

ATTITUDES ABOUT MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Republicans and Democrats disagree about the importance of marriage to creating strong families and healthy societies, but most agree it helps families financially.

8 in 10 vs. 4 in 10

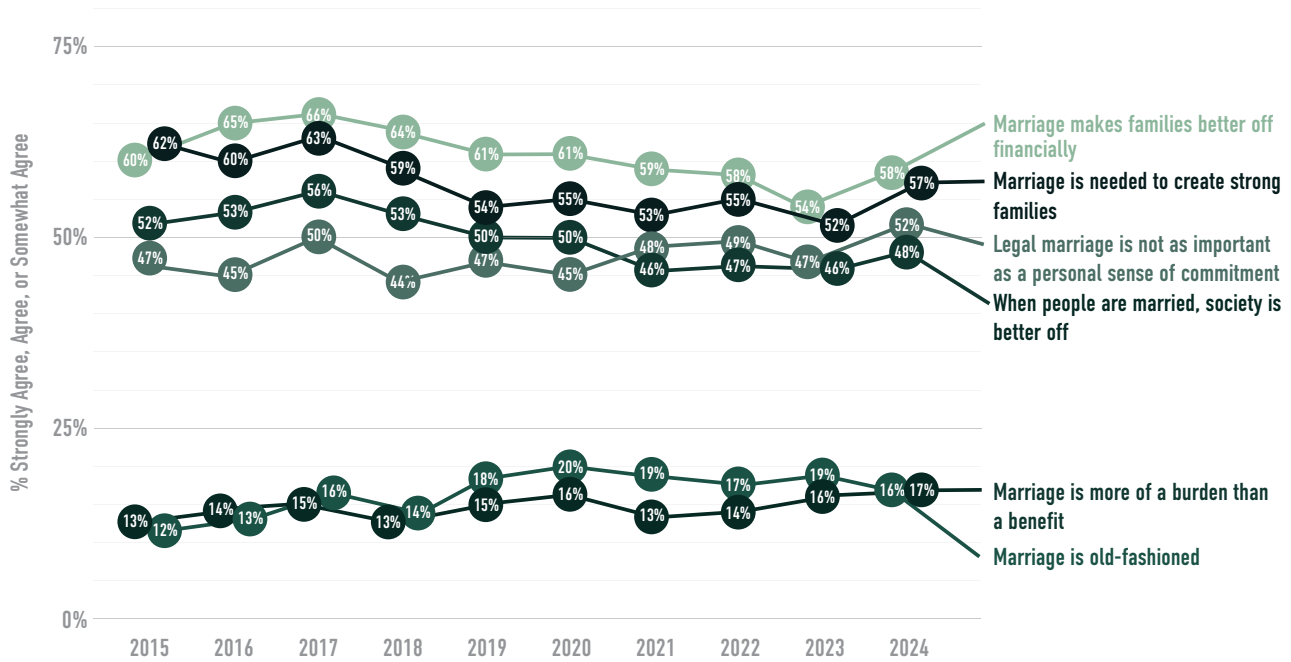
Republicans

Democrats

believe that marriage is needed to create strong families.



Attitudes About Marriage 2015-2024



SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree. Percentages indicate any level of agreement, including somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree.

Despite the striking similarities in the day-to-day family lives of Republicans and Democrats (see “Family Life in Red and Blue”), American attitudes about family and especially marriage are not shared across party lines. The experience of marriage also differs between Republicans and Democrats, with 42% of Democrats in the 2024 AFS reporting that they are currently married, compared with 54% of Republicans. These differences are not merely the result of differences in age. When we restrict the sample to those over 30, 50% of Democrats report being currently married, compared with 60% of Republicans.

Over the past 10 years, the American Family Survey has also included a battery of questions designed to measure Americans attitudes about marriage, its importance, and its role in promoting positive social outcomes. Specifically, we asked survey respondents how much they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- **When more people are married, society is better off**
- **Marriage is more of a burden than a benefit to couples**
- **Marriage is needed in order to create strong families**
- **Being legally married is not as important as having a personal sense of commitment to your partner**
- **Marriage is old-fashioned and out-of-date**
- **Marriage makes families and children better off financially**

