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The Marriage Gap

Marital Status Crucial Dynamic in American Politics

To: Interested Parties

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In the past few cycles, few dynamics have been more important in understanding how people vote than marital status. The academic and political community have paid due attention to the gender gap, looking at differences in voting along regional, educational and generational lines and focusing on the most trendy subgroup every year ("soccer moms," "NASCAR dads," "office park dads" and so forth). But in terms of political outcomes, the size of the groups involved and electoral participation, marital status trumps many other factors in defining American politics.

To cite just a few examples;

- In 2000, there was a 22-point gender-gap in how men and women voted in the presidential race (men voted 42 percent for Gore, 53 percent for Bush; women voted 54 percent for Gore, 43 percent for Bush); between married and unmarried voters, there was a 28-point gap in who these voters supported. Between married and unmarried women, there was a 32-point gap.
- In 2004, the gender-gap shrunk to 14 points in the Kerry-Bush contest. The marriage gap, however, *grew* to 33 points. Among unmarried women, the gap jumped to 36 points.
- 2006 saw a 9-point gender gap with Democratic congressional candidates winning among both men and women; it also saw a 32-point marriage gap overall and a 35-point marriage gap among women.¹

¹ Source: National Election Poll's Exit Polls, conducted by Edison Mitofsky, November in 2000 and 2004. The 2006 data from Edison/Mitofsky/CNN Network Exit Poll.

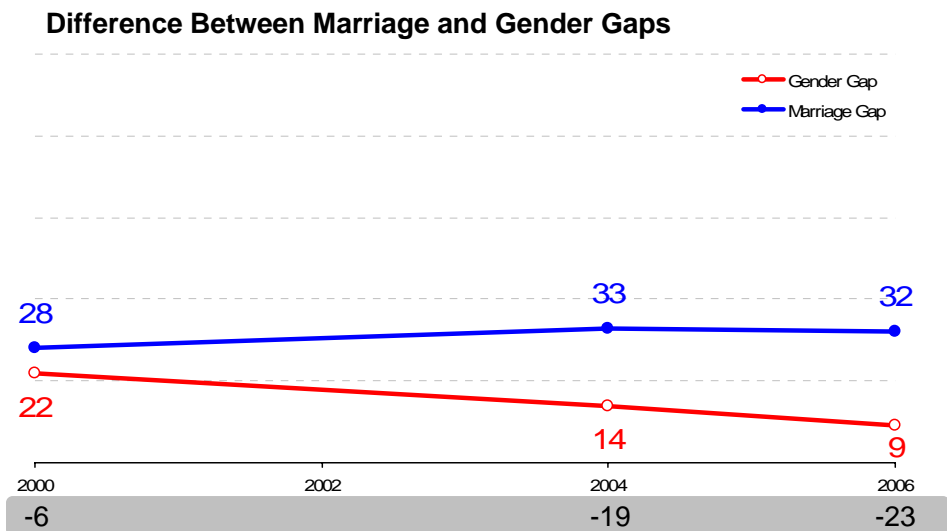
Looking closer, marital status among women predicts voter preference even *within* voting blocs and transcends other demographic variables. That is to say that a young college educated unmarried woman is more likely to vote like an older, high-school educated unmarried woman than vote like a young, college educated *married* women.

As a group, unmarried persons now head a majority of American households. In total, there are over 49.5 million unmarried women citizens of voting age. These voters – who are politically distinct from other voters - have the power to reshape American politics, *if they choose to do so*. Unfortunately, many do not participate in elections and levels of participation and registration rank well below participation among married households. Understanding the marriage gap, therefore, is crucial to understanding American politics.

A Transcendent Political Variable

Elections since 2000 have seen a shrinking gender gap in American politics. Whether it continues to shrink, remains to be seen, but there can be no question that the marriage gap will play a defining role in political outcomes in 2008.

