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CARNEY

How to get more babies



Every day, the United States has fewer and fewer babies, and so it is no small matter that Vice President JD Vance, in his first week in office, said he wants more babies.

"I want more babies in the United States of America," Vance said at the March for Life on Jan. 24. "I want more happy children in our country, and I want beautiful young men and women who are eager to welcome them into the world and eager to raise them."

Vance went further: "It is the task of our government to make it easier for young moms and dads to afford to have kids, to bring them into the world, and to welcome them as the blessings that we know they are."

If you have followed Vance, you're not surprised he would bring up birth rates. In February, when Vance mentioned low birth rates among NATO countries, he was only the third Republican to bring up the problem on the Senate floor in a decade.

If you have followed the Republican Party, though, you might be surprised that he asserted a federal role in family formation and birth rates.

Conservatives promote the principle of limited government and hold the nuclear family sacrosanct. But the Trump revolution has produced a less-libertarian GOP, embodied by Vance, and the severity of the baby bust has spurred more conservatives to look for solutions wherever they may be.

So what, exactly, can be done to drive up the birth rate in the U.S.? Specifically, what could the federal government do?

CULTURE FIRST

People have had fewer and fewer babies just about every year since

2007, and the drop has accelerated in recent years. We had 4.32 million births in 2007, and that dropped steadily to 3.75 million in 2019. In the last 12 months, we've had only 3.60 million.

The total fertility rate, the best measure of the birth rate, has fallen from above 2.1 babies per woman in 2007 to 1.6 today. If the birth rate remained there, we would start losing population (even with our recent high rates of immigration) within a generation. But there's no reason to believe our birth rate will remain there. In the Western world, low birth rates beget lower birth rates. We already have fewer children living in America today than we did in the last census, and that will just continue.

This baby bust is primarily a cultural problem (this is the central argument of my latest book). The knee-jerk reaction, by both liberal politics-types and by 20- and 30-somethings of all stripes, is to declare, "Nobody has kids because it's not affordable."

The reaction is understandable: The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that it costs more than a quarter million to raise a child to age 18, and everything has gotten more expensive in recent years.

But if we dig deeper, the "affordability" explanation for the baby bust doesn't hold up. Millennials and members of Generation Z are not poorer than members of Generation X, but they have a lot fewer babies. Richer people don't generally have more babies than poorer people. We had more babies during the Great Recession than we did in the golden days of 2019. Geographically, affordability changes don't predict birth rate changes.

That is to say, our baby bust is

mostly cultural. We value autonomy too much, we are too pessimistic about the future, we are too disconnected from neighbors, and we are too dismissive of the past. It follows that wealth redistribution cannot do much to reverse this. But around the edges, there are policies that can help.

WHAT IS PRO-NATAL?

European governments, trying to balance feminism with a concern for the birth rate, have tried to push pro-family policies. Universal child care has been the most popular, largely because it blends the progressive stance of big-government mandates with the 21st-century-feminist demand for liberation from familial duties. But day care subsidies turn out to be work subsidies rather than family support.

A larger child tax credit would help us get more babies, but there are limits there. Studies on universal cash benefits and child benefits all suggest at least a short-term bump in birth rates when parents get extra cash from the government. But data out of France and the U.S. (Alaska's permanent fund) suggest that big piles of cash for parents can deter marriage. Less marriage, in the long run, means fewer babies.

The right step for Congress would be a significant, but not massive, increase in the child tax credit, including rolling in the costs of other parental benefits, such as the earned income tax credit and the child care tax credit.

MAKE MORE HOMES

When you dig deeper into affordability and birth rates, the story gets a bit nuanced, but it's ultimately simple. There is one way in which family life is currently becoming significantly less affordable, and it seems likely to deter marriage and baby-making: the cost of owning a home.

Studies in England show that when the cost of owning a home rises, people have fewer babies. In the U.S., this is likely even more true because the tale of the American dream often includes owning a home with a yard as almost a prerequisite to starting a family.

