995) or same-sex marriage (Lewis, 2005).

Some research has looked at how traditional morality concerns shape voting and highlight these as family issues. In doing so they conflate issues of family with larger debates over morality and social concerns (Knuckey, 2005; Langer & Cohen, 2005), where the family is an ideological battleground but ignoring its instrumental functions, such as material support, unpaid care giving, and child rearing (Josephson, 2005; O'Connor et al., 1999). By focusing directly on morality as a proxy for family, such studies ignore the potential complexities in a voter's view of family and politics. This downplays the extent to which citizens may see policy issues like child care, education, and tax credits as important influences on their vote choice. Instead, we propose a new line of research that starts from a broader consideration of understanding how Americans define family issues when allocating political support or speak to issues of overall levels of family issue salience. Understanding which family issues are political family issues thus provides a starting point for future research on how these affect electoral or policy outcomes.

## Family Issues Versus Family “Values”

As American families have changed so have political reactions. After a wave of liberalization in family forms and attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s, a conservative backlash began building in the 1980s (Pankhurst & Houseknecht, 1983). The Republican Party focused on “family values” in the 1994 “Contract with America” and stressed policy support for more traditional family forms. This message coincided with that of the leaders of a large, well-organized body of Evangelical Christians (e.g., James Dobson of *Focus on the Family*). Such a coalition may have contributed to a large Republican victory in the 1994 elections as well as constructing family issues as conservative religious issues. Indeed, Brooks (2002) found that Evangelical Protestants who attend church regularly are the primary group concerned with family decline, though more frequent attendees regardless of denomination are also significantly more concerned. Debates over family tap into broader schism in political affiliation and ideology. Political conservatives are more likely to prefer traditional family norms and behavior, such as mothers as primary caretakers, preventing access to abortion, and making divorce more difficult to obtain (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). As conservative politicians and religious leaders

have expounded the importance of traditional family, research suggests that family may be an issue “owned” by political conservatives (Manza & Brooks, 1997), and Brooks (2002) found that concern with family decline helped Republican candidates. Yet, with regard to specific policy actions, research indicates that conservative Republicans actively undermine policy changes to support families and children (e.g., Elison, 1997; Marks, 1997).

Prior research and political coalition-making has focused on family issues within a relatively narrow scope of issues focused on candidate morality and traditional family forms and being salient only to the conservative, religious, and Evangelicals. However, such an assumption ignores the potential political diversity in family issues and their importance. Prior research has not asked Americans to define family issues for themselves. We begin to address these gaps in our analysis below.

## Data and Analytic Approach

Data are from the 2003 *Constructing the Family* telephone survey conducted at the Indiana University Center for Survey Research (Powell, Bolzendahl, Fettes, Geist, & Jamison, 2003). The survey used the University of California Computer-Assisted Survey Methods software (CASES v5.3). Numbers were randomly generated by Marketing Systems Group using the Genesys list-assisted method. The sample was a random selection of households, and adults within the household were randomly selected for an interview. The survey was constructed of a set of questions asked to all respondents, as well as a ballot portion that randomly assigned respondents to take a further subset of qualitative questions. Ballot selection is computer generated. The survey consists of 712 respondents; 307 were collected from a random sample of Indiana residents and 405 from a random sample of U.S. residents. All respondents were sampled from the adult, noninstitutionalized population.<sup>1</sup> After dropping missing values for variables included in the analysis, the final sample for analysis of this question is 634 respondents (55% national; 45% Indiana).<sup>2</sup> The demographic characteristics of the U.S. and Indiana samples are statistically equivalent with the exception that Indiana residents are less likely to be some “other” religion (6% vs. 2%) and less likely to have a college degree (42% vs. 26%).

This article focuses on two connected questions available in this survey. The first (quantitative) question asks all respondents: “When you choose to support a national candidate or party, how important are that candidate’s or party’s views on family issues?” Cleavages in political salience are assessed through a binary logistic regression model (Long, 1997) that compares those answering “very important” to all else (“somewhat important,” “not very important,” and “not at all important”), discussed in further detail below. We

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for all Variables.

