



# What Do Voters Want on Child Care Ahead of the 2020 Elections?

Results from a National Survey of Registered Voters

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# Introduction and summary

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the lives of many Americans—particularly the rhythms and stability of people and families with children. With many parents now working from home, or seeking to juggle hybrid and in-person work with other family needs, the situation for those in need of child care or other reliable early education options for their children is increasingly difficult and trying.

As the nation heads into a critical national election on November 3, the Center for American Progress and its partners at the public opinion polling firm GBAO set out to get a clearer picture of how recent developments may be affecting voters' views about child care and related issues facing the country. How much have things changed for parents and families during the pandemic? Are they facing rising difficulties with child care and schooling or not? Have these developments affected people's views about child care availability and costs in any manner? If so, do voters want to see more government assistance on this front or less? How important are these issues to voters' considerations of policies and political leaders?

To better understand these and other questions, CAP and GBAO designed a national study of 1,400 registered voters, including oversamples of African American and Hispanic women to allow for deeper examinations of these groups, conducted online from September 8 to September 13, 2020. The overall sample was weighted to reflect nationally representative demographic and geographic targets based on census and other voting data. Additional state-specific surveys were also conducted in Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, and Texas. The results presented in this report represent the results of the national study only and the state results will be presented separately.

In terms of the parenting profile of people in this study, 28 percent of all respondents have children under the age of 18, and just over half (53 percent) of these parents have children 5 years old or younger. In addition, 39 percent of parents say that they rely on someone else other than themselves, or a spouse or partner, for their child care needs. Among this group, 34 percent of parents reported that they

rely primarily on a child care center for their children's needs; 23 percent rely on a babysitter or nanny; 22 percent rely on relatives; and 19 percent rely primarily on home-based care in another person's household.

Overall, the study finds serious ongoing challenges for the majority of American parents in terms of finding and affording good quality child care. The coronavirus pandemic compounded many of these existing challenges by, first, negatively affecting people's work, income, and child care situations and, second, by also making many parents anxious about sending their children to child care facilities or at-home arrangements. As a result of these immediate pressures, plus lingering concerns about costs and availability, American voters across demographic and partisan lines express strong support for increased governmental assistance on child care and back a range of specific actions to reduce costs and increase the quality of child care arrangements in the country. In turn, voters say that they will be more likely to support policymakers and political leaders who endorse these investments to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning.

# Overall child care context and parental experiences with COVID-19

To better understand how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting families and parents, the study probed on a number of issues related to overall availability and costs of child care and how, if at all, their situations might have changed in recent months. Long-term problems with child care and early learning options have clearly been accentuated during the pandemic.

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6 in 10 American parents say that there is a serious problem finding quality, affordable child care in their community

Although less than 4 in 10 voters overall say that finding quality, affordable child care in their area is a problem, 28 percent of parents (those with children under the age of 18) report a “very serious problem” finding quality, affordable child care where they live, and another 32 percent say there is a “somewhat serious problem”—a total of 60 percent. The perceived challenge of finding quality, affordable child care is highest among parents of children under the age of 6, at 64 percent. These challenges hit both married and unmarried parents alike, at 62 percent and 57 percent, respectively.

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The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the challenges for roughly 4 in 10 parents in terms of the availability and costs of child care for their children

Asked how easy or difficult it is for them personally to find quality, affordable child care since the pandemic started, 41 percent of parents report that it has been easy to find; 36 percent say it has been difficult to find; and another 24 percent say that they haven’t needed child care. Difficulties are particularly pronounced among Hispanic women, with 47 percent saying it has been very or somewhat difficult for them finding quality, affordable child care during the pandemic.

Among those who have needed child care during the pandemic, however, costs are clearly a pressing concern. Forty-two percent of parents report that their child care costs have increased during the pandemic compared to just 13 percent who say that the cost has decreased and 46 percent who say it has stayed about the same.

