Family Structure and Voter Turnout

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Abstract

We use data from the Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey to explore the effects of family structure on turnout in the 2000 presidential election. Our results indicate that family structure, defined as marital status and the presence of children, has substantial consequences for turnout. Married adults are more likely to vote than are those who have never been married; in turn, previously married people are the lightest voters. Children have a smaller but still noteworthy effect on turnout. These results are only partially explained by social and demographic differences.

INTRODUCTION

Soccer moms and NASCAR dads, staple characters in journalists' stories about past and future elections, are not even bit players when social scientists describe who is likely to vote. Analyzing citizens one by one, researchers have concluded that who votes is explained largely by a triad of individual characteristics: education, age, and residential stability; the more of each, the higher the probability of voting (R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Squire, R. Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Although not disputing this conventional wisdom, we add a fourth variable to be treated as a significant predictor of turnout: each person's family structure, defined as marital status and the presence of children in the household.

This connection is noteworthy for several reasons. First, sociologists have established that family structure has important implications for many aspects of well-being (McKeever and N. Wolfinger 2005; Waite and Gallagher 2000). We inquire whether these implications extend to electoral participation. Second, we find that vulnerable social groups—notably single parents—are light voters and their interests may receive less representation in policy making. Third, married people are more inclined than other citizens to vote for Republican presidential candidates (Miller and Shanks 1996: 263, 534-535; *New York Times* 2004).

Voting is the most fundamental form of political participation in a democracy; indeed, it is the only form of participation for most Americans. Voting also has more stringent requirements than other common forms of action, such as contributing to a candidate or writing letters to an elected official. Unlike these activities, voting is unlikely to be spontaneous. For all but a few citizens, voting requires focused attention to procedures and deadlines on two occasions that are separated both geographically and temporally; one-third of all citizens have moved within two years and therefore need to re-register (Squire, R. Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). First, an aspiring voter must remember to register within a set number of days before an election. Then registrants must show up to vote at a given place between particular hours on a certain day (or procure and submit an absentee ballot). Because voting requires two considered actions, it may be affected by the contexts in which people live: their immediate families.

Previous Research

Forty-five years ago Harold Wilensky proposed a life cycle theory of participation. Civic engagement of different kinds, including political participation, waxes and wanes over the life course in response to familial attachments. Wilensky asserted that participation is highest among young single adults, dipping only slightly with marriage. Participation drops substantially when children are in the household, then returns to earlier highs as the nest empties. Subsequently participation declines when a spouse dies (Wilensky 2002: 196-202; see also Wilensky 1961, 1981). Thus Wilensky anticipated high turnout both for adults who are married and those who have never married, but lower turnout for those who have previously been married. Irrespective of marital status, the presence of children in the household should depress turnout.

Studies of married people's turnout have been an exception to the overall paucity of research on family structure and political participation, but consensus is lacking about even the most elementary question: are married people more likely to vote? The magisterial *The New American Voter* reports a clear affirmative answer (Miller and Shanks 1996: 263, 534), as do Plutzer (1998, 2002); Plutzer and Wiefek (2006); Strate *et al.* (1989: 449); Timpone (1998: 151); and R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980: 44-45). One study concentrating on young people reports a negative relationship up to age 42 (Stoker and K. Jennings 1995). Two other articles on youth turnout report that marriage makes essentially no difference (Highton and R. Wolfinger 2001; Plutzer and Sandell 2005).

Some research about married couples gives rise to the classic question: "compared to whom?" (We anticipate our data analysis by noting that fewer than three-fifths of adult American citizens are married.) As Miller and Shanks (1996: 254) point out, marital status is not a dichotomous variable. Some analysts of turnout, however, evidently compared married individuals to everyone else (Plutzer 1998; Plutzer and

Sandell 2005; R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Yet divorced and to a lesser extent widowed people fare worse than their married and never-married peers on a variety of social indicators (Waite and Gallagher 2000) that are related to voter turnout.

