

Study Contends Marrieds are More Likely to Vote

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Who is most likely to vote in presidential elections? Researchers have known that who votes can be determined by a trio of individual characteristics: education, age, and residential stability; and the more you have of each, the greater the probability of voting, with education the strongest predictor of voter turnout.

But University of Utah researcher Nicholas H. Wolfinger, associate professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Studies, has found a fourth consideration: an individual's family structure, defined as marital status and the presence of children in the household. Wolfinger will present his findings at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, to be held in Philadelphia this weekend.

Using a Census Bureau survey of more than 74,000 people to explore the effects of family structure on turnout in the 2000 presidential election, Wolfinger and his father and co-author, Raymond E. Wolfinger, professor emeritus in the Charles and Louise Travers Department of Political Science, at the University of California, Berkeley, researched whether family structure, which "has so many implications for well-being," extended to electoral participation.

The study discovered that "vulnerable social groups"—notably single parents—are light voters and therefore may be proportionately underrepresented in policy making.”

The study finds that divorce may deter voting for several reasons—the

stress that accompanies ending a marriage disrupts family routines; between 40 and 50 percent of divorced women move within a year after ending their marriages, an experience that greatly reduces turnout. Wolfinger notes divorce deprives ex-spouses of companions who might provide an impetus for civic participation. Moreover, household members might share such pedestrian tasks as registering and learning where to vote.

Wolfinger's research indicates that in the 2000 presidential election, nearly three-quarters of married people voted, compared with just over half of the singles. Voter turnout increases with age, and almost everyone enters adulthood without a spouse, perhaps, explaining the low turnout of single adults. (Turnout gradually increases with age, up to the 60s.)

Says Wolfinger: "Married citizens are leaders in voter turnout. Married couples, who account for 58 percent of adult citizens, were 65 percent of the voters in 2000. Childless married couples have turnout rates at least seven percent above other childless adults. Married people with children also vote at high rates. Compared with separated adults with children, married parents are 12 percentage points more likely to have voted in 2000.

People whose marriages have ended, whether from divorce, widowhood, or separation, are lighter voters.

Source: University of Utah

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