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Joe Manchin's Choices on Family Policy

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There is an interesting counterfactual scenario for the now-flailing Biden presidency, where the president responded to the initial success of his bipartisan infrastructure push — all those Republicans at the White House, signing up for billions in new spending — by immediately going out and saying, *let's do the same for family policy*.

In this scenario, instead of letting his administration's big ideas for helping families — paid parental leave, extending the expanded child tax credit, new spending on child care and preschool — get folded into the omnium gatherum of a multitrillion-dollar reconciliation bill, Biden would have invited every Senate Republican who has ever worked on family policy, from moderates like Mitt Romney and Bill Cassidy to populists like Josh Hawley and Marco Rubio, and hashed out a proposal that could win some Republican support.

There are several reasons this might not have worked. Some of the Republicans most interested in family policy in theory have the strongest incentives (namely, a desire to be president someday) not to work with Democrats in practice. Mitch McConnell blessed the infrastructure deal as part of a strategy to derail other Democratic priorities; there's no reason to assume he would do that twice. The legislative calendar might have made another bipartisan negotiation difficult; the Democratic Party's progressive wing might have made it impossible.

But Biden and his party have ended up conducting the same kind of negotiations as in this hypothetical, except that instead of negotiating with Republicans, they're mostly just negotiating with Joe Manchin.

Family policy isn't the only issue in the reconciliation wrangling, but it's an important one, and Manchin has articulated what would have been Republican points in a bipartisan negotiation — that the progressive vision spends too much money, and that it's a mistake to subsidize parents who don't work at all. Meanwhile progressives are attacking Manchin the way they would have attacked a family policy deal brokered by (say) Marco Rubio and Kyrsten Sinema: "Biden's Women-Focused Economic Agenda Is Getting Destroyed by Joe Manchin" ran a recent headline in Mother Jones.

If this is basically what's happening — a negotiation between center-right and center-left, with the center-right embodied by a Democrat — what would a reasonable family policy compromise look like? As a matter of what polls best, one possibility is suggested by David Shor and Simon Bazelon, writing for the squishy-moderate newsletter *Slow Boring*: They find that means-testing the child tax credit makes it more popular, so you could imagine a compromise that made family policy cheaper by making sure the benefits flow mostly to the poor and lower middle class.

Unfortunately I think that as a matter of policy the optimal deal is somewhat different. That's because I'm a noted birthrate obsessive, concerned that America's fertility collapse will depress our economy and darken our society for generations to come. But if I'm right to worry about this future (spoiler: I am right), then finding the least expensive family policy deal is a mistake, since the best evidence suggests that increasing family formation meaningfully doesn't come cheap.

Instead the best family policy deal would give progressives more of the money they want to spend, and give

conservative ideas more influence over the way that money is spent. For instance, conservatives tend to argue that direct spending on child care discriminates against stay-at-home parents, as well as those parents who prefer to use relatives as caregivers. They're right: To the extent that Manchin is asking his party to choose between its different policy ideas, they should choose the spending that goes to parents rather than to programs.

Conservatives also tend to worry, reasonably, about how the incentives of welfare spending can discourage marriage, if benefits drop when couples tie the knot. Right now, the reconciliation bill would create a sharper "marriage penalty" than existing law, which any compromise should fix.

Finally, conservatives worry about how spending creates incentives for parents not to work at all, effectively trapping families in intergenerational poverty. I think this worry is overstated, and the Biden tax credit avoids some of the work disincentives of past welfare programs. But the worriers have reasonable points: For instance, this week brought a new paper estimating that the Biden credit could lead more parents to leave the work force than previous analysis suggested, counteracting some of its reductions in child poverty.

A possible compromise here would attach a work requirement to the credit for parents with kids older than 1, while offering the money free of strings to parents of infants. That would encourage single mothers, especially, to return to the work force as their babies get older, without forcing them back at a moment when they're particularly vulnerable and when children have the right to a parent in the home.

Add these ideas up and you have what should be Manchin's ask: A family policy that spends generously without disfavoring marriage, work or households that don't use day care. In a better world, that's what Republicans and Democrats would be negotiating together, but even in this one, it isn't out of reach.

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