Dependent variable	Categories	Proportions
Family issue importance	0 = Not at all/not very	10%
	1 = Somewhat	32%
	2 = Very	58%

  

Independent variables	Range	Means/proportions (SD)
Age	18-92	45.89 (16.53)
Female	0/1	0.60 (0.49)
# Children in household	0-6	0.72 (1.08)
Non-White	0/1	0.11 (0.31)
Marital status (ref: Partnered)		
Never married	0/1	0.17 (0.37)
Separated/divorced	0/1	0.14 (0.35)
Voted in last election	0/1	0.84 (0.37)
Politically conservative	0-6	3.30 (1.46)
Currently employed	0/1	0.66 (0.47)
College degree	0/1	0.32 (0.47)
Religious service attendance	0-7	3.32 (1.85)
Religious affiliation (ref: Mainline Protestant)		
Catholic	0/1	0.24 (0.43)
Evangelical Protestant	0/1	0.32 (0.47)
Other religion	0/1	0.05 (0.21)
No religion	0/1	0.14 (0.34)
Urban resident	0/1	0.50 (0.50)
Region of residence (ref: Central)		
North	0/1	0.10 (0.30)
South	0/1	0.17 (0.38)
West	0/1	0.12 (0.33)

Source: Constructing the Family, 2003.

tested a variety of specifications of the dependent variable, including multinomial and order logistic regressions, and found that results were substantially the same (available on request). Thus, in the interests of parsimony and ease of interpretation, we present results for this binary logistic comparison (i.e., 1 = *very* vs. 0 = *all else*).<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the dependent variable and all independent variables used in logistic models. Several demographic and ideological measures are included such as gender, marital status, age, parental status, race, education, religious affiliation, employment status, frequency of church attendance, self-reported political ideology, region of residence, urban or rural resident, and whether the respondent voted in the past 5 years.<sup>4</sup>

Second, as part of the ballot design of the survey, one third of the respondents who answered “very important” or “somewhat important” to the first question were randomly chosen by the computer to receive a follow-up qualitative question: “Could you give me an example when you thought a candidate’s or a party’s views on family issues were [very/somewhat] important?” Their open-ended answers were recorded on the computers and later transcribed. Approximately half of these respondents are from the national sample and half from the Indiana sample, and the patterns we found were substantively the same for both samples.

These qualitative data are a unique nationally-representative contribution to our understanding of how important family issues are, by revealing *which types* of family issues are most salient in respondents’ support of a politician or party. These data are analyzed by simultaneously exploring categories of respondent opinions as well as specific quotes that illustrate these categories and highlight the complexities and nuance of public opinion. These categories were obtained by reading through all of the answers, noting reoccurring themes and using these to develop a coding sheet. Both authors independently coded all responses, compared coding outcomes, double coded a further set of responses, and arrived at a final set of coded responses. A detailed set of categories emerged, and these were further collapsed into the main substantive categories listed below.

Notably, these data were collected in 2003, prior to the economic collapse and the heavy politicization of gay marriage in several states, especially California. However, although the issues and politicians have changed in that time, family scandals have continued to plague political contenders (e.g., affairs and divorce), and discussions about many of the issues mentioned below (e.g., education, family services, tax credits) continue to figure into political platforms.

## The Importance of Family Issues

As seen in the descriptive statistics, the majority of respondents (58%; Table 1) believe family issues are very important. Combined with those who view family issues as somewhat important, this total jumps to nearly 90%. The unanimity of response alone is worth noting. However, our statistical tests (discussed above) indicated that the primary variation in the variable is between those answering “very” and all other responses, with results from this binary regression in Table 2. Given the preliminary and exploratory nature of this analysis, we report coefficients that are significant at  $p < .10$  in addition to standard significance levels, as well as odds ratios and the percent change in odds for all coefficients. Results were the same when Indiana residents were excluded from the sample.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2.** Binary Logistic Regression of Believing Family Issues Are Very Important on Selected Sociodemographic Variables,  $N = 634$ .

	$\beta$	SE	Odds ratio	% Change in odds
Age	0.01*	0.01	1.02	1.5
Female	0.22	0.18	1.25	24.6
# Children in household	0.23*	0.10	1.26	25.8
Non-White	0.07	0.30	1.07	7.0
Marital status (ref: Partnered)				
Never married	0.12	0.29	1.13	13.1
Separated/divorced	0.12	0.26	1.13	13.0
Voted in last election	0.43 <sup>+</sup>	0.26	1.53	53.3
Politically conservative	0.16*	0.06	1.18	17.6
Currently employed	-0.00	0.21	1.00	-0.3
College degree	-0.36 <sup>+</sup>	0.19	0.70	-30.3
Religious service attendance	0.22**	0.06	1.25	25.0
Religious affil. (ref: Mainline Prot.)				
Catholic	-0.03	0.24	0.97	-2.7
Evangelical Protestant	0.54*	0.25	1.71	70.9
Other religion	0.26	0.44	1.30	30.3
No religion	0.37	0.30	1.45	44.5
Urban resident	0.10	0.18	1.10	10.2
Region of residence (ref: Central)				
North	-0.12	0.30	0.89	-10.9
South	0.23	0.25	1.26	26.2
West	-0.01	0.28	0.99	-1.2
Constant	-2.45	0.58		
BIC statistic			-3184.40	
Pseudo- $R^2$			.10	