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As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, half of all parents say that their work hours or wages have been reduced—and many face mental health challenges

The study presented respondents with a series of potential negative impacts from the coronavirus pandemic and asked them whether they or someone in their family has had a serious problem with each one. Parents report higher than average experiences with all 8 of these items assessing health, economic, and family situations during the pandemic.

For example, roughly one-quarter of American voters overall say that they or a member of their immediate family has suffered the loss of a job compared to nearly 4 in 10 parents. Fifty-one percent of parents have seen their own or their family's work hours cut back or wages reduced versus 36 percent of voters overall. And 42 percent of parents say that they or a family member have had significant mental health challenges during the pandemic versus one-quarter of American voters overall.

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Half of all parents report difficulties in adapting to online learning during the pandemic, and more than 4 in 10 parents say that they have been unable to return to work fully due to child care issues

Notably, many parents and their families have faced acute issues during the pandemic associated with schooling and child care.

More than half of all parents (55 percent) say that their household has faced difficulties adapting to online schooling. Forty-five percent of parents say that they or other family members have had trouble finding child care when needed, and an equal proportion have had to cut back their own work or been unable to return to work due to child care or other schooling issues.

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The majority of parents in need of child care are uncomfortable sending their kids to a child care center or home-based provider during the pandemic

Even though many parents clearly need help with child care during these tough times, the bulk of them are reluctant to send their children to outside facilities or in-home arrangements. This is similar to trepidations many parents might have about sending their children back to school in general.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, 53 percent of parents in need of child care feel uncomfortable sending their children to a child care facility or in-home care provider, while 47 percent say that they are comfortable with such arrangements.

Noticeable income and education divides emerge on this measure. While 57 percent of those needing child care with household incomes of more than \$50,000 per year are comfortable sending their children to facilities during the crisis, 68 percent of those households earning less than \$50,000 annually say that they are uncomfortable doing so. Likewise, 59 percent of college educated voters with child care needs are comfortable with outside arrangements versus 64 percent of noncollege educated voters who are uncomfortable.

It should be noted that, although many parents express concerns about sending their children to child care at this point in time, child care providers continue to incur expenses such as rent or mortgage payments, insurance, payroll, and utilities during the pandemic. Demand for child care will almost certainly rise when the coronavirus pandemic subsides, necessitating child care providers to reopen their doors so that parents can return to work at full productivity.

# The role of government and general support for child care investments

Knowing that many parents and families may be experiencing heightened difficulties and stresses related to child care both long-term and during the pandemic, the study explored a number of questions focused on potential governmental responses. Voters express strong support for increased steps in general and in relation to a potential second round of coronavirus relief measures from Congress.

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Given growing family and economic needs during the pandemic, 6 in 10 voters favor a strong role for government in helping families get reliable, affordable child care so people can work

The survey presented respondents with two competing statements about whether the government should or should not do more to help people better access and afford child care as a result of the pandemic.

Sixty-percent of voters overall say they agree more with the idea that, “Government should take an active role in ensuring all families have access to reliable, affordable child care because we will not be able to fully recover from the current coronavirus pandemic unless parents are able to return to work.” This is compared to the 40 percent who agree with the statement, “The government has already spent more than taxpayers can afford and added trillions to the federal debt. Helping people afford child care would be great, but we have other more important priorities and can’t afford to add any more debt right now.”

Agreement with the first statement about an increased role for government is higher than average among parents (67 percent); African American women (75 percent); and Hispanic women (67 percent). Support for a greater government role is highest among younger voters ages 18 to 34 (72 percent) and steadily decreases with age.

In partisan terms, 78 percent of Democrats back a stronger role for government on child care issues during the pandemic along with 55 percent of independents and 4 in 10 Republicans.

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## 7 in 10 voters support increased congressional funding for child care and early childhood education

When asked, “Would you support or oppose efforts in Congress to increase funding for child care assistance and to expand access to early childhood education?” 70 percent of voters overall say that they support increased funding. Only 16 percent oppose these efforts, with 14 percent undecided about the issue. This includes 84 percent of Democrats; 61 percent of independents; and 60 percent of Republicans.