Another question not satisfactorily resolved—indeed, rarely addressed—in previous research concerns the effect of children on voting. Kent Jennings (1979: 755) found that the presence of children in the household "has a trivial or debilitating impact in the domain of national politics but a highly salutary one in school politics." In contrast, Plutzer (2002) showed no relationship between children and voting while Plutzer and Sandell (2005) found that children diminished turnout when born to white parents attending high school. There are reasons to expect both higher and lower turnout rates for families with children. On the one hand, child care may reduce the time available to vote, an issue especially for single parents. It is also possible, however, that children may increase turnout by stimulating parental civic involvement, particularly in the public school system (K. Jennings 1979). Voting even in non-concurrent school board elections requires registering to vote, which facilitates participation in national contests and increases exposure to electioneering. An additional point concerns omitted variable bias. Given the strong correlation between marriage and children, it would seem advisable to avoid measuring the effect of one variable in the absence of the other.

We expect that differences in turnout rates by family structure may be related to the demographic correlates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing, hence propositions presented in the following paragraphs will be tested in our multivariate analysis. Divorce is disproportionately common among women who spent less time in school (Bramlett and Mosher 2001); education is a powerful predictor of voting (R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). On the other hand, the average age of divorced women is 50 (McKeever and N. Wolfinger 2005), when Americans generally are entering their highest turnout years (R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Widows of course tend to be older, while never-married adults may be light voters simply because they are young. The lack of a spouse may depress turnout by the parents of children born out of wedlock, who usually are young (Wu, Bumpass, and Musick 2001) and uneducated (Korenman, Kaestner, and Joyce 2001). These considerations lead us to expect unmarried parents to be least likely to vote.

Divorce may deter voting for several other reasons. Ending a marriage is a stressful process that frequently disrupts familiar routines (Wallerstein and Kelley 1980). Moreover, between 40 and 50 percent of divorced women move within a year after their marriages end (McLanahan 1983; Speare and Goldscheider 1987), an experience that greatly reduces turnout (Squire, R. Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). For both reasons, controlling for residential mobility should have a larger effect on the estimated turnout of separated adults—who presumably have ended their marriages fairly recently (Ono 1995)—than for their divorced counterparts. Moreover, divorce deprives ex-spouses of companions who might provide an impetus for civic participation (e.g., Stoker and K. Jennings 1995). Specifically, household members might share such pedestrian tasks as registering and learning where to vote. This clerical function perhaps is more important when absentee ballots are an option, a growing practice in many states. (In California more than 25 percent of all votes cast in the 2004 presidential election were on absentee ballots.) In other words, one individual's action might suffice to meet the voting costs of a couple.

METHODS

Our data are from the 2000 Voting and Registration Supplement (VRS) of the Current Population Survey (United States Bureau of the Census 2000). The Census Bureau conducts the Current Population Survey (CPS) each month primarily for raw data on unemployment. The basic questionnaire provides detailed demographic information; monthly supplements solicit data on an additional topic, e.g., internet use, smoking, child care. In November of each even-numbered year the VRS asks about citizenship status, registration, and voting.[1] The most apparent feature of the VRS is its immense sample, which provides complete data on voting in 2000 for 73,541 citizens. The huge sample also is essential for analyzing sub-groups, e.g., widows with children, who are sparse in conventional surveys. The National Election Study

(NES), the other common source for analyses of electoral participation, completed pre- and post-election interviews with 1,555 respondents in 2000 (Burns et al. 2001).

Sample size is not the only CPS advantage. The completion rate for the 2000 VRS was 95 percent (United States Bureau of the Census 2003: 2-3). This compares to an aggregate response rate of 87 percent for the 2000 NES (Burns et al. 2001).[2] VRS interviewing concludes by the third week in November, while NES field work continues into mid-December.

Our dependent variable is whether each VRS case voted in the 2000 presidential election. Our primary independent variable is family structure. This is a ten-category nominal variable based on current marital status and presence in the household of children under age eighteen. The coding for all variables appears in Appendix A. Seven other independent variables allow us to determine whether differences in turnout based on family structure can be explained by the personal and social attributes social scientists have used in studies of electoral participation (e.g., Squire, R. Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). These variables largely exhaust the known predictors of turnout available in the CPS. The "big three" of turnout variables are age, education, and residential mobility. Age is a continuous variable; its square is included to account for curvilinearity in its relationship to turnout (R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Education and residential mobility are treated as categorical, as are the rest of our independent variables. These include family income, race, sex, and whether individuals were currently employed. There is no easy way with CPS data to determine the presence of unmarried live-in partners; nor can children's ages be readily ascertained.

