

# Can Familial Protectionism Save Families from Too Much Economic Freedom?

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the contemporary political backlash among the political new Right against economic freedom. They assert that while economic freedom makes us materially rich, it erodes traditional family life by inducing women to work outside the home. Their claims that family life and structure has changed are true, but I argue but that economic freedom is not a zero-sum game and that families have more choices today, giving them greater autonomy. Rather than trying to protect the family with government stipends, which I call familial protectionism, economic freedom provides better choices for women inside and outside the home.

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“Economic Growth is a moral imperative.”

—Peter Boettke, *The Struggle for a Better World*

“It is the maxim of every prudent master of a family, never to attempt to make at home what it will cost him more to make than to buy . . . What is prudence in the conduct of every private family, can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom.”

—Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

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## I. Introduction

The Left and Right in the United States engage in extensive debates about the equality and efficacy of market economies. Scholars on the left argue for subsidies and regulations to fight female inequality, for which they blame capitalism (Holmstrom 1981; Cudd and Holmstrom 2011). The new Right<sup>1</sup> claims that globalization, although it has grown output, erodes communities and families by necessitating two-income households based on their claim that male wages have fallen by 36 percent relative to prices since 1985 (Cass 2023a), which they argue drives women from their homes in pursuit of paid labor to support the family income. The Left and the new Right<sup>2</sup> seek more government involvement in family life. The Far Left argues that socialism will generate more egalitarian social and economic outcomes. Far Left scholars argue for regulations and income redistribution and wish to mandate maternity leave, further subsidize college education, forgive student loans, and provide free or subsidized daycare, among other welfare benefits for women. The Left and new Right agree that capitalism wages war on the working and middle class (Cass 2018, 2020; Brenner and Holmstrom 2013),

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<sup>1</sup> The “new Right” can be a convoluted term. David French, in his interview with *Reason* editor Stephanie Slade, argues that it is “an umbrella term for a range of subcultures and schools of thought that are generally critical of traditional conservatism and embrace illiberalism,” which includes political figures such as J. D. Vance, Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio, and Ron DeSantis. It includes groups such as Catholic integralists and national conservatives led by figures such as Sohrab Ahmari, founder of *Compact Magazine*, and Oren Cass, executive director of American Compass. French and Slade (2023) agree on the following assessment of the new Right:

“The institutional left does not intend to leave anything of the old republic behind for us to salvage. Constitutionalism, scientific inquiry, individual liberty, civil society, volunteerism, patriotism, parental authority, free expression, free enterprise, religious pluralism, cultural diversity, they’re coming for everything. So national conservatism must come for them.” I think that that’s one of the best distillations of that view of the world that I’ve read. And it seems to cut across all the strands of national conservatism or the new right, whether it’s Catholic integralism or national conservatism. It is this idea of wielding the power of the state in a punitive way. Not just in a way that’s advancing a particular set of policies, but also in a way that’s designed to destroy political opponents, to end their influence in American life.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is inspired by a colloquium I attended, where members of the new Right, including Cass, were present. An argument was made that the state should pay working-class families a stipend to stay at home so that they can spend more time as mothers with their children. Members of the new Right in attendance agreed that this could be an effective way to keep families together.

and both are willing to restrict components of economic freedom as a remedy.<sup>3</sup>

The new Right argues for government intervention through subsidies to working-class families to restore their vision of the traditional family life in which men worked and women stayed home to raise children. This paper assesses the claims of the new Right and challenges their policy proposal of cash subsidies to parents of young children. It argues that while increased economic freedom does change the structure of family life and household behavior, it does not create a zero-sum wage game between men and women. Indeed, economic freedom cannot solve all problems, but it can open more consumption and production opportunities for working parents by increasing employment and leisure opportunities. It reduces opportunity costs within the household by increasing purchasing power through advances in worker productivity. More economic freedom will support families in the face of increasing costs of raising a child, from daycare to college.

