

EST



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AMERICAN COMPASS

RESEARCH

The Family Policy Renaissance, Explained

*Republicans, Independents, and the working and middle classes
respond to the pressures facing working families*

February 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The family policy renaissance of the past few years has come in response to the rapid realization that market forces are eroding the foundations of the American family. After decades of stagnating wages, parents are struggling to make ends meet and organize their home lives as they want. Their fertility rates continue to decline even as they report an increase in the number of children they want, and affordability is the reason they most often cite for this gap. Across the political spectrum, policymakers are coming forward to talk about this crisis and make the case for a public role in supporting working families. Perhaps as a result, support for such policies is surging, especially on the Right.

In November 2023, American Compass partnered with YouGov to survey 1,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 about their own families, their aspirations, and their views on family policy. The results are compared here to results from a similar survey conducted in January 2021 (see: American Compass Home Building Survey).

- **Since 2021, the share of parenting-age Americans who say the federal government should “provide more support for families with children” has risen from 67% to 73%.**
 - A dramatic shift on the Right is driving this rise: support among Republicans jumped from 52% to 69% and among those who are Conservative or Very Conservative from 51% to 64%.
 - Support has also jumped among the working and middle classes, from 64% to 70% and 63% to 75%, respectively.
- **Since 2021, the share of parenting-age Americans who report having fewer children than they would ideally want has risen from 50% to 55%.**

- Affordability continues to be the reason most often cited, chosen by 30% of respondents in both 2021 and 2024.
- While policymakers have focused intensively on reducing the cost of childcare, less than one in five families uses paid childcare at all; lower- and working-class Americans are more likely to prefer having a parent at home with young children.
- **In assessing the flourishing of American families, it is important to understand their expansive conception of the American Dream, not focused on narrow measures like “better off than my parents.”**
 - Across classes, most Americans see each of eight different achievements contributing to the American Dream.
 - “Earning enough to support a family” is most often chosen as most important, but “enjoying the freedom to live how and where you want” is a close second.

SUPPORT FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES

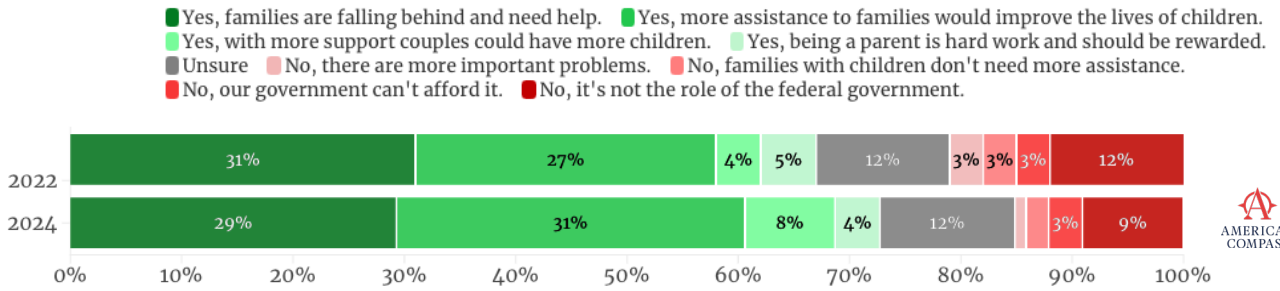
Respondents were prompted with the question, “Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?” and asked to “choose the response you agree with most.” The nine options included four reasons for answering “yes” and four for answering “no”:

- Yes, families are falling behind and need help.
- Yes, more assistance to families would improve the lives of children.
- Yes, with more support couples could have more children.
- Yes, being a parent is hard work and should be rewarded.
- No, families with children don’t need more assistance.
- No, our government can’t afford it.
- No, there are more important problems.
- No, it’s not the role of the federal government.
- Unsure

Overall, 73% chose an affirmative response and 15% chose a negative response, while 12% were unsure. This represented a 6-point shift from three years earlier, when 67% responded “yes.” Arguments that more assistance to families would improve the lives of children and that with more support couples could have more children saw the largest increases in support.

FIGURE 1. Support for Family Policy Is Rising

“Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?”

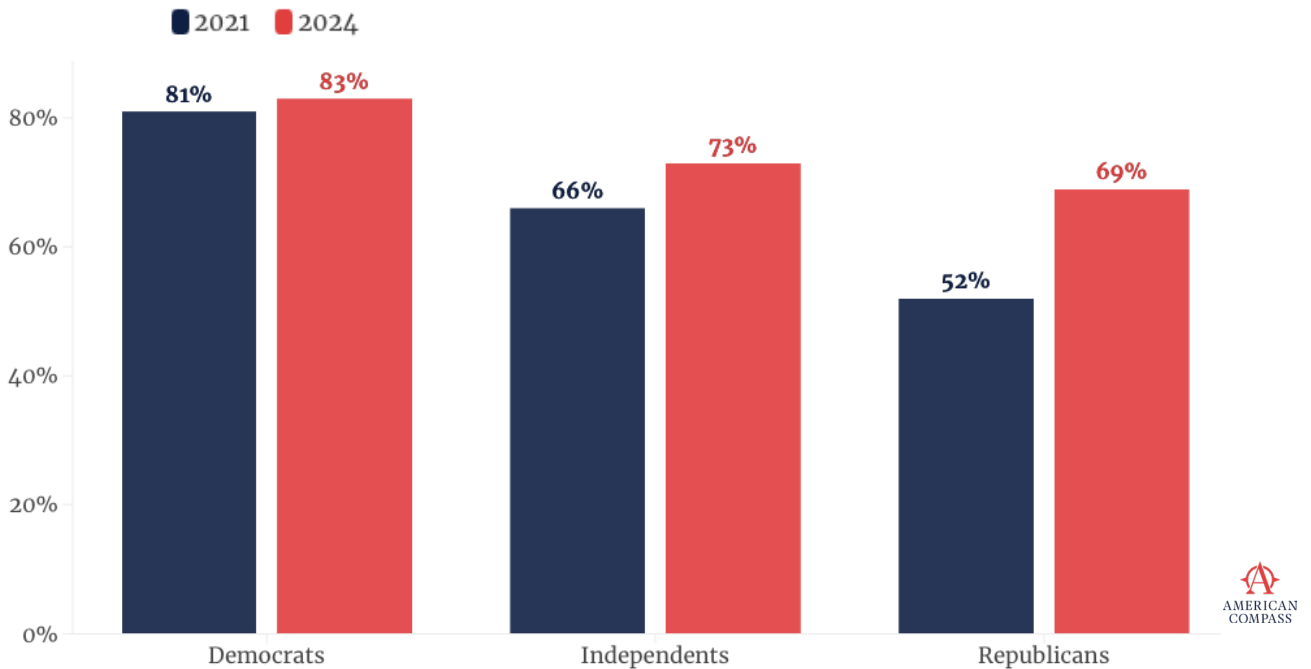


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 1,000 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 2,000 Americans age 18-50

The Left side of the political spectrum has historically advocated for more government assistance; however, the increase in enthusiasm for family support has come primarily from the Right. While the share of Democrats choosing an affirmative response rose by 2 points, the share of Republicans rose by 17.