Support is particularly high among parents at 82 percent, but two-thirds of voters who don’t have children under the age of 18 also support increased funding for child care. At least 6 in 10 people in every age and educational group support increased congressional funding for child care and early education, along with 81 percent of African American women and 78 percent of Hispanic women.

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## Nearly 6 in 10 voters want money for child care included in any future coronavirus stimulus package

The study assessed opinions about a potential next round of coronavirus legislation offering arguments both for and against including child care funding as part of any package:

Some members of Congress say we need new coronavirus relief measures to support unemployed workers and small businesses, but we must also include funding to support child care providers who are struggling to stay in business and families trying find suitable child care to meet new work and school demands.

Other members of Congress say we have already spent trillions on coronavirus relief. Any new coronavirus relief package must be much smaller than what has already passed and must be focused on our top priorities - supporting unemployed workers and helping businesses create or preserve jobs. We can’t afford to spend money on other priorities like child care.

Fifty-eight percent of voters overall say that the next coronavirus relief package should include these funds for child care, while 21 percent believe it should not, with an equal proportion undecided on the issue. Support includes 75 percent of Democratic voters; half of independents; and 44 percent of Republican voters.

Desire to see funding for child care in any future relief package is far higher than average among parents (72 percent); African American women (74 percent); and Hispanic women (65 percent).

# Political impact and support for specific child care proposals

Beyond voters' overall opinions about the role of government on child care, the study also examined voter attitudes toward political candidates who might back these efforts as well as on a range of specific policy ideas. Voters want candidates to take on this issue and express high levels of support for direct investments in child care affordability and infrastructure.

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Half of all voters would be more likely to vote for a candidate for office if they support increased funding for child care and expanded early learning

Fifty percent of voters overall say that they would be more likely to vote for a candidate for office if they support increased funding for child care assistance and expanded access to early childhood education. Only 14 percent say that they would be less likely to vote for such a candidate, with 37 percent saying it would not influence their vote either way.

Voters regardless of partisanship say that they would be more—rather than less—likely to vote for a candidate who supports increased funding for child care and early learning. Democrats said they would support such a candidate by a 68 percent to 2 percent margin; independents by a 44 percent to 15 percent margin; and Republicans by 32 percent to 26 percent margin.

Sixty-two percent of parents say that they would be more likely to vote for a candidate supporting increased funding for child care, as would 50 percent of nonparents. More than 6 in 10 African American women and more than half of Hispanic women would be more likely to vote for such a candidate in upcoming elections.

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More than 7 in 10 voters express support for a range of specific policy proposals to help address the costs of child care for American families in the long term

Respondents were presented with a series of concrete policy ideas to improve access to quality, affordable child care and asked whether they would support or oppose each item. In many cases, support for specific measures on child care and early education exceeds general support for increased investment seen in the previous section. For example, 79 percent of voters overall support a proposal to: “Guarantee child care assistance to low-income and middle-class families on a sliding scale based on household income,” including 90 percent of Democrats; 76 percent of independents; and 67 percent of Republicans. Parents (87 percent) and nonparents (80 percent) both support the idea of subsidizing child care for families.

Along these lines, 75 percent of voters overall support a proposal to: “Offer low-income and middle-class families a tax credit of up to \$8,000 to help pay for child care,” including support from 88 percent of Democrats; 70 percent of independents; and 65 percent of Republicans. Seventy-two percent of voters overall—and roughly 7 in 10 voters across all partisan persuasions—also support an idea to: “Limit child care payments to 7 percent of a family’s income.”

Support is wide and deep for steps to: “Help subsidize and create more options for home-based child care,” with 73 percent of voters overall backing this proposal, including nearly 9 in 10 Democrats and more than 6 in 10 independents and Republicans, respectively.

