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Is There a Marriage Gap in Politics?

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With 1984 national survey data, the authors test whether there is a "marriage gap" in politics—that is, does marital status affect political orientations and participation? Married and single persons consistently differ in their politics: the married were relatively inclined to Reagan, the Republican party, conservative self-identification, and conservative views on a number of issues. However, multivariate analyses indicate that marital status per se only modestly affects some dimensions of political orientation, including presidential vote. When various factors are controlled, the married have somewhat higher turnout rates than singles, but the latter are more inclined to political participation beyond the act of voting. The modest political effects of marital status do not appreciably differ by sex, age, or homeownership status.

During the campaign for the presidential election of 1984, Martin Plissner (1983) briefly but provocatively drew attention to a "marriage gap," suggesting that married people were significantly more inclined to support Reagan than were single people. In fact, postelection surveys confirmed the reality of this gap: 63% of married voters chose the Republican candidate, but only 45% of the single, never-married voters did so (Weisberg, 1985). A difference of this magnitude may well have important political ramifications. A sizable minority (26%) of the 1984 electorate was not married, and demographic projections (Masnick and Bane, 1980) indicate that married couples will comprise only a bare majority of households by 1990.

That such a gap has gone largely unnoticed is remarkable in an electorate so thoroughly and elaborately dissected to detect differences in the political orientations of social demographic groups. Of course it is a long-standing presumption in political sociology that social demographic characteristics structurally "locate" individuals in ways that expose them to particular political influences, creating distinctive political interests and outlooks. Thus, as a recent extension of this research tradition, analysts debate the nature and meaning of the "gender gap" (e.g., Poole and Zeigler, 1985). At the same time, however, the larger difference in the Reagan vote between married persons and singles (18%) than between men and women (8%) remains unexamined. Yet this large political cleavage cannot be sensibly ignored, either by scholarly analysts of the family or politics—or by those concerned with the practical matters of electoral politics.

Indeed, the gap in presidential preference may be indicative of broader differences in political orientations between married and single Americans. As Plissner (1983: 53) argues, married people are more apt to have made political commitments in the prevailing order that extend beyond the self. These commitments may be material but also include such intangible matters as attachments to social values and community. Married life—the socially conventional life for adults—may reflect or even create a preference for order and stability in one's domestic life, and this preference may be transferred to the political realm. This general orientation in domestic life, then, may foster a benign view of authority and be the grounds for conservative, traditional politics. Conversely, with fewer commitments rooted in their domestic lives, singles may be less responsive to conservative political appeals.

Moreover, several studies suggest that married people are relatively more likely to participate in the political system (Olsen, 1972; Welch, 1977), though this research does not theoretically consider the political meaning of marriage or even

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give it much attention. Their higher voting rates may reflect interpersonal influences within the family that may motivate otherwise apathetic citizens to go to the polls (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), but these findings may also be interpreted in a broader perspective. Married people would seem to have a greater psychological stake in the established order and thus may be more likely to participate politically, both to affirm their commitment to, and to bolster, that moral order.

These theoretical speculations are echoed in Novak's (1982) expansive defense of "democratic capitalism." He is quite right in noting that social scientists have given little systematic attention to the political significance of the "bourgeois family." However, in arguing that the family is an important bulwark against totalitarian impulses and that it creates dispositions favorable to democratic institutions, he seems to be articulating themes that have long been implicit in the conservative philosophical tradition. For Novak (1982: 164) *the* family, meaning a married couple (especially those with children), teaches and reinforces "the habits of mind and will indispensable to the conception and practice of self-government." This occurs, Novak argues, because

> the individual bound by responsibilities and loyalties to spouse and children is bound, as well, to traditions welling up from the past and extending into the future. . . . Through it [the family] the sociality of the self is realized in flesh and blood, gains perspective on past and future and is made to belong not to the self alone, not to the present alone, and not to the regime of the moment alone, but to a culture thousands of years old.