Voter turnout is a binary variable, analyzed using logistic regression. Sample weights are employed to make the data nationally representative. Our analyses employ Huber-White standard errors (Huber 1967; White 1980) to avoid the artificially inflated t-ratios that can result from weighted data. The Huber-White algorithm also provides asymptotically correct standard errors for cluster-sampled data. Two variables have missing data. Income is not available for thirteen percent of cases. Because this item is treated as categorical, we employ an additional dummy for missing data. More sophisticated means of addressing missing data, such as multiple imputation, do not perform appreciably better (Paul *et al.* 2003). For residential mobility, lacking data on less than one percent of cases, we use listwise deletion.

RESULTS

Fifty-eight percent of adult citizens were married, ten percent were divorced, seven percent were widowed, another two percent were separated, and 22 percent had never married. Nearly three-quarters of married people voted in 2000, compared to just over half of the never-marrieds. These simple tabulations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Appendix B shows metric coefficients from our logistic regression of voter turnout on family structure. The differences, all of which are statistically significant, show that family structure is an important determinant of who votes. For ease of interpretation we convert the coefficients into predicted probabilities via regression standardization. The results for the zero order model appear in Table 2. Thirty-four percentage points differentiate the lowest-voting population group, never-married parents, and the highest, childless married adults.

Table 2 here

Prior researchers reported mixed results about the relationship between marriage and voting. We find that married CPS participants, both with and without children, had the highest turnout of any family type.[3] Seventy percent of married parents and 78 percent of childless married adults voted in the 2000 presidential election. In many respects this is predictable. Married people enjoy greater physical and emotional health (Waite and Gallagher 2000). They have partners to help with household tasks and also most of the chores associated with voting: not only registration, but also locating polling places or obtaining absentee ballots.

As Table 2 shows, the negative effect of children on turnout persists among all family structure types, ranging from four percentage points for widowed parents to eleven points for separated parents.

Separated people are almost always in transition from separation to divorce (Ono 1995), hence their low turnout rates are understandable. Marital disruption brings profound personal upheaval (Wallerstein and Kelley 1980), and separated parents have had less time to adapt than have their counterparts who have formally ended their marriages. Under these circumstances the exigencies of child care are especially likely to interfere with political participation. Thus the second-lowest turnout rate in Table 2, 45 percent, applies to separated parents.

The lowest turnout rate shown in Table 2 is for never-married parents, 86 percent of whom are women. Often poor and uneducated, it is not surprising that fewer than half voted in 2000. Almost 40 percent of children are now born out of wedlock (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2006), hence this is a noteworthy demographic group. Many women who give birth out of wedlock eventually will marry (Lichter and Graefe 2001), which is why never-married parents comprise a small fraction of our sample.

Given that single parents are disproportionately female, we also analyzed turnout separately for men and women. Generally the disparities are small, at most a few percentage points (result not shown). The exception concerns never-married parents: fathers have participation rates seventeen percentage points below their female counterparts. Due to the scarcity of these men (they represent just one-third of a percent of our sample) we do not attach much meaning to their low turnout.

At 52 percent, the turnout rate for unmarried adults without children is nearly as low as it is for their counterparts with children. Childless unmarried adults do not have to contend with the burdens of parenthood. They also are less likely to suffer disadvantages—poverty and low education—that afflict never-married parents. Yet childless unmarried adults vote only eight percent more than those with children—and 26 percent less than childless married couples.

Social scientists have explained political participation using age, education, and residential mobility. These are the most important factors in accounting for the relationship between family structure and turnout; sex, race, employment status, and income make only modest contributions. The Big Three variables account for much of the variation in turnout related to family structure. But noteworthy differences remain, as Table 3 shows.

Table 3 here

Married citizens continue to be turnout leaders after controlling for the Big Three. Childless married couples have turnout rates at least six percentage points above other childless adults. Married people with children also vote at high rates. Compared to separated adults with children, married parents are thirteen percentage points more likely to have voted in 2000.

