

Marriage and Divorce in Utah and the United States

Convergence or Continued Divergence?

VINCENT KANG FU AND NICHOLAS H. WOLFINGER

The social context for marriage and divorce in the United States has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Since the 1950s, Americans have been waiting longer to marry. Women's median age at first marriage rose from 20 in the 1960s to 25 in 2000; for men, the increase was from 22 to 27 (Clarke 1995; Fields and Casper 2001). Divorce became increasingly common from the mid-1960s to 1979 (Goldstein 1999). Rates of nonmarital cohabitation also rose, with the number of cohabiting couples growing from about one million in 1977 to over four million by 1997 (Casper and Cohen 2000). By 1995, 45% of women had been or were currently in cohabiting relationships (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

These patterns coincide with dramatic changes in the social and economic structure of the United States, including cultural changes in the acceptability of cohabitation and divorce, increases in women's labor force participation, higher levels of educational attainment, and the shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. Like the rest of the United States, Utah has been subject to these forces. However, Utah possesses unique cultural influences that have produced distinct patterns of marriage and divorce.

Foremost among these influences is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church), to which 66% of Utahns belong (see chapter 12). Strong support for the traditional family is characteristic of the Mormon faith. This support was made clear in a recent statement by church authority

L. Tom Perry (2003): "In a world of turmoil and uncertainty, it is more important than ever to make our families the center of our lives and the top of our priorities." Active Mormons are encouraged to marry in a religious ceremony conducted in an LDS Temple. These Temple marriages replace the notion of marriage "til death do us part" with the idea that the marriage bond is eternal. Accordingly, divorce is discouraged because it breaks a sacred bond (Ostling and Ostling 1999). The LDS Church also offers members various social services intended to support marriage. Taken together, these religious influences have greatly affected marriage and divorce in the Beehive State.

This chapter compares marriage and divorce in Utah and the United States more generally. Whereas changing social and economic conditions, notably the shift to a postindustrial economy and growing occupational opportunities for women, are probably responsible for delayed marriage and increased divorce in the nation as a whole, Utah differs because of its distinct social context. This chapter suggests that the LDS Church has served to buffer Utahns' marital behavior against secular social and economic changes.

MARRIAGE PREVALENCE AND TIMING

A distinguishing feature of Utah family demography is the prominence of marriage. Figure 4.1 shows 2000 U.S. census data on current marriage levels for women aged 15 or

