

# A Conjoint Survey Experiment on Childbearing Preferences in the United States

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## Abstract

To better understand the relative weight given by American women to childbearing preferences in contemporary family life, as well as the factors that influence childbearing preferences, Behrman, Marshall, and Keusch conduct an online conjoint survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,785 American women (ages 18–35). In the experiment, respondents view two family scenarios, each comprising randomly varied attributes related to: (1) number of children, (2) extent of sharing of housework and childcare, (3) time intensity of career, (4) existence of family policies, (5) financial stability, and (6) partnership status. Contrary to the researchers' hypothesis predicting that the two-child family would be given high priority, findings provide evidence that a two-child norm may not be as robust as conventional surveys suggest. They find strong evidence that preferred number of children significantly differed by financial stability and marital status in ways consistent with theories that emphasize the importance of financial instability and the symbolic importance of marriage for fertility preferences, and they find some evidence for theories supporting the importance of gender equity to fertility preferences. Their discussion contextualizes these results as part of a broader discussion of whether there has been a de-institutionalization of childbearing in the contemporary U.S.

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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, childbearing in the United States has been characterized by a “two-child norm,” or the idea that a family with two children is normatively preferable (Hagewen and Morgan 2005). In recent years, however, there has been an increasing divergence between Americans’ reported ideal family size, which has remained relatively stable at an average of about 2.5 children (Behrman 2023b), and the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which fell below two children per childbearing person in 2010 and has consistently declined ever since (Osterman et al. 2021). In Europe, a divergence between ideal and realized fertility has existed for longer (Hagewen and Morgan 2005; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014), but the U.S. has until recently been exceptional in maintaining relatively high total fertility rates that are similar to ideal fertility.

Making sense of changing fertility dynamics in the United States necessitates a better understanding of childbearing preferences and the two-child norm. Continuing preferences for a two-child family, represented in survey responses to questions about ideal or desired family size, may be real, but such preferences may not be a high priority for all who report them—much is unknown about the extent to which, and circumstances under which, other preferences take precedence over having two children, as opposed to people arranging other aspects of their lives to make it possible to have two children. Understanding more about the relative weight given to preferences for two-child families and the two-child norm is particularly relevant as norms about other key family institutions—such as marriage—have become increasingly de-institutionalized, or optional, flexible, less universally practiced, and defined by a weakened set of social norms (Cherlin 2004; Robbins, Dechter, and Kornrich 2022). To explore whether childbearing is undergoing a similar process of de-institutionalization, we must examine not only ideals or

desires, but the tradeoffs people are willing to make when their ideals come into conflict with each other or with the social and material contexts of their lives.

Further unpacking fertility change requires a better understanding of when and why American women adjust their childbearing preferences. Although fertility preferences have long been integrated into European debates on gender, work, and family (Goldstein, Lutz, and Testa 2003; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014), they have been surprisingly underrepresented in the U.S. scholarship. While a large literature documents trends in fertility ideals, desires, and expectations in the United States (Guzzo, Hayford, and Lang 2019; Hagewen and Morgan 2005; Hayford 2009), this scholarship typically does not explore how fertility preferences change in response to competing work, family, and financial demands. Meanwhile, a separate (but equally expansive) literature explores how competing work, family, and financial demands inform family life (Budig and England 2001; Collins 2019; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007), but does not look at how this shapes reproductive preferences.

To better understand how American women weigh childbearing in relation to work, family, and financial constraints, we conduct an online conjoint survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,785 American women ages 18-35. Each participant views a pair of family scenarios and asked to choose the scenario they prefer, repeating this process five times with different pairs of scenarios. Each family scenario contains a randomly assigned combination of attributes: number of children, division of care and housework, time intensity of career, family policy, financial stability, and partnership status. In doing so, our experiment tests two main hypotheses, described below: One related to the weight given to childbearing preferences, relative to other preferences (Hypothesis 1) and one about factors affecting childbearing preferences (Hypothesis 2). (Full hypotheses are in Appendix A.3.)

Conjoint survey experiments have been widely used in the social sciences as a way of assessing respondents' preferences and the ways in which respondents make choices given a multidimensional set of options (Flores and Schachter 2018; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Peterson 2017; Schachter 2016). Forced-choice conjoint survey design allows estimation of the relative importance of multiple factors (attributes) in choosing a preferred scenario, making it the ideal method to better understand how tradeoffs are considered in reported fertility preferences. The interactive quality of the paired forced choice design also promotes respondent engagement and attention (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). Conjoint experiments are thought to lower social desirability bias by providing respondents with cover in the form of additional attributes for providing a potentially sensitive response (Schachter 2016); our study design reduces social desirability bias by including childbearing preferences as one attribute of several in a choice between family scenarios, rather than presenting respondents with a family scenario and asking how many children they would prefer under those conditions. This design means that we do not estimate mean preferred family size under specific conditions; what we observe is how likely respondents are overall to prefer different family scenarios, in absolute terms. We next describe our research hypotheses in more detail and then provide additional information about our experimental approach.

### **The Priority of Childbearing in the United States (Hypothesis 1)**

In the American context, children have been historically seen as a central component of family life and an important marker of transitions to adulthood (Casper and Bianchi 2001). Between the 1970s and early 2000s, both ideal and realized fertility remained relatively high in

the United States: In contrast to many other high-income countries in Europe and East Asia where fertility fell below “replacement level” (about two children per childbearing person), the total fertility rate (TFR) in the US stayed above two (Hagewen and Morgan 2005). However, since 2008, fertility in the United States has declined every year (Osterman et al. 2021). Despite declines in TFR, ideal family sizes have remained stable between two and three across races and ethnicities in the General Social Survey (GSS) (Behrman 2023b) and recent social crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—have had little impact on statements about ideal family size (Behrman 2023a). Intended fertility has also stayed at or above two children for all age groups and racial and ethnic groups observed in the National Survey of Family Growth, although there was a small decrease in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Hartnett and Gemmill 2020). Both ideal and intended family size remain at about two children, even when recent waves of the GSS and NSFG are limited to women ages 18-35, the age range in our sample (Appendix A, Figures A.1 and A.2). This stability in ideal and intended family sizes indicates that American women’s preferences continue to reflect a two-child norm in numeric statements about fertility ideals and intentions.

Although available evidence points to stability in numeric statements about family size preferences, we know very little about the relative weight given to childbearing preferences in Americans’ conceptions of family today. Although in the past, a strong two-child norm has been reflected both in reported preferences and in behavior, it is possible that this is changing, either because other preferences are gaining strength, relative to the two-child norm, or because other priorities are less compatible with two-child families due to economic insecurity, the structure of work, or other factors. Our first hypothesis thus focuses on the relative weight given to childbearing in the U.S. context. *We hypothesize that childbearing will be the strongest predictor*

of young adult women's preferred family scenarios (**H1a**), and that women will prefer families with two children (compared to zero, one, three, or four children) (**H1b**), reflecting an enduring two-child norm (see Appendix A.3 for complete hypotheses). Lack of support for this hypothesis would provide evidence for a process of "de-institutionalization" (Cherlin 2004) in which childbearing is becoming optional, flexible, and contingent, as proposed by some theories of demographic change (Lesthaeghe 2014). If this is the case, the U.S. may be following the European pattern of long-term divergence between higher ideal and lower realized fertility. Alternatively, it could be that lower realized fertility in the U.S. will lead to long-term changes to lower fertility preferences, as some have predicted (Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa 2006).

## **Factors Affecting Fertility Preferences (Hypothesis 2)**

There is a long held consensus among demographers that fertility preferences change dynamically in response to different life circumstances (Bulatao 1981; Freedman, Coombs, and Bumpass 1965; Lee 1980; Udry 1983; Westoff and Ryder 1977). For example, people's preferences about childbearing vary systematically with changes in partnership status, changes in educational or occupation status, and the birth or death of an offspring (Hayford 2009; Heiland, Prskawetz, and Sanderson 2008; Liefbroer 2009; Sennott and Yeatman 2012; Smith-Greenaway and Sennott 2016; Yeatman, Sennott, and Culpepper 2013). Starting from the premise that childbearing preferences are dynamic, our *second hypothesis (H2)* is that women's childbearing preferences will be negatively affected by work, family, and financial constraints in ways that are consistent with three non-mutually-exclusive perspectives: gender equity and fertility (perspective 1), financial instability and fertility (perspective 2), and the symbolic importance of marriage (perspective 3).

### *Perspective 1: Gender Equity and Fertility*

Theories of gender equity and fertility suggest that high levels of gender inequality in the family, increasing gender equity in the labor market, and lack of family policies that equalize care burdens corresponds with low fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015; McDonald 2000, 2006). Specifically, this perspective suggests that women adjust childbearing preferences downwards when faced with time-intensive careers and unequal division of care within the home. These theories also suggest that family policies that help alleviate unequal care burdens—such as paternal leave, subsidized early childhood care, or flexible work schedules—can help reduce the tension between women’s roles as workers in the labor force and caregivers, creating conditions that facilitate higher fertility.

As a case study, the United States exemplifies a situation where expectations for women outside of the home have come into conflict with unequal care burdens inside the home, described by some scholars as an “unfinished” or “stalled” gender revolution (England 2010; Gerson 2011). Though women’s labor force participation has increased dramatically over time, so that full-time work is now the norm for women (BLS 2023), and women increasingly outpace men in higher education (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Goldin 2006; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006), there remain high levels of inequality in the gender division of unpaid care work within the home (Sayer 2005; Schaeffer 2019). Furthermore, family policy aimed at equalizing or alleviating care burdens remains extremely limited (Collins 2019), which has been cited as a factor in the endurance of unequal care burdens. For example, experimental research in the US suggests that young women are much more likely to prefer the sharing of household care work compared to gender-based specialization when generous family policies are in place (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).



Survey research shows Americans increasingly report preferring households characterized by an egalitarian division of labor, as opposed to more traditional gender-based specialization (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). Drawing on theories of gender equity and fertility outlined above, *we hypothesize that for each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios where respondents equally share care and household work, compared to family scenarios where respondents either do most of the care and household work themselves, or have a partner who does most of the care and household work (H2a. Division of care)*. Because prior research indicates that shared housework and care work is the ideal of many young, unmarried US adults, we predict that sharing will be preferred to one's partner doing most of this work (Gerson 2011; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

Due to the difficulties in combining long work hours and family life, we predict full-time work (40 hours a week) will be preferred to 60-hour-a-week work. Yet, career comprises a central component of identity in the United States today, and an 'ideal worker' norm associated with a 40-hour work week is long established, in addition to being important for family financial security (Minnotte and Minnotte 2021; Williams 2001). Thus, we also hypothesize that full-time work (40 hours a week) will be preferred to part-time work (25 hours a week) or no work. More specifically, *we hypothesize that for each category of childbearing (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios in which respondents work average-intensity hours (40 hours a week), compared to high-intensity hours (60 hours a week), part time work (25 hours a week), or not working (H2b. Time intensity of career)*.

A key implication of theories of gender inequality and fertility is that family policies that help alleviate care burdens can help reduce the tension between women's roles as workers and caregivers, creating the conditions that allow for higher fertility (McDonald 2000). *We hypothesize that for each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios in which generous family policy is available, compared to scenarios with moderate or no family policy (H2c. Family policy).*

#### *Perspective 2: Financial Instability and Fertility*

Financial instability has been hypothesized to negatively impact childbearing across diverse contexts (Adsera 2011; Fahlén and Oláh 2018; Goldstein et al. 2013; Hofmann and Hohmeyer 2013; Kreyenfeld 2010; Mills and Blossfeld 2013). The financial instability perspective coalesces with the theoretical perspective of the Narrative Framework (Vignoli et al. 2020), which highlights the role of subjective interpretations and imaginaries of the future in linking material conditions to fertility preferences and behavior. Empirical evidence from the U.S. supports a link between financial instability and fertility. For example, Schneider (2015) shows that economic hardship and uncertainty around the Great Recession had a negative effect on fertility in the U.S. Likewise, Seltzer (2019) documents a link between prolonged financial uncertainty in the U.S. due to structural changes in the U.S. labor market and ongoing fertility decline, thus providing an explanation for why fertility in the U.S. never rebounded after the Great Recession. Brauner-Otto and Geist (2018) also show that both objective and subjective conditions of economic uncertainty correspond with more uncertainty about future childbearing plans in the U.S. Drawing on the financial instability and fertility perspective, *we hypothesize that for each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability*

*of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios where respondents are highly financially stable compared to moderately stable or financially struggling (H2d. Financial stability).*

### *Perspective 3: Symbolic Importance of Marriage*

Scholars have found that marriage continues to be a highly valued social institution in the United States among Americans of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cherlin 2020; Edin and Kefalas 2011; Rackin and Gibson-Davis 2017). In his influential article on the de-institutionalization of marriage, Cherlin argues: “Although the practical importance of being married has declined, its symbolic importance has remained high, and may even have increased” (Cherlin 2004:848). Yet, the age at first marriage has been rising due to financial instability (Gibson-Davis, Gassman-Pines, and Lehrman 2018; Santos and Weiss 2016), longer educational trajectories (Cherlin 2010), changing marriage markets (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2019), and ideational change favoring individual self-fulfillment above the initiation of family (Lesthaeghe 2014). The high symbolic value of marriage coupled with delays in transitions to marriage could lead to low fertility if people wait until marriage to start childbearing.