Note. BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed tests.

Those with a greater probability of saying family issues are very important versus all other options are, on average, older respondents, parents, conservatives, more frequent religious attendees, and Evangelical Protestants. Those with college degrees are, on average, less likely to say family issues are very important. Regardless of religious or political beliefs, those who vote have 53% greater odds of viewing family issues as very important, suggesting that this is a widely held political concern. If we consider how these characteristics might combine, we note some strong cleavages. Namely, there is an 84% predicted probability of believing family issues are very important for a

hypothetical Evangelical Protestant political conservative respondent aged 45, who attends church once a week, votes, did not attend college, and has children. A respondent with the opposite characteristics has only a 14% predicted probability of finding family issues to be very important.<sup>6</sup> Although there are many more respondents in the sample who do *not* have all such characteristics simultaneously, these nevertheless represent real differences in the American population. The gap between these two hypothetical respondents is wide enough to illustrate why so many commentators view family issues as central to a “culture war” (e.g., Green, Guth, Smidt, & Kellstedt; Hunter, 1991; but see also Davis & Robinson, 1996; Williams, 1997).

### Which Families Issues Are Politically Salient?

Given that the majority of respondents believe family issues are politically salient, the results suggest that terms like *family issues*, which are broadly used in the popular discussion of politics and family, are actually tapping into a variety of concepts. *The family* is a convenient term for politicians, parties, churches, and nongovernmental organizations to use without necessarily connecting to what the average citizen conceptualizes. We can gain a clearer conception of where political salience lies by exploring the issues respondents themselves consider as important family issues.

In coding respondents’ answers to the importance of the candidate’s or party’s views on family issues, one of the first findings that emerged was the difficulty respondents had in naming any kind of example, even though they all said that family issues were “very” or “somewhat” important. Of the 212 respondents, 61 (roughly 29%) could not name *any* issue or example. Previously in the survey, respondents had addressed some additional open-ended questions, for example, explaining what defines a family for them, so they would not have been overly surprised by the format (Powell et al., 2010).<sup>7</sup> An analysis of the average demographic make-up of the two groups finds three significant differences. Those who did not or could not answer are less likely to have voted in the past 5 years, attend religious services less often, and are less likely to be Evangelical Protestants.

This inability to speak to specific issues may reflect a number of influences. First, many Americans are uncomfortable discussing political issues, though whether this is due to ignorance or preference remains open to debate (Brooks, Manza, & Bolzendahl, 2003; Burstein, 1998; Converse, 1964). Second, “family issues” have been the source of a great deal of heated rhetoric, which may have raised their salience to respondents but left them with little in terms of substantive issues to discuss. Thus, the social desirability pressures of agreeing that family issues are important create the disjuncture<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 3.** Coded Results: "Could You Give Me an Example When You Thought a Candidate's or a Party's Views on Family Issues Were Very/Somewhat Important?"

Family issues (N = 274)	Number	Percent of total issues
<b>Politicians and candidates</b>		
Negative assessment of specific politician	35	13
Ambiguous assessment of specific politician	7	3
Positive assessment of specific politician	23	8
Candidate's family values	23	8
Candidate's belief in God/religious values	11	4
Candidate's behavior and family life	30	11
Anticonservative voting	5	2
Subtotal	134	
<b>Policies and programs</b>		
Education	22	8
Government family services	12	4
Taxes/economy	18	7
Health care/FMLA	14	5
Security/courts	10	4
Anti-same-sex marriage	8	3
Pro-liberal family forms/same-sex marriage	6	2
Women's and children's rights	17	6
Anti-abortion rights	22	8
Ambiguous abortion rights	6	2
Pro-abortion rights	5	2
Subtotal	140	

Note. FMLA = The Family and Medical Leave Act.