■ **Figure 1 : Voting Gaps**



Equally striking is the power of the marriage gap to predict the vote *within* voting blocks among women. Unmarried women tended to vote like other unmarried women, regardless of some other powerful demographic variables, including age, income and education. At the same time, married women tended to vote like other married women.

Table 1 : Election Year Gaps
(*marriage gap in bold*)

2000 Gore - Bush			2004 Kerry - Bush		
Group	Margin	Gap	Margin	Margin	Gap
White married women	-9	28	White married women	-23	34
White non-married women	+19		White non-married women	+11	
Working women	+19	19	Working women	+3	4
Non-working women	-		Non-working Women	-1	
Married working women	+6	32	Married working women	-16	46
Non-married working women	+38		Non-married working women	+30	
Women 18-24	-	4	Voters 18-24	+13	18
Women 65 and older	+4		Voters 65 and older	-5	
Married Women 18-24	-25	42	Married Women 18-24	+4	17
Non-married Women 18-24	+17		Non-married Women 18-24	+21	
Married Women 65 and older	+5	13	Married Women 65 and older	-4	23
Non-married Women 65 and older	+18		Non-married Women 65 and older	19	
Women College Graduate	-	2	Women College Graduate	-	6
Women Non-College Graduate	-2		Women Non-College Graduate	-6	

■ **Table 1 : Election Year Gaps**
(*marriage gap in bold*)

Married Women College Graduate	+9	33	Married Women College Graduate	-6	40
Non-married Women College Graduate	+42		Non-married Women College Graduate	+34	
Women married union members	+20	31	Women married union members	+13	30
Women non-married union members	+51		Women non-married Union members	+43	

Examining just one critical 2006 Senate race tells a similar story. Claire McCaskill won women by a 51 – 45 percent margin and lost men 46 – 50 percent, a 10 point gender gap. She also lost married women (45 percent McCaskill, 52 percent Talent), while winning unmarried women (61 percent McCaskill, 35 percent Talent), a 33 point marriage gap. Unmarried college educated women (64 percent McCaskill, 32 percent Talent) voted similar to unmarried non-college graduates (57 percent McCaskill, 38 percent Talent). Married college educated women preferred the Republican (52 percent Talent, 46 percent McCaskill), as did married non-college women (49 percent Talent, 46 percent McCaskill).

Looking at 2007, we see that unmarried women remain progressive almost regardless of their demographic profile. For example, overall unmarried women deliver a 35-point margin in a generic presidential match-up in data combined from December to May. This margin generally holds among unmarried seniors (26 point margin for Democratic candidate) and younger voters (18 points), among college educated (40 point margin for Democratic candidate) and non-college (33 point margin for Democratic candidate) voters, and upper income (45 point margin for Democratic candidate) and lower income (35 point margin for Democratic candidate) voters. Rural voters once comprised a Republican base, but are now politically competitive.² Among unmarried women, however, the marriage gap transcends conservative rural instincts (30 point margin for Democratic candidate).³

² See May, 2007 Center for Rural Strategies survey of 800 likely voters in rural counties, <http://www.ruralstrategies.org/projects/tracker/2007/>

³ Data from a combined data set of Democracy Corps surveys taken from December, 2006 to May 2007; includes a total of 1,578 unmarried women in the sample

■ **Table 2 : Generic Presidential Vote – Women Voters**

	Married High School or less	Married College	Unmarried High School or less	Unmarried College
Democratic Candidate	52	52	61	65
Republican Candidate	40	38	28	25
Dem-Rep	+12	+14	+33	+40
<i>"I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the election in 2008, if the election for president were held today, for whom would you vote -- the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?"</i>				

The New, Underrepresented American Majority

The gaps we see between married America and unmarried America are particularly notable given the changes we have seen in the organization of the American household and family. In 1950, 35 percent of American women lived without a spouse. Currently, this number stands at 48 percent. A majority (50.3 percent) of American households are now headed by an unmarried person. (This figure includes single people living alone and unmarried people living together or with children.) In raw terms, the voting age population includes over 89 million unmarried adults, including 49.5 million unmarried women.⁴

Unmarried voters and unmarried women represents the largest progressive block of voters and potential voters in the country. Unmarried women constitute an even larger block than seniors, Hispanics or other groups often identified as crucial to political outcomes.