While Americans with higher socio-economic status (SES) continue to have children within the context of marriage, non-marital childbearing is much more common among lower SES Americans (Cherlin 2010), so we might expect these results to vary by SES. Nonetheless, many lower SES women report preference for marital childbearing even if this is not a realistic possibility in their own lives (Edin and Kefalas 2011), thus it is also possible that women will prefer childbearing in the context of marriage regardless of SES. Drawing on the symbolic importance of marriage perspective, *we hypothesize that for each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will*

*be significantly higher for scenarios where respondents are married compared to scenarios where respondents are unmarried or cohabiting (H2e. Marital status).*

The three perspectives that guide our hypotheses are not mutually exclusive; the processes they describe may co-occur. Taken together, we believe the attributes in our family scenarios represent many of the major categories of work, family, and financial constraints that contemporary Americans balance when making decisions about childbearing. However, there are additional potential attributes, representing additional life circumstances, that we intentionally exclude from the experiment (described in Appendix B); we limit the number of attributes to avoid overwhelming respondents (Auspurg & Hinz 2014).

## **Data**

Our experiment was selected by the Time-Sharing Experiments in the Social Science (TESS) program to be fielded as part of the AmeriSpeak online panel run by NORC at the University of Chicago between September and October of 2023. The AmeriSpeak panel is a high-quality nationally representative multi-client household panel that has been collected since 2015 by NORC at the University of Chicago. Of 1,794 completed surveys, we excluded nine respondents for skipping questions. Our final sample thus consists of 1,785 US-based female-identified respondents ages 18-35. All analyses employ sampling weights generated by NORC that take into account probability of selection into the sample, nonresponse adjustments, and poststratification adjustments to match population benchmarks. The weighted sample is nationally representative of women of this age group in terms of education, race, and region. Table 1 presents weighted and unweighted sample characteristics.

We focus on women because they continue to do the majority of family care work in the United States (World Economic Forum 2022) and thus face great constraints balancing work,

family, and financial lives. Our sample is limited to ages 18-35. Consistent with many studies of fertility preferences, we limited our sample to women of reproductive age; we further narrowed the age range to reduce heterogeneity by age as much as allowable in the AmeriSpeak panel.

The unit of observation in the study is pairs of family scenarios and each respondent evaluates 5 pairs of family scenarios (or 10 family scenarios in total), so our sample of 1,785 respondents generates 8,925 paired evaluations or 17,850 evaluations in total. This sample size is consistent with other paired forced choice conjoint survey experiments where respondents evaluated a similar number of scenarios and attributes (e.g., Flores and Schachter 2018; Schachter 2016).

## **Methods**

To test our research hypotheses, we conduct a forced choice paired conjoint online survey experiment. In our survey experiment, respondents view two family scenarios, each comprising six categories of randomly varied attributes: number of children, division of care and housework, time intensity of career, family policy, financial stability, and partnership status. The complete list of attributes and values appears in the Measures section, below. Respondents are asked to choose which of the two scenarios they would personally prefer. (See Appendix A.4 for an example of the screen respondents view). The prompt does not refer to a particular period of the life course, because referencing a specific period of the life course might introduce bias, given respondent differences in personal expectations and experiences about when and how key life course events should occur. Furthermore, our wording that does not specify timing is more consistent with standard survey questions on ideal or desired family size, which similarly do not condition on a particular stage of the life course.

All possible combinations of values of attributes are randomly assigned, with one

exception: To prevent impossible combinations of attributes, in scenarios with the marital status “single,” options for the care and household work attribute that involve sharing work with a partner are not given. (See Appendix B for more details.) We discuss the implications of these restrictions for interpretation of results in the section on sensitivity analyses. The order in which attributes were presented randomly varies between respondents, though remains constant within respondents. Attributes were chosen to correspond with the three main perspectives under study about why people adjust their childbearing (see Appendices A.3 & B for further details).

Our survey instrument was finalized following a process of rigorous pre-testing. In November 2022 we conducted 10 in-depth cognitive interviews with respondents of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds to assess and refine the survey instrument. In December of 2022, we conducted a pilot using a sample from the Dynata non-probability online panel consisting of 5,088 observations from 424 female respondents ages 18-35. The section on sensitivity analyses contains a brief summary of the pilot results; main results are given in Appendix C, Table C.2.

To test **hypothesis 1** (*relative weight given to childbearing preferences*), the estimand of interest is the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) (Hainmueller et al. 2014). According to Hainmueller and colleagues, the AMCE “represents the marginal effect of [an] attribute... averaged over the joint distribution of the remaining attributes” (10). Because attributes are randomized across scenarios, we can calculate the independent effect of each attribute (e.g., childbearing preference, financial stability etc.) on the dependent variable (preferred family scenario), net of the joint distribution of the other randomized attributes (Hainmueller et al. 2014). For example, the AMCE of childbearing preference can be conceptualized as the independent effect of number of children on the probability the family

scenario will be chosen, net of career intensity, financial stability, marital status, etc. Linear probability models with robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level are used to account for the fact that each respondent evaluates five pairs of scenarios.

The conjoint design allows us to compare the magnitude of each attribute's effect on preferred family scenario (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Thus, to assess **H1a** (*childbearing as the strongest predictor of preferred family*), we compare the magnitudes of the childbearing coefficients to the magnitude of the coefficients of the other attributes to assess their relative importance in predicting preferred family scenario. To assess **H1b** (*preference for two-child families*), we look at whether the AMCEs of preference for zero, one, three, or four children are significantly lower than preference for two children in predicting preferred family scenario. To test **H2** (*factors influencing childbearing preferences*), we calculate the Average Component Interaction Effect (ACIE) (Hainmueller et al. 2014) by interacting the family size attribute with other attributes. More specifically, to test the gender equity and fertility perspective we look at the interaction between childbearing and division of care and housework (**H2a**); time intensity of career (**H2b**); and family policies (**H2c**), to test the financial instability and fertility perspective we explore the interaction between childbearing and financial stability (**H2d**), and to examine the symbolic importance of marriage perspective we look at the interaction between childbearing and marital status (**H2e**).

## Measures

*Dependent variable:* The dependent variable in the analysis is a binary indicator of preferred family scenario. Preferred family scenario—rather than number of children—is the main outcome, because in the first part of the analysis we are interested in assessing the relative

importance of number of children compared to the other attributes in the study (e.g. financial stability, career intensity etc.) in predicting preferred family scenario and in the second part of the analysis we are interested in exploring whether the effect of number of children on preferred family scenario varies depending on the value of other attributes.

*Attributes:* The six attributes in the family scenarios conform with the theoretical perspectives described in the literature review and elaborated upon in Appendices A and B. Reference categories in empirical analyses correspond with our main hypotheses—so, for example, since our childbearing hypothesis is focused on the two-child norm, we use two children as the reference category.

*Childbearing:* Indicators for having zero, one, two, three, and four children (two children is the reference category).

*Division of care and housework:* Indicators for equally sharing all care work and housework with a partner, doing most of the care work and housework oneself, and a partner doing most of the care work and housework (sharing is the reference category).

*Time intensity of career:* Indicators for working 60 hours a week, 40 hours a week, 25 hours a week, and not having a job (40 hours a week is the reference category).

*Family policy:* Indicators for generous family policy (“parents receive lots of support: affordable childcare, 6 months of paid parental leave, flexible work, and generous sick leave”), moderate family policy (“there is a tax credit that sends families a monthly payment of \$300 per child”) and minimal family policy (left blank to simulate the respondent’s status quo in the U.S., i.e., no federally mandated paid family leave, usually minimal or no benefits at the local level) (generous family policy is the reference category).



*Financial stability:* Indicators for high financial stability (“your household has plenty extra after you pay your bills each month”), moderate financial stability (“your household has just enough to pay your bills each month”), low financial stability (“Your household struggles to pay your bills each month”) (high financial stability is the reference category).

*Marital status:* Indicators for married, single, and cohabitating (married is the reference category).

*Background controls:* One advantage of our experimental approach is that randomization should eliminate the influence of respondent background characteristics on calculation of the AMCE. Nonetheless, all models include controls for key respondent background characteristics including parity (zero, one, two, three, or four or more children); race and ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, Other); age (18-25, 26-30, 31-35); and education (less than high school degree, high school degree or equivalent, some college, Bachelor’s degree). Supplementary analyses (available upon request) show that results are robust to the inclusion and exclusion of background characteristics in models and to alternative specifications of age categories.

*Additional controls:* All models control for the order in which the attributes were presented (which is constant within respondents but varies between respondents) and the time spent on each pair of conjoint questions.

## **Results**

### **H1. Relative weight given to childbearing preferences**

In H1a we predict that childbearing will be the strongest predictor of young adult women’s preferred family scenario: specifically, that the AMCEs of preferences for zero, one, three, or four children (compared to the reference category of two children) will be significantly

larger in absolute magnitude than the AMCEs of other attributes (relative to their reference categories) in predicting preferred family scenario. Figure 1 presents estimates of the AMCEs on preferred family scenario, which shows the independent effect of each attribute on the probability of preferring a given family scenario. Table 2 contains these regression coefficients.

Figure 1 yields a clear finding: Contrary to H1a, the magnitudes of the childbearing coefficients are not significantly larger in absolute magnitude than the AMCEs of other attributes in predicting preferred family scenario. Most notably, the magnitudes of childbearing coefficients are significantly smaller than those of the coefficient for financial instability (“struggling to pay bills”) in predicting preferred family scenario. The coefficients for zero, one, and three children (relative to two) are also significantly smaller in magnitude than the single and cohabiting (relative to married) coefficients, 60-hour work week (relative to 40-hour) coefficient, and moderate financial stability (relative to high stability) coefficient. In most other cases, the childbearing coefficients are not significantly different than the coefficients of other non-financial attributes. Yet, even this finding is surprising, given our initial hypothesis that childbearing would be viewed as much more important than, for example, care and housework arrangements in predicting people’s preferred family scenarios.

In H1b, we predict that women in our sample will prefer families with two children (compared to zero, one, three, or four children), reflecting the endurance of a two-child norm. On one hand, we find support for preferring two over four children, with a 10 percentage-point lower probability of preferring a family scenario with four children compared to two children ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Table 1). On the other hand, we did not find evidence that two children were preferred over zero, one, or three children: respondents had between 1 and 3 percentage point lower probabilities of preferring a family scenario with zero, one, or three children compared to

two children, but none of these coefficients was statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Thus, while we find evidence that respondents strongly prefer two-child families compared to four-child families, we find little evidence in support of preference for two-child families compared to zero, one, or three-child families in this nationally representative sample.

Table 1 also provides valuable information about other dimensions of respondents' preferred family scenarios. Most notably, financial stability emerges as a particularly important predictor of preferred family scenario: struggling financially is associated with a 33-percentage point lower probability of preferring a family scenario compared to having plenty extra money ( $p < 0.001$ ) and having just enough money is associated with a 13-percentage point lower probability of preferring a family scenario compared to having plenty extra money ( $p < 0.001$ ). Respondents also strongly preferred married family scenarios: Being single is associated with a 15-percentage point lower probability of preferring a family scenario compared to being married ( $p < 0.001$ ) and cohabitation is associated with a 9-percentage point lower probability of preferring a family scenario compared to being married ( $p < 0.001$ ). (As discussed in the section on sensitivity analyses below, additional analyses suggest that the effects of marital status single are not due to the restrictions in randomization of the care and housework attribute.) In addition, respondents preferred family scenarios characterized by sharing of care and housework compared to specialization by either spouse, a 40-hour work week relative to no work or a 60-hour work week, and generous family policy compared to moderate family policy or no family policy. There was no significant difference between 40-hour and 25-hour work weeks in predicting preferred family scenarios.

## **H2. Factors affecting childbearing preferences**

As a next step, we explore H2: that childbearing preferences will be negatively affected by work, family, and financial constraints in ways that are consistent with three (non-mutually exclusive) perspectives: gender equity and fertility; financial instability and fertility; and the symbolic importance of marriage.

First, to explore the gender equity and fertility perspective we interact the childbearing preference (or number of children) attribute with the division of care and housework, career intensity, and family policy attributes. To ease interpretation, we present the predicted probabilities of preferring families with different numbers of children at different levels of the attribute in question (these are generated following regression with interaction terms). These results represent absolute, not relative, probabilities of selecting a family scenario with the given combinations of attributes, controlling for other attributes. Figure 2 is grouped by number of children in the family scenario; each subgroup of a panel (separated by vertical red dashed lines) represents the predicted probabilities of preferring family scenarios with a given number of children, by different values of the other attribute in the interaction.

The nature of the paired forced-choice design—in which the respondent had to decide between two scenarios—means that the average probability of being preferred is 0.5 (indicated by the black horizontal dashed line in Figure 2). Note that predicted probabilities do not add up to 1 in conjoint experiments, because respondents may have multiple levels of an attribute that are considered important across different scenarios or because respondents do not have consistent preferences evaluating different attributes across different scenarios. Attribute levels are considered significantly less likely than average to be preferred if estimates and their confidence intervals (CIs) fall below 0.5 and are significantly more likely than average to be

preferred if estimates and their CIs fall above 0.5. Point estimates are considered significantly different from each other when the confidence intervals of two point estimates do not overlap.

