

Who Gets a Seat at America's Family Table?

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AM ST 304

Op-Ed #2

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April 21, 2026

Most Americans do not learn who belongs in the nation from a civics lecture. They learn it from the couch. A rerun of *Modern Family* plays while someone clears the dishes. The *Friends* theme starts, and half the room can sing it on command. It looks like harmless entertainment. It is not. For decades, family sitcoms have taught Americans what households look normal, lovable, respectable, and fully American.¹

Audiences like to treat these shows as nostalgic comfort or a chance to relax. Commentators often describe them as mirrors of social change, as though television simply follows culture around and reports back. That lets television off too easily. Family sitcoms do not just reflect change; they rehearse it, soften it, stage it, and make it feel natural. From *Leave It to Beaver* to *The Brady Bunch*, from *All in the Family* to *Friends* and *Modern Family*, the form of home keeps shifting while the symbolic work remains. Long before most people sort out their views through law, politics, or public argument, television has already been teaching them which households look normal, stable, and fully American. Family has long served as one of the nation's strongest symbols, a shorthand for care, duty, legitimacy, order, and belonging. Family arguments are rarely only about private life; they are arguments about who counts, whose relationships look secure, and which households deserve recognition as part of the national story.

Leave It to Beaver offered the old template in its cleanest form: calm father, composed mother, safe suburban home, manageable childhood mistakes, and a household structure that never really seemed at risk. The point was not realism; it was reassurance. If the family was orderly, America was orderly. If the home was secure, the country was secure. Stephanie Coontz cut through that fantasy by reminding readers that *Leave It to Beaver* 'was not a documentary.' Its power came partly from what it left out.² Its power came partly from what it left out. Black

¹ Kristen Lopez, "The Evolution of the Family Sitcom," The Peabody Awards, December 15, 2022.

² Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

families, immigrant families, poor families, single-parent families, multigenerational families, and families in apartments rather than roomy suburban homes were not missing from America. They were missing from the story that television preferred to tell.

The Brady Bunch revised that image, but gently. It brought divorce and remarriage into view without frightening the audience. The family was blended, but the house stayed cheerful, the conflicts stayed manageable, and the larger world still felt padded and safe. The message was simple: America could absorb change, as long as the change arrived smiling and did not rattle the furniture.³ The show remodeled the old family ideal rather than abandoning it.

All in the Family dropped the pretense that the living room was protected from the country's fights. Archie Bunker's house still looked like a familiar sitcom set, but race, class, gender, and politics now sat at the dinner table. Family remained at the center of the story, but it no longer symbolized consensus. It symbolized conflict. *All in the Family* showed that those arguments were already inside the home. The living room did not hide division; it staged it. The family was still a symbol of America, but now that symbol barked, argued, flinched, and contradicted itself.⁴

By the 1990s, many Americans no longer lived in anything resembling the Cleaver household, but they still wanted a place to belong. *Friends* understood that and shifted the emotional work of family away from blood and toward presence. Monica's apartment and Central Perk became domestic centers because they offered what older sitcom homes had long promised: return here, and someone will know your story. *Friends* told viewers that the home might look less like an inheritance and more like the people who keep showing up. Jillian Sandell calls the series a fantasy of alternative families.⁵ Meals, rituals, breakups, private jokes,

³ Kristen Lopez, "The Evolution of the Family Sitcom"; see also Janna Jones, "Making Room for *The Brady Bunch*: The Syndication of Suburban Discomfort," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019).

⁴ Jim McKairnes, "On Its 50th Anniversary, Why *All in the Family* Is Still a Story That Matters," *Humanitas*, January 12, 2021.

⁵ Jillian Sandell, "I'll Be There for You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (1998): 141–55.

holidays, backup, and second chances were the old materials of family, now reassigned to friendship. The table widened, but not for everyone.

Modern Family pushed that revision and made it look ordinary. Divorce, remarriage, same-sex parenting, adoption, immigration, step-relations, and age-gap marriage all became part of the everyday material of sitcom life. The show did not present those households as warnings or sociology lessons. It presented them as family. In American culture, what looks ordinary carries power. Once viewers are taught to see a household as familiar, funny, loving, and worth rooting for, the argument has already shifted. *Modern Family* widened the frame without making it seem as though it had shattered.⁶

Family fights on television have never been only about entertainment. “Family” is one of the strongest words in American public life, carrying ideas about duty, legitimacy, order, care, and belonging. When Americans argue about family, they are also arguing about the nation itself: who counts, who belongs, and whose lives receive respect. Sitcoms tidy all this up. They make conflict funnier, endings neater, homes prettier, and struggle easier to survive in twenty-two minutes. They leave out rent panic, fear, disorder, and loneliness that define much of real family life. That is not a reason to dismiss these shows. It is a reason to take them seriously.

Family sitcoms show how badly Americans want family to keep anchoring the culture, even as its shape keeps changing. The country keeps arguing over who gets included in the family ideal. That struggle still surfaces in campaign speeches, school board fights, policy debates, church language, online panic, and nostalgia for a sturdier past that never existed the way people remember it. Television did not create that hunger, but it has fed it for decades. America is still deciding who gets a seat at the family table. The real question is whether we are willing to see the families already sitting there.

⁶ “Modern Family,” The Peabody Awards, accessed April 11, 2026.

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