To be sure, this poetic vision does not readily lend itself to empirical test, and the larger claims about the indispensability of the bourgeois family to democracy cannot be evaluated with cross-sectional voting and public opinion data from one society. But if true, one should at least expect that married people would have greater political participation—a prerequisite for self-government—than single people. One might also expect that the "self-discipline," "critical judgment," and "realist," nonutopian attitudes allegedly taught in the family, along with an appreciation for tradition, would generally induce a conservative orientation in politics. If so, a conservative candidate with strong traditional "pro-family" appeals should be able to mobilize this group in an election.

In this brief analysis our aim is to test this line of theoretical speculation with recent survey data. Does marital status affect political orientations and participation? We look to establish whether marital status represents a cleavage in recent American politics; but more important, because marital status is associated with other sociodemographic characteristics that are related to political orientations, we analyze whether marital status per se has an independent effect on an individual's political behavior and attitudes.

Conceivably, marital status has a different impact on specific groups, and so we also test for such interaction effects. In particular, we examine the interaction between marital status and three other characteristics: sex, age, and homeownership. Since marriage and family life seem to have a greater affective hold on wives than husbands, we might reasonably expect that any political ramifications of marriage are relatively pronounced among women. Moreover, while not conclusive, considerable research suggests that the psychic meaning of marriage varies over the life cycle (Beyer and Whitehurst, 1976; Chadwick, Albrecht, and Kunz, 1976; Nock, 1979). These changes may be associated with political attitudes.[1] Finally, the impact of homeownership warrants attention because, like marriage, it represents a certain stability in domestic arrangements, and it has been shown to have social and political ramifications. Homeowners are modestly more inclined to be attached to the prevailing moral order and community life (Blum and Kingston, 1984) and slightly more inclined to vote and have conservative political preferences (Kingston, Thompson, and Eicher, 1984). In looking at the interaction of marital status and homeownership, the political orientations of married homeowners are of particular interest. Does being part of the "married and mortgaged" set intensify the impact of these domestic factors?

In this analysis we focus on the contrast between currently married and single people since it is most directly linked to the previously noted theoretical speculations and would seem to bring any differences associated with marital status into sharpest relief. Of course, with the great number of divorced, separated, and widowed people, marital status is not a dichotomous matter. Yet it makes little sense to assign single or married status to the disparate group of previously married persons, especially without knowing how long they have lacked a partner. In some ways these individuals are partially single and partially married, making it difficult even to speculate whether their current "aloneness" or past "attachment" is more consequential politically. Thus in our analysis we consider three categories of marital status—married, single, and previously married—but with little theoretical guide to the dispositions of this

last group, we concentrate on the contrast between single and married persons.

DATA AND METHODS

We analyze here the American National Election Study of 1984, a large nationally representative survey of adults aged 18 and over living in the United States in private households. The survey was conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. We focus on the 1984 election because Plissner (1983) first drew attention to an alleged "marriage gap" during that campaign. Further, many analysts suggest that Reagan effectively cultivated "familistic" sentiments as part of his more general traditional cultural appeals. Perhaps more than other recent elections, then, the 1984 election brought "family issues," at least indirectly, into the political arena. If so, our test is biased in the direction of finding a "marriage effect."

In the following discussion, we first establish the bivariate relationship between marital status and various indicators of political orientation and participation. We then test to see whether significant relationships remain once other variables are introduced into multiple regression equations.[2] These equations are not intended as fully specified models of the dependent variables (including "mediating" attitudinal measures, for example). Rather, our analysis tests whether marital status has a net effect once other social demographic variables are controlled. Since we have theoretical reason to predict results, we use the one-tail test for significance.