FIGURE 2. Support for Family Policy Rising Fastest with Republicans

“Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?”



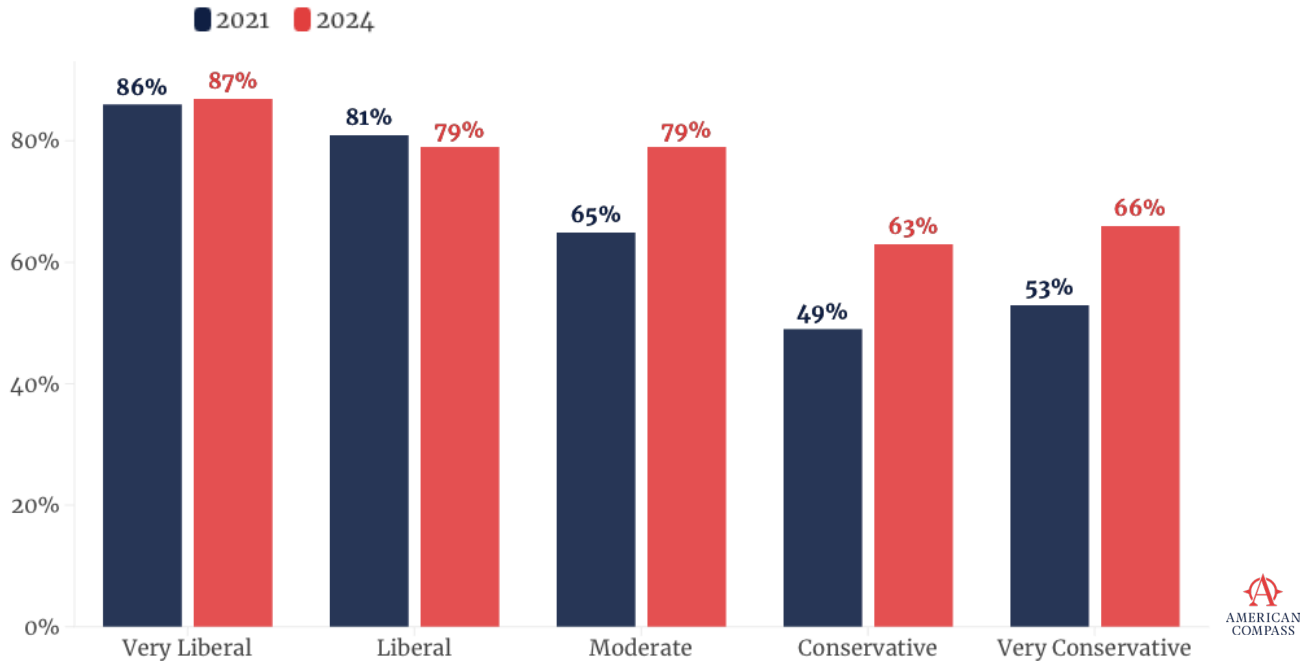
Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 876 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,722 Americans age 18-50

Note: Respondents were given four different rationales for “Yes” and four for “No”; values reflect share selecting any of the “Yes” responses.

While a shift in partisan identification might in theory explain the shift in views by party, an equivalent shift occurred among ideological conservatives. While liberal views did not change significantly, moderate and conservative views shifted by 13–14 points.

FIGURE 3. Support for Family Policy Rising Rapidly with Moderates and Conservatives

“Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?”

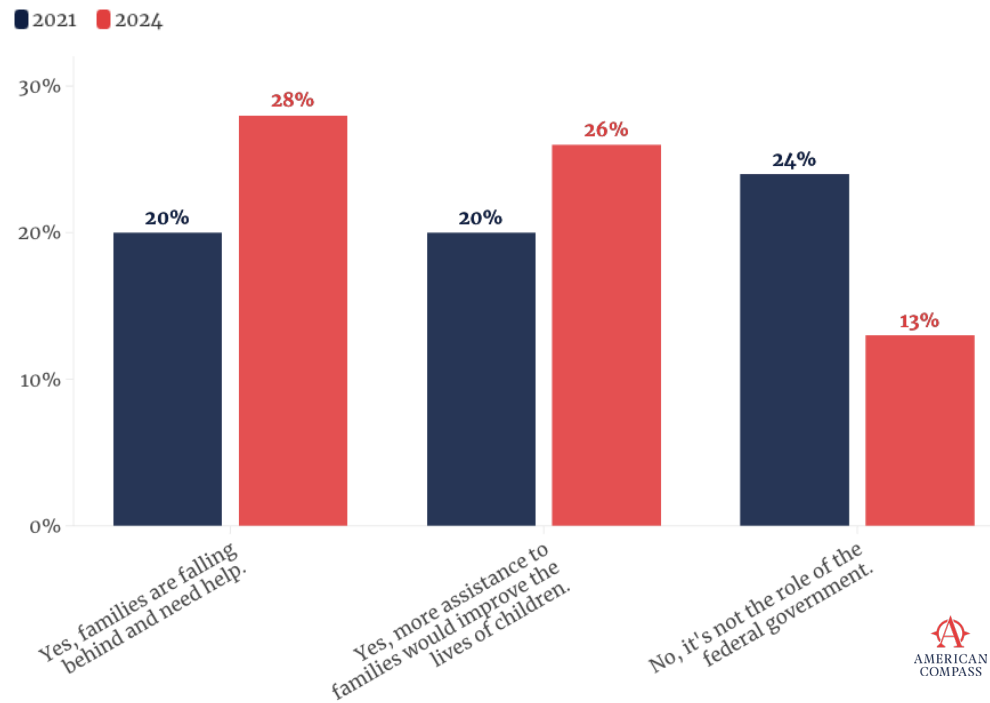


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 886 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,746 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Respondents were given four different rationales for “Yes” and four for “No”; values reflect share selecting any of the “Yes” responses.