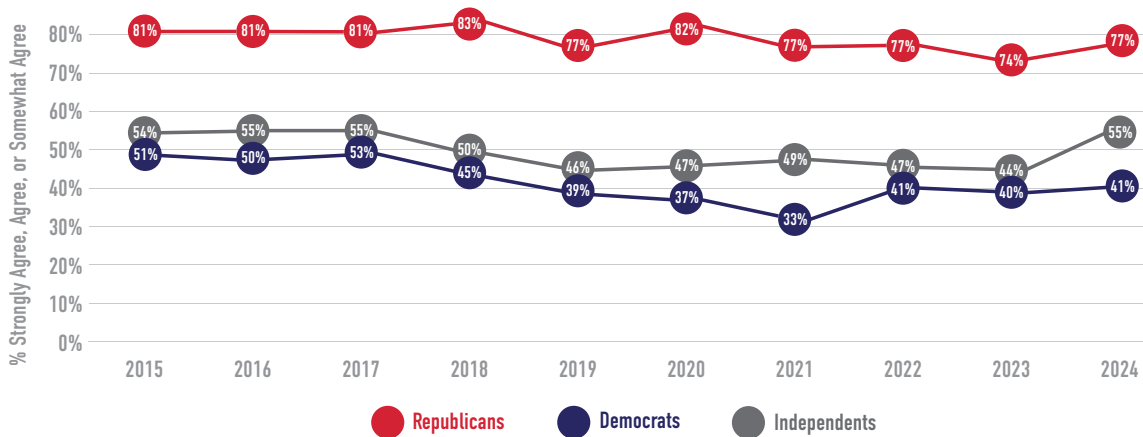
Respondents indicated their level of agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and in the analysis below, we report the percentage of respondents who strongly agree, agree, or somewhat agree with each statement.

The findings reveal majority support for many elements of marriage, though in recent years, such support never exceeds 60%. Most Americans believe that marriage has financial benefits for families and that it is needed to create strong families. Slightly less than a majority agree that society is better off when more people are married. But Americans also value a personal sense of commitment to a relationship, and a majority believe that such personal commitment is more important than legal marriage.

At the same time, highly negative statements about marriage do not garner much support. Fewer than 1 in 5 Americans believe that marriage is more of a burden than a benefit or that marriage is old-fashioned and out of date. However, support for those opinions has risen by about 5 points since 2015 — and more in some years.

The majority support for many of the statements about marriage masks substantial partisan divisions in public opinion. For example, close to 8 in 10 Republicans believe that marriage is needed to create strong families, compared with 4 in 10 Democrats. One-third of Republicans strongly agree with the statement, while only 9% of Democrats do. And among Democrats, agreement of any kind with this statement has declined by about 10 percentage points in the last decade. (Support among Republicans has also declined slightly, but the decline is less dramatic.) Put simply, the vast majority of Republicans believe that marriage is essential to healthy family bonds, while far fewer Democrats believe the same thing.

Agreement that Marriage is Needed to Create Strong Families 2015-2024

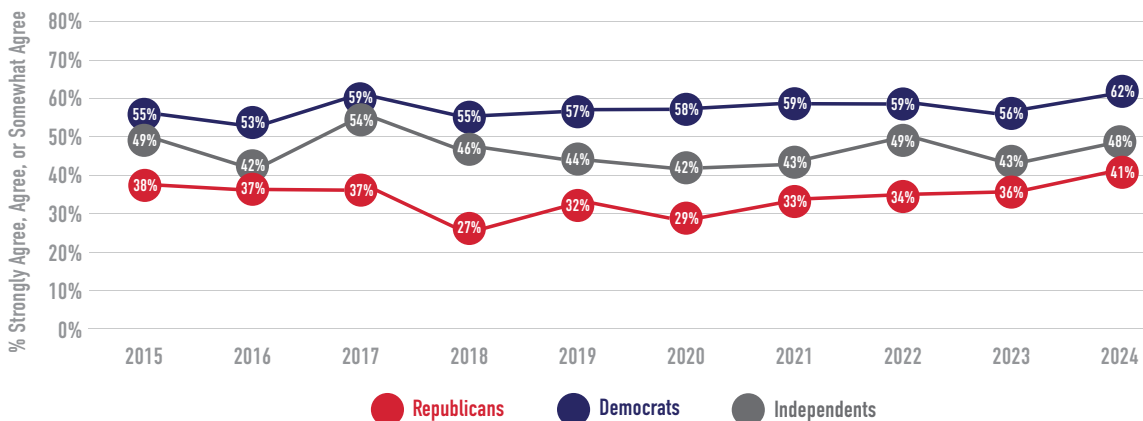


SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Marriage is needed in order to create strong families. Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree. Percentages indicate any level of agreement, including somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree.

This lack of support among Democrats does not mean that they care little for healthy relationships or that they do not support those who choose to get married. Rather, Democrats are simply less willing to say that marriage is necessary or that the legal contract of marriage is critical. When asked to choose which is more important, legal marriage or a sense of personal commitment, most Democrats emphasize personal commitment. Most Republicans, by contrast, choose the opposite. One interpretation of these findings is that Democrats want to avoid being judgmental about those who choose different relationship paths, whereas Republicans see marriage as being a goal toward which relationships should strive.