Independent Variables

To examine the effect in the multiple regression equations of three categories of marital status, we created two dummy variables: single (yes = 1, no = 0); previously married (yes = 1, no = 0). Married is the excluded, or baseline, category; thus the coefficients for single and previously married represent the difference from the married group. Those who are "living together" (1.9% of the total sample) are classified as single.[3]

For control variables in the regression models we included a substantial set of social demographic variables commonly used in voting research (Conway, 1985; Kingston et al., 1984). Three relate to socioeconomic status: family income (22 categories: 22 = $75,000 and up); education (10 levels: 1 = 8th grade or less; 10 = advanced degree); and self-identification of social class, (8 categories: lower class = low). Others are: sex (male = 0, female = 1); race (white = 1, nonwhite = 0); size of community where brought up (3 categories); homeownership (1 = own, 0 = rent or other); and employment status (1 = employed, 0 = not employed). To measure region, we created dummy variables—East, Midwest, South, and West (in models, East is the excluded category). Finally, we used dummy variables to stand for young (less than 30 years old) and elderly (over 65) respondents, and entered these variables (with middle-aged respondents as the baseline) to control for age. This approach is desirable for two reasons. First, there is a strong possibility of nonlinear effects of age on several of the dependent variables, notably voting turnout and participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Second, we were interested in possible interaction effects of age and marital status, and the dummy technique allowed us to create nine groups based on age and marital status whose average scores on the dependent variables, when all other sociodemographic factors are controlled, can be calculated and easily compared.[4]

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in the analysis include items related to political orientation and participation. These items, listed below, do not exhaust the range of political matters potentially affected by marital status, but they do tap important and diverse dimensions of political life.

Political Orientations

1. 1984 presidential vote (Democratic, high).
2. Party identification (7 categories: strong Democrat, low; strong Republican, high).
3. Ideological self-definition (7 categories: extremely liberal, low; extremely conservative, high).
4. Desire for government aid to minorities (7 categories: government should help minority groups, low; minority groups should help themselves, high).
5. Government responsibility for provision of jobs and good standard of living (7 categories: government see to a job, low; government let each person get ahead on own, high).
6. Attitudes about civil rights: "We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country" (5 categories: agree strongly, low; disagree strongly, high).
7. Attitude toward source of failure: "Most people who don't get ahead should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame" (5 categories: agree strongly, low; disagree strongly, high).

Political Participation and Attachment

8. Voted in presidential election (yes = 1; no = 0).
9. Participation index. Constructed as the sum total of four activities: talking to others to convince them to vote a certain way; wearing buttons or displaying campaign stickers or signs; attending campaign meetings or rallies; and working for a party or candidate. A higher score indicates greater partcipation.
10. Efficacy index. An average score was constructed from three items to which respondents agreed or disagreed: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does"; "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think"; and "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." A higher score indicates a greater sense of efficacy.[5]
11. Trust index. An average score was constructed from four items: "Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste much of it?"; "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of time?"; "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?"; and "Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?" A higher score indicates less trust.

RESULTS

Political Orientations

As Table 1 (Panel A) indicates, married, single, and previously married people differed in their political orientations in 1984, though these differences do not represent a major cleavage. Perhaps most notable is the difference in voting preference: 63% of the married voted for Reagan; 45% of the singles did so. The previously married had an intermediate level of support—55%. Partially consistent with this difference, the married people on average (4.7) identified themselves as close to "slightly conservative," while the singles on average (3.9) identified themselves as "moderate." Again, the previously married were intermediate (4.4), though similar to the marrieds. Further, on average, the married were slightly less apt to identify themselves (2.9) with the Democratic party than the singles (2.6). (On the 7-point scale, 2 is scored "independent Democrat" and 3 is scored "pure independent.")

On specific policy issues, the married took slightly more conservative positions than the singles and the previously married. For the items relating to government aid to minorities (7-point scale), government guarantee of a job (5-point scale), and civil rights enforcement (5-point scale), average scores for the singles and married differ by .4. While each of these differences is statistically significant, they suggest only a modest divergence in views.

Whatever their marital status, people are about equally inclined to a moderately individualistic orientation in locating blame for personal economic failure (Table 1, Item 7). Both have a tendency to blame individual shortcomings, not systemic problems, for personal failure to achieve economically.