The rationale-specific responses also shed light on what changed. Looking specifically at Republicans, the shares saying that “families are falling behind and need help” and that “more assistance to families would improve the lives of children” increased significantly. But perhaps most notably, the share saying that providing support to families with children is “not the role of the federal government” fell by 11 points, or roughly half.

FIGURE 4. Republican Views Shift Sharply on Some Rationales

“Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?” (Republicans only)

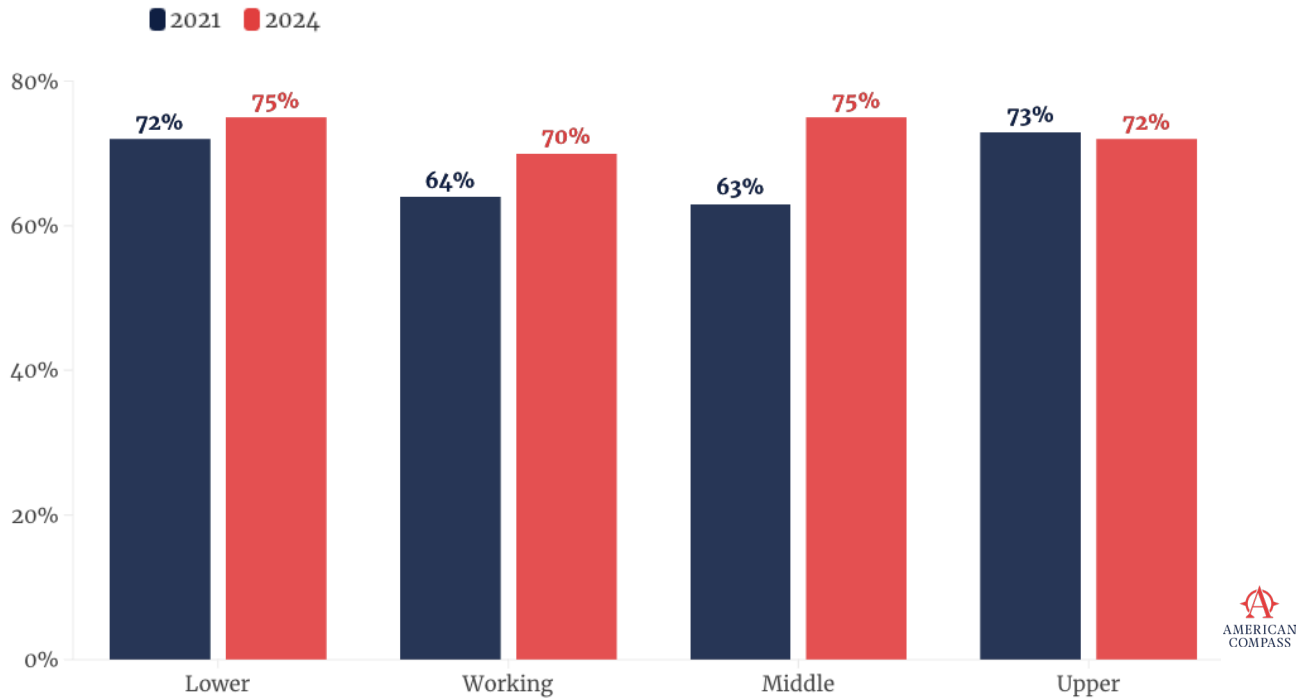


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 241 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 404 Americans age 18-50
Note: Respondents were given four different rationales for “Yes” and four for “No.”

Socioeconomic groups that were previously less enthusiastic about family support have likewise seen the most significant shift in their views. While the share in favor among the lower and upper classes has changed little since 2021, the share among the working and middle classes has increased significantly and views are now indistinguishable across classes.

FIGURE 5. Support for Family Policy Rising Fastest with Working and Middle Classes

“Should the federal government provide more support for families with children?”



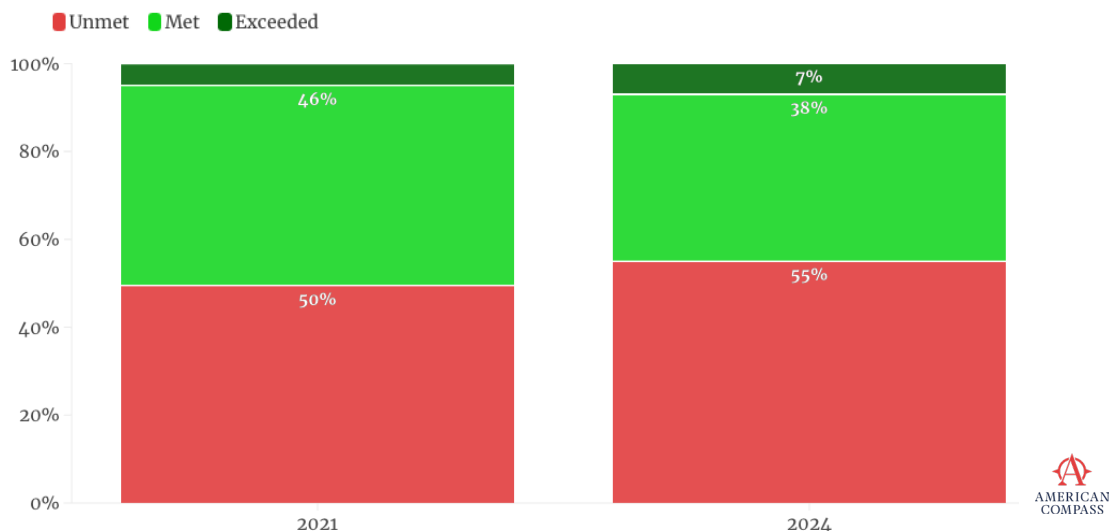
Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 961 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,902 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Respondents were given four different rationales for “Yes” and four for “No”; values reflect share selecting any of the “Yes” responses. American Compass refined class definitions between 2021 and 2024. Current definitions used for both datasets here.

WHAT PARENTS WANT

As the Institute for Family Studies has documented, the ideal family size in American minds keeps increasing, even as fertility rates keep falling. This survey confirms the trend, which led to an increasing share of parenting-age Americans reporting that they have had fewer children than they would ideally have. (Note: The results exclude respondents who gave the reason for this gap as “My family is still growing.”) In 2021, 50% reported not meeting their goal; that figure has now risen to 55%.