The economic importance of the family can be traced to Aristotle (Carnes 2013) and is essential to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Genesis 1:28, the first book of the Old Testament, God asserts the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply. The commandment is true regardless of circumstances. Jeremiah 29, in the Old Testament, is written to exiles, imploring them to work, build cities, and grow their families and communities despite their exiled status. The relationship between parents and children is enshrined in the Decalogue. The social significance of the family is emphasized by Adam Smith, who viewed the family as the first place where we begin to cultivate virtue (Smith 2002). Economists understand the family as a crucial socioeconomic unit in society, essential to the welfare of the individual and important to society at large (Ermisch 2016; Pakaluk 2024) and have studied household behavior and resource allocation (Becker 1986) and its relation to the state (Becker and Murphy 1988).

Historically, women had the primary role in household production, including domestic chores and house maintenance, including cooking, cleaning, raising children, and tending the garden, with little ability to

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper I equate capitalism with economic freedom. Capitalism is a system with private ownership of the means of production. Economic freedom is an empirical assessment of the institutions of capitalism—private ownership, freedom in labor markets, and freedom from coercion from others.

outsource. Societies where the men are the breadwinners and the women manage the home are deemed familistic societies, the norm before industrialization (Esping-Andersen 1999). Women in such societies did not have legal or economic opportunities to work outside the home because of a lack of economic, political, and human freedoms. They also lacked access to technological advancements, which have lowered their opportunity costs of leaving the home and entering the labor market as well as for leisure. This changed in the United States over the twentieth century and continues to change into the twenty-first century for a variety of reasons, including entry into the workforce; changes in divorce law and women's property rights; social, legal, and technological changes, including low-cost household appliances; and changes in reproductive technology including access to contraception and in vitro fertilization. Together, these factors have increased women's opportunities for paid work and leisure and provided more autonomy for individuals and families (Stevenson and Wolfers 2007), altering the division of labor within the home as well as marriage and divorce patterns, especially since 1960 (Sawhill 2014; Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Murray 2012; Arosio, 2017).

There is a vast literature that examines the outcomes of economic freedom, including the relationship between high levels of economic freedom and increased human freedom, including civil, social, and political freedoms (Gwartney et al. 2024; Gwartney and Lawson 2003; Hall and Lawson 2014). Economic freedom reduces gender disparities (Fike 2017) and is positively correlated with growing per capita income (Faria and Montesinos 2009; Dawson 1998; De Hann and Sturm 2000; Gwartney et al., 2004), entrepreneurship (Block et al. 1996; Nyström 2008), economic growth (Hussain and Haque 2016; Justesen 2008; Altman 2008), investments in human capital (Feldmann 2017), worker productivity (Angulo-Guerrero et al. 2017; Naanwaab and Yeboah 2013), employment opportunities for women in the formal economy (Wong and Stansel 2015; Russell et al. 2020; Fike 2016; Stroup 2011), subjective well-being (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Fischer 2008) and social trust (Berggren and Jordahl 2006).

Economic freedom correlates with better family opportunities, including less childhood labor, lower childhood mortality, greater income equality (Gwartney and Lawson 2004), and improved life satisfaction (Ovaska and Takashima 2006; Gropper et al. 2011). This elevated quality of life includes better work-life balance and "has a greater overall impact on health, safety, and overall life satisfaction for women than for men" (Nikolaev 2014).

Individualism, a hallmark of economic freedom, in societies is associated with personal autonomy and fosters cultural acceptance of women as autonomous agents and the moral equivalent of men (Davis and Williamson 2019, 2022).. Contrary evidence suggests that despite women's increased access to more economic, legal (Lemke 2016), and political freedoms over the twentieth century and improvements in women's well-being over that time (Blau 1998), there has been declining female happiness relative to men (Stevenson and Wolfers 2009) potentially related to the pressure (external or internal) women face to succeed on more margins. The sociological literature also debates whether increased access to machines that automate or reduce the time cost of domestic chores has lightened the burden on women given that they have increased the standards for cleanliness (Cowan 1984). It is argued that women face a "second shift" in which they come home from their paid jobs to engage in unpaid household work (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Today, women still spend more time than men on household work, yet the gap is narrowing. Since 1965, men's household work has gone from four to nine hours per week, and women's household work has decreased from twenty-eight to fifteen hours per week (Pew Research Center 2013). Moreover, work is "greedy" according to Goldin (2021, pp. 9–10), demanding more time as women attempt to climb the income ladder, with greater income rewards to more demanding jobs, luring women further from the home.