We start with the interaction between number of children and division of care and housework (H2a). As panel a of Figure 2, shows, the predicted probability of preferring family scenarios with any given number of children (zero, one, two, three, or four) is significantly higher when care and housework are equally shared than when the respondent does most of the housework. On the other hand, preference for sharing is not significantly different than preference for a partner doing most of the care and housework in predicting preferred family scenario. Thus, the primary distinction of relevance for predicting preferred childbearing appears to be whether or not the respondent herself specializes in care and housework.

Next, we turn to the interaction between number of children and career intensity (H2b). As panel b of Figure 2 shows, the predicted probability of preferring a family scenario with any given number of children (zero, one, two, three, or four) is significantly higher when the respondent works full time (a 40-hour week) or part time (a 25-hour week) compared to overtime (a 60-hour week), though there is no significant difference between full and part-time work. For one, two, or three-child families, the predicted probability of preferring a family scenario is also significantly higher when the respondent works full time (a 40-hour week) compared to not working, which may be due to the prevalence of the “ideal worker” norm in the U.S. (except for the case of four-child families, which presumably bring larger family responsibilities).

To test H2c, we look at the interaction between number of children and family policies (Figure 2, panel c). For scenarios with zero children, predicted probabilities do not significantly differ depending on policy condition, which makes sense because family policies primarily benefit those with children. However, for one-child family scenarios, the predicted probabilities

of preferring a family scenario also do not significantly differ depending on policy conditions. In contrast, for scenarios with two, three, or four-child families, the predicted probability of preferring a scenario is significantly higher when generous family policies are in place, compared to no family policy. Likewise, the predicted probability of preferring a two or four-child family is significantly higher when moderate family policies are in place compared to no policies. Yet, there is no significant difference between generous and moderate family policies in predicting preferred scenarios for any given number of children.

Next, we turn to the financial instability and fertility perspective and examine the interaction between number of children and financial stability (H2d). Figure 2, panel d shows a clear pattern across the board: For any given number of children, the predicted probability of preferring a family scenario is significantly higher and quite a bit larger in magnitude when the household is highly financially stable (“has plenty extra”) compared to moderately financially stable (“has just enough money”) or financially unstable (“struggle to pay bills”). Likewise, the predicted probability of preferring a scenario is also significantly higher when the household is moderately financially stable compared to financially unstable, for any given number of children. Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that preferences significantly differ depending on financial stability, regardless of family size.

Finally, to test the symbolic importance of marriage perspective (H2e) we look at the interaction between number of children and marital status. For zero-child family scenarios, the predicted probability of preferring a scenario does not significantly differ by marital status, which suggests that preferences about partnership status are not strong for those without children. On the other hand, for scenarios with one, two, or three children, the predicted probability of preferring a scenario is significantly higher and quite a bit larger in magnitude for

being married, compared to being single or cohabiting. This indicates that a live-in partner is usually not viewed as equivalent to marriage in predicting preferences for families with children. These findings suggest that marriage continues to hold a special status in women's preferences for families with children.

### **Analyses of Heterogeneity by Respondent Background**

Though randomization ensures that respondent background characteristics should not impact our calculation of AMCEs, we also conduct exploratory analyses to understand whether the patterns of childbearing preferences observed in Table 2 vary by respondent characteristics of parity, age, race, and education. We interact respondent characteristics with childbearing preferences and present predicted probabilities in Figure 3. (Like Figure 2, Figure 3 presents absolute probabilities.) Figure 3, panel a (interaction between childbearing preferences and respondent's own parity) yields two findings of note: Respondents who have zero children are significantly more likely to prefer family scenarios with zero children and significantly less likely to prefer family scenarios with four children, compared to respondents who have children. Otherwise, there are no significant differences between respondent parity and childbearing preferences. Figure 3, panel b shows that respondents in the 18-25 age range are significantly more likely to prefer family scenarios with zero children compared to respondents in other age groups, but there are no other significant differences by age. Furthermore, there is no evidence that predicted probabilities of preferred family size differ by race or education level (Figure 3, panels c and d).

### **Assumptions & Sensitivity Analyses**

The conjoint experimental design rests on three key assumptions (Hainmueller et al. 2014): First, we assume that evaluations of later profiles are not influenced by evaluations of earlier profiles. We test this empirically by interacting each attribute with the order in which it was presented in the experiment (e.g., in the first pair of profiles, the second pair, etc.); these supplementary analyses suggest that attribute preference does not significantly vary by profile order (Appendix C, Figure C.1). Second, we assume that the row order in which each attribute was presented has no effect on preference. To prevent row order effects, we randomly vary the row order in which attributes are presented between respondents and include controls for row order in all models. As a robustness check, we interact each attribute with the row in which it was presented in the experiment; we find that attribute preference does not significantly vary by row order (Appendix C, Figure C.2). Third, we assume profiles are fully randomized; randomization was conducted by TESS and verified in pre-testing and simulation analyses prior to launching the study.

As a further sensitivity analysis, we explore the implications of having restricted scenarios with the marital status “single” to only contain the value “you do most of the household work and childcare” for the division of care and housework attribute. The concern is that this restriction might make the independent effect of “single” in Table 2 appear larger than it should be by correlating the “you do most of the household work and childcare” category with the “single” category. This means that the “true” effect of being single (relative to married) might be less pronounced than what is observed in Table 2. However, Appendix C, Figure C.3 shows that there is a substantial preference for being married—compared to being single—when the marital status attribute is interacted with sharing of care and housework attribute. In other words, there is a strong preference for marriage relative to being single even when the



respondent does most of the housework (i.e., when the restriction has been accounted for). This suggests that the restrictions do not account for the strong preference for marriage, relative to being single, observed in Table 2.

As an attention check, after completing the main conjoint tasks, respondents are asked whether the scenarios they evaluated contained information about child gender (the correct answer is no). Of our sample of 1,785 respondents, 1,579 (88.46%) passed the attention check, 200 (11.2%) did not pass the attention check, and 6 (0.23%) skipped the attention check. Appendix C, Table C.1 replicates our main results from Table 2 among only respondents who passed the attention check; results are substantively the same.

Finally, Appendix C, Table C.2 presents the results of the same experiment conducted on a pilot sample of 424 American women ages 18-35. Though the pilot sample was smaller in size and came from a nonprobability online access panel, it is striking that virtually all the main findings of Table 2 replicate in another sample.

## **Limitations**

A core limitation of our online survey experiment is external validity: Would these results hold outside the confines of a stylized survey experiment? Would respondents act differently in the real world outside the parameters of a survey experiment? Of course, survey experiments have limitations to external validity; their strengths lie in illuminating mechanisms. There are, however, reasons to think that the conjoint survey design might perform better on external validity than other types of survey experiments. Unlike traditional informational experiments when one core piece of information is experimentally manipulated, conjoint survey experiments provide respondents with a multidimensional set of choices that more closely mimic

real life. A study that paired Swiss voting data with several types of survey experiments found that a forced pair conjoint survey experiment captured voters preferences remarkably well (Hainmueller et al. 2015). A conjoint survey allows us to address the contingency of fertility preferences in ways that conventional survey questions about fertility do not.

Another potential limitation is that we do not know whether respondents interpreted the survey instrument with respect to their current life stage, as opposed to their broader life course. This type of limitation is a concern with any survey question about general ideals or life plans and, as we explain in the methods section, we believe the benefits of the wording we adopted outweigh any disadvantages. The biggest concern with this limitation is whether there was systematic variation in interpretation by key characteristics—such as age—that might influence results. Though we cannot rule out this possibility, we believe it is less of a concern for several reasons. First, cognitive interviews conducted prior to the survey with respondents of diverse ages and demographic backgrounds suggested respondents interpreted the survey instrument as intended. Furthermore, we would expect there should be consistently patterned differences by respondent characteristics across different categories of childbearing if this type of systematic variation in interpretation was at play. To the contrary, analyses of childbearing preferences by respondent background characteristics suggest minimal differences (Figure 3).

## **Discussion**

Our conjoint survey experiment provides important insights into fertility preferences and factors affecting them in the United States. In the first part of our analysis, we found that the relative weight given to childbearing preferences was lower than expected in predicting preferred family scenario among American women ages 18-35. To the contrary, financial stability—rather

than childbearing—was the most important predictor of preferred family scenario. Second, preference for two-child families was not significantly different from preference for zero, one, or three-child families, though there was clear preference for two-child families compared to four-child families. It was particularly notable that there was no significant difference between preference for family scenarios with zero or one-child families and those with two child families, given that ideal family sizes of zero or one child remain low in survey research among respondents of the same age range (Appendix A, Figures A.1 and A.2). The strong reported preference for zero children was especially notable. In part, this intriguing finding could reflect the age range of our sample: 43% of the weighted sample was in the 18-25 age range, and this age range had significantly higher than average preference for family scenarios with zero children (Figure 3, panel b). Preference for family scenarios with zero children among this age group could reflect cohort effects—in which preferences are changing for this cohort due to the unique conditions in which this age group came of age (i.e. the 2009 recession, climate change, and the COVID pandemic)—age effects—in which this younger sample will change its preferences in the future as it ages—or interpretation effects—in which this group was more likely to interpret the question with respect to a current life stage prior to childbearing. Nonetheless, Figure 3, panel b showed that for every other childbearing category there were no significant differences in preferred family scenario by age, thus suggesting that the observed weakening of preference for two children extends beyond any specific age group.

Taken together, the findings from the first part of our analysis suggest that even if desired or ideal family sizes remain above two children in standard survey research, a two-child family is not a strong preference once competing work, family, and financial constraints are accounted for. In other words, high numeric ideals might persist, but achieving those ideals might not be a

strong priority for American women of reproductive ages. In this respect, our findings support the view that a process of “de-institutionalization” of childbearing is occurring in the United States, in which childbearing has become optional, flexible, contingent on factors related to work and family life, and only realized under a preferred set of conditions. These findings also showcase the value of incorporating survey experiments alongside standard demographic survey questions on ideal or desired family size to illuminate different aspects of fertility preferences, including both quantum of ideal fertility and priority given to attaining those ideals.

The second part of our analysis supported the perspective that childbearing preferences are dynamic and responsive to competing work, family, and financial demands. In particular, we found strong evidence that family size preferences significantly differed by financial stability, consistent with perspectives on financial instability and fertility. For example, we found that preference for any level of childbearing systematically and dramatically varied depending on levels of financial stability. In a contemporary U.S. context of widening inequality, economic precarity, and diminished opportunities for wealth accumulation among young people, these results suggest that financial status plays an important role in shaping young people’s childbearing and family decisions. Future research may investigate in more detail how people understand what it means to have “just enough” or “plenty extra,” in order to better understand this element of the tradeoffs examined here.

We also found evidence that preference for family scenarios differed by marital status in ways consistent with the symbolic importance of marriage. Interestingly, there was limited difference in preferred partnership status for scenarios without children, however there was strong preference for marriage (compared to cohabitation or being single) for most scenarios with children. Notably, the predicted probabilities of preferring family scenarios with one, two,

or three-child families were significantly higher with married partnerships, compared to cohabiting. This finding indicated that partnership alone was not viewed as enough for childbearing, thus reinforcing that even as marriage has been de-institutionalized it has enduring symbolic value.

We also found evidence that preferred family scenarios differed by housework and care arrangements, career intensity, and family policies in ways that supported the gender equity and fertility perspective, though at times these results were less consistent, and the magnitude of effects was not as large as in the other two perspectives under study. Nonetheless, these findings provided key insights. For example, in the U.S., a setting with notoriously limited family policies, the predicted probability of preferring a two, three, or four-child family scenario was significantly higher with generous family policies, compared to no family policy. This finding suggested that scalable society level interventions that provided social support to prospective parents might play an important role in alleviating constraints to childbearing and shaping family decision-making.

Taken together, the results from the second part of our analysis are consistent with a large demographic literature on the dynamism of fertility preferences in response to changing circumstances (Bulatao 1981; Freedman, Coombs, and Bumpass 1965; Lee 1980; Udry 1983; Westoff and Ryder 1977). Importantly, we contributed to this literature—which typically relies on cross-sectional or longitudinal survey data—by demonstrating the malleability of fertility preferences using an experimental online survey. Our approach also allowed us to test the work, family, and financial constraints that correspond with changing fertility preferences. On one hand, our results support multiple theoretical perspectives about the factors that affect fertility preferences, thus suggesting that there is likely no one explanation for the growing gap between

ideal and realized fertility. At the same time, our results highlighted that certain perspectives—such as the financial insecurity and fertility perspective—appear to be especially consequential for malleability in fertility preferences in the contemporary U.S., thus providing an important starting point for researchers interested in further unpacking the tradeoffs people make when balancing childbearing decisions alongside work, family, and financial constraints.