FIGURE 6. A Rising Share of Americans Have Had Fewer Children Than They Want

Total children compared to ideal number of children

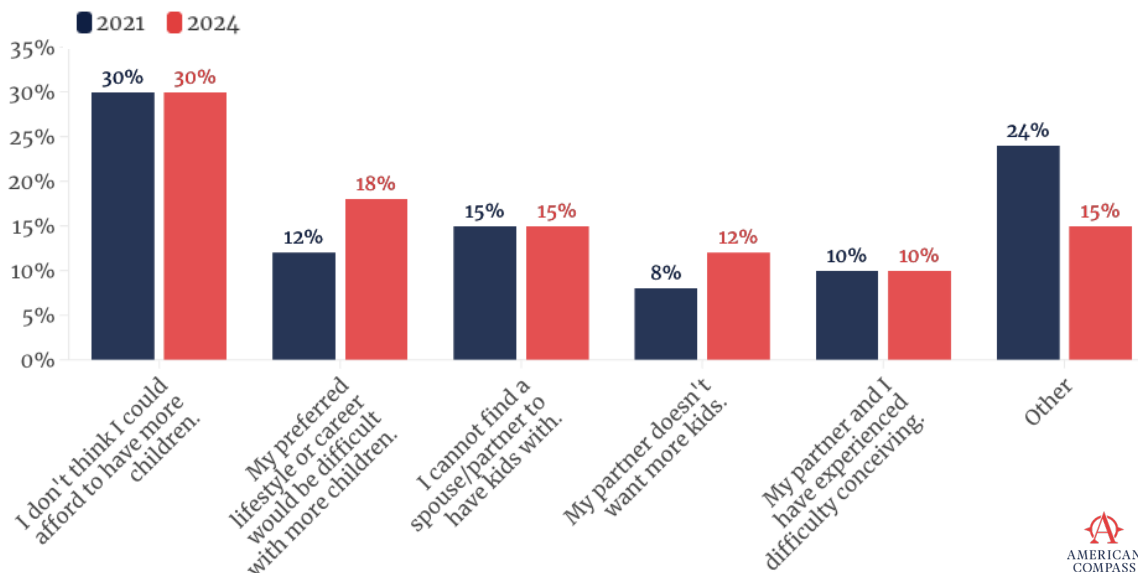


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 882 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,826 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Excludes respondents who say that “my family is still growing.”

As the share not meeting their fertility goal has increased, the top reason for the gap has remained the same: Both then and now, 30% of Americans explain “I don’t think I could afford to have more children.” That figure is roughly double the next highest.

FIGURE 7. Affordability Remains the Leading Reason for Unmet Fertility

Reason for having fewer children than the desired number

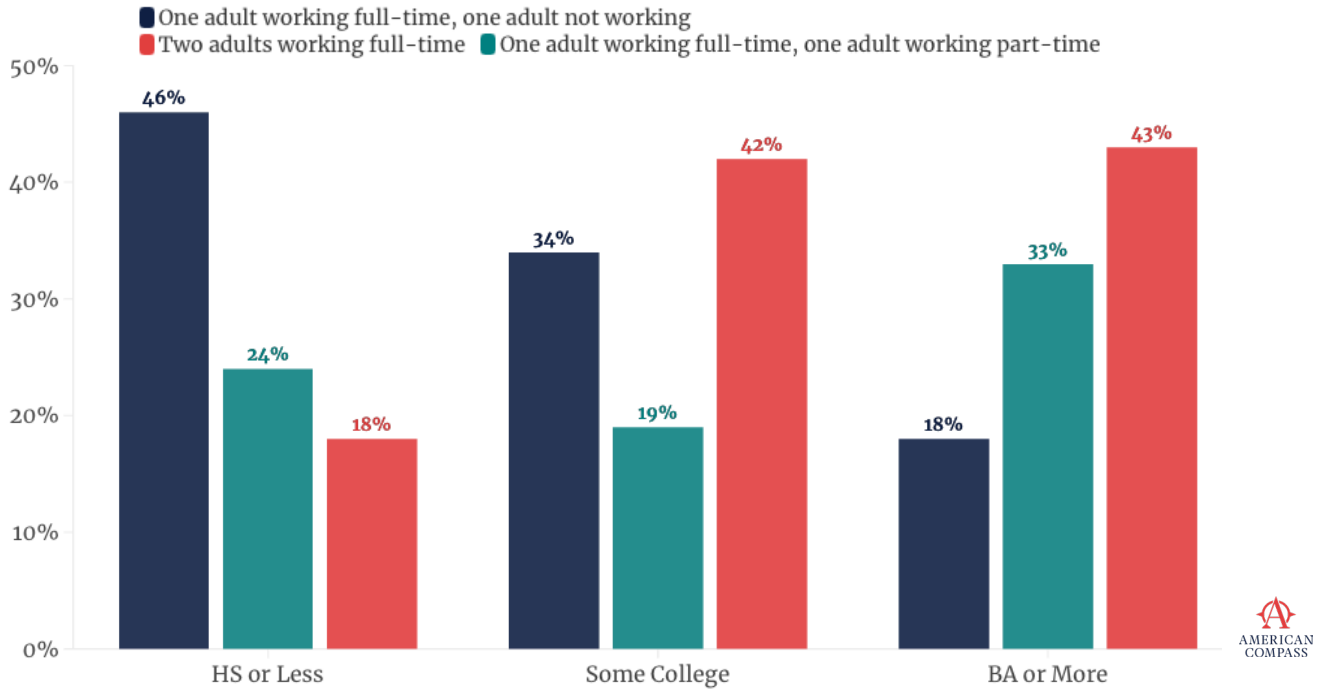


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 502 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 910 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Excludes respondents who say that “my family is still growing.” In 2021 survey, wording was “My partner or I have experienced trouble conceiving.”

Economists often note that families have compensated for stagnating wages and rising costs by having both parents work. But two-income families are not the norm, even among households with the highest levels of education.