Finally, we suggest that Americans are not accustomed to being asked to elucidate well-formed opinions on family issue, being rather consumers of news and political statements, thus even those offering an opinion find it difficult to fully articulate their ideas.

Barring further information, we turn to those respondents who provided examples of the candidate's or party's views. These 134 respondents from all walks of life provide a compelling qualitative glimpse into American views on family and politics. We found these views fell compellingly into two categories. In general, respondents focused on either politician relevant issues or policy relevant issues. These results are in Table 3. Only 10 respondents mentioned both policy and politicians in one answer.

### *Politician, Party, and Candidate-Centered Responses*

The patterns indicate that particular candidates and politicians are key in shaping respondent's answers. The importance of particular candidates was also reflected in the fourth emergent theme focused on candidate's personal characteristics (16% of coded responses). These two categories often, but not always, overlapped. The most popular response was mentioning a specific politician or party (26%). This survey took place in 2003, and issues surrounding George W. Bush's stance on gay marriage, education, and (conservative) "family values" were prominent in many people's minds. Although no longer president, opinions regarding Bill Clinton's extramarital behavior while in office remained salient. Thus, of the approximately 50% of respondents who mentioned a politician, these responses were either in favor of Bush or against Clinton: "The last time when George Bush was . . . his family values are much . . . are so strong . . . Oh, there's so many for him. Can I elaborate? No" (13118; 43 years old, White, Evangelical Protestant, less than college).

Although a focus on candidates may appear short-sighted, respondents often made fairly sophisticated linkages between their own values and what they see embodied by a particular candidate:

I mean on the abortion issue I'm against abortion but some people decide that the gay issue is a family issue and I don't really care one way or the other on that one. I guess in the last presidential election one of the reasons I supported Mr. Bush was because of his, I guess, strong family attitudes to have a strong family. (12513; 39-year-old White male; college educated Catholic)

Interestingly, the previous respondent actively rejected an issue-based response in favor of an assessment of the politician's own values and characteristics. Respondents were able to contextualize the campaigns and political opinions of candidates, creating powerful personal heuristics that related to broader family issues:

I believe that Dan Quayle went on his little media campaign against Murphy Brown and single mothers, that he believed that they wasn't capable of doing a good job raising their child. I would say that that is not entirely accurate, that just because a child is born into a single home, or a single parent household, does not mean that the child is going—is doomed to failure, or is going to become a leech on society. (21163; 21-year-old White male; Catholic, less than college)

The more elaborated responses that connect politicians to particular worldviews or policy issues illustrate connections that other respondents

were unable or unwilling to provide. The shorter responses that simply mention a particular politician, however, were not necessarily less adamant or important. Highlighting the heuristic power of candidate names for example, a 68-year-old White man said: “How about Clinton? He’s bad. Kennedy too, President Kennedy. He turned the White House into a whore house, how about that?” (12870; Evangelical; less than college). Clearly this man cares about more than just Presidents Clinton and Kennedy. The adamancy of his response illustrates broader conservative sexual mores and likely traditional family preferences.

This is further demonstrated in the related, but separate, category of respondent concerns with the candidate’s personal characteristics. What candidates do in their own lives are important markers for respondents. Do they have a good marital relationship? Are their children responsible and successful? Do they attend church and give to charities? Such behaviors form a character-relevant heuristic: “Personally I would think I would have a hard time having a leader that . . . like if there was an ugly divorce and there were kids involved . . .” (10645; 25-year-old White female; college educated, Catholic). In other words, a candidate who cannot maintain a “good” private life cannot adequately serve the public:

I think our President [W. Bush] does a great job. So I think the way he deals with all family issues I think he does a wonderful job. I just like the way he treats his wife and I like the way he the way he works with his children and cares for them and has concerns for them. I think he has a good attitude toward his family and to the families of the United States. I think his Christian values are wonderful. (13037; 59 years old, White; Evangelical, less than college)

Clearly, candidates matter, both in terms of particular persons whom respondents attach meaning to but also more generally how any candidate handles his/her private life. Both names and behaviors are important heuristics for translating broader issue and value concerns into the political sphere.