Extending private property rights, an element of the rule of law and economic freedom, to women increases the female labor supply and reduces the gender wage gap (Heath and Tan 2019). Regulations, however, are negatively correlated with economic freedom and exacerbate inequality by increasing the cost borne by low-income individuals entering different industries (Chambers et al. 2019). As economic freedom is expanded to women, female labor participation rates rise, and the demand for nonparent childcare rises (Gorry and Thomas 2017). The cost of childcare is an ongoing matter of political debate. Employment rates for mothers increase with lower childcare costs and higher childcare subsidies (Anderson and Levine 1999; Berger and Black 1992; Connelly and Kimmel 2003; Connelly 1992; Herbst 2010; Kimmel 1998; Leibowitz et al. 1992; Tekin 2007). The Left suggests that stipends or zero-price government-provided childcare are the answer (Roberts 2003). The new Right sees the increasing cost of childcare as part of their argument for returning to a more traditional family structure, wherein the mother can stay

home and raise her children and thus not rely on nonparent, paid childcare.

Feminists question the benefits of capitalism and whether it advances women's interests (Davis and Williamson 2022). However, some who critique aspects of capitalism acknowledge that it fosters social innovations that are good for women and disrupts traditions that subordinate women (Cudd 2015). Some feminist scholars argue that women suffer from the dual expectations as unpaid workers at home and as second-class citizens in the workforce (Holmstrom 1981; Cudd and Holmstrom 2011; Williams 2024) and are thus exploitable. The new Right argues that capitalism requires two-household incomes, which have eroded the traditional family life wherein the man works outside the home and the woman raises children and is the homemaker (Cass 2018, 2020). The new Right and progressive Left agree that government intervention is needed to support the family, despite their disagreement on the traditional view of the family.

The family is also of great interest to politicians. Congress declared in 1996, as part of its legislative findings, that marriage is the foundation of society and promotes the interests of children (Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996). Studies highlight how declining birth rates in industrialized economies, aging populations, and slower growth rates (Maestas et al. 2016) present looming fiscal problems (Sheiner 2017). Thus, proposals to increase family subsidies raise fiscal questions about how to finance increased spending over time and the unintended consequences of those subsidies.

Other variables of concern for the new Right include the growth of female wages, which they view as occurring at the expense of lower male wages, increased divorce rates, and the bifurcation of culture between high-income and low-income families. All these factors change the choices available to women and alter family life and household production. This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 examines the demographic and economic changes that have altered family life. Section 3 examines modern patterns of household production and outsourcing. Section 4 critiques some of the claims and policy proposals from the new Right as a form of familial protectionism. Section 5 concludes that stipends to families intended to protect them are a form of protectionism that will not solve the underlying problems.

## II. Demographic and Economic Changes

### *A. Labor Force Participation*

Markets change norms and behaviors by providing freedom of choice to families. Unleashing “entrepreneurial capitalism” generates a dynamic and innovative economy (Baumol et al. 2007). The twentieth century was revolutionary for American women, particularly after 1960. Goldin (1994) notes a U-shaped female labor force, in which women returned to work in the 1960s as opportunity costs changed. In 1950, only one in three women participated in the labor force; by 1998, it was three of every five women (US Department of Labor 2000). Young women aged twenty-four to thirty-five doubled their labor force participation rate from 34 to 76 percent (Fullerton 1999). Goldin (1989) finds that married women who enter the labor force tend to remain in it over their working lives. This is a point celebrated by economists, but for the new Right, perhaps their biggest objection. Married women enter and stay in the labor force, meaning they are outside of the home throughout their working lives. Seventy-one percent of young millennial women participate in the labor force, compared to 58 percent in 1965. Moreover, as labor productivity grows, there is greater flexibility to work less. Both men and women work fewer hours today than in 1965 (Aguiar and Hurst 2007).

### *B. College Attendance*

Female labor force opportunities have increased because women’s access to higher education has grown. Millennial women are four times more likely to have a bachelor’s degree than their silent-generation counterparts. Millennial men are only twice as likely to have a college degree (Fry et al. 2018). Access to higher education has increased for both men and women. Access to contraception in the 1960s increased female college enrollment from 12 to 20 percent (Bernstein 2019). In 1979, the percentage of women who were teachers, nurses, librarians, and social workers began to decline. Those who were doctors, lawyers, professors, and managers started to grow until the mid-1980s, when this category represented a higher percentage of the female labor force than the above category (Goldin 2006, p. 13). Expanding the education franchise has benefited women the most because they have historically been discriminated against (Norberg 2017). As women’s college and postgraduate attendance grows, their opportunity costs change. They delay childbirth and have fewer children.

