Op-Ed

Phony solutions for real social ills

Social conservatives say they want to address family breakdown, crime and welfare costs. But those problems have nothing to do with abortion or gay marriage, the issues they most often target.

By David Boaz

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Social conservatives say they're trying to address the problems of family breakdown, crime and welfare costs, but there's a huge disconnect between the problems they identify and the policy solutions they propose. It's almost like the man who looked for his keys on the thoroughfare, even though he lost them in the alley, because the light was better.

Social conservatives tend to talk about issues such as abortion and gay rights, stem cell research and the role of religion "in the public square": "Those who would have us ignore the battle being fought over life, marriage and religious liberty have forgotten the lessons of history," said Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) at the Family Research Council's 2010 Values Voter Summit.

But what, exactly, are the policy problems they say they aim to solve?

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, at the same summit, said: "We need to understand there is a direct correlation between the stability of families and the stability of our economy…. The real reason we have poverty is we have a breakdown of the basic family structure." And Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) said: "It's impossible to be a fiscal conservative unless you're a social conservative because of the high cost of a dysfunctional society."

Those are reasonable concerns. As a 2009 Heritage Foundation report stated, children born to single mothers "score lower on tests, have increased chances for committing a crime, have higher chances of living in poverty, experience more emotional and behavioral problems, are more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and have higher chances of becoming pregnant as teens." And social problems like that do tend to lead to higher government spending.

But those problems have nothing to do with abortion or gay marriage, the issues that social conservatives talk most about.

Abortion may be a moral crime, but it isn't the cause of high government spending or intergenerational poverty. And one thing gay couples are not doing is filling the world with fatherless children. Indeed, it's hard to imagine that allowing more people to make the emotional and financial commitments of marriage could cause family breakdown or welfare spending.

When Huckabee says that "a breakdown of the basic family structure" is causing poverty — and thus a demand for higher government spending — he knows that he's really talking about unwed motherhood, divorce, children growing up without fathers and the resulting high rates of welfare usage and crime. Those also make up the "high cost of a dysfunctional society" that worries DeMint.

But the "Family Values" section of DeMint's Senate website talks about abortion and gay marriage, along with adoption. There's no mention of divorce or unwed motherhood.

Or take a look at the key issues on the website of the Family Research Council, the chief social conservative group. It recently listed eight papers on abortion and stem cells, seven on gays and gay marriage, and one on divorce. Nothing much has changed since 1994, when I reviewed the Council's publications index and found that the two categories with the most listings were "Homosexual" and "Homosexual in the Military" — a total of 34 items (plus four on AIDS). The organization did show some interest in parenthood — nine items on family structure, 13 on parenthood and six on teen pregnancy — but there were more items on homosexuality than on all of those issues combined. There was no listing for divorce. Since that time, the out-of-wedlock birthrate has risen from 32% to 40%.

Back then, conservatives still defended sodomy laws. These days, after the 2003 Supreme Court decision striking down such laws, most have moved on. Now they just campaign against gays in the military, gays adopting children and gays getting married.

Reducing the incidence of unwed motherhood, divorce, fatherlessness, welfare and crime would be a good thing. So why the focus on issues that would do nothing to solve the "breakdown of the basic family structure" and the resulting "high cost of a dysfunctional society"? Well, solving the problems of divorce and unwed motherhood is hard. And lots of Republican and conservative voters have been divorced. A constitutional amendment to ban divorce wouldn't go over very well, even with the social conservatives. Far better to pick on a small group, a group not perceived to be part of the Republican constituency, and blame it for social breakdown and its associated costs.

That's why social conservatives point to a real problem and then offer phony solutions.

But you won't find your keys on the thoroughfare if you dropped them in the alley, and you won't reduce the costs of social breakdown by keeping gays unmarried and preventing them from adopting orphans.

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