Agreement that Commitment to Partner is More Important than Legal Marriage 2015-2024



SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

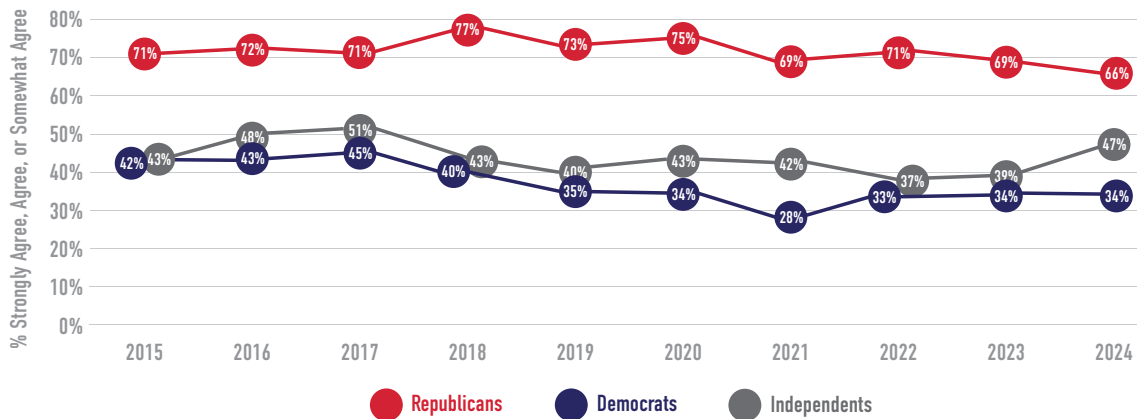
QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Being legally married is not as important as having a personal sense of commitment to your partner. Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree. Percentages indicate any level of agreement, including somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree.



In recent years, we have also asked Americans whether marriage is “for life, come what may.” Again, the partisan divide is large. Nearly three quarters (73%) of Republicans agreed with that statement in 2024, compared with less than half (47%) of Democrats. A little less than 30% of Republicans strongly agree with the statement; about 13% of Democrats share such strong agreement.

These differences have implications for partisans’ visions of what makes for healthy societies. About two-thirds of Republicans agree that when more people are married, society is better off. In contrast, only one-third of Democrats agree with the statement, down from over 40 percent in the first few years of the American Family Survey. (Agreement has also declined somewhat among Republicans, though less so.) If we limit the analysis to only those who are currently married and have children at home, the gaps persist, though are not quite as large: in 2024, a little more than 70% of married Republicans with children agreed that society is better off when more people are married, compared with 46% of married Democrats with children. By contrast, only about one quarter of unmarried Democrats without children agreed with the statement. Married Democrats with children, then, are about 20 percentage points more supportive of marriage as an important part of a thriving society than Democrats who are single and do not have children, but on the Democratic side, support among married parents still does not cross the majority threshold.

Agreement that Marriages Make Society Better Off 2015-2024



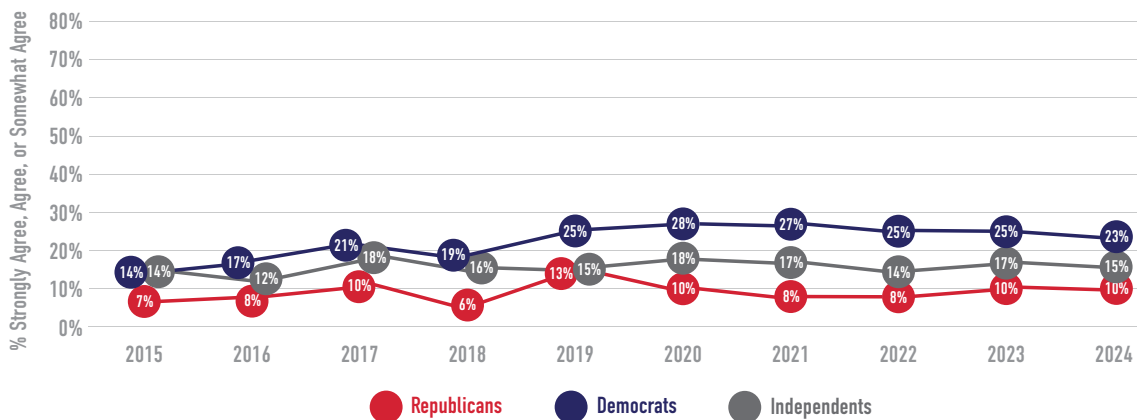
SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? When more people are married, society is better off. Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree. Percentages indicate any level of agreement, including somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree.