Even though respondents who attend church frequently and Evangelical Christians were more likely to view family issues as politically salient, religious beliefs and disagreements over legislating “family values” were not discussed often. This was not due to respondents feeling that they had already addressed such issues, as religion questions were only posed at the end of the survey. Religious sentiments were mainly used to support other opinions: “How they value whether or not male and female marry, whether or not they believe in God and whether or not they believe in having family. Those are the three things that I look for” (10250; 50-year-old White female; Mainline Protestant; less than college). Interestingly, opposition to conservative/religious values in politics was also relevant:

I tend to vote Democrat, or liberally, so . . . that tends to influence, you know, issues that are focused on the welfare of families and things like that if I tend to be more liberal. And I'm not a quote un-quote family values kind of voter, or as it is termed, because that is sort of a more Republican kind of thing. (11508; 31-year-old White female, college educated Catholic)

It is unclear why religion or values are not mentioned more often, though perhaps the taken-for-granted nature of these beliefs and the specific wording of the question minimized the salience of those particular issues for the open-ended responses.

### *Policies and Programs*

Another overwhelming theme among respondents was specific government programs and services. Respondents made connections between the economy, education, and health care and family issues, in contrast to popular political rhetoric and even academic work that may separate these into "separate spheres." In fact education was the most common reference:

Nationwide, there's not much money out there for schools and either party never really talks about that. I mean, as far as sending your kids to college, unless you have the money to pay for it or they can really get money as far as being very intelligent, there is really no money out there other than, just then to borrow it now. Where, years ago that wasn't the choice. There were grants and stuff out there and that has just completely—almost if nothing—dried up. And actually none of them are much better at that either party. (20795, 46-year-old White female; Catholic, less than college)

For many respondents issues of support for military families, senior citizens, or improving the unemployment system are fundamentally related to the family. A 43-year-old Black man ties several issues together for a broader conception of family issues as connected to his support of politicians or parties:

Yes, it's when you, [consider] what they do for the economics of a household for the mother, the father and the children, so how they pretty much look in the economics, and the health issues because when I say family those are things that [are] a necessity to family, . . . if those issues are not very strongly on their minds then when you break down the family structure, you create problems. . . . I look at the structure of our men that in my community that are unemployed and out of jobs and the jobs that they're being offered, they're not being offered from a position where a man would feel I would think comfortable with his taking care of family. (11643; Christian/Muslim, less than college)

Respondents who refer to government services want the government, parties, and politicians to make it easier for families to remain stable, children to have access to health and education, and taxation to privilege (traditional) family priorities. Some responses pointed to changes in welfare programs, the need for child care, and family leave policies.

Abortion, a volatile issue in American politics, was mostly mentioned by those opposed to abortion rights. The polarized nature of this debate is seen in the responses of those who do mention abortion. On one hand, the anti-abortion right opinion: "Abortion. I, personally, would not vote for someone that would [agree] to an abortion" (21588; Evangelical, less than college). On the other hand, the pro-choice perspective: ". . . it's the person's right to choose, so I would go with candidates that would give me that right to choose, so whatever preference, what happens with my body or who I care to share it with" (11860; 39-year-old White female; college educated Mainline Protestant). Alternatively, some respondents refused to specify a position:

Oh I hate to even go here, but how about the abortion issue: pro-life, pro-choice, and I'm not going to tell you which way I'm going to go on that, but, that would make a difference to me. (11804; 47-year-old White woman; college educated Catholic)

With few exceptions, respondents who mentioned a government service issue did *not* also mention a specific political candidate or party. In one exception, a respondent covered a variety of issues that were coded, especially government services, but only used Cheney to illustrate broader views rather than making him the focus of her opinion:

Their education, their health and I don't like parties to discriminate on families. Vice president Dick Cheney said he was against homosexuality and his daughter came out and said she was a lesbian you know what I mean? And he came out and spoke against it. He had no right to speak against it because lesbians are considered a family unit. And so to me that would affect me 'cause he's making his own moral judgment and judging someone else. (12852; 50-year-old White female; college educated, LDS)

Respondents sometimes linked politicians to a policy, such as Bill Clinton's push for health care reform, or Bush's stance on benefits for military families. Overall, however, if respondents who mentioned government services discussed another category, it was opinions on family forms, protecting children, or dealing with abortion. The lack of overlap between respondents who mention politicians and respondents who mention services for family forms/laws/rights suggest two distinct approaches to the political salience of family

issues. Some are using politicians as a heuristic “short-cut” in forming opinions, whereas others look beyond particular candidates to focus on particular issues or policies.