FIGURE 8. Families with Higher Education Are More Likely to Be Dual Income

“Which best describes your household’s arrangements for paid work?” (Couples with children under the age of five)

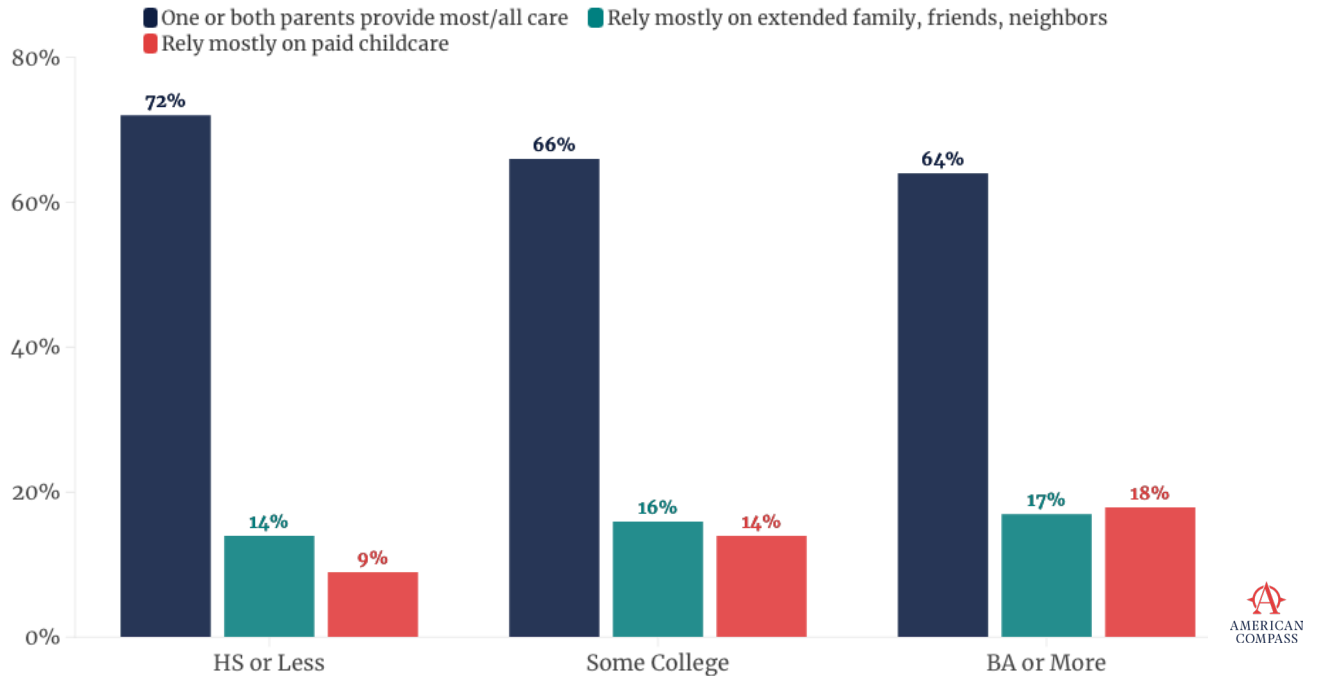


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 179 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Couples include responses of “Married” and “Domestic/civil partnership.”

Likewise, while policymakers focus intensively on the issue of affordable commercial childcare, only a very small share of households utilize it. Even among those who do not provide most or all care themselves, reliance on informal care networks is more common than paid childcare.

FIGURE 9. Few Households Rely on Paid Childcare

“Which best describes your household’s arrangements for caring for your children during the day or when they are not in school?” (Adults with children under the age of five)

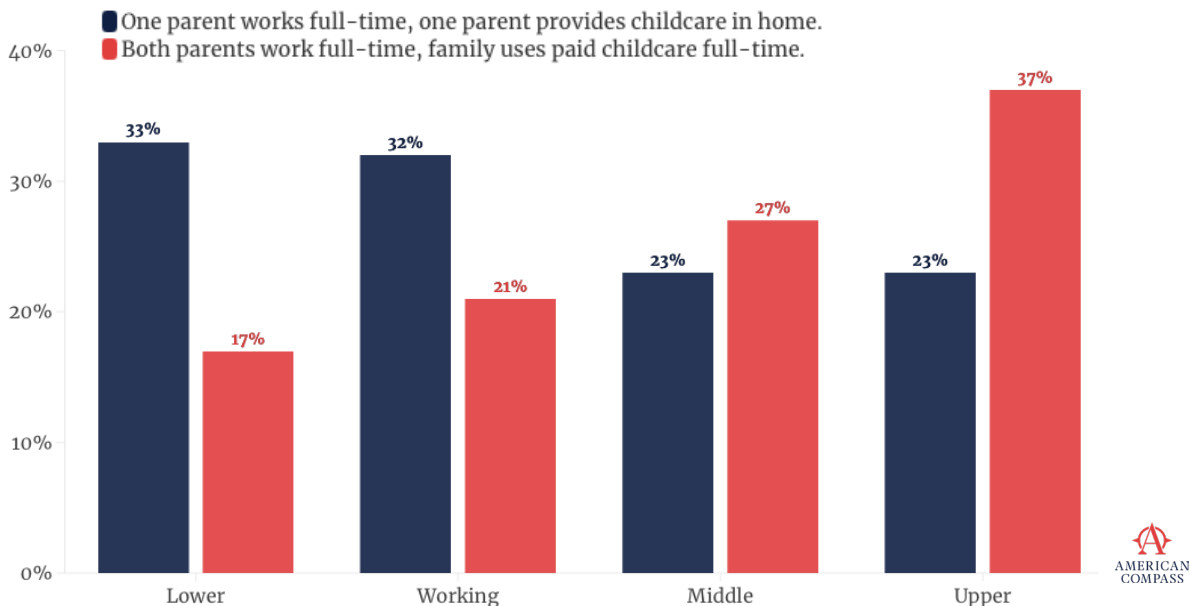


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 220 Americans age 18-50

For families with young children, most would prefer to have one parent working full-time and one at home rather than two parents working full-time. The group most likely to feel this way is married women.

FIGURE 10. Only Upper Class Households Would Prefer Two Incomes and Paid Childcare

