

Marriage and Family in the Presidential Election Campaign, and Beyond

Helen Alvaré, J.D., Senior Fellow in Law

October 30, 2008

A review of both presidential candidates' platforms and speeches tells us a lot of importance about where both stand regarding the crucial topics of marriage and family. Often, one has the sense that for both candidates, "family" is a group of persons who happen to be the convenient receptacle channeling the delivery of whatever government benefits each is promising.

One candidate (McCain) refers often to "working families." For Senator Obama, there is only the "middle-class family." Neither approaches the family in the time honored categories of Catholic social thought. That is, "family" as a natural, pre-legal entity, tied by bonds of blood, marriage, adoption, and acting as a fundamental building block of a healthy society. Family as the unfolding of the unique, socially sanctioned procreative relationship we call marriage. A little society whose members have individual strengths but also complementary and synergistic strengths. A society disposed by nature to take up the tasks of support, education and moral formation in such a way as to be indispensable for the creation and maintenance of a free, just and sufficiently prosperous nation. Additionally, neither candidate explicitly takes up the language of the family as the literal cradle of life, guarding the lives of children – our entire social future – and also the elderly, and the disabled.

Nonetheless, the word "family" appears in both candidates' literature and in their discourse, often. This reveals that both understand that Americans instinctively assess government policy in light of how it will affect, not just themselves, but the people they love the most in this world. Surprisingly, neither candidate has tried to tap into voters' good graces with a more explicit message on this point.

Setting aside the important things the candidates have failed to say, what have they said explicitly about the family? My approach here will be to consider first anything the candidates have said which might reveal their fundamental understandings -- even if not fully concluded or articulated – about the family as the building block of society and the family as the guardian of life. Then I will address additional family-related proposals made by each.

Senator Obama's platform ties a variety of proposed policies to strengthening families. His support for same-sex marriage, (1) however, demonstrates that he subscribes to the notion that families aren't social building blocks, but strictly personal accomplishments. Support for same-sex marriage is inextricably based upon the claim that marriage is most importantly about the emotional commitment of two people of any sex to one another. It is also based upon the notion that marriage is the State's way of indicating respect toward the individual persons it allows to obtain marriage licenses, no matter their sexual preference. These



CULTURE of LIFE
FOUNDATION®

1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
www.culture-of-life.org

arguments appear in every judicial opinion and article supporting same sex marriage; they are a far cry from a “social” understanding of marriage.

Senator Obama’s support for same-sex marriage also has implications for his views on the family as the guardian of life. Simply put: he sees no relationship between the family and the protection of human life. Marriage is rather about the adult individuals involved, who, when same-sexed, cannot procreate. It might further be said that if Senator Obama sees any relationship between the family and human life, it is this: a family relationship is a license to perform some types of homicide. In particular, a blood relationship between a woman and child is a prerequisite in order to allow the woman to seek the legal abortion of her child, at any time after conception, and even right after birth if the abortion was “unsuccessful” and the abortionist wishes to leave the infant to die from dehydration, malnutrition, or other deprivations. Candidate Obama has even declared openly that he supports a federal law to expand abortion rights via the Freedom of Choice Act, and that he would certainly appoint federal judges who support the existing abortion regime.

Senator McCain’s platform materials treating various topics reference the family regularly, but, interestingly, not as often as Senator Obama’s materials. Regarding same-sex marriage, McCain has said only that he would like to see the states restrict marriage to the union of one man and one woman. He does not support federal action to do the same. There isn’t much to be gleaned here regarding McCain’s understanding of the family’s role as a social building block. That emerges rather from considering how many of his proposals, noted below, place the right and the responsibility upon the family first, to make choices about education, health care, and financial security. These positions together evidence McCain’s embracing of the principle of subsidiarity when it comes to families’ role in building a stable society. He further indicates that, for families who are not able to take up this role, the State will step in, in some cases. This is similar to Senator Obama’s rhetoric on the subject of families who might fall through the cracks, but Senator Obama does not precede this with as much attention to the innate strengths of families.

Regarding the concept of families as the guardians of life, Senator McCain is, in the words of one reporter, “at ease.” He is openly and consistently pro-life, and has freely used the term to describe his plans for a “pro-life presidency” and “pro-life policies.” He has promised that he will support justices who construe the Constitution faithfully as to its terms. This, as everyone knows by now, is code for “judges-who-won’t make-up-rights-out-of thin-air-like-the-‘right’-to-abortion.”

What are the intentions of each candidate to strengthen families via policies that are not directly on marriage or respect for life, but are closely related to families’ economic and physical health? Senator Obama’s website says that while he “does not believe that we can simply legislate healthy families, good parenting skills or economic success”, government can “eliminate roadblocks parents face” and provide them “tools to help them succeed.” As for these, he proposes sweeping, federally-directed, health care reforms that he intends to close the health insurance gap entirely. He proposes special attention to children in their earliest years when interventions could prevent later serious and expensive problems. He also favors



CULTURE of LIFE
FOUNDATION®

1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
www.culture-of-life.org

government programs paying special attention to strengthening the bonds of fatherhood, and economically assisting single mothers, and rural farm families. This includes laws facilitating better child support collection, and spending more federal spending on such collection. He proposes that when such support is collected from absentee fathers, rather than using it to reimburse the state for welfare payments already made to the mothers in lieu of father's debts, that money too would flow to the mothers. Obama never mentions his tax proposals without promising that these are directed toward assisting "middle class families." This would include an additional tax credit to middle class parents of \$1000.

As for Senator McCain, his past voting record combined with his promises about the future indicates that he, too, understands that the government can't remake families in an ideal image, but can provide economic and other incentives to support family stability. Senator McCain's tax proposals regularly reference "working families." He proposes generally to allow income generating families to keep more of their income. He would seek to preserve the Bush tax cuts. He would provide families with dependents a doubling of the current deduction -- from \$3500 to \$7000. He would also increase the child tax credit.

Senator McCain's proposals on health care are also often phrased in terms of family-assistance. He proposes to put more decision making about health care insurance into the hands of families and individuals. He also has proposals designed to expand care especially to uninsured children; he has a record of votes in the past in favor of extending health care coverage to uninsured children.

Regarding assisting single mothers, Senator McCain has in the past, and promises to continue in the future, to support laws automating and unifying state child support collection and distribution procedures, toughening child support collection procedures, and rewarding states who demonstrate good collection performance. Senator McCain has voted several times in the past to support federal welfare policies whose primary goals are to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and strengthen marriage and fatherhood.

This list is not complete. One could ask about education and workplace policies, and much more. This is a testament to the sheer number of federal laws which affect family life (in addition to myriad state laws which do the same). There is enough here however to provide more than a glimpse of the basic dispositions of the two candidates toward families.

(1) Senator Obama has orally claimed to oppose same-sex marriage. Yet in written commitments to same-sex marriage proponents, he has expressed (vehement) opposition to states' attempts to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. CITE

Helen Alvare, J.D. is Senior Fellow in Law for the Culture of Life Foundation



CULTURE of LIFE
FOUNDATION®

1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
www.culture-of-life.org

Briefs



**CULTURE of LIFE
FOUNDATION®**

1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
www.culture-of-life.org