Again, housing prices cannot explain all of the baby bust because the increase in housing prices from 2007

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* to 2019 was no greater than inflation, and yet the birth rate fell dramatically in those years. But the skyrocketing of home prices since 2019 surely is an anti-family development.

Home prices are the single greatest economic contributor to the baby bust and the retreat from marriage, and so anyone who wants to reverse these trends needs to figure out how to make homes more affordable.

The obvious answer, when you consider that prices are set by supply and demand, is to help create more houses. (Twenty years ago, you may remember, the U.S. government, through Fannie Mae, was dead set on subsidizing demand. That led to the financial crisis of 2008-2009.)

The "Yes, In My Back Yard" movement, the counterweight to a powerful "Not In My Back Yard" force, has pushed states and municipalities to create as much new housing supply as possible. There are plenty of ways to do this: repeal laws requiring massive parking lots for new housing, repeal zoning laws that prohibit duplexes and apartment buildings, and repeal

minimum-lot-size laws.

Conservatives sometimes resist these changes as federal or state meddling in local affairs and as efforts to abolish the suburbs by replacing single-family homes with apartment complexes. Also, evidence from Tokyo suggests that not all supply is pro-family. Large apartment buildings don't facilitate community (something parents desperately need), and they don't make it easy for children to run out and play. If the buildings don't include a mix of studios, one-bedroom, two-bedroom, and three-bedroom apartments, they could trap young adults in permanent singlehood or childlessness.

What's missing the most in the current housing market is the "starter home." Think of a townhome, a small 1,000-square-foot Cape Cod, or a suburban duplex. These exist, but they are aging, and the supply is shrinking because they are almost never built anymore. One root problem here is overregulation. The federal government should lean on states and localities to repeal all unneeded

regulations (labor, environmental, safety) that make starter homes uneconomic to build.

ELIMINATE MARRIAGE PENALTIES

The single largest driver of the baby bust is the retreat from marriage. People are getting married later and getting married less. While it is possible to have babies outside of marriage, the fact is that a society with less marriage is a society with fewer babies.

Governments have not had much success in promoting marriage. Under President George W. Bush, Republicans tried various pro-marriage efforts, and they all seemed to fail.

As a small step, though, Congress could try to eliminate the marriage penalties in current law. The earned income tax credit and child tax credit both have marriage penalties. A poor single mother living in subsidized housing could instantly be kicked out of her home if she married the father of the child. Congress should change

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The advertisement features three smartphones against a red background. The top of the ad has the Washington Examiner logo with an eagle and the text "THE WASHINGTON EXAMINER BRINGS ITS READERS THE BEST IN BREAKING NEWS AND ANALYSIS ON POLITICS." The left smartphone shows the Washington Examiner website with a "NEXT MINUTE" section. The middle smartphone shows the Washington Examiner Facebook profile with 776K likes and 997K followers. The right smartphone shows the Washington Examiner Twitter profile with 358.3K followers and a tweet about the inauguration portrait. At the bottom, there is a red banner with social media handles: "FOLLOW US TODAY @WASHINGTONEXAMINER WASHINGTON EXAMINER @DCEXAMINER".

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In rallies across Washington, some Democrats have declared war on the effort to curb spending. “Shut down the city! We are at war!” Rep. LaMonica McIver (D-NJ) screamed at a rally. “We have to fight this in the courts, we have to fight this in the Congress, and we have to fight this in the streets,” Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) said. And from Rep. Jonathan Jackson (D-IL): “The same spirit that Elon Musk has coming from South Africa ... we’re not going to have apartheid in America anymore!”

You get the idea. Will the public really side with Democrats on this? “Relaunching the Resistance to defend one of the least popular corners of the federal budget could be a monster miscalculation,” *Politico*’s Rachael Bade wrote, “and some prominent Democrats told me they have serious strategic reservations about how their party is fighting back.”