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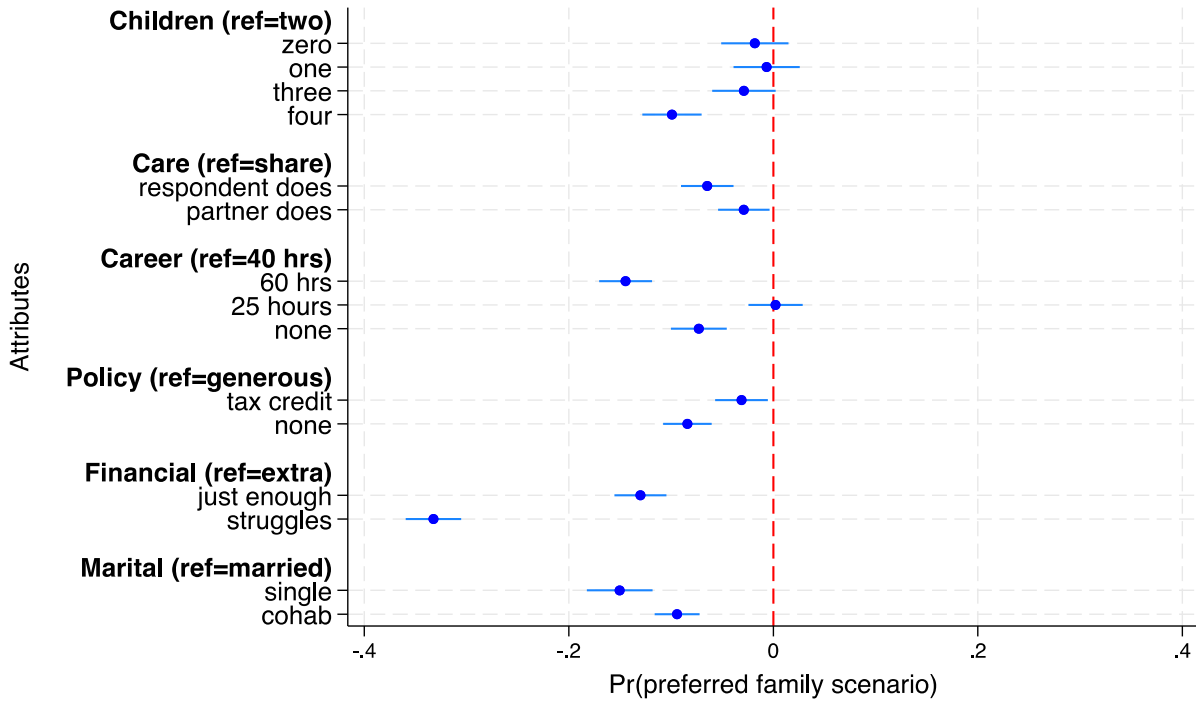
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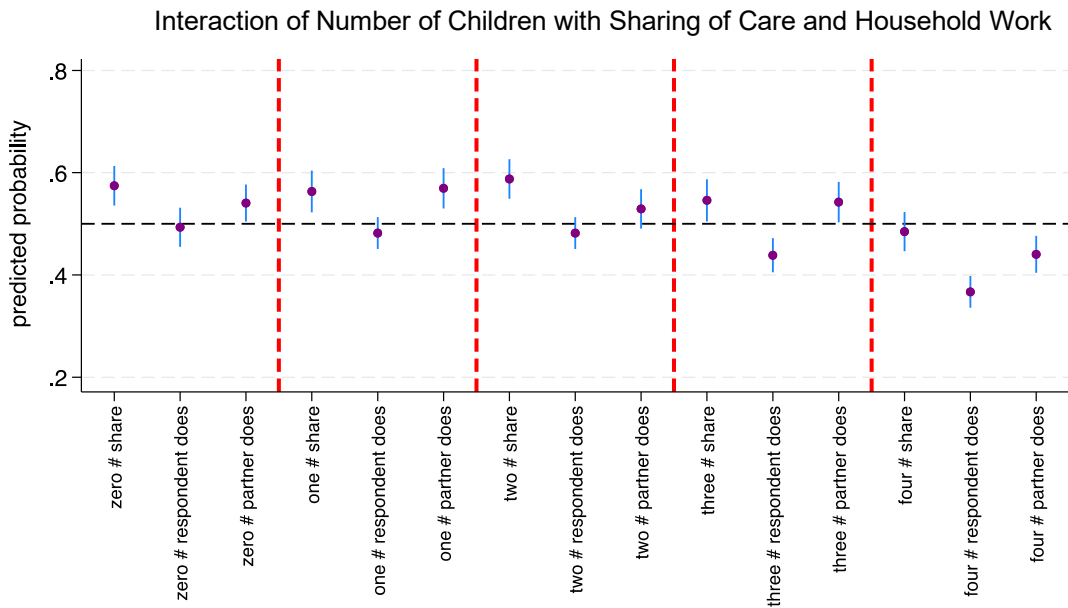
Figure 1. Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE): Effect of family attributes on preferred family scenario



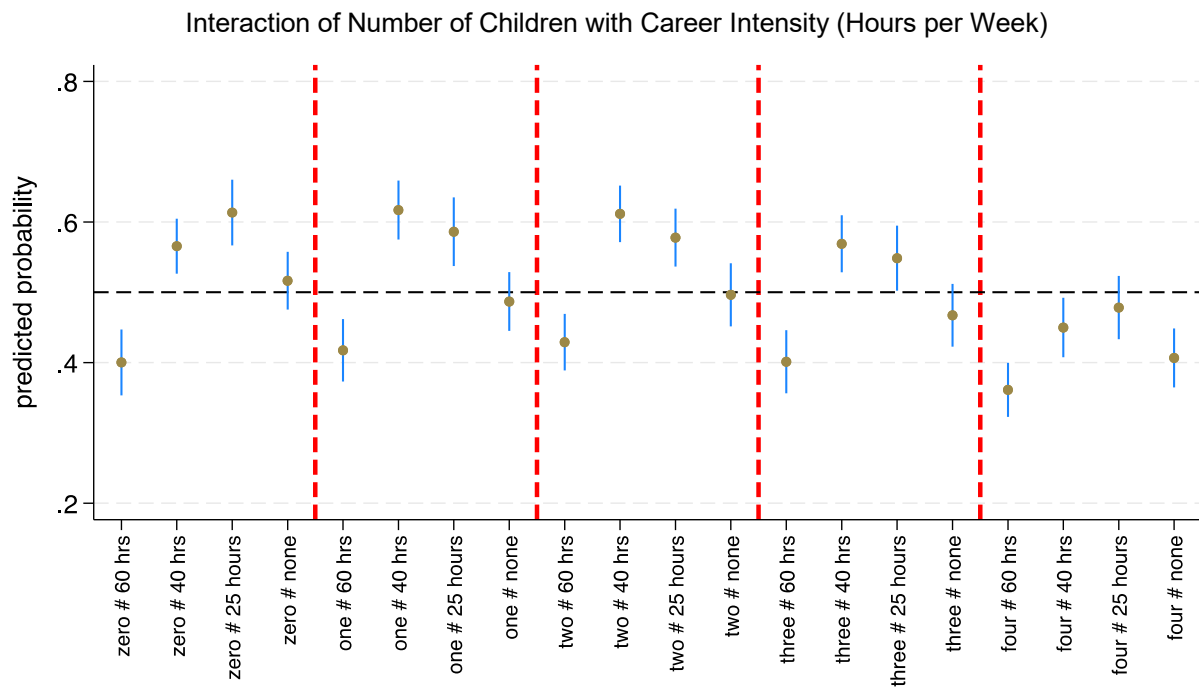
*Notes:* Coefficients from regression analysis of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model). Model also includes controls (not shown) for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of preference for family scenario: Interaction of number of children by other family scenario attributes

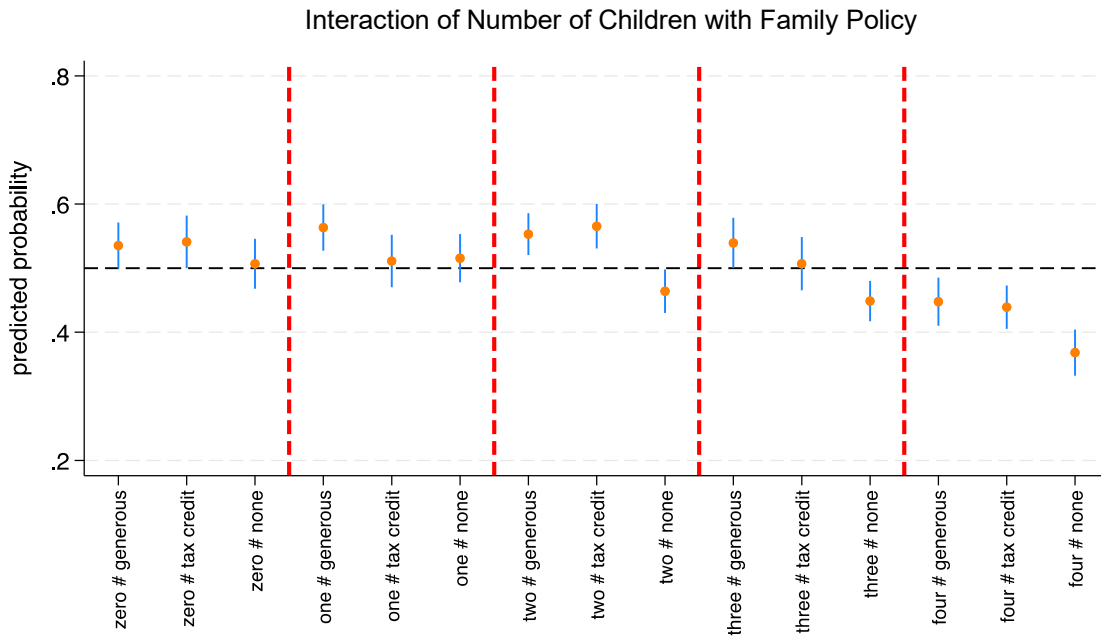
Panel a.



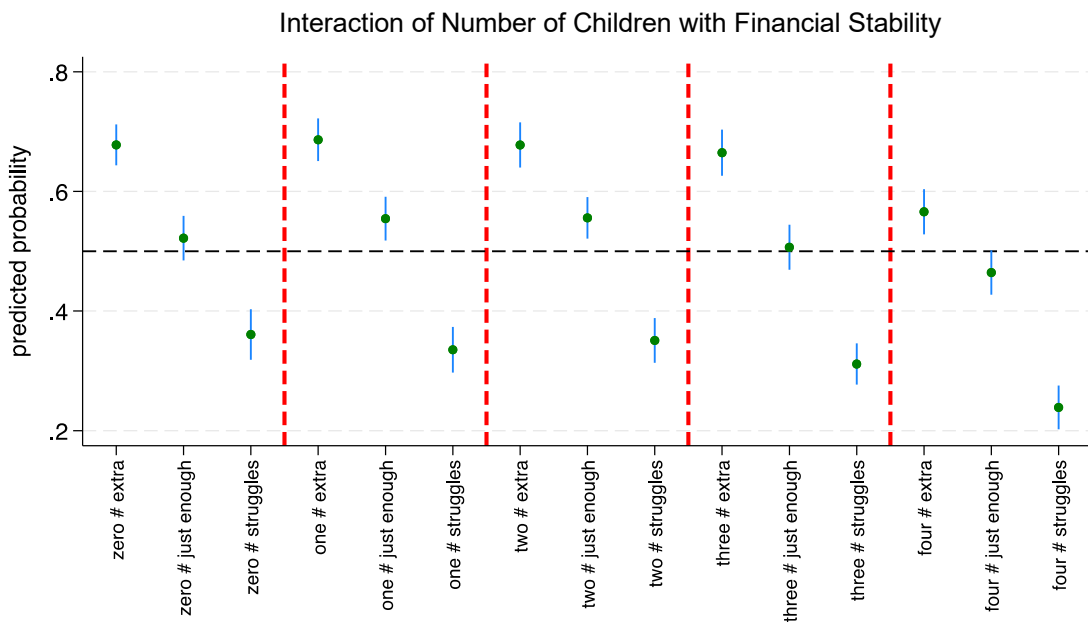
Panel b.