By 2025, women will surpass men in college attendance with expected rates of 57 percent versus 43 percent (Educational Policy Institute 2019), and the costs of college are far outpacing average wages, meaning that access to higher education is becoming more difficult for working-class families (US Department of Labor 2023). The increasing cost of obtaining a college degree disproportionately disadvantages working-class families with lower disposable incomes.

### *C. Marriage, Divorce, and Children*

Macroeconomic trends play a significant role in family structure, including the remarkable economic growth following World War II and the development of birth control. Nobel laureate economist Robert Lucas (2002) discusses the first demographic transition, the decline in fertility rates, following the first Industrial Revolution, marking the first time in human history that economic growth outpaced population growth. Improvements in nutrition, health, education, and family stability drove this shift. Pakaluk (2024) highlights the existence of a second demographic transition in the mid-twentieth century, which involved a further evolution of family life choices. For instance, the increase in cohabitation and divorce rates that began in the 1960s influenced decisions regarding the timing and number of children. Pakaluk emphasizes a significant change in perspective: Women transitioned from using contraception to prevent pregnancy to discontinuing it to start conceiving. This cultural change has had profound economic impacts on family size.

Today, college-educated women are more likely to be married than less educated women, and college-educated women have the highest chances of remaining married (Wang 2015). The most significant decline in overall marriage rates since the 1980s can be explained by a reduction in marriage among adults without a four-year degree. Kearney (2023) explains that this is due to economic and social factors. She suggests that in that time, the economic position of men without a four-year degree has declined, making them less reliable income earners and “less suitable marriage partners.” The “marriage divide” remains. College-educated and higher-income individuals are more likely to get married and stay married than their less educated and lower-income counterparts (Wilcox and Wang 2017; Murray 2012), who have lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

Many disagree over what, if any, the government’s role should be in either promoting or sustaining marriages. Research indicates that children from single-parent or disrupted households generally have

poorer outcomes compared to those raised in two-parent families (Kearney 2023), and the problem of family transition in divorce and fatherlessness<sup>4</sup> is well documented (McLanahan et al. 2013; McLanahan 2011; Tach et al. 2011; Tach 2012), as is the inability of policy to combat it (Robertson 2022). Kearney (2023) suggests that single motherhood is also an economic problem due to reduced male wages, which creates a “marriageability problem” at lower income levels. This is the basis for many government interventions suggested by Cass and others on the new Right and perhaps why he believes wages among men and women are a zero-sum game.

### **III. Household Outsourcing and Production**

Technological change allows households to make different outsourcing decisions regarding consumption and capital goods, different marriage decisions, and different household time investments (Ogburn and Nimkoff 1955; Becker 1965). More resource access allows parents to invest more in their children (Kearney 2023). Becker (1981) argues that the household is an economic unit that produces childcare, cooking, and chores. As labor productivity grows, households can transition from autarkies to importers of goods and can outsource what was once done inside the home. Income growth and technological change alter the household division of labor and change the income and substitution effects by lowering opportunity costs. A growing income means parents can buy services like housecleaning and take clothes to the dry cleaner rather than do the cleaning themselves. Cheap consumer durables such as washing machines and microwave ovens allow for the substitution of machines for human labor to replace or shorten the production process of doing laundry or making dinner.

Technologies such as washing machines, robot vacuums and mops, dishwashers, microwave ovens, electronic pressure cookers, air fryers, and cell phones all push out the household production possibility frontier by changing comparative advantage within the home. When machines replace women in the home, the family benefits, and today, the average woman spends 11.1 fewer hours doing household chores than in 1965 (Aguiar and Hurst 2006). This freed up women’s time and allowed them to enter the labor force by

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<sup>4</sup> The absence of a father, or fatherlessness (this can be separate from divorce), is correlated with many behavioral problems in children including suicide, drug abuse, runaways, homelessness, and high school dropouts.

automating tasks (Greenwood et al. 2005), and the time allocated to market work by married households has increased due to technological progress (Greenwood and Guner 2008). Additionally, cooking had the most “marketization” from 1965 to 2019, from a rate of 12 to 29 percent (Bridgman 2023).