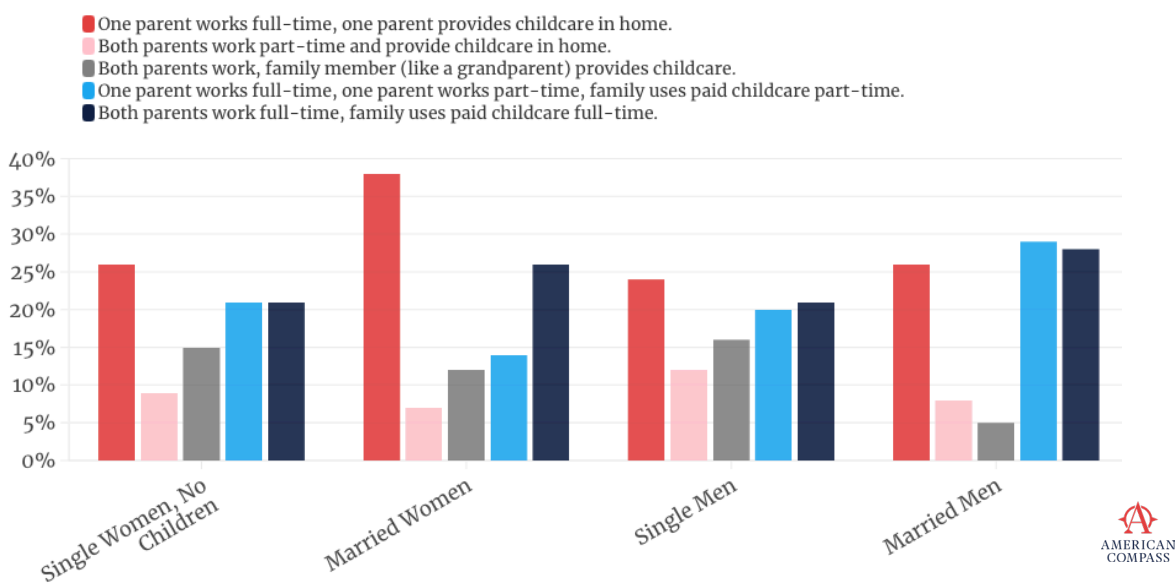
“Which arrangement for paid work and childcare do you think is best for your family while you have children under the age of 5?”



Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 961 Americans age 18-50. Note: Respondents without a child under the age of 5 were asked, “If you were to have a child in the near future, which arrangement for paid work and childcare do you think would be best for your family while you had children under the age of 5?”

FIGURE 11. Married Women Are Most Likely to Prefer a Stay-at-Home Parent

“Which arrangement for paid work and childcare do you think is best for your family while you have children under the age of 5?”

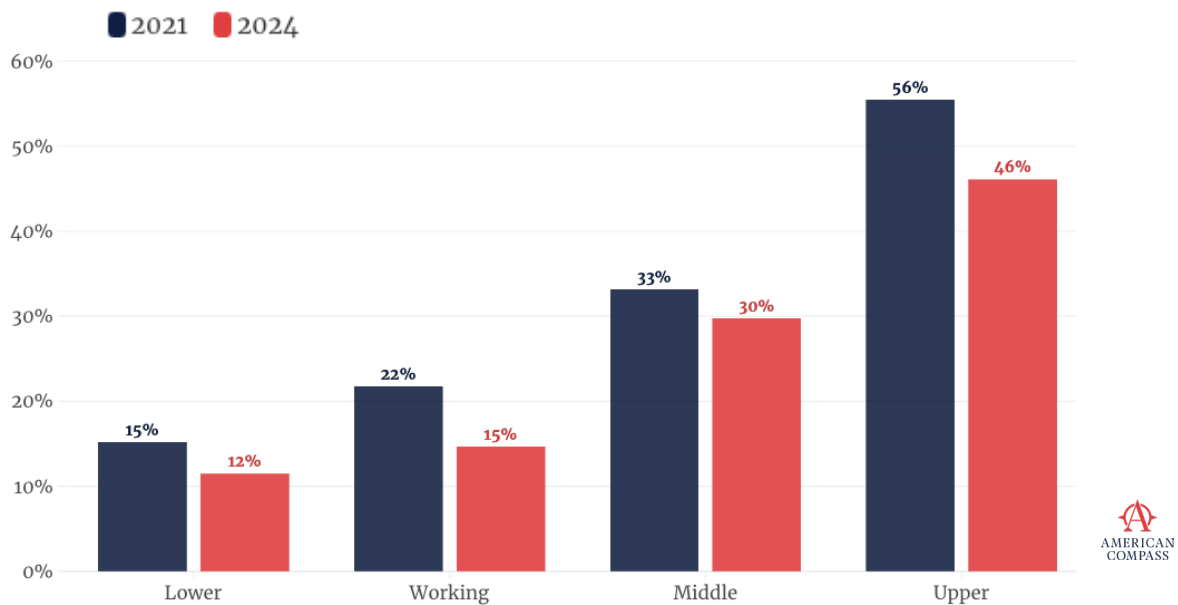


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 986 Americans age 18-50. Note: Respondents without a child under the age of 5 were asked, “If you were to have a child in the near future, which arrangement for paid work and childcare do you think would be best for your family while you had children under the age of 5?”

DEFINING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Underlying the economic distress felt by many American families is the sense that the American Dream has drifted further out of reach. While those of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to report that they are achieving the American Dream, that share has fallen significantly for every class.

FIGURE 12. The American Dream Deferred
Share responding “My family is living the American Dream”



Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 959 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,902 Americans age 18-50

Note: For respondents without children, options used “I am” instead of “My family is.” Other options were “my family is getting by, but we do not have the life we want” and “my family is struggling, and I am worried for our future.”

But what do Americans mean by the “American Dream”? Many analysts assume a definition along the lines of “better off than your parents” and, on those terms, most Americans would seem to be doing well—just look at the size of their televisions, and the seat-warmers in their cars. But that’s not how Americans see it.

Respondents were provided with eight “different parts of a person’s life that might contribute to achieving the American Dream” and asked to assign 100 points across those parts. “Giving all 20 points to one part would mean that it represented the entire American Dream. Giving the same number of points to two different parts would mean that they were equally important to the American Dream.” The eight options as well as “Other,” provided in random order, were:

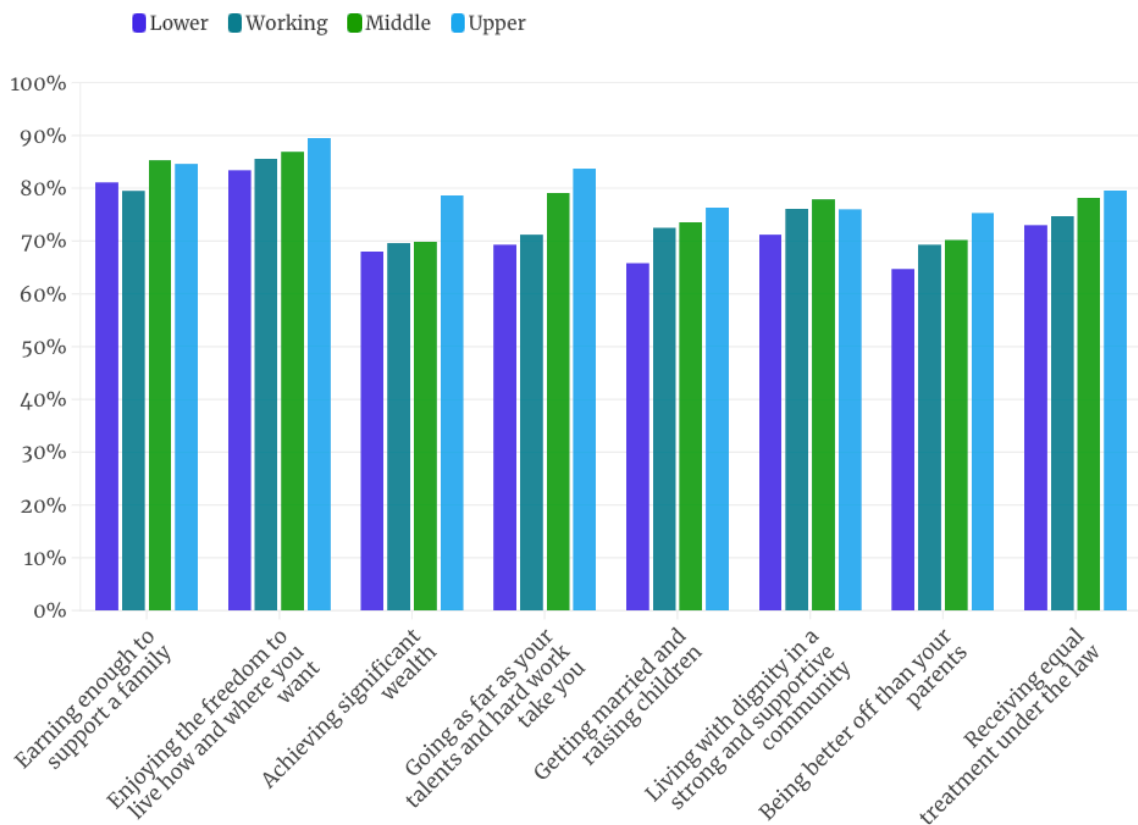
- Earning enough to support a family;
- Enjoying the freedom to live how and where you want;
- Achieving significant wealth;
- Going as far as your talents and hard work take you;

- Getting married and raising children;
- Living with dignity in a strong and supportive community;
- Being better off than your parents; and
- Receiving equal treatment under the law.

An initial, remarkable result is just how broad and widely varying are people’s definitions. Across classes, each option was chosen by at least two-thirds of respondents.

FIGURE 13. Americans Have Expansive Definitions of the American Dream

“Parts of a person’s life that might contribute to achieving the American Dream”

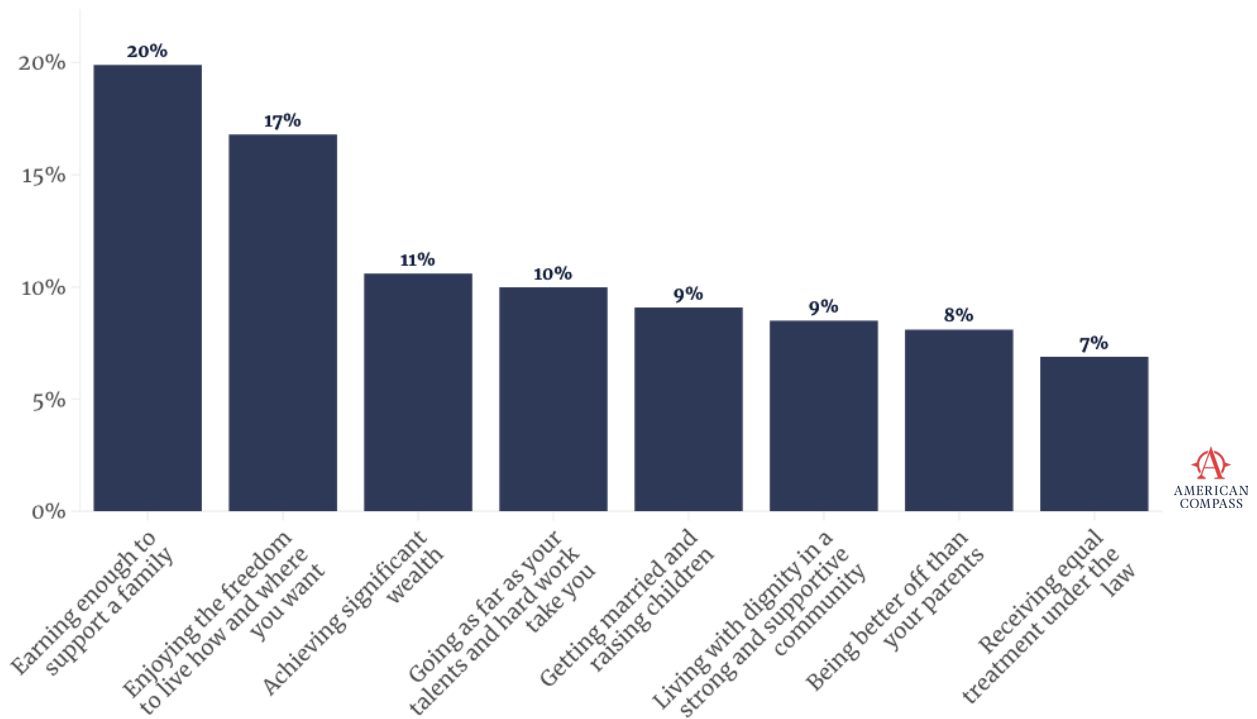


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 1,000 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Respondents were given 100 points to allocate across these eight categories as well as “Other.” Values are determined by respondents assigning at least one point to an option.

The picture becomes a bit clearer by focusing on the option to which a respondent assigned the *most* points. All options are still well represented, but “earning enough to support a family” emerges as the most popular choice, followed by “enjoying the freedom to live how and where you want.”