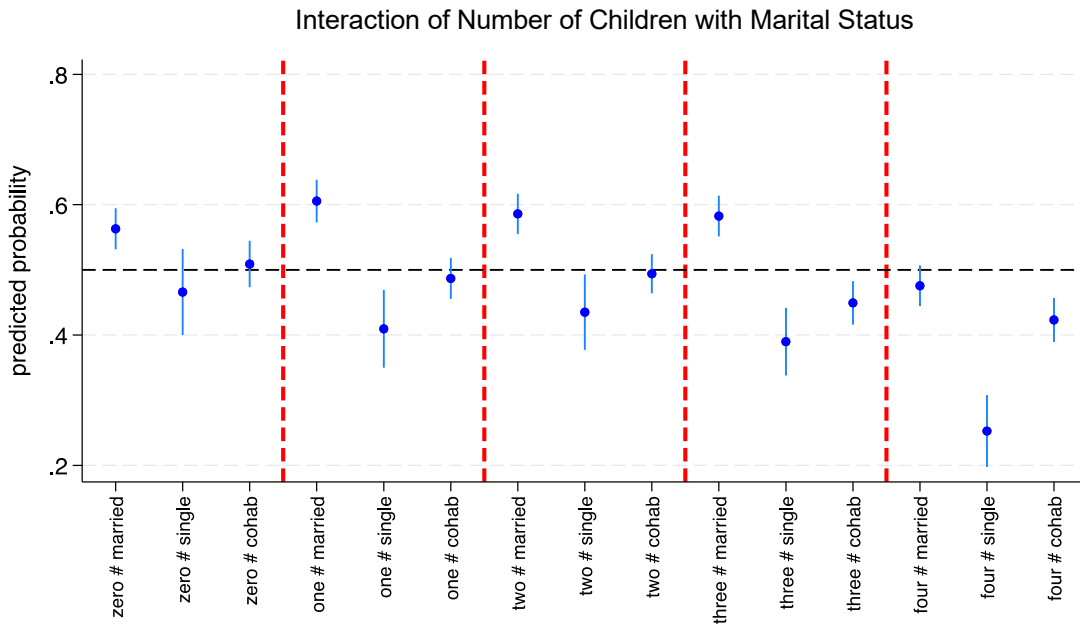
Panel c.



Panel d.



Panel e.

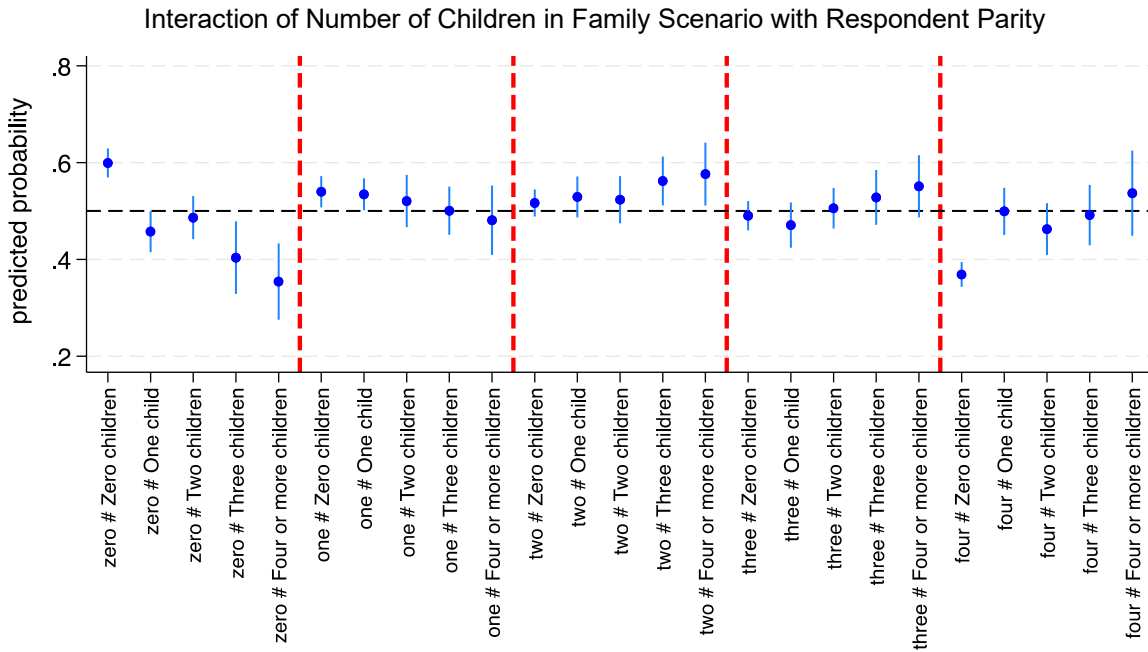


*Notes:* Predicted probabilities generated following regression analyses of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model), including interactions between childbearing preference and preference for attribute specified in a given panel. Models also include controls (not shown) for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

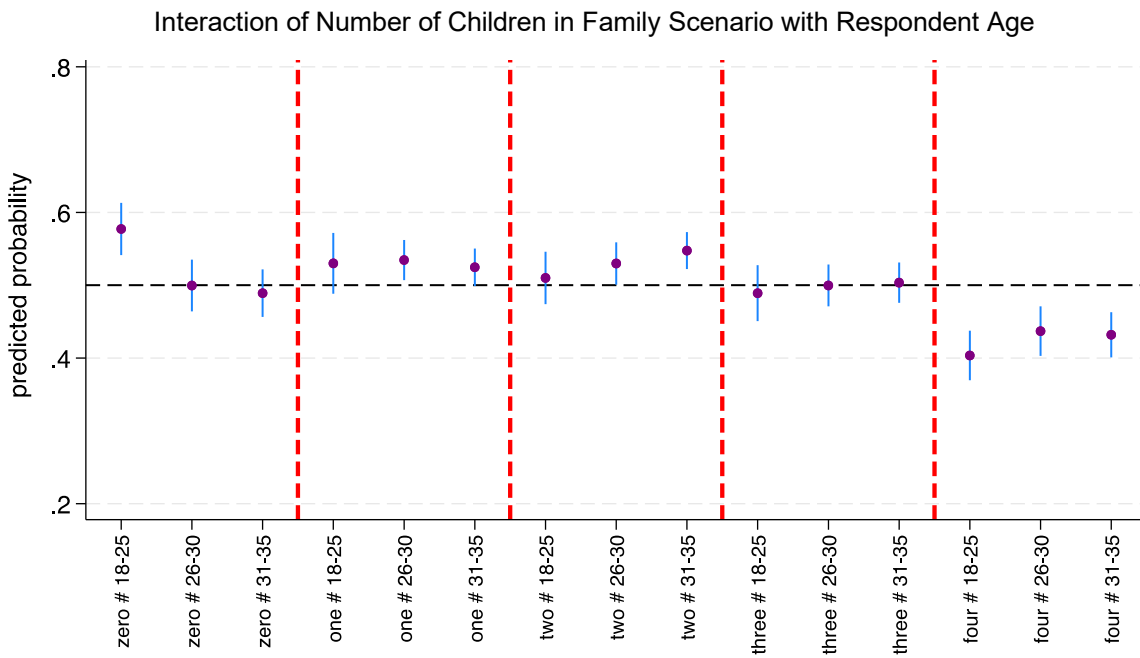


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of preference for family scenario: Interaction of number of children in scenario by respondent background characteristics

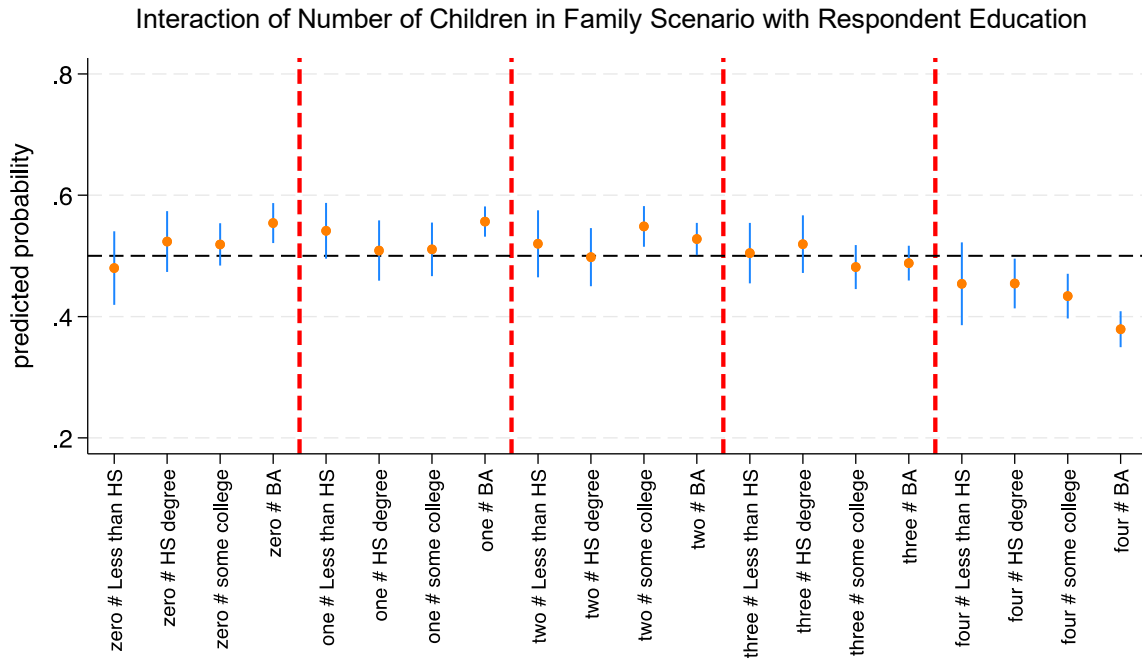
Panel a.



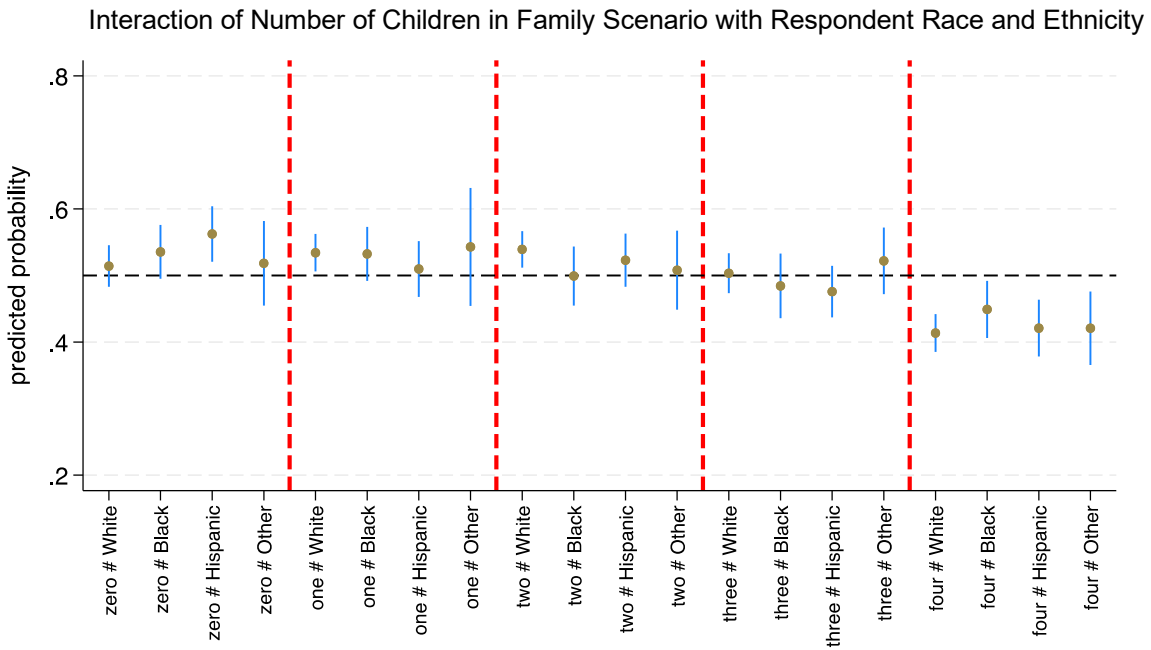
Panel b.



Panel c.



Panel d.