However, the most important time spent within the household cannot be outsourced. We cannot pay people to love our children for us; we cannot substitute quality time with our children with anything else. Alexa may be able to set an alarm for bedtime, but it cannot tuck a child into bed, making them feel secure and loved. We can outsource much, but the role of loving children has not been fully displaced by technology or lower-skilled labor. While nannies make it possible for mothers to leave home for work, true parental love cannot be outsourced, and if it is, it has significant consequences for the child’s well-being. If you outsource everything, you miss the deep bonds that develop with your child. Economic freedom allows women and families to determine what to outsource and what to produce at home, giving them more ability to spend time and raise their children.

Technological change and changing norms have allowed women to escape a history of having few options for personal income mobility. However, many have reported on the loss of social capital (Putnam 2020), the social alienation (Carney 2018) and the decay of traditional family values that some attribute to liberalism itself (Deneen 2019), which they argue fosters a decline in religious belief and practice and an erosion of civil society (Deneen 2017) along with economic growth and technological progress. Hymowitz (2006, p. 199) argues that free markets erode moral character by “stirring up desire” and celebrating hedonism, which hurt low-income communities the most. Michael Novak (2008) claims that what corrodes moral character in commercial society is not commerce, free markets, or growth itself but that the younger generation takes for granted the virtues needed for prosperity, including innovation habits and “focus on the future.” The bourgeois virtues (McCloskey 2010) of temperance, prudence, and hard work require preservation. However, research shows that economic freedom is associated with less materialism, not more (Teague et al. 2020). Outsourcing according to the preferences of each family allows families and parents to try and get the most out of life.

#### **IV. Proposed Solutions from the New Right**

The new Right is accurate in some of its assessments. Income growth and technological innovation do change family structure and the division of labor within the home. They are right to point out that women spend more time out of the home and that in lower-income families, children get less time with their parents (Kearney and Levine 2009). Declining birth rates are indeed an economic and sociological problem. They are right to have concerns about higher relative divorce rates among working-class families, which put a financial strain on those managing two independent households, with consequences for children. They are right to worry about the bifurcation of American culture along socioeconomic lines. The new Right is correct about the virtue and importance of work and the idea that growing wages and job opportunities are necessary. The new Right does not oppose technology per se but laments the changing patterns of how parents and families spend their time.

The new Right gets some things wrong. In a market, wage growth is a sign of increasing productivity afforded by the institutions of economic freedom. Moreover, despite the economic destruction caused by US COVID-19 government policies and an overall slowdown in productivity since the 1948–70 golden age of 4 percent growth rates, the postpandemic labor market has been better for those at the bottom of the income distribution (Federal Reserve 2024; Autor et al. 2023), especially those who have a high school education or less and are under forty years old (Lahart 2024). Low-income wages have recently rapidly increased, reducing the wage gap between low-wage and median-wage workers and reversing three decades of rising worker-wage inequality (Aeppli and Wilmers 2022). There is income mobility; more would be even better.

The new Right argues for more government intervention in the family to protect it and, in some cases, preserve it. This debate has been ongoing for decades and is invigorated today by their claim that working-class families suffer from declining male wages. There is debate about the extent and severity of male wage stagnation. Winship (2024) argues that worker pay has kept up with productivity growth, yet productivity has grown unequally over industries, which has resulted in slower growth in men's pay, and he argues that the "breadwinner rents" men received fifty years ago eroded as women entered the workforce. Others argue that male wage stagnation is real (Cass 2018) and stark (Hammond 2024). Strain (2022) suggests that many economists argue that average wages have stagnated

(Krugman 2021; Stiglitz 2020; Azar et. al 2020; Hoynes and Rothstein 2019; Sachs et. al 2015; Benmelech et. al 2022; Benmelech et. al 2019) yet provides evidence that when we adjust the base year and use Personal Consumption Expenditures rather than the Consumer Price Index as the measure of inflation, average nonsupervisory wages have grown by 39 percent since July 1990 (using Personal Consumption Expenditures), or by 21 percent using the Consumer Price Index. This is compared to 0.7 percent growth if we use 1973 as the base year (Strain 2022; Norbert and Kedia 2023).<sup>5</sup>

