

Unmarried women: Politically cohesive, more concerned about women's status

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Why do unmarried women tend to be more liberal and Democratic than their married counterparts? A key reason is because unmarried women—those who have never been married and those who are divorced—are more concerned about the status of women as a collective group, suggests a new study that will be presented at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

"Over 67 percent of never married women and 66 percent of divorced women perceive what happens to other women as having some or a lot to do with what happens in their own lives," said Kelsy Kretschmer, a co-author of the study and an assistant professor of sociology at Oregon State University. "Only 56.5 percent of married women hold the same views."

These results reveal that unmarried women have high levels of "linked fate," or the conviction that an individual's chances of success depend on the status of the group. According to Kretschmer, the differences in married and unmarried women's levels of gender "linked fate" explain a significant amount of their political divergence.

"For a woman, when it comes to politics, having a high level of gender linked fate generally means she thinks in terms of what will benefit women as a group," said Kretschmer. "This could encompass things such as wage equality, workplace protections for pregnancy and maternity leave, anti-domestic violence laws, and welfare expansion. Not every individual woman needs these things, but women who have a strong

sense of gender linked fate will think in terms of how women as a group will benefit from them. These issues have been most championed in the United States by liberals, female representatives, and the Democratic Party."

Confirming prior research, Kretschmer and her co-authors Christopher Stout, an assistant professor of political science at Oregon State University, and Leah Ruppanner, an assistant professor in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Melbourne, found that never married and divorced women are typically more liberal and Democratic than married women. They also found that never married women are significantly more likely than married women to value having females elected to political positions.

The study by Kretschmer, Stout, and Ruppanner relied on data from the nationally representative 2010 American National Election Study (ANES), which asked a wide range of questions about political attitudes and behaviors. The three researchers compared the responses of married, never married, divorced, and widowed women 18 years of age and older.

Interestingly, they found that widowed women and married women are nearly identical to each other when it comes to their levels of gender linked fate.

"Widowed women are frequently older and never ruptured their relationships with their husbands by divorcing them," Kretschmer said. "They may still be receiving their husbands' pensions, social security, or health benefits. In other words, despite not having a husband, many widows are still engaged in the marriage institution in ways that make them more like married women than never married or divorced women."

According to Kretschmer, the concept of linked fate has previously been used to understand why African Americans and Latinos "are more likely

than other underrepresented groups to vote in blocs for candidates, parties, and policies that will benefit the majority of the group, even if not the individual voter."

The marriage gap in women's [political preferences](#) had been well established in social science research, "but differences in their sense of gender linked fate had not been examined," Kretschmer said. "This seemed surprising to us, given how important linked fate is for explaining political behaviors of other groups."

The researchers found that differences in married and unmarried women's income, employment status, number of children, attitudes about gender discrimination, and views on [traditional gender roles](#) do not explain the marriage gap in political preferences.

"We were surprised because these are the traditional explanations for why [married women](#) are more conservative and Republican," said Kretschmer. "However, we found that whether or not a woman has a sense of linked [fate](#) with other women does a better job than any of these previously considered variables of explaining why the marriage gap exists, and yet no one is talking about this as an important factor in women's political preferences."

But, perhaps that needs to change. As women increasingly get married later or do not marry, Kretschmer said, more [unmarried women](#) may amount to more support for liberal and Democratic candidates and policies, as well as for female political candidates.

More information: The paper, "All the Single Ladies: Gender Linked Fate and the Marriage Gap in American Politics," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 23, at 8:30 a.m. CDT in Chicago at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting.

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