*Notes:* Predicted probabilities generated following regression analyses of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model), including interactions between childbearing preference and respondent background characteristics. Models also include controls (not shown) for other attributes, order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

Table 1. Background characteristics of sample

	<b>Weighted</b>		<b>Unweighted</b>	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
<b>Age</b>				
18-25	0.43	0.50	0.28	0.45
26-30	0.26	0.44	0.33	0.47
31-35	0.31	0.46	0.39	0.49
<b>Education</b>				
Less than high school degree	0.08	0.27	0.12	0.33
High school degree	0.25	0.43	0.19	0.39
Some college	0.31	0.46	0.32	0.47
Bachelor's degree	0.36	0.48	0.37	0.48
<b>Race</b>				
White	0.53	0.50	0.49	0.50
Black	0.14	0.35	0.17	0.37
Hispanic	0.22	0.41	0.22	0.41
Other	0.11	0.31	0.12	0.33
<b>Parity</b>				
Zero children	0.55	0.50	0.47	0.50
One child	0.16	0.37	0.18	0.38
Two children	0.16	0.36	0.19	0.39
Three children	0.08	0.27	0.10	0.30
Four or more children	0.05	0.23	0.07	0.26
Observations	1,785		1,785	

Table 2. Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE): Effect of family attributes on preferred family scenario

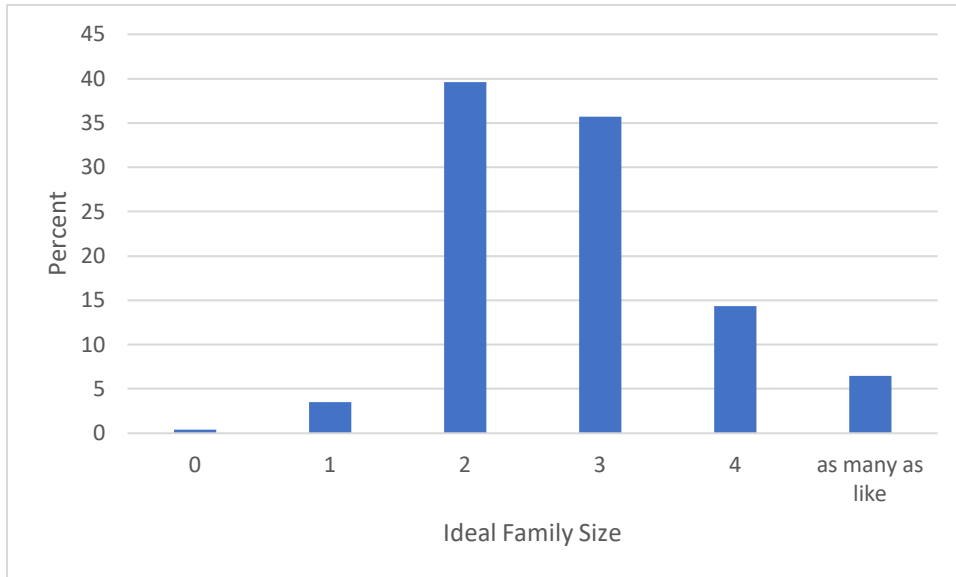
	(1) Preferred family
<b>Children (ref = two)</b>	
Zero children	-0.02 (0.02)
One child	-0.01 (0.02)
Three children	-0.03 (0.02)
Four children	-0.10*** (0.01)
<b>Division of care &amp; housework (ref = share with partner)</b>	
Respondent does most	-0.06*** (0.01)
Partner does most	-0.03* (0.01)
<b>Intensity of career (ref = 40 hours/week)</b>	
60 hours/week	-0.14*** (0.01)
25 hours/week	0.00 (0.01)
None	-0.07*** (0.01)
<b>Family policy (ref = generous family support)</b>	
Child tax credit	-0.03* (0.01)
None	-0.08*** (0.01)
<b>Financial stability (ref = plenty extra)</b>	
Just enough financially	-0.13*** (0.01)
Struggles financially	-0.33*** (0.01)
<b>Marital status (ref = married)</b>	
Single	-0.15*** (0.02)
Cohabitation	-0.09*** (0.01)
Respondents	1,785
Pairs of observations	8,925
Observations	17,850
R-squared	0.12

---

Notes: Linear probability model; constant not shown; model includes controls for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at respondent level; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

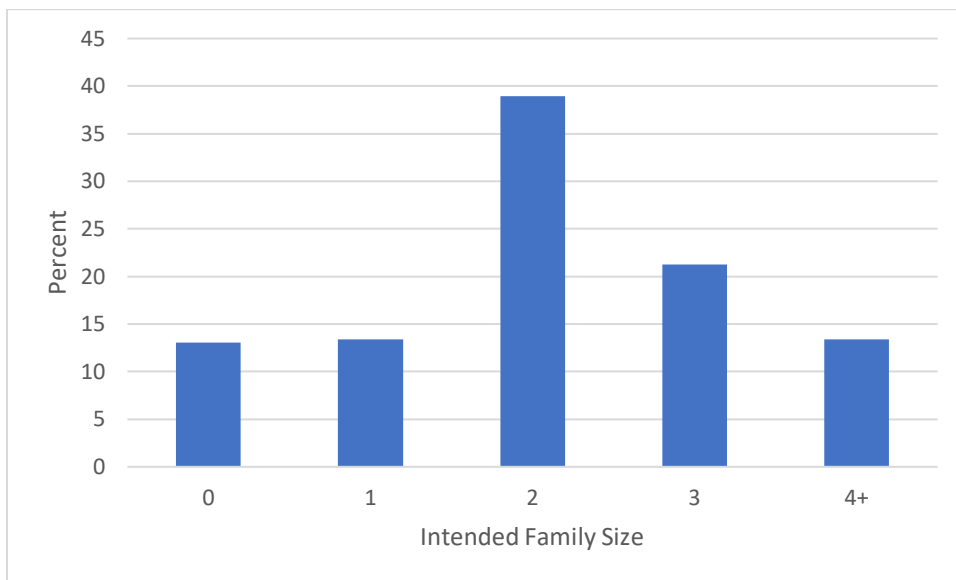
## Appendix A. Additional Contextual Information

Figure A.1. Ideal Family Size among women ages 18-35 in the 2018 General Social Survey



Source: Created by the authors

Figure A.2. Intended Family Size among women ages 18-35 in the 2017-2019 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)



Source: Created by the authors

## A.3 Research Hypotheses

### Hypothesis 1. Priority of childbearing preferences

- H1a. Childbearing will be the strongest predictor of young adult women's preferred family scenario, that is, the AMCEs of preference for zero, one, three, or four children (compared to the reference category of two children) will be significantly larger in absolute magnitude than the AMCEs of other attributes relative to their reference categories in predicting preferred family scenario.
- H1b. Young adult women will prefer families with two children (compared to zero, one, three, or four children), reflecting the endurance of a two-child norm. In other words, the AMCEs of preference for zero, one, three, or four children will be significantly lower than preference for two children in predicting preferred family scenario.

### Hypothesis 2. Factors affecting childbearing

Women's childbearing preferences will be negatively affected by work, family, and financial constraints in ways that are consistent with three non-mutually-exclusive perspectives: gender equity and fertility (perspective 1), financial instability and fertility (perspective 2), and the symbolic importance of marriage (perspective 3).

More specifically:

#### Perspective 1. Gender Equity and Fertility

- H2a. Division of care: For each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios where respondents equally share care and household work, compared to scenarios where respondents either do most of the care and household work themselves, or have a partner who does most of the care and household work.
- H2b. Time intensity of career: For each category of childbearing (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios in which respondents work average-intensity hours (40 hours a week), compared to high-intensity hours (60 hours a week), part time work (25 hours a week), or not working.
- H2c. Family policy: For each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios in which generous family policy is available, compared to scenarios with moderate or no family policy.

#### Perspective 2. Financial Instability and Fertility

- H2d. Financial status: For each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for family scenarios where respondents are highly financially stable compared to moderately stable or financially struggling

#### Perspective 3. Symbolic Importance of Marriage

- H2e. Marital status: For each childbearing preference (i.e., one child, two children, etc.) the predicted probability of being the preferred family scenario will be significantly higher for scenarios where respondents are married compared to scenarios where respondents are unmarried or cohabiting



## A.4 Sample Questionnaire

One example of a pair of family scenarios is below. As attributes randomly vary, this is just a sample.

Which of these two life situations would you personally prefer?

*Please select the option you prefer.*

(1 of 6)

Life Situation 1	Life Situation 2
You are unmarried and living with a partner	You are married
Your household struggles to pay your bills each month	Your household struggles to pay your bills each month
Parents receive lots of support: affordable childcare, 6 months of paid parental leave, flexible work, and generous sick leave	-
You have one child	You have two children
You work 25 hours a week	You do not have a job
Your partner does most of the household work and childcare	You do most of the household work and childcare
<input type="button" value="Select"/>	<input type="button" value="Select"/>

Back

Next

---

*Note:* The attributes that comprise each of the life situations should be randomly varied in each pair of life situations. Appendix B, Table 1 provides a full list of the attributes and their values. In addition, the order in which attributes are presented randomly varies *between* respondents, but remains constant *within* respondents. So, for example, respondent 1 would be randomly assigned to see the family size attribute first for all five pairs of scenarios and respondent 2 would be randomly assigned to see the financial stability attribute first for all five pairs of scenarios.

## Appendix B. Attributes and Levels

Table B.1. Attributes and Levels

---

### *Childbearing*

- a. You have no children
- b. You have one child
- c. You have two children
- d. You have three children
- e. You have four children

### **Perspective: Gender equity and fertility**

#### *Division of care and housework*

- a. You equally share all the household work and childcare with your partner
- b. You do most of the household work and childcare
- c. Your partner does most of the household work and childcare

#### *Time-Intensity of Work*

- a. You work 60 hours a week
- b. You work 40 hours a week
- c. You work 25 hours a week
- d. You do not have a job

#### *Family Policy*

- a. Parents receive lots of support: affordable childcare, 6 months of paid parental leave, flexible work, and generous sick leave
- b. There is a tax credit that sends families a monthly payment of \$300 per child
- c. [blank]

### **Perspective: Financial instability and fertility**

#### *Financial Stability*

- a. Your household has plenty extra after you pay your bills each month
- b. Your household has just enough to pay your bills each month
- c. Your household struggles to pay your bills each month

### **Perspective: Symbolic importance of marriage**

#### *Marital Status*

- a. You are married
  - b. You are single
  - c. You are unmarried and living with a partner
-

*Notes:* We exclude impossible combinations of attributes, so in family scenarios with zero children, respondents are only asked about the sharing of housework, not housework and childcare. In our analyses, we treat these different wordings of the housework-sharing attribute as interchangeable.

The other restriction on the randomization of profiles is that in family scenarios with marital status “single,” respondents are only given the “you do most” option for the housework-sharing attribute. The implications of this restriction for the interpretation of results are discussed in the sensitivity analysis section.

The third family policy condition is always left blank, which we expect will lead participants to assume their status quo for family policy.

There are additional potential attributes, representing additional life circumstances, that we intentionally exclude from the experiment:

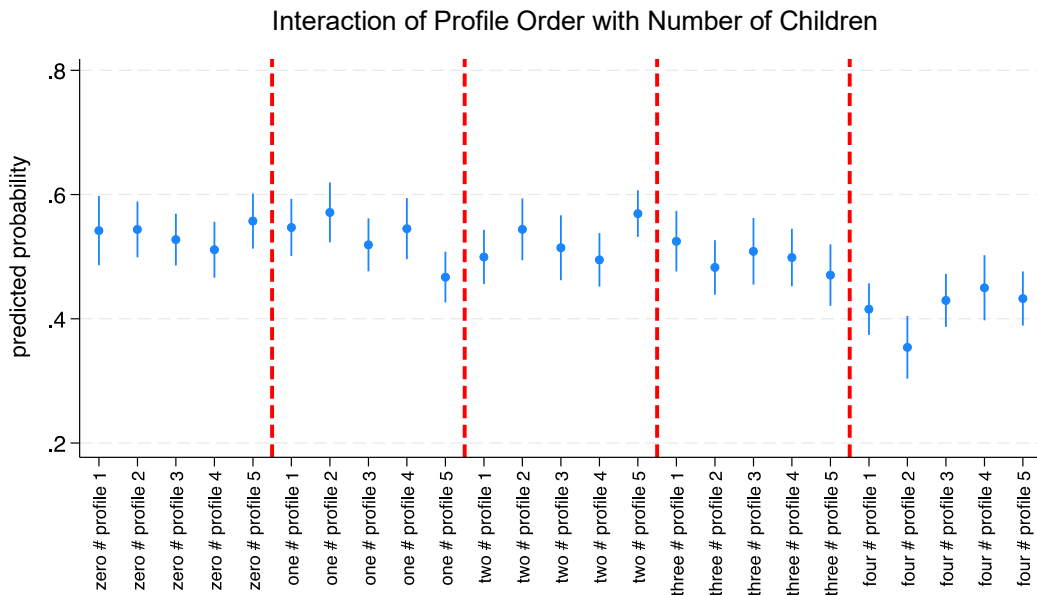
*First,* we exclude two additional sources of care provision that are prevalent in the US: (1) extended family networks; and (2) domestic outsourcing. Although many Americans rely on family support and domestic outsourcing to navigate career and family constraints, neither of these options provides a scalable solution to addressing unequal care burdens at a societal level. Furthermore, extended family members may actually contribute to care burdens (e.g., through provision of elder care) and people’s abilities to afford domestic outsourcing are highly correlated with financial status (which we include). Thus, we prefer to focus on family policy as the main lever for addressing unequal care burdens and the provision of childcare.

*Second,* we do not include a measure of occupational prestige because the financial stability and time intensity of career variables are likely proxies for occupational prestige.