A distinct yet often overlapping concern was with the definition of family itself. Given the increasing attention same-sex marriage has been facing, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents see this as a politically important family issue. Respondents are concerned over the changes in traditional family forms as threatening the stability of society:

It's the family that is the cement that holds our society together, and we have to keep that cement there in order to maintain the morals and the values that are necessary for us to live in, in a world that is not total chaos. . . . So I'm a little bit leery of anything that [. . .] does not involve the unity of a man and a woman in the sacrament of marriage, or living as a family, supporting each other as they raise their family. (21243; 61-year-old White male; college educated Catholic)

The implication is that many of these respondents would and/or do support efforts by politicians to privilege traditional marriage, such as laws to define marriage as a heterosexual contract:

You know when a politician—what is his choice, what is his view? Does his view affect the structure of America? Is America going to be weak, is it going to be strong? If a president supports same sex marriages, I wouldn't support him. (21099; 51-year-old Black female; Evangelical, less than college)

It would be wrong however to assume that all of these concerns were directed toward same-sex marriage. In fact, the role of children in the family is often what drives respondents to mention family forms:

I think a candidate should always look at what the children need more than what an adult needs. Because there are a lot of kids out there that need to look up to somebody. And if they are going to look up to a candidate that's sayin' okay, I understand where you're coming from, let's see what I can do to help you . . . but a lot of candidates don't do that. They just say, well we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that. (12837; 48-year-old Native American female; no religious affiliation, less than college)

Along these lines family diversity is seen as a potential strength:

I usually go with the candidate that is for families and families of all different kinds of families in society. Because a family can be anything as long as you have somebody that loves you and you have a home to go to and they are taking care of, that's your family, you know no matter what. I mean my family was my grandparents. (11586; 26-year-old White female; Evangelical, less than college)

The respondents may differ in the type of family they support, but nearly all of these respondents share a common concern with “family” as a pillar of society and children as dependents deserving political care and attention.

## Conclusion and Discussion

With the ongoing discussion of family in politics and the popular media, it can be difficult to disentangle whether these references are merely rhetorical devices or more accurate reflection of public political concerns. By simultaneously examining levels and sociodemographic sources of family issue importance in combination with detailed look at the types of issues that matter most, the results confirm the centrality of family issues but specify the ways in which support is affected by ideological and demographic cleavages, as well as distributed across a broad range of issue concerns. We now summarize our findings but also offer what we see as plausible (but not definitive) interpretations for these findings. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the results require further testing through the collection of additional data probing a wider range of family issues and representing the more recent climate of family and politics. We hope our findings will spur further research along these lines.

Looking at levels of and cleavages in the political importance of family issues suggests a double-edged sword. On one hand, political leaders may reap large rewards for appealing to citizens’ general interest in family issues; on the other hand, a focus on family issues may splinter groups along key cleavages. The results suggest that a focus on family issues will be more likely to appeal to women and to people as they age but not to the more highly educated. Those more politically conservative and more religious are much more likely to care about family issues. Furthermore, there is some evidence that Evangelical Protestants also place more emphasis on family issues, supporting earlier findings in this area (Brooks, 2002). However, political and religious effects do not fully mediate each other, suggesting their *independent* influence on the political salience of family issues. Interestingly, despite the bulk of attention paid to the role of Evangelical Christians and Republicans in forwarding conservative family policy, the results indicate that formal affiliation with these groups are *not* the strongest or the primary determinant of family issue importance but rather ideological measures of religiosity and conservatism.

From the qualitative data compelling new patterns emerge in how respondents discuss family issues, beyond demographic cleavages in the importance of family issues. The split between respondents who mention politicians versus those mentioning particular policies suggests that these are two viable, though distinct, ways of expressing family issue salience.

Interestingly, debates over family form, marriage rights, or same-sex marriage were *not* the most common issues mentioned despite the great deal of media attention on the issue at that point.