Oren Cass is a vocal advocate for new Right views through his organization American Compass and is a leading voice arguing for policy to support working-class families. He argues that the cost of thriving for families has increased: “In 1980, 40 weeks of the median male income could provide middle-class security for a family of four. Now it takes 62 weeks, which is a problem, there being 52 weeks in a year.” Winship argues that both the Left and new Right are aligned on this claim (Winship 2022), which is refuted in a study by Winship and Horpedahl (2023). The study accounts for the changing quality of goods and services, lower tax rates, and the inclusion of full-time workers and finds a 53 percent increase in after-tax male wages since 1985.

Incomes and wages are increasing, yet some essential costs have increased: childcare, college education, and health care. The Consumer Price Index for all prices has increased 82.4 percent since 2000, a big imposition on working families. It is, however, 94 percent cheaper to buy a television, toy prices are down by 74 percent, and computer software is 72 percent cheaper. However, college tuition has increased by 184 percent, college textbooks 154 percent, hospital services 224 percent, medical care services 132 percent, childcare costs 133 percent, and food costs 95 percent (Perry 2022; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023). These cost-of-living increases hurt lower-income families by reducing alternatives. These cost increases are outpacing wage increases, reducing purchasing power.

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<sup>5</sup> Strain (2020) argues that using 1990 as the base year makes more sense than 1973 because it applies to too few current workers because it was fifty years ago. Moreover, 1990 was a business cycle peak, which means using it as the base year overstates wage growth by estimating it from a trough. Also, the earlier the base year the more challenging it is to adjust for inflation. The period from 1970 to 1990 was one of declining real wage growth, compared to the 1995–2020 period, and averaging real wage growth over these two different types of regimes distorts our understanding of wage growth over time.

The data suggest that despite claims from the new Right, we are materially far better off than the 1970s. Divorce rates are down, but so are marriage rates (Pew Research Center 2021). However, a new study shows that while the relationship between education or income and births is negative for women, we may be at the bottom of a U-shaped curve (Hazan and Zoabi 2015). White, non-Hispanic women with bachelor's degrees have more children because at higher levels of income, they spend a significant amount of time raising their children and running households, purchasing those services in the market. Expanding economic freedom further would bring even better income and consumption outcomes by increasing choices available to families. However, can the government use family policy to stimulate higher birth rates and protect the traditional family? Conservative think tanks have been addressing this question for decades.

In 2000, the Heritage Foundation released a policy brief wherein it argued that the federal and state governments should take an active role in protecting the traditional family, including setting target numbers for divorce-rate reductions, offering "marriage training" with federal funding, offering a one-time tax credit to "always-married families" when their children turn eighteen, requiring divorce education, eliminating no-fault divorce, and lengthening the process of obtaining a divorce by two years (Fagan and Rector 2000, p. 2).

The new Right shares this impulse to salvage the traditional family structure by returning to the family structure of the 1970s. Cass (2018) claims that men then could support their families on one income. He suggests that gross domestic product growth has given us lots of cheap stuff but has taken our virtues and eroded our institutions, leaving us rich in things and poor in spirit. However, his policy suggestions would erode the family in attempting to salvage it.

Cass and King (American Compass 2023b) argue for a Family Income Supplemental Credit, which they suggest is not a child allowance but rather a stipend paid only to working families. They argue this is a necessary step in the aggressive extension of the social compact. They argue for "supplemental credit paid to families per child but capped at the household's earnings the prior year, equal to \$800 per month to pregnant women beginning in fifth month of pregnancy, \$400 per month from birth until the child's 6th birthday, and then \$250 per month until the child's 18th birthday; TANF preserved and expanded for families ineligible to receive the supplement." Cass rightly critiques the welfare state as a destructive

social and economic force (Cass 2018), yet this proposal would only increase the welfare state and obfuscate family trade-offs. There are fiscal questions about how this would be financed and economic questions regarding the unintended consequences. It is unlikely that a stipend of this amount would induce a mother to leave the labor force, as Cass desires.