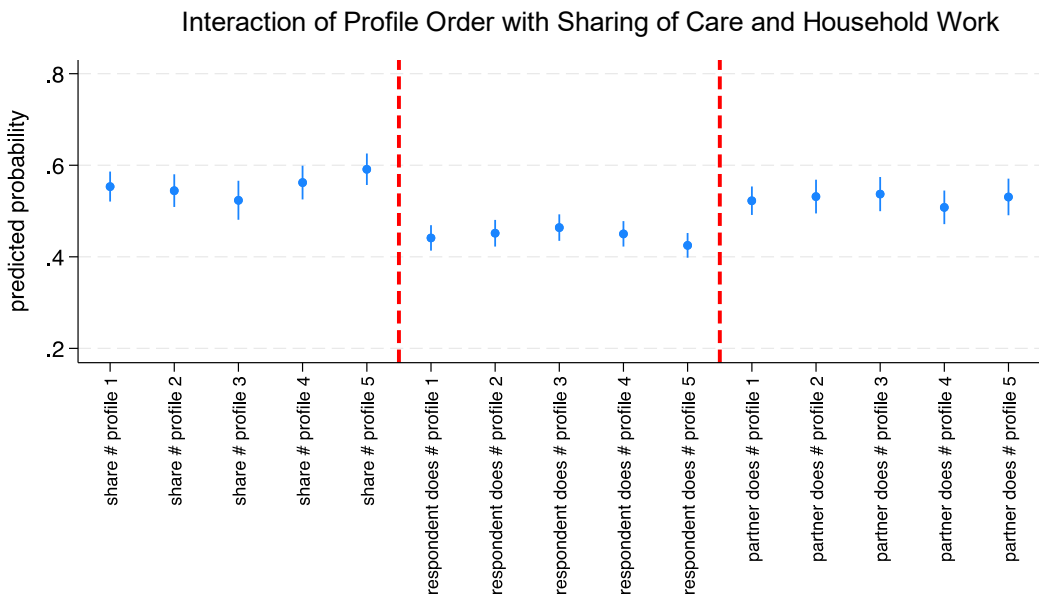
## Appendix C. Sensitivity Analyses

**Figure C.1.** Predicted probabilities of profile order interacted with attributes

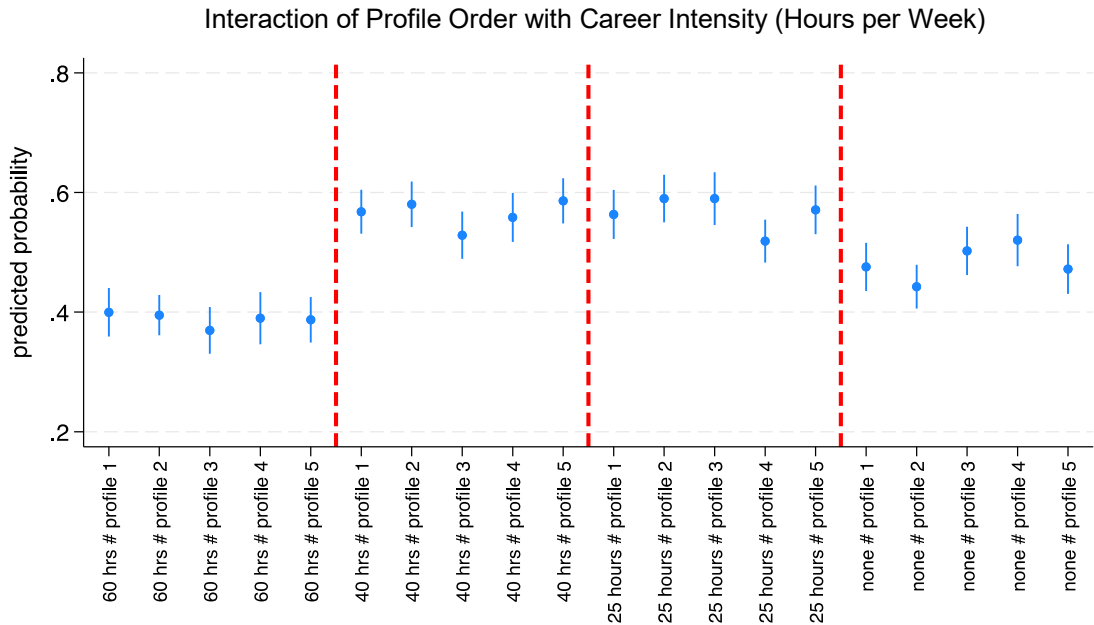
Panel a.



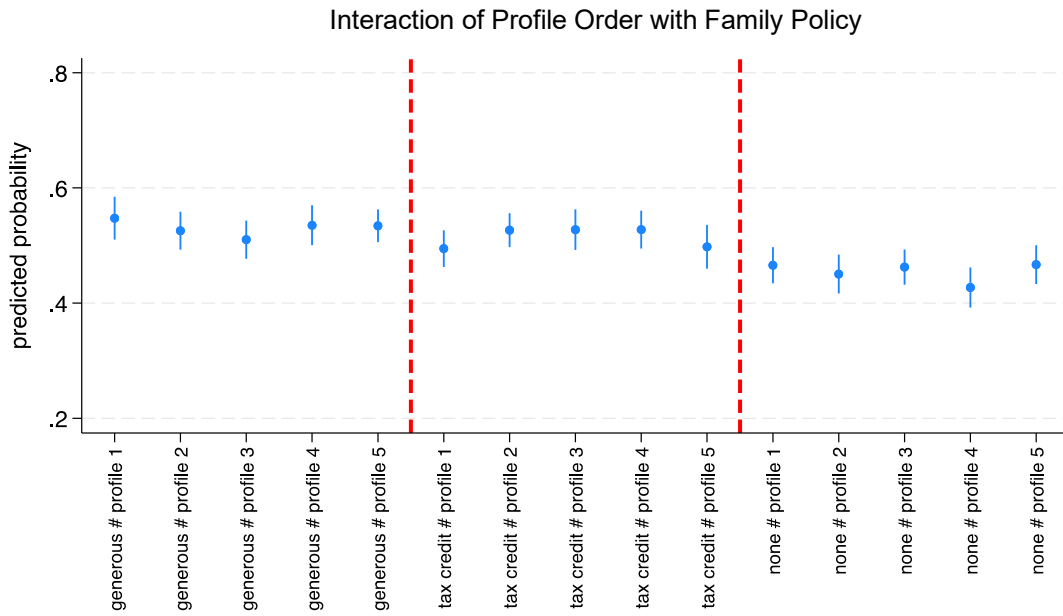
Panel b.



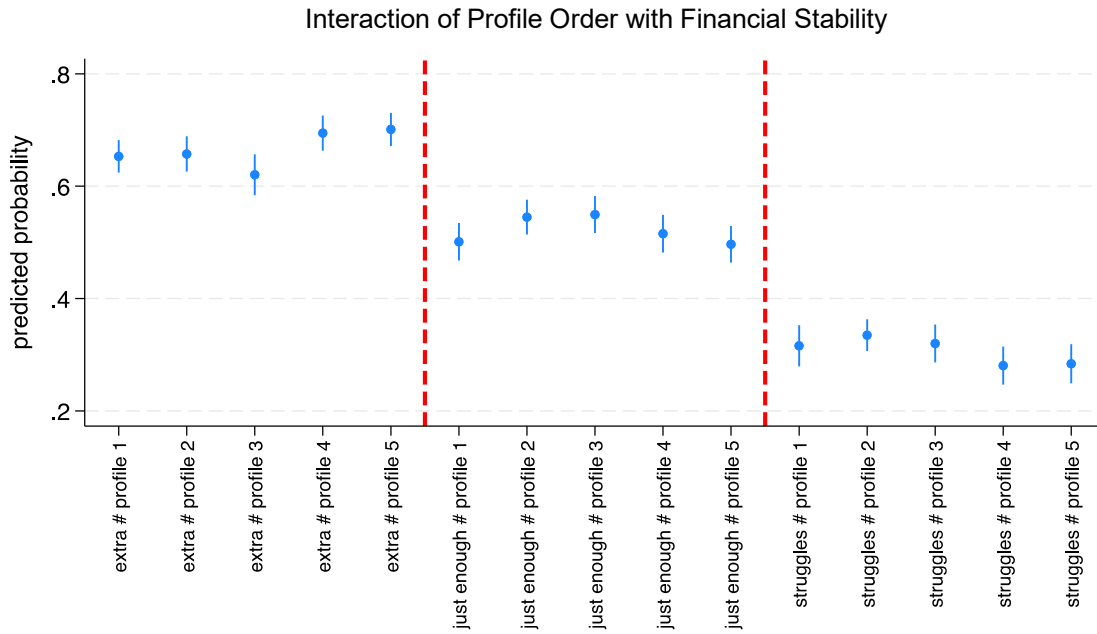
Panel c.



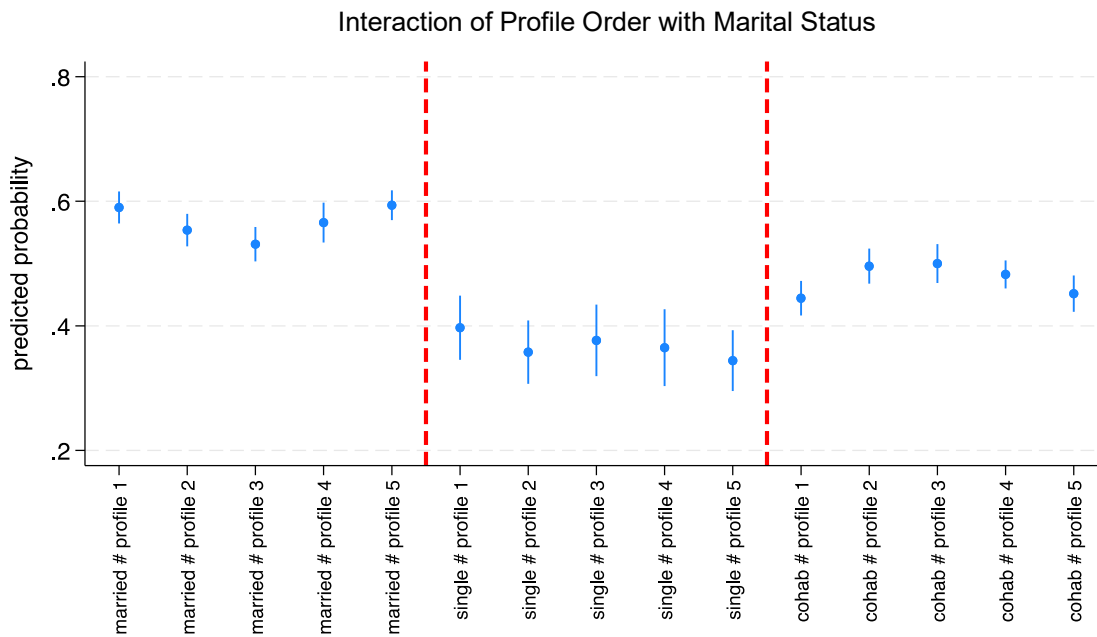
Panel d.



Panel e.



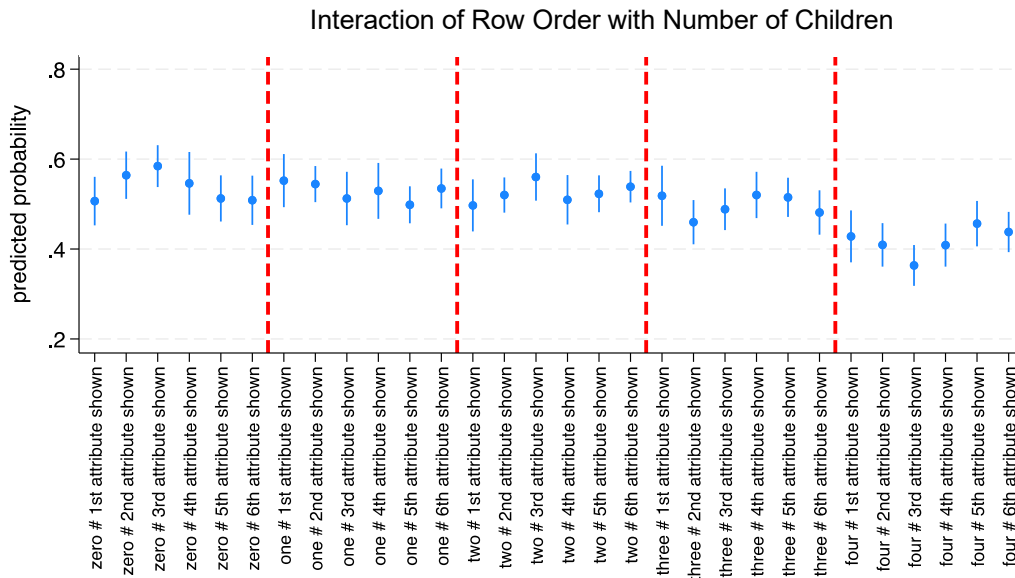
Panel f.