Approximately 80 percent to 90 percent of African American and Hispanic women support each of these proposals to help families with affordable child care.

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Beyond cost issues, voters overwhelmingly support steps to increase pay for child care workers and improve child care infrastructure

Nearly 9 in 10 voters (88 percent) say that they would support a specific proposal to: “Ensure people who work in child care earn a living wage,” including more than 9 in 10 Democrats and 8 in 10 independents and Republicans, respectively. Ninety percent of both parents and nonparents support increased pay for child care workers.

In addition, 80 percent of voters overall would support steps to: “Invest in new child care programs in rural and low-income neighborhoods where the lack of licensed child care is greatest.” More than 9 in 10 Democrats back these targeted investment efforts, along with about 8 in 10 independents and more than two-thirds of Republicans. Support for new investments in rural and low-income areas is particularly high among African American women (92 percent) and Hispanic women (82 percent).

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## 8 in 10 voters back a proposal to offer optional public pre-K to all 3- and 4-year old children in the country

Support for optional public pre-K crosses party lines with 90 percent of Democrats supporting this idea along with three-quarters of independents and 72 percent of Republicans. Nearly 9 in 10 parents support this idea as do 8 in 10 of those without children.

Likewise, 61 percent of voters overall support a more far-reaching proposal for “universal free child care from birth to age 5, similar to public school,” including 80 percent of Democrats; 55 percent of independents; and 44 percent of Republicans.

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## At least half of all voters view a range of arguments for increasing funding for child care and early learning as convincing reasons for taking these steps

The study presented people with a list of concrete rationales for both supporting and opposing increased federal funding for child care and expanded early childhood learning and asked whether they found each argument convincing or not convincing.

Interestingly, the most convincing arguments in favor of these steps focus not only on costs, as seen throughout the study, but also on the wider societal and economic benefits of early learning. For example, more than two-thirds of voters overall find the following rationale for increased federal funding convincing:

The first five years of a child’s life are critical to their ability to learn social and emotional skills, and for becoming good students later in life. Just as we make K-12 education available to all families, we should be investing in early childhood programs to make them available to all children and to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Eighty percent of Democrats; 62 percent of independents; and 54 percent of Republicans find this argument convincing.

Similarly, 62 percent of voters overall find the following argument convincing as a reason to support increased federal funding:

A major investment in child care and early learning would put more people to work, increase wages, and help families make ends meet while providing children with safe and stable learning environments. It would create 2.3 million new jobs and help predominantly low-income parents to return to the workforce.

Three-quarters of Democrats, nearly 6 in 10 independents, and half of Republicans find this argument convincing.

# Conclusion

As the nation heads into the final weeks of national elections, policymakers and political leaders would be wise to pay attention to the child care needs and desires of voters across the country—particularly among parents and African American and Hispanic women.

The coronavirus pandemic has clearly accelerated existing challenges for many people in finding and affording quality child care arrangements. Consequently, voters across demographic and partisan lines support both a general commitment to increase governmental assistance for child care and a range of concrete proposals to help families find and afford good child care and early education options. Importantly, most of the solutions receiving support from voters are not limited to short-term steps. Issues around child care costs and availability represent long-term challenges, and voters broadly support a range of long-term solutions, including subsidies for families and new infrastructure.

Unlike many divisive issues in national politics, this study finds basic consensus among voters on the need for increased federal funding for child care and the rationales for doing so. If political parties and candidates take on these proposals—and show families and parents that they truly understand and want to help with the life and economic challenges of raising children and working—they will be rewarded by voters across the spectrum and among both parents and nonparents alike.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For more information on public attitudes on schools see: Collin Binkley and Hannah Fingerhut, "AP-NORC poll: Very few Americans back full school reopening," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2020, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/ap-norc-poll-very-few-americans-back-full-school-reopening/2020/07/22/fed7e564-cc80-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/ap-norc-poll-very-few-americans-back-full-school-reopening/2020/07/22/fed7e564-cc80-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b_story.html).

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