TABLE 1. BIVARIATE RELATIONSHIPS: MARITAL STATUS, POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Variable	Married	Single	Previously Married
A. Political orientations			
1. 1984 vote (percentage for Reagan)	63*	45	55
2. Party identification (mean)	2.9*	2.6	2.5
3. Ideology (mean)	4.7*	3.9	4.4
4. Aid to minorities (mean)	4.2*	3.8	4.0
5. Government guarantee of jobs (mean)	4.3*	3.9	3.9
6. Civil rights enforcement (mean)	2.9*	3.3	3.1
7. System blame/Individual responsibility (mean)	2.5*	2.7	2.5
B. Political participation			
8. Voted in 1984 (percentage)	78*	64	71
9. Campaign participation (mean)	.49*	.60	.39
10. Efficacy (mean)	3.1*	3.0	2.9
11. Trust (mean)	3.9	3.8	4.0

Note: See text for description of variables.
*Differences across the three categories of marital status are significant at .05 level.

TABLE 2. REGRESSION OF MARITAL STATUS AND SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON SELECTED ORIENTATIONS AND PARTICIPATION

	1 Vote Preference		2 Ideology		3 Civil Rights Enforcement		4 Campaign Participation	
Variable	*b*	beta	*b*	beta	*b*	beta	*b*	beta
Single	.07*	.05	-.49*	-.10	.22*	.06	.18*	.08
Previously married	-.05	-.04	-.14	-.03	.12	.03	.01	.01
Sex	.02	.02	-.05	-.001	.06	.02	-.12*	-.07
Size community	.04*	.07	-.06	-.02	.06	.04	-.006	-.01
Class	-.004	-.01	.01	.01	.02	.02	.03	.05
Employed	-.03	-.03	-.13	-.03	-.03	-.008	-.04	-.02
Race	-.19*	-.12	.50*	.08	-.54*	-.12	.009	.00
Homeownership	-.03	-.02	.33*	.08	-.15*	-.05	.006	.00
Education	.007	.03	-.02	-.03	.08*	.13	.06*	.16
Young	-.04	.003	.01	.003	.06	.02	-.02	-.01
Old	.004	-.003	.20	.04	.08	.02	-.07	-.03
Income	-.07*	-.09	.02	.06	.003	.01	.000	.00
West	.06*	.05	-.006	-.001	.23*	.06	-.08	-.04
South	-.05	-.05	.17	.04	-.16	-.05	-.05	-.03
Midwest	.03	.03	.16	.04	-.007	-.002	-.07	-.04
Party ID[a]	-.14*	-.64	—	—	-.15*	-.21	.16*	.19
R^2	.52		.05		.11		.08	
n	(1,197)		(1,612)		(1,849)		(1,644)	

Note: Marital status did not have a significant net effect in the multivariate equations for all other dependent variables. See text for descriptions of variables.

[a]In Model 4, the original party identification measure was folded to obtain a 4-value measure of strength of partisanship: "strong Republican" or "strong Democratic" is high, "pure independent" is low.

*$p < .05$.

While generally modest, all the noted bivariate differences are in the predicted direction. Moreover, the results of multivariate analyses indicate that the impact of marital status on political orientations cannot be ignored, though its effects do not extend to all matters. (See Table 2, which presents the equations in which marital status reaches statistical significance; all other multivariate analyses are not presented.)

Once the control variables are introduced, the singles are still more apt to have voted Democratic than the married (Table 2, Equation 1). Note that this model includes party identification as well as sociodemographic factors as control variables; party identification is a powerful predictor of voting preference, though marital status is not independently related to it. If the unstandardized coefficient is interpreted in terms of percentages, married people differ from singles by 7 points. The previously married appear somewhat less likely to vote Democratic than the married, but this difference is significant only at the .10 level. In a *relative* sense, marital status is a sociodemographic characteristic of political consequence; of the sociodemographic variables, only race and family income are substantially better predictors. However, none of the social demographic variables accounts for much variance.

For ideological self-identification as well, marital status is a relatively good predictor (Table 2, Equation 2). The standardized coefficient for single status (-.10) is statistically significant and the largest in the equation, though it is a poor predictive equation ($R^2 = .05$).

