

Marriage and Relationships

Blended Families Have Made It to the White House (And That's Not a Bad Thing)

When we share common family traits, we will better relate to each other and push policies forward to help all American families.

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By Jeffery M. Leving

Politicians in Washington, D.C., are frequently criticized for being unable to relate to regular Americans. However, since presidential candidates from both major political parties knit blended families together after divorce, regular Americans may be able to relate to them a bit more.

And it's not just the two most recent presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. According to nationally recognized Chicago-based divorce lawyer Arthur S. Kallow, a litigation director with my law firm, more than two dozen members of Congress are now stepparents. This comes almost half a century after divorce began to cause major shifts in many American families.

Divorced and blended families are now so common that they've become a significant part of popular culture — featured in shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Ted Lasso*, and *The Bear*, among others. Our biggest celebrities, such as Ben Affleck and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who might have been scandalized a generation ago by divorce, do not suffer any damage in the public eye after experiencing what has become a fact of life for so many.

Regarding our most recent presidential candidates, Harris is a child of divorce and now has a blended family that includes her husband, Doug Emhoff, and her stepchildren, Cole and Ella. Trump has been divorced twice and has five children who are half-siblings to one another. I've been divorced myself.

This matches up with most adult Americans, as approximately 43% of first marriages end in divorce. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the rate is higher for second marriages, with 60% of those ending in divorce. In the past, a divorce was considered by some to be shameful, a failure, but with more divorces came the realization that it is just a fact of life for many. Divorce can be a healthier alternative, especially if children are involved, rather than remaining in a bad marriage.

Previously, divorce had been viewed as a negative for politicians. For example, Nelson Rockefeller's divorce and subsequent remarriage are thought by some to have been a big reason for his 1964 presidential bid failure. Today, nearly one in six children lives in a blended household with stepparents, step-siblings, or half-siblings, according to the Pew Research Center, and 78% of people believe single-parent households are acceptable.

Before Trump, Ronald Reagan was the only president who had ever been divorced. Still, even as recently as 2008, divorce was an issue with the press, as John McCain's first marriage to Carol McCain was the source of media attention. It should also be noted that former President Joe Biden has a blended family, but not from divorce. His first wife, Neilia, passed away, and his second wife, former First Lady Jill Biden, is stepmother to the late Beau Biden and his brother, Hunter, and her biological daughter, Ashley Biden, is their half-sister.

The point is that the traditional nuclear family is now the minority in America and has been for some time, with even our leading politicians having blended families. This is not a bad thing. Empathy is easier to come by when we can relate to each other, not just by imagining, but by living a similar reality.

Not surprisingly, both 2024 candidates sought to appeal to nuclear and blended American families. On the right, Republicans are pushing for a return to the traditional family structure as a solution for social ills, like declining birth rates, student achievement, and crime. On the left, Democrats are promoting a vision of families that includes same-sex couples, blended families, adoptive families, and single parents or grandparents.

Every type of family arrangement has pros and cons, and thus, politicians can and will cherry-pick what they see as the positives and negatives about blended families to sell their particular issues and critique their opponents' platforms. How one interprets these pitches about blended families may well depend on which party they support and whether they themselves share similar traits or not.

It was interesting to see how voters in blended families voted in November. The fact that both most recent presidential candidates, along with many in Congress, shared traits with the majority of American families is not a bad thing, but a good thing. It gives us hope because when we share common family traits, we will better relate to each other and push policies forward to help all American families.

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