■ **Table 3: Unmarried Population**

Group	Percent of Voting Age Population⁵
Unmarried	44 ⁶
Unmarried women	25
Hispanic	8
Total non-white	25
Seniors	17

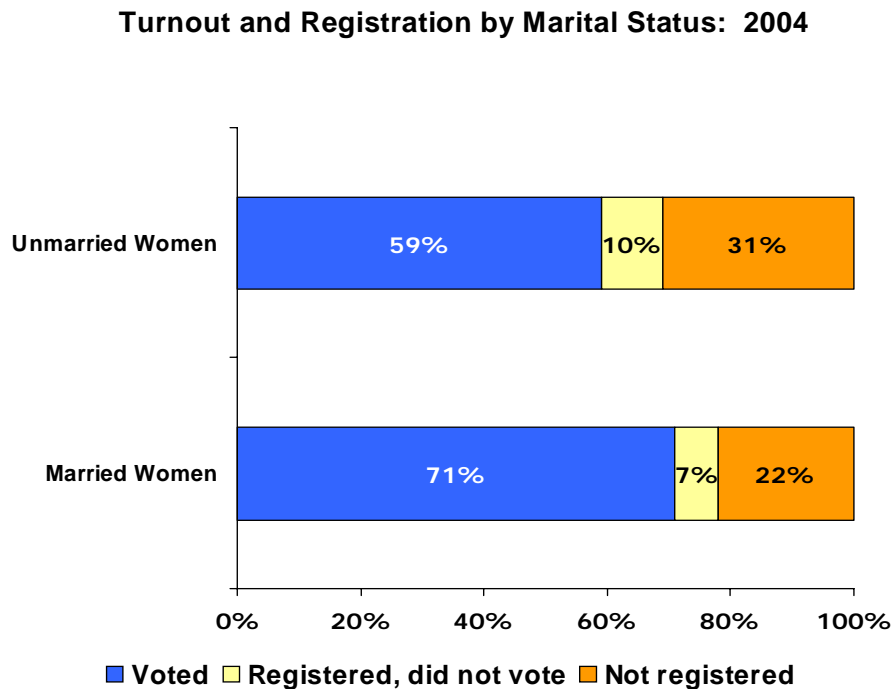
⁴ Data from US Census, 2005 and Census Community Population Survey November, 2006.

⁵ Includes only U.S Citizens.

⁶ The 50.3 percent figure cited above represents the percentage of households, not individuals.

As it stands, however, nearly 20 million unmarried women did not vote in 2004, of whom 15 million were eligible, but not registered to vote; 41 percent did not participate in total. Conversely, just 29 percent of married women failed to exercise their right to vote.

Figure 3 : Turnout and Registration



Current Population Survey, 2004 November Supplement

Unmarried women are more economically marginal and less connected to their communities than married women (e.g., unmarried women are twice as likely as married women to have lived in their current home for less than six months).⁷ They typically have fewer resources to draw upon to educate themselves about the political process—including understanding the simple mechanics of registering to vote—and tend to believe their issues are ignored by politicians. The result is a marriage gap not only in terms of political outcomes, but political participation as well.

⁷ Current Population Study, 2004 November Supplement.

Conclusion

In recent cycles, the marriage gap has grown to be a defining factor in American politics. Marital status not only powerfully influences preference, but plays a significant role in participation as well. If unmarried women participated in elections in greater numbers, they could change the course of our country's politics. Regardless, there is little doubt that marital status will continue to shape American political through 2008 and beyond.