On only one of the attitudinal items relating to policy does marital status have a net effect (Table 2, Equation 3). Single people are slightly more inclined (beta = .06) to take a liberal stance on civil rights enforcement than married people. Again, this effect is more notable for its relative than absolute size, as the entire equation accounts for only 11% of the variance.

Marital status does not have a net effect on party identification, attitudes toward government aid to minorities or guarantees of jobs, or views on the source of personal failure.

Political Participation and Attachment

Even at the bivariate level, marital status does not consistently have the predicted effects on participation and psychological attachment to the system (see Table 1, Panel B).

Married people have a higher voting turnout than singles (a 14% difference) and the previously married (a 7-point difference); but beyond this minimal act of participation, the singles are

generally the most politically involved. On a 4-point scale of participation, the singles on average score .56, .10 higher than the average for married people. Furthermore, contrary to some implications of Novak's argument, marital status is unrelated to an individual's sense of political efficacy or trust.

Multivariate analysis indicates that the association between marital status and voting turnout is spurious. However, even with this substantial set of control variables, single people appear more politically involved than married people (Table 2, Equation 4). The standardized coefficient for single status (.08) is small, but only party identification and education have larger net effects.

Interactions

For all dependent variables, we then ran the models with interaction terms to see whether marital status had different effects on different groups within the population.

None of the interaction terms for homeownership and marital status was significant. Thus the effect of being "married and mortgaged" is not different from separate, additive effects of marriage and homeownership.

There are only a few, weak interaction effects between sex and marital status on political orientations. While sex itself has no effect, the interaction between sex and marital status is significant in several models. Single women are more inclined than single men to endorse government aid to minorities and government provision of jobs, and previously married women were relatively likely to identify with the Democratic party. These effects, however, are extremely small and do not constitute a consistent pattern. We conclude that the political ramifications of marital status do not notably differ between the sexes.

For the four dependent variables in which marital status made a difference (Table 2), there were also significant interactions between age and marital status. Table 3 presents the adjusted percentages or means for these dependent variables for each of the nine age-marital status groups, *when all other independent variables are controlled.* These estimates are obtained through a straightforward application of dummy variable regression, essentially analogous to the adjusted means calculated in multiple classification analysis or analysis of covariance (Welch, 1977).[6]

Table 3 reveals that the effects of marital status are largely constant for young and middle-aged respondents. For these groups, married people are both more conservative and less participatory than singles, and the differences between marrieds and singles are roughly similar. For the elderly, however, the effects of marital status are exactly the opposite, with *single* elderly people more conservative, more Reagan-oriented, less participatory, and less disposed toward civil rights than their married counterparts. Given the general (though weak) correlation of old age and conservative political outlook, this means that the single elderly are the most conservative group in the entire sample. This distinctive pattern is surprising and not readily explainable, but it appears that there are fairly strong political consequences associated with being old among never-married respondents, a very small subgroup within the sample. In general, though, there do not seem to be any fundamental life cycle interactions with marital status.

DISCUSSION

In the political arena, married and single people consistently differ in expectable ways. In 1984 the married were relatively more inclined toward Reagan, the Republican party, a conservative self-identification, and conservative views on a number of issues. Yet aside from voting pattern, these differences are quite modest, not indicating a fundamental social cleavage in political orientations. The "marriage gap," as revealed in bivariate analysis, is one of limited size.

Multivariate analyses indicate that marital status per se affects only some dimensions of political orientation, namely, presidential vote,

TABLE 3. EFFECTS OF MARITAL STATUS AMONG AGE GROUPS

	Young (18–29)			Middle-Aged (30–64)			Old (65+)		
Variable	S[a]	PM	M	S	PM	M	S	PM	M
Mondale vote (%)	47	20	36	51	42	43	17	34	37
Ideology (mean)	4.08	4.72	4.60	4.02	4.17	4.63	5.49	4.68	4.65
Civil rights enforcement (mean)	3.16	3.15	2.91	3.26	3.13	2.92	2.59	3.04	3.06
Participation (mean)	.65	.48	.49	.76	.60	.52	.40	.49	.56

Note: Table entries are adjusted percentages or means, with controls for all variables in Table 2 (see Footnote 6). There were no significant interaction effects for the other dependent variables. See text for descriptions of dependent variables.