Treating marital status as a dichotomous variable conflates different turnout rates among unmarried people. Previously married citizens—separated, divorced, and widowed—all are lighter voters than people who have never married. In this respect it appears that some people never recover from the loss of a spouse. Especially for childless adults, the circumstances of this loss seem unimportant. After controlling for age, education, mobility and other variables, the estimated turnout rates for separated, divorced, and widowed adults are within three percentage points of each other. In contrast, those who have never married have rates four, six, and seven percentage points respectively higher than separated, divorced and widowed people.

The lowest turnout rate in Table 3—60 percent—is for separated parents. Given the upheaval associated with a presumably recent marital disruption, many separated parents would be disinclined to vote. It is more surprising that never-married parents vote at the same rate (68%) as do their childless counterparts. Many disadvantages are associated with giving birth out of wedlock (Korenman, Kaestner, and Joyce 2001). Yet with respect to voting, these disadvantages can be accounted for by age, education, and residential mobility. In fact, never-married parents are the demographic group whose turnout varies most between zero order and full models: they gain 24 percentage points. We should also note that single parents in general do not have less free time than do their married counterparts (Sayer, Passias, and Casper 2006); other factors may explain the latter's high turnout.

One of the reasons we suspect married people vote more is their opportunities to discuss elections and voting with their spouses. This behavior is presumably more likely among better-educated citizens, to whom we impute greater interest in—and discussion of—current events, which in turn leads to higher levels

of turnout. To our surprise, this plausible scenario is not supported by the data—the relationship between marital status and electoral participation does not vary substantially by education (result not shown).

CONCLUSION

Our most evident finding is confirmation—which we venture to claim is definitive—of the higher turnout of married citizens, irrespective of demographic differences. Married people, 58 percent of all adult citizens, accounted for 65 percent of voters in 2000. Earlier reports of this advantage usually attributed it to spousal encouragement and shared influences (R. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980: pp. 44-46).[4] Today, perhaps reflecting rational choice theory, we add that marriage offers this advantage: one member of the couple can act for both when it comes to essential administrative details: remembering the need to register to vote at their current address if they are in the one-third of the population who have moved within two years, obtaining absentee ballots if they anticipate being out of town on election day, and learning where to vote if they will be at home then.

Another finding is the inclination toward lower participation by people whose marriages have ended, whether by death, divorce, or separation. Registering and voting doubtless were not priority tasks for those who separated, whose upheaval was recent. The assumption of a recent trauma is not a sure thing for widows and divorcées. Perhaps formerly married adults became habituated to the assistance of spouses in the voting process. Alternately, their failure to vote may reflect the reduction in emotional well-being often accompanying the loss of a spouse (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Voting presumably seems unimportant when people are depressed and otherwise not functioning well.

Contrary to previous research (cf. Jennings 1979; Plutzer 2002), we find that CPS participants with children have lower turnout in presidential elections. In most types of family structures, the relationship between children and voting is explained by social and demographic differences. The two exceptions concern widowed and separated parents. Spousal bereavement with minor children present is uncommon, accounting for about one quarter of one percent of CPS participants. We therefore do not speculate on its consequences for turnout. Separation, reflecting in most cases recent marital disruption, has a predictable negative effect on parental turnout. We assume that voting is a low priority for people struggling to cope both with the loss of a spouse and life as a single parent.

Social and demographic differences between respondents explain much of the relationship between family structure and turnout, but notable differences remain. Therefore we suggest that political participation cannot be fully understood without taking family structure into account. The zero order differences in turnout by family structure are dramatic, which may be useful to those attempting to understand the results of recent presidential contests: married people are more likely to vote, and to vote Republican.

These results offer partial confirmation of Wilensky's (2002) theory of participation across the life course. Consistent with Wilensky, losing a spouse adversely affects turnout. Spousal loss in Wilensky's model was limited to bereavement—divorce and non-marital births were relatively uncommon when the model was formulated in the early 1960s—but our results suggest that the reasons for spousal loss are unimportant: no matter how it happens, it adversely affects turnout.

ENDNOTES

1. The CPS uses a design in which one respondent reports for all members of the household. This proxy reporting seems not to affect estimates of turnout (Highton 2005; J. Jennings 1990).

2. Completion rates in 2000 for both surveys were lower than in the last decades of the 20th century (cf. Brehm 1993: 16).