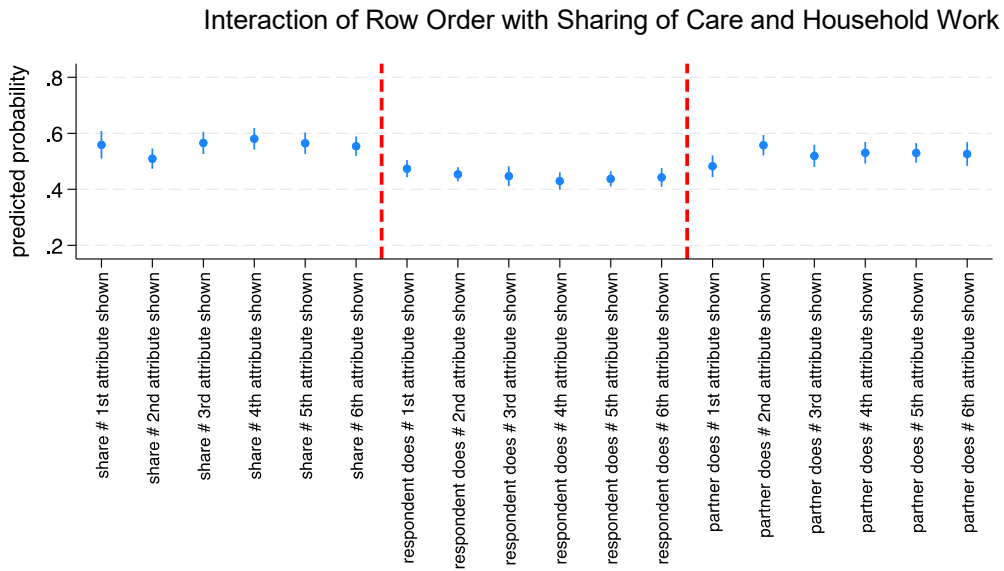
*Notes:* Predicted probabilities generated following regression analyses of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model), including interactions between attributes and profile order. Models also include controls (not shown) for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

**Figure C.2.** Predicted probabilities of row order interacted with attributes

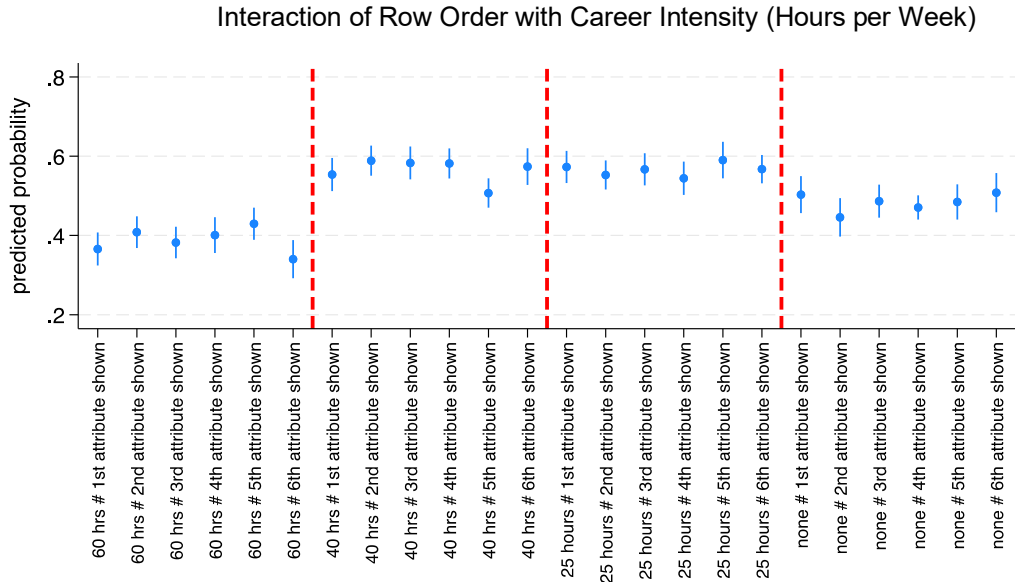
Panel a.



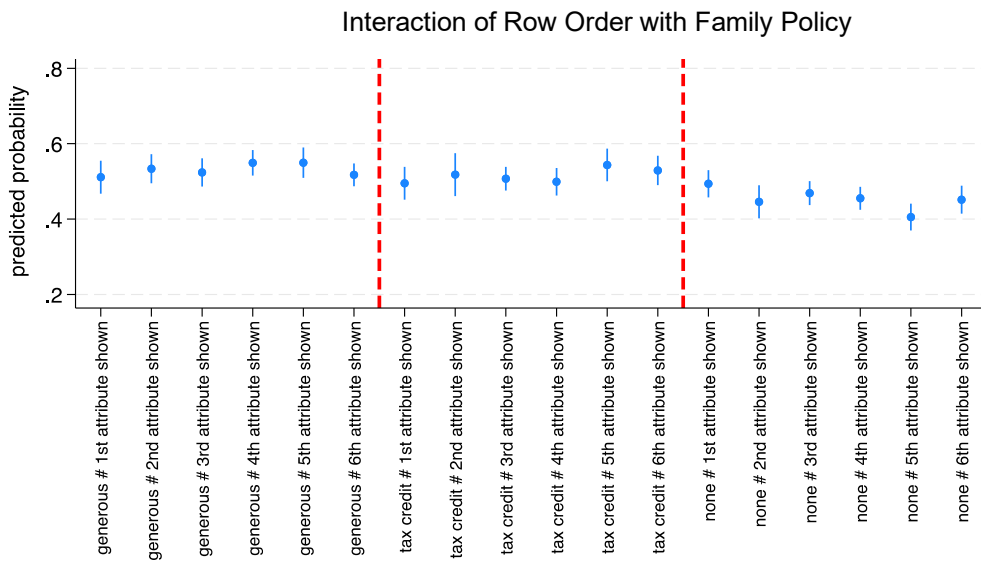
Panel b.



Panel c.

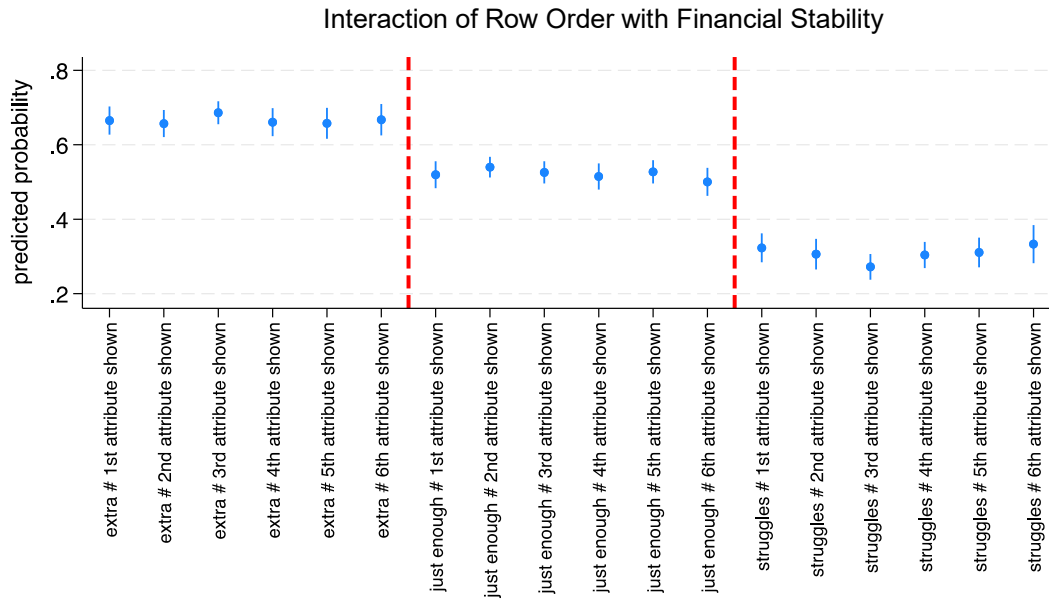


Panel d.

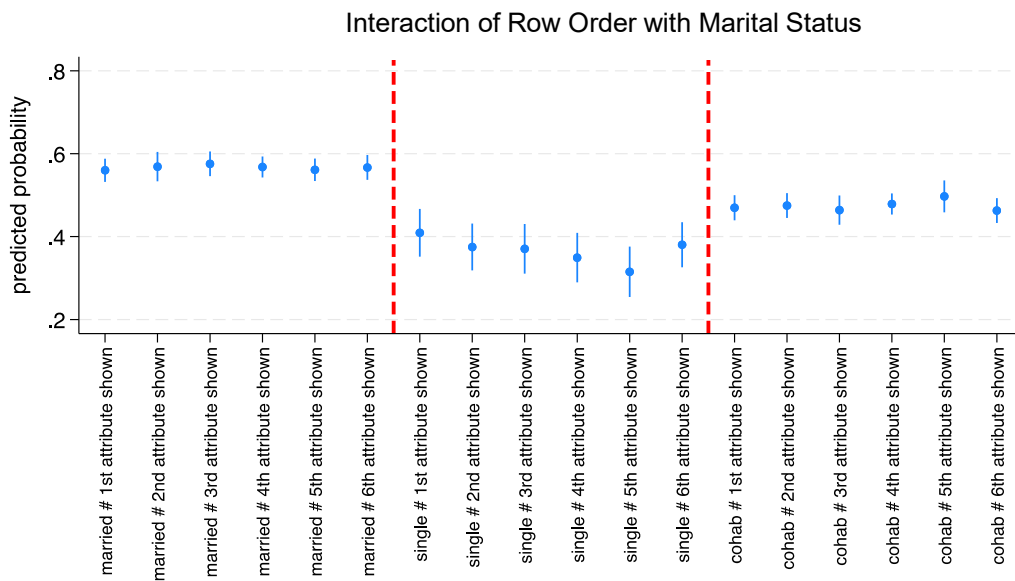




Panel e.

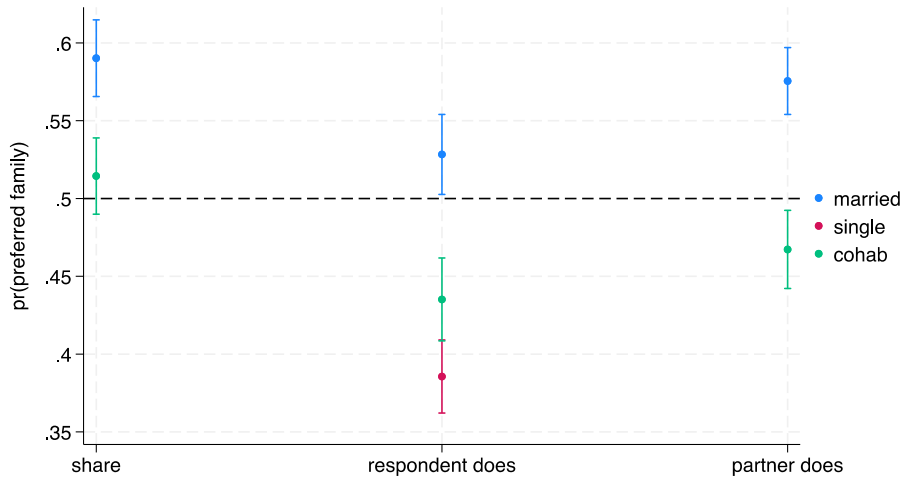


Panel f.



*Notes:* Predicted probabilities generated following regression analyses of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model), including interactions between row order and profile order. Models also include controls (not shown) for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

Figure C.3. Predicted probabilities of preference for family scenario: Interaction of marital status with division of care and housework



*Notes:* Predicted probabilities generated following regression analyses of the association between attributes and preferred family scenario (linear probability model), including interaction between marital status and division of care and housework attributes. Models also include controls (not shown) for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet). Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

Table C.1. Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE): Effect of family attributes on preferred family scenario, limited to those respondents who passed an attention check

	Preferred family
<b>Children (ref = two)</b>	
Zero children	-0.01 (0.02)
One child	-0.01 (0.02)
Three children	-0.03 (0.02)
Four children	-0.10*** (0.02)
<b>Division of care &amp; housework (ref = share with partner)</b>	
Respondent does most	-0.07*** (0.01)
Partner does most	-0.03* (0.01)
<b>Intensity of career (ref = 40 hours/week)</b>	
60 hours/week	-0.16*** (0.01)
25 hours/week	0.00 (0.01)
None	-0.07*** (0.01)
<b>Family policy (ref = generous family support)</b>	
Child tax credit	-0.03* (0.01)
None	-0.09*** (0.01)
<b>Financial stability (ref = plenty extra)</b>	
Just enough financially	-0.14*** (0.01)
Struggles financially	-0.35*** (0.01)
<b>Marital status (ref = married)</b>	
Single	-0.17*** (0.02)
Cohabitation	-0.09*** (0.01)
Respondents	1,579
Observations	15,790
R-squared	0.14

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Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +

Linear probability models; constant not shown; model includes controls for respondent background characteristics (age, race, parity, education), order attributes were presented, time spent on each question, type of device survey administered on (phone, computer, tablet).

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at respondent level.

Weighted using sampling weights provided by NORC.

Table C.2. Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE): Effect of family attributes on preferred family scenario, results from pilot study

	Preferred family
<b>Children (ref = 2 kids)</b>	
0 kids	-0.04 (0.02)
1 kid	0.03 (0.02)
3 kids	-0.02 (0.02)
4 kids	-0.07*** (0.02)
<b>Financial status (ref = plenty extra)</b>	
Struggles financially	-0.34*** (0.02)
Just enough financially	-0.16*** (0.02)
<b>Career (ref = 40 hrs/week)</b>	
None	-0.11*** (0.02)
25 hrs/week	-0.01 (0.02)
60 hrs/week	-0.12*** (0.02)
<b>Marital status (ref = married)</b>	
Single	-0.12*** (0.02)
Cohabitation	-0.08*** (0.01)
<b>Housework (ref = share with partner)</b>	
Respondent does most	-0.07*** (0.02)
Partner does most	-0.07*** (0.02)
<b>Policy (ref = generous family support)</b>	
None	-0.08*** (0.02)
Child tax credit	-0.04** (0.02)
Respondents	424
Observations	5,088
R-squared	0.11

Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at respondent level; \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05; Linear probability models; constant not shown; limited to respondents who pass attention check

