

Most Americans Want to Promote Marriage, Surveys Say, but Aren't Sure How
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Most Americans endorse the goals of marriage promotion programs but are uncertain about their methods, according to two new surveys. Encouraging marriage and family stability are the focus of several initiatives proposed by the Bush Administration and members of Congress, often with faith-based and community organizations as intended partners in such efforts.

"Marriage promotion is rife with controversy," said Ron Haskins, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, after hearing the results of a new national survey on marriage entitled, *With This Ring*. "Most Americans do not want government telling them to get married or participate in relationship counseling."

The survey, conducted by the National Fatherhood Initiative, a private nonprofit organization that advocates marriage and family values, did not attempt to assess public support for specific marriage programs, either now funded, or under debate, by the federal government. However, the poll did garner opinions about programs with strong educational and counseling components, such as those the government is promoting and supporting.

"They (the respondents) are supporting the goals of government programs rather than the means," said Norval Glenn, the University of Texas sociology professor who conducted the survey. A grant from the U.S. Department of Justice helped to pay for the findings.

A majority of those in the National Fatherhood Initiative survey showed strong support for marriage, with 94 percent saying divorce is a serious national problem. And nearly half -- 49 percent -- thought that premarital counseling should be required. Glenn said those who were older, or who identified themselves as being politically conservative, were more opposed to mandatory premarital counseling than those who were younger or who described themselves as being politically liberal.

A second survey, recently released by the PBS program *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, was more explicit on the question of government involvement in marriage promotion. That survey showed that 82 percent of respondents were against having the government involved in encouraging marriage.

"There is a sense that perhaps the government... should not be too involved in family life," said John C. Green, a University of Akron professor and senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, who participated in the poll.

"Many people would certainly like to see the ideal enshrined in the law about marriage, but they're not necessarily sure that they want the government telling people how to live their lives and what kinds of families they should be in."

"This disjunction, I think, is really very important, and it helps explain the politics that surrounds family values," Green added.

President George W. Bush launched his Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002 to promote marriage among low-income Americans as a way of fighting poverty and reducing the number of single-parent households. The federal government has awarded more than \$25 million in pro-marriage grants for demonstration projects, including grants to 42 faith-based and community organizations nationwide to build their capacity to deliver such programs. President Bush is seeking \$1.5 billion in federal money to support the initiative over the next five years.

One component of the current effort has hit a roadblock, however. In September 2004, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), a Minneapolis-based private research facility, was chosen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to house the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC). But two weeks ago, the group informed the government it was withdrawing from its \$900,000-a-year grant to serve as the national repository and central clearinghouse for the Healthy Marriage Initiative.

"It was a marriage that didn't work," said Pam Monroe, assistant graduate school dean at Louisiana State University and Acting President of NCFR.

Monroe announced the decision by the NCFR Board of Directors to withdraw from the project in a Nov. 2 letter to NCFR members and colleagues.

"A significant factor in the Board's decision to exit the cooperative agreement is the government's request that the NHMRC Website include a statement by President Bush and a picture of President and Mrs. Bush on the home page," the letter stated.

"The Board concluded that such a requirement has the appearance of overtly politicizing the project, and unacceptably risks NCFR's image and posture as a policy and education organization, rather than a political or partisanship organization which, among other things, is inconsistent with NCFR's tax exempt status."

In a telephone interview last week, Monroe said NCFR also had administrative difficulties meeting the terms of the grant, but that "the overtly political aspect finally caused it to unravel."

"Despite the best efforts, as some of the issues became more politicized to us, we felt we could not sustain our work in this project," she said.

Michael Benjamin, NCFR's executive director, said as the website was being developed over the past year, the federal government set out expectations that NCFR and its membership felt were constraints. He cited among them a government request to include research, papers and speeches about marriage on the website that had not met peer review and did not meet the scientific standards upheld by NCFR.

"The website sent out a different message," Benjamin said. "As academics, we were concerned about what that message was."

He said NCFR worked with five universities and one nonprofit organization to develop the website, spending almost all of its first year grant of \$900,000, as well as a small portion of the second year's grant, which was for the same amount. The overall grant provided potential funding of up to \$4.5 million to NCFR over five years.

Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for HHS Administration for Children and Families, said that his agency is now looking at options for launching the website, and whether it needs to contract with another organization to be the new clearinghouse.

"Clearly, we're committed to getting the website online," Horn said in a recent report by the Washington Times. "A lot of good work has been done. We'd like to find a way to preserve that good work and get that website online as quickly as possible." He said he considered a presidential picture and statement on the website to be appropriate.

Both surveys revealed a disconnect between Americans' perception and the realities of marriage, and a gap between behavior and belief.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, American family structures have undergone a major shift in the last 50 years. In the 2000 census, almost half of Americans lived in a home where the head of household was unmarried, compared to only 22 percent in 1950. Meanwhile, census data shows the number of unmarried couples living together increased tenfold from 1960 to 2000.

The surveys found that a majority of respondents idealize and support the traditional family even as divorce, cohabitation and nontraditional family structures are becoming more accepted, especially among religious groups. According to the Religion and Ethics Newsweekly survey, almost three quarters of all Americans agree that "God's plan for marriage is one man, one woman, for life."

But the growing acceptance of divorce is also occurring among all Americans, including religious conservatives. Only 34 percent of evangelical Christians and 30 percent of traditional Catholics say that divorce is a sin.

"Americans have become much, much more tolerant of deviations from that ideal," Green said. "I suspect that's because they experience those deviations -- that they themselves may have been in divorce, or may have been involved in other kinds of nontraditional families -- and they certainly know an awful lot of people, and may even be related to a lot of people, who have those different kinds of family structures."

"This shows up in the politics of family values in an interesting way," Green concluded.