Republicans are also more likely to prioritize marriage over career as a key to happiness. In 2024, we introduced a new item to our marriage attitudes index: “Marriage is more important than a career to finding happiness.” Overall, a little more than 4 in 10 Americans agree with that statement, and about 10% strongly agree. About 6 in 10 Republicans agree, with nearly 20% strongly agreeing. In contrast, about one-third of Democrats agree, and fewer than 6% strongly agree. If we focus on the attitudes of those who are currently married, agreement among Republicans remains at about 60%, while support among Democrats increases to a little more than 4 in 10 — still less than a majority.

Does this mean that Democrats are actively hostile to marriage? Not quite. In 2024, for example, only 20% of Democrats agreed that marriage is more of a burden than a benefit, compared with 14% of Republicans. Fewer than one quarter of Democrats believe that marriage is old-fashioned and out of date, compared with about 10% of Republicans. We might add that 4 in ten Democrats are currently married, suggesting that the institution has a certain appeal regardless of how people answer these questions. Nonetheless, concerns about the contemporary relevance of marriage has increased among Democrats by nearly 10 percentage points (and more than that in some years) since 2015.

Agreement that Marriage is Old-fashioned and Out of Date 2015-2024



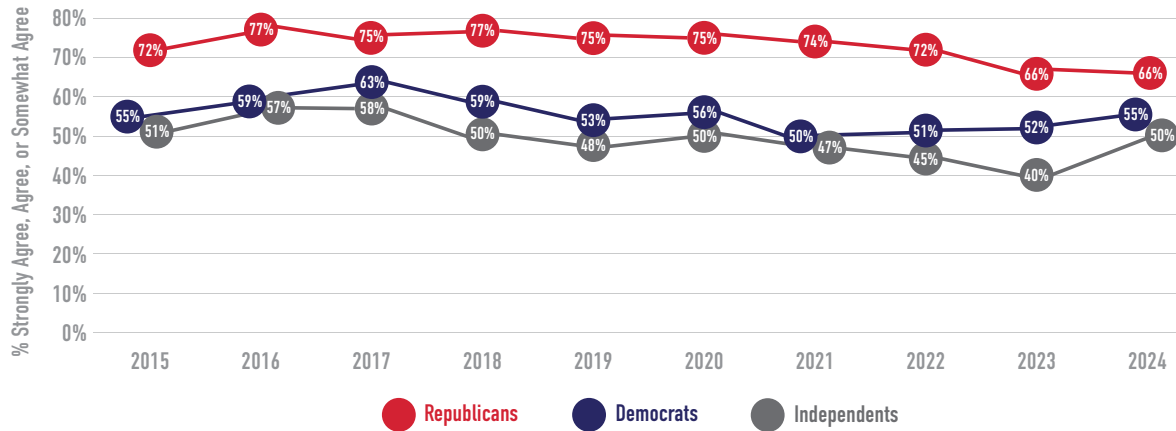
SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Marriage is old-fashioned and out of date.
Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree.
Percentages indicate any level of agreement, including somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree.

In 2024, we also asked for the first time whether Americans believe “there are more advantages to being single than to being married.” Only 22% of Republicans agreed with the statement, with less than 4% strongly agreeing. About 30% of Democrats agreed, and less than 5% strongly agreed. Large percentages of both Democrats (35%) and Republicans (27%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, however.

Do Democrats and Republicans share any beliefs about marriage? The one place where we see majority support among partisans on both sides of the aisle is the idea that marriage has financial benefits for families and children. In the 2024 data, two thirds of Republicans agree, and 55% of Democrats also agree. A gap persists, but it is substantially smaller than for the other marriage attitudes. In every year of the American Family Survey, a majority of Democrats have expressed support for the idea that marriage strengthens the economic foundation for families and children.

Agreement that Marriage Helps Children and Families Financially 2015-2024



SOURCE: American Family Survey 2024.

QUESTION WORDING: How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Marriage makes families and children better off financially. Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree.

A decade of American Family Survey data highlights stark partisan divides in perceptions of the importance of marriage to creating strong families, healthy societies, or even personal happiness. Marriage is seen by the vast majority of Republicans as a social good that should be a key relationship milestone. While most Democrats are not actively hostile to marriage, they are more likely to embrace a variety of different approaches to relationships, with a sense of personal commitment being far more important than the legal status of the relationship. At the same time, majorities of both Democrats and Republicans do agree that marriage has some financial benefits that may be important for children. This area of agreement could be especially important for policymakers concerned about protecting children from poverty or other forms of economic distress.

—By Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jeremy C. Pope with research assistance by Ellie Mitchell

METHODOLOGY NOTE

Between August 22-29, 2024, YouGov interviewed 3,245 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 3,000 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4 categories), race (4 categories), and education (4 categories), to produce the final weight. The overall margin of error is +/- 2%.