[a]S = single; PM = previously married; M = married.

ideological self-identification, and attitudes about civil rights. To be sure, these net effects are fairly slight, but they are notable because marital status has been so consistently overlooked in analyses of the "social bases" of politics. The net effects of marital status compare in size to commonly examined social demographic variables.

Furthermore, the modest political ramifications of marital status are largely similar throughout the population. That is, marital status does not have different political meaning for specific groups. The modest effects hold equally for homeowners and renters, and the differences between men and women are limited, with single and previously married women being slightly more liberal on a few matters. Also, age does not systematically condition the impact of marital status. The only age-marital status interaction of note involves the distinctly conservative orientation of the few elderly singles (never married).

As an independent causal factor, then, marital status does not have the pervasive or strong impact on political orientations suggested by Novak or Plissner's arguments. Rather, its effects seem minor and selective, perhaps activated by particular appeals. Thus, when other factors are controlled, the married are drawn to Reagan, an appealing self-avowed conservative who stressed "familistic" concerns, and to a conservative label themselves; but at the same time they are not more inclined toward the Republican party or to conservative stances on important issues. If the pattern of results in the 1984 election is revealing, it appears that marital status has political dimensions that may potentially be activated, but it does not fundamentally shape the full scope of an individual's political orientations.

Marriage also does not consistently breed "good citizenship." When numerous other factors are controlled, the married have somewhat higher turnout rates than singles, but the latter are more inclined toward political participation beyond the act of voting. Perhaps, as Novak argues, family life does nurture an attachment to the system, an attachment easily affirmed by voting. Yet more active participation takes time, and the involvements of family life may preclude this commitment. Without pressing obligations to a spouse and perhaps with a desire for a sociable outlet, singles may have both relatively greater opportunity and interest in political participation. Whatever the case, an individual's current family situation does not condition feelings of political efficacy or trust. Counter to the implications of Novak's argument, marriage does not appear as the great school for attitudes associated with good citizenship.

After noting that Carter advised White House staff members who were "living in sin" to marry, Plissner (1983: 53) observes, "A Democratic president more conscious of the marriage gap might have left well enough alone." Perhaps so. Yet he should not have expected great political gain. In the future, political sentiments associated with marital status may be mobilized, but currently they are limited in scope and force.

FOOTNOTES

1. We did not directly test the interaction of marital status and life cycle stage because we were unable to control for length of marriage. Our analysis simply shows whether the effects of marital status vary among people of different ages. Indeed, it would be very desirable to see whether the effects of marriage are conditioned by its length.

2. Our analysis violates a measurement assumption of ordinary least squares regression in that two of our dependent variables (presidential vote and turnout) are dichotomous. However, satisfactory estimates can be made when the distribution of the dependent variable is not heavily skewed (Nervlove and Press, 1973). Both of our dichotomous dependent variables meet this condition.

3. We classify individuals "living together" as single because their living arrangement contravenes prevailing social norms prescribing marriage as the legitimate way for adults to live together intimately. Even though these individuals do not live alone and may share some of the bonds that arise in marriage, they lack the socially and personally meaningful status of a formal marriage.

4. We also ran the models with age coded in years. The coefficients for the marital status variables remained the same in all cases.

5. The items used to create the efficacy and trust indices are those commonly employed in political attitude research (Abramson, 1983).

6. Regressions were conducted with the control variables and with eight dummy age-marital status variables, with middle-aged married respondents representing the baseline category. The adjusted mean score for the baseline category is calculated by:

   Grand mean = $\Sigma b(i)*P(i)$, where $b(i)$ is the unstandardized regression coefficient for group dummy (i) and $P(i)$ is the proportion of the sample in group (i). The adjusted mean score for all other groups is calculated by adding the regression estimate $b(i)$ for that group to the just-calculated adjusted mean of the baseline group. See Welch (1977: 719–720) for a similar procedure.

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