3. Our results differ from those of Stoker and Kent Jennings (1995), perhaps because of sample size limitations or cohort variation. They studied participation in the 1980 presidential election with a sample initially comprising 630 high school seniors in 1965, while we analyze the 2000 contest with a large and nationally representative sample.

4. A generation earlier, one scholar attributed higher turnout by married people to ". . . similar motivations, outside stimuli, and social norms which affect husband and wife simultaneously but independently . . . . interaction within the family is probably an additional force which supplements the other predispositions of the individual members." (Glaser 1959: 566).

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Table 1. Turnout by marital status.

	Percent voting	Percent of sample
Married	74	58
Widowed	66	7
Divorced	60	10
Separated	52	2
Never married	51	22

Notes: **N** = 73,541. Percentages in second column do not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

Source: Current Population Survey, 2000, November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Table 2. Zero order predicted probabilities of voting by family structure.

	Children	No children
Married	70%	78%
Widowed	62%	66%
Divorced	56%	61%
Separated	45%	56%
Never married	44%	52%

N = 73,541

Source: Current Population Survey, 2000, November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Table 3. Predicted probabilities of voting by family structure, controlling for age, mobility, education, sex, employment, income, and race.

	Children	No children
Married	73%	74%
Widowed	67%	61%
Divorced	65%	62%
Separated	60%	64%
Never married	68%	68%

N = 73,541

Source: Current Population Survey, 2000, November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Appendix A. Coding of variables.

Political participation	Dummy variable coded zero if individual did not vote and one if s/he voted.
Family structure	Ten-category nominal variable, measuring whether individuals are married, divorced, separated, widowed, or never married; for each of these five family types we differentiate adults with and without co-resident minor children.
Age & age squared	Continuous variables
Education	Five-category nominal variable, measuring whether individuals are not high school graduates, high school graduates, attended some college, have four year college degrees, or have postgraduate degrees.
Residential mobility	Six-category nominal variable, measuring whether individuals had lived in their current location for less than a month, one to six months, seven to twelve months, one to two years, three to four years, or over four years.
Sex	Dummy variable coded zero for women, one for men.
Race	Four-category nominal variable, coded white, non-Hispanic Black, non-Black Hispanic, other.
Income	Eight-category nominal variable measuring whether family income is less than $10,000, $10,000-$19,999, $20,000-29,999, $30,000-$39,999, $40,000-$59,999, $60,000-$74,999, or $75,000 or greater. An additional dummy is coded for missing data.
Work status	Three-category nominal variable, measuring whether individuals are not working, working between one and 34 hours, or working 35 or more hours.

Appendix B. Logit coefficients for voter turnout on family structure and other variables.

	Zero order model	Full model
Family structure		
Married, no kids	--	--
Married, kids	-.41***	-.03
Widowed, no kids	-.57***	-.60***
Widowed, kids	-.77***	-.33
Divorced, no kids	-.80***	-.55***
Divorced, kids	-1.02***	-.42***
Separated, no kids	-1.01**	-.44***
Separated, kids	-1.47***	-.64***
Never married, no kids	-1.17***	-.29***
Never married, kids	-1.48***	-.29***
Age	--	.05***
Age^2	--	-.0002***
Education		
No H.S.	--	--
H.S. graduate	--	.73***
Some college	--	1.39***
College graduate	--	2.08***
Postgraduate	--	2.30***
Time since last move		
< 1 month	--	--
1-6 months	--	.30**
7-12 months	--	.33***
1-2 years	--	.62***
3-4 years	--	.77***
5+ years	--	1.08***
Male	--	-.17***
Ethnicity		
White	--	--
African-American	--	.45***
Latino	--	-.23***
Other	--	-.78***
Hours worked per week		
0	--	--
1-34	--	.24***
35+	--	.09***
Income		
< $10,000	--	--
$10,000-$19,999	--	.13**
$20,000-$29,999	--	.28***
$30,000-$39,999	--	.44***
$40,000-$59,999	--	.50***
$60,000-$74,999	--	.60***
$75,000+	--	.77***
Missing data	--	.42***
Constant	1.25***	-3.37***
Log-likelihood	-45095.51	-39162.44

N = 73,541   *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Source: Current Population Survey, 2000, November Voting and Registration Supplement.