Markets optimize social welfare by shepherding resources to their most highly valued uses. Working-class families need cheaper access to goods and services. Cass and his colleagues would bring even more state intervention into the complicated and highly personal family unit, opening the door to technocratic family planning through state subsidies. These proposed solutions are what Mises (2007) describes as a system of interventionism, but applied to the family. Cass and King (American Compass 2023a) suggest that over half of married women with children prefer one parent to work full-time when children are young. This contrasts with just 14 percent who prefer both parents to work full-time while relying on paid childcare. What is missing in their analysis is how part-time, flexible work can allow flexibility within families with young children. Cash subsidies for families open the door for a culture of rent-seeking to permanently secure those benefits regardless of income mobility. Moreover, a Swiss experimental study shows that cash stipends to working-class families induce women to work more hours; specifically, if the subsidy covers 25 percent of the cost of childcare, women increase their labor supply by two hours per week (Zangger et al. 2021).

The Family Income Supplemental Credit would end the stipend upon children's eighteenth birthday. Yet the average American spends the most money on their children after they turn eighteen, particularly as many enter college during this time with expenses easily exceeding \$50,000 in tuition annually, or \$200,000 for a full four-year degree (Wood 2024). The Family Income Supplemental Credit does not cover half of current college expenses, much less the entire cost of raising a child, which in 2023, according to the US Department of Agriculture (2023), was \$233,610 from birth till the child turns seventeen.

Cass takes the technocratic approach to fix what he views as the primary problems—the erosion of trust, the breakdown of the family, and declining middle-class living standards—by inviting government into the family. Economic freedom not only gives us stuff, it gives us agency through increased productivity, which brings higher incomes, which present more choices. Family stipends distort incentives

within the household and grow government debt, eroding economic dynamism and growth.

## V. Conclusion

As economic freedom expanded for women in the US over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, household production changed drastically. Expanding women's economic and property rights created new incentives to invest in female human capital (Geddes et al. 2012). Economic growth allows all people to outsource more than ever, yet no transitions are without costs.

Family structure changes with income growth and more opportunities for women to work outside the home. High-income households have less risk of divorce (Eads and Tach 2016; Killewald et al. 2023) and more cohesive family units (Murray 2012) because they can choose to outsource what is less valuable to produce at home. The Smithian division of labor is realized through more economic freedom, which affords income growth and opportunities to make family life successful; it is the antidote for family breakdown rather than its source. Human capital accumulation requires enabling institutions (Goldin 2016), and economic freedom supports such institutions, which give families choice and autonomy.

For Cass, capitalism is a zero-sum, gendered socioeconomic game in which women's gain comes at the expense of men, the family, and society. He and the new Right call for familial protectionism to support working-class families. Family life will look different, more women will choose a variety of employments, and with this family life and culture will change. Disliking cultural norms does not necessitate government correction. Although low-income families struggle more with drug and alcohol issues, they hold traditional views on marriage (Trail and Karney 2012).

Policy can help working-class families best by lowering their opportunity costs for work and household management. The new Right decries an economy that has supposedly left men behind and argues for stimulus for families. A better solution would be to remove obstacles to even more significant income growth for working-class families. Less protectionism and more opportunities are what working-class families need. Winship (2022) offers important insights about the culprit:

To the extent that men's pay has not improved at the rates seen in the 1950s and 1960s, declensionist views may get the diagnosis backward in essential regards. Rather than economic problems

hurting men's ability to provide for families, trends in men's pay may reflect choices men and women have made in response to rising affluence. Some of these choices cause concern, such as replacing husbands' earnings with the expanded safety-net benefits a more prosperous society can afford. However, some choices reflect important gains, such as wider professional opportunities for women and the greater flexibility that has afforded husbands.

The family remains society's most essential social and economic unit. The economic hardships facing families today are exacerbated by decades of government welfare and subsidy programs. College and health care are more expensive than ever because they are lethargic quasi-state bureaucracies with high costs and inefficiencies. State regulation in labor and housing markets as well as occupational licensing retards the economic mobility of working-class families and further limits their purchasing power and job opportunities. Expanding economic freedom and refraining from protectionism will help families thrive by expanding their choices for household work, paid work, and leisure time.

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