“My heart is with the people out on the streets outside USAID, but my head tells me: ‘Man, Trump will be well satisfied to have this fight,’” former Obama aide David Axelrod told *Politico*. “When you talk about cuts, the first thing people say is: Cut foreign aid.”

It’s important to note that, in many cases, Congress did not specifically authorize the wild expenditures. Rather, lawmakers gave money to the State Department or USAID and, in some cases, gave the various offices within

those organizations discretion on how to spend it. According to sources, the Peruvian LGBT comic book was funded by the Fulbright Program inside the State Department. Congress gave the State Department money for the Fulbright Program but gave the program discretion on how to spend it. That’s how you got the comic book or the LGBT job program in Serbia.

It’s also important to recognize that Musk is not the first person to go after outrageous government spending and, in particular, outrageous foreign aid. Indeed, a lot of the messages Musk is sending out from inside USAID, highlighting this or that expenditure, echo what some members of Congress have been doing for years. Whether Musk makes more progress than they did remains to be seen.

And then it’s important to remember that cutting indefensible spending, while necessary, is not going to solve the nation’s deepening problem of spending and debt. A number of experienced budget hands have pointed out that Trump might cut a billion or two here and there, while at the same time adding hundreds of billions in debt through more spending and tax cuts. That’s not a solution to the problem. But still: Cutting outrageous spending is a good idea, no matter how inconsequential some say it is.

So what about Musk? One problem that besets some billionaires is that they think they can do anything they want because they mostly can. Musk, who

has had extraordinary, historic success building rockets and cars and also owns X, has brought huge enthusiasm to the DOGE effort. But through it all, he has made public statements that grate on a lot of sensibilities — and not just those of Democrats. “We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper,” Musk posted at 1:54 a.m. Monday. “Could [have] gone to some great parties. Did that instead.”

In a few words, Musk managed to diminish the seriousness of what he was trying to accomplish and then brag that he passed up some great parties to do it. It’s good that the spirit of sacrifice is alive within DOGE.

But to go to the most important thing: This is not Musk’s effort. It is Trump’s effort. As powerful as he is, Musk has no authority inside the executive branch beyond what the president has temporarily granted him. This is Trump’s project, and a lot of his supporters see it as a very important way not just to stop wasting money but to reduce the powers of woke inside the federal government.

That’s why Trump has made clear that Musk is working within parameters set for him by the president. Trump will probably say it again and again as the effort goes on. When Democrats say, “Nobody elected Elon,” they’re right, and that is why the ultimate responsibility lies with the man in the Oval Office. ★

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the eligibility formulas for these aid programs to make sure there is no marriage penalty.

WORK FLEXIBLE HOURS FROM HOME

There is also robust evidence that parents have more children when at least one parent can work from home. This shouldn’t be surprising.

If every mother in America got to snap her fingers and determine her work arrangement, the most popular choice among those with school-aged children would be to work part time and to be home when the school bus picks up and drops off.

This requires broader acceptance of

two things: parents working from home and parents working about 30 hours per week, whether in a regular salaried job or as a freelancer.

Current labor regulations on full-time vs. part-time work make it harder to work in the gray areas.

Also, the federal government, as the largest employer in the country, should make working from home easier for as many federal employees as is reasonable. This could not only spark a baby boom among federal workers, but it could also push private-sector employers to become more flexible about where and when their employees get their jobs done.

LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRACY

If none of these answers sound like magic bullets for the baby bust, that’s

because there is no magic bullet. Asia and Europe have been wrestling with their low and falling birth rates for more than a decade, and no country has found a policy fix that seems to work consistently.

The U.S. has the blessing of 50 states and federalism. Every state could attempt different pro-natal policies, and as a country, we could gather the data, seeking best practices or tweaks.

This is a new problem in the world. We don’t exactly know what will work, but Vance is right that we need to try. ★

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