FIGURE 14. Americans Are Most Likely to Emphasize Supporting a Family and Freedom

“Parts of a person’s life that might contribute to achieving the American Dream”: Top Choice

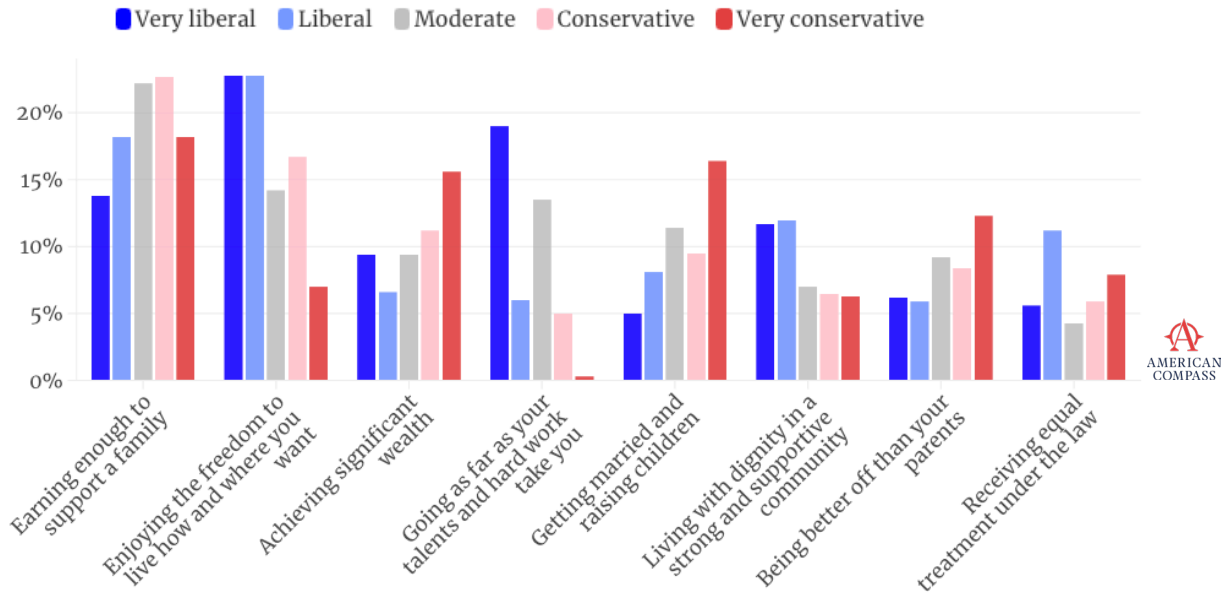


Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 638 Americans age 18-50
 Note: Excludes respondents who assigned equal value to two or more top choices.

Priorities vary across the ideological spectrum, with liberal Americans more likely to emphasize “freedom to live how and where you want” while moderate and conservative Americans are more likely to emphasize “earning enough to support a family.” Priorities also vary somewhat by class, but as with ideology the perspectives are widely scattered and indicate a lack of consensus or even strong trends in beliefs.

FIGURE 15. Liberal Americans Are Most Likely to See Freedom as Central to the American Dream

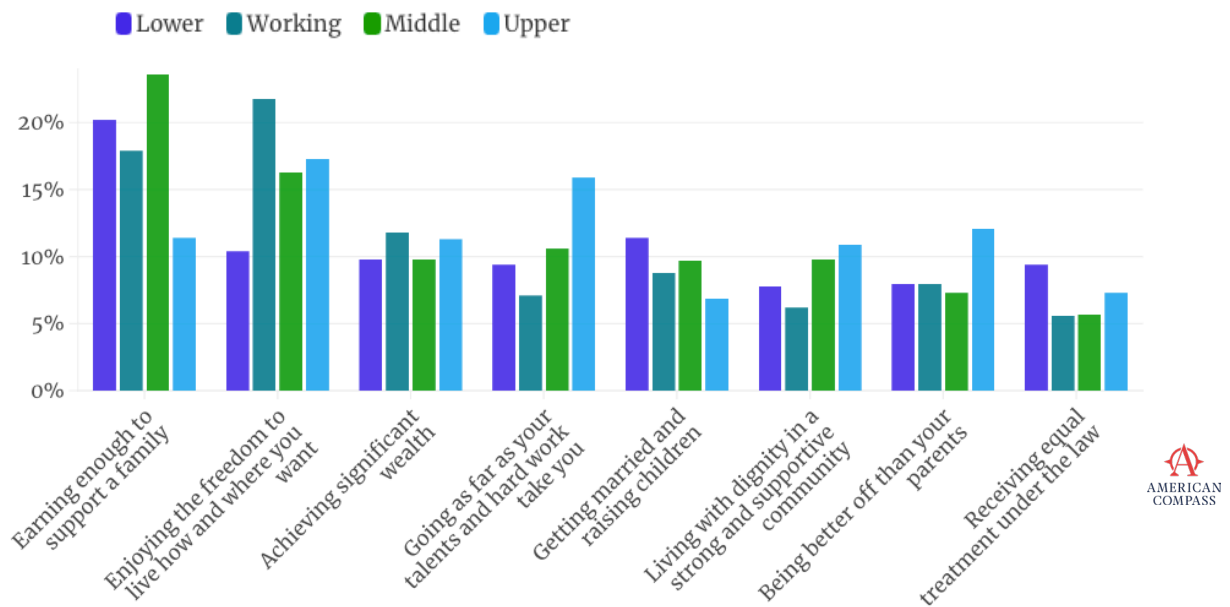
“Parts of a person’s life that might contribute to achieving the American Dream”: Top Choice



Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 558 Americans age 18-50. Note: Respondents were given 100 points to allocate across these eight categories as well as “Other.” Values are determined by respondents assigning at least one point to an option. Excludes respondents who assigned equal value to two or more top choices.

FIGURE 16. Upper Class Americans See the American Dream Differently

“Parts of a person’s life that might contribute to achieving the American Dream”: Top Choice



Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 613 Americans age 18-50. Note: Respondents were given 100 points to allocate across these eight categories as well as “Other.” Values are determined by respondents assigning at least one point to an option. Excludes respondents who assigned equal value to two or more top choices.

ABOUT THE DATA

The American Compass Family Survey was conducted by YouGov between November 21 and 28, 2023, with a representative sample of 1,000 Americans aged 18–50. YouGov interviewed 1,138 general population aged 18–50 who were then matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The sampling frame is a politically representative “modeled frame” of U.S. adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote.

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 propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, 2020 presidential vote choice and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The weights were then post-stratified on children under 18, 2020 presidential vote choice as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (four categories), race (four categories), and education (four categories), to produce the final weight.

In analysis of the results, “Class” is defined by education and income:

- “Lower” (N= 219): less than a four-year degree and household income below \$30K; or did not report household income and do not have a high school diploma.
- “Working” (N= 273): less than a four-year degree and household income \$30K–\$80K; or did not report household income and have either a high school diploma or some college but no degree.
- “Middle” (N= 351): four-year degree or more and household income \$30K–\$80K; or household income \$80K–\$150K; or did not report household income and have a two-year or four-year college degree.
- “Upper” (N= 118): household income above \$150K; or did not report household income and have a post-graduate degree.

Respondents with a four-year college degree or more but household income below \$30K are excluded from analyses using the “Class” variable (N= 39).

For more information about the 2021 data cited in this report, see the American Compass Home Building Survey, published in February 2021.



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