Some evidence supports cynical views of public opinion and the political process in that respondents clearly are very candidate centered and not particularly “issue oriented”—even when directly asked to reflect on a particular issue of self-stated importance (Converse, 1964). However, more generous interpretations suggest that candidates and media accounts of candidates’ private behaviors may act as heuristics for voters, helping them voice opinions and values that may otherwise seem politically unsophisticated (Sniderman, 1993). This heuristic *does* have important potential policy ramifications, as the stress on values is typically met with an individualistic and privatized view of family policy that has often proved inadequate when dealing with fundamental issues of poverty, violence, and joblessness (Avishai et al., 2012; Heath, 2012; Weigt, 2010). The approach may represent the outcome of the allegiance between conservative politics and fears over family normlessness already identified in the early 1980s (Pankhurst & Houseknecht, 1983). Furthermore, respondents also discussed very specific types of government programs and services, debates over family forms and children’s rights, reproductive issues, and concerns over values and religious beliefs. The second most popular issue type was in fact government services but the content of these concerns do not reflect a desire for Western European style policies such as child care and paid maternity leave but rather a focus on expanding existing programs (Amenta, 1998).

The tendency, then, is for existing policy expansion and potential difficulties in introducing new policy styles (Pierson, 2001). Part of the reason discussions of “new” or more expansive sets of family policies may lag may be due to the noninstitutionalized nature of family and welfare policy in the American political system. Nearly every Western democracy has a set of welfare policies aimed at families and children and at least one legislative committee dealing with issues of social policy, health, family, children, aging, and so on. The United States, however, has a very limited and fragmented set of family policies and no committees that deal with such issues, aside from the Appropriations subcommittee dealing with Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, and the Ways and Means subcommittee on Health, Social Security, or Human Resources. Furthermore, laws and policies also vary substantially between U.S. states adding another layer of complexity (e.g., Stokes & Ellison, 2010). When new policies are developed, lobbying by powerful, moneyed groups and extreme partisan conflict often dilutes legislative impact (Marks, 1997). Americans’ disjointed and uneven conceptualizations with regard to family issues may then represent

the lack of prioritization and clarity in approach it plays within the legislature and the law itself.

A further challenge for future research is to specify mechanisms and substantive areas where family issues matter for political opinions and outcomes. Ideally, a new survey could further examine these questions and begin to evaluate the extent to which American opinion is stable or variable with regard to family. As the responses demonstrated, Americans do not conceptualize family issues as simply family form or family values but instead connect them to other spheres of life including the labor market and race relations, for example. The implications suggest we expand our understanding of what comprises “family issues.” With more nuanced approaches to family issues, research becomes grounded in the reality of contemporary citizens’ political engagement.

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### **Notes**

1. For a detailed discussion of the survey procedures, see Powell et al. (2010), Appendix 1A.
2. Missing values were distributed randomly across demographic categories. The largest group of missing was on the political identity measure ( $N = 17$ ), but an examination of these missing with relation to the dependent variable suggests no discernible pattern.
3. The distribution of responses is positively skewed, so using the results of likelihood-ratio tests for combining outcomes revealed that the main points of differentiation were between somewhat and very important and between very important and not very/not at all important. Responses of not very and not at all important were not statistically different, so these responses were combined.
4. Membership in Protestant religious denominations were coded based on the most accurate scheme currently available (Steensland et al., 2000; Walls, 2001).

5. Specifically all logistic regressions were run in three additional ways: (a) with only the national sample, (b) with only the Indiana sample, and (c) with Indiana as a control rather than the regional controls. The results for (a) and (c) are the same as those in Table 2. The results in (b) are not significant beyond the positive influence of religious service attendance. This is partially attributable to the small sample size but also confirms that Indiana residents are not skewing the results but do add important variation to the final sample regression. All results are available on request.
6. All other variables held at their mean. The second hypothetical respondent is age 22, has no children, does not vote, is politically liberal, has a college degree, attends church once a year or less, and is not Evangelical Protestant.
7. Questions preceding the family issue items in the survey were the following: (a) definitions of family (closed and open ended), (b) support for granting marital rights and benefits (e.g., inheritance) to same-sex and unmarried heterosexual couples, (c) demographic and background information (e.g., gender, mother's education, marital status, but NOT religious or political views), (d) beliefs about the appropriate age to become a parent, (e) beliefs about the influences of birth order, (f) beliefs about the influence of siblings, (g) experiences of work/family pressures, (h) beliefs about child custody, (i) beliefs about parenting responsibilities, and (j) beliefs about determinants of a child's development (see Powell et al., 2010, Appendix 1B).
8. We tend to favor the latter interpretation given the characteristics of this group. The respondents with no substantive answer were more likely to be female (71%) than those who provided an answer (62%). The majority of no answer cases (65%) were partnered with children. They were middle aged, moderately religious, and about equally likely to be Catholic or some type of Protestant. Most vote (70%), have more than a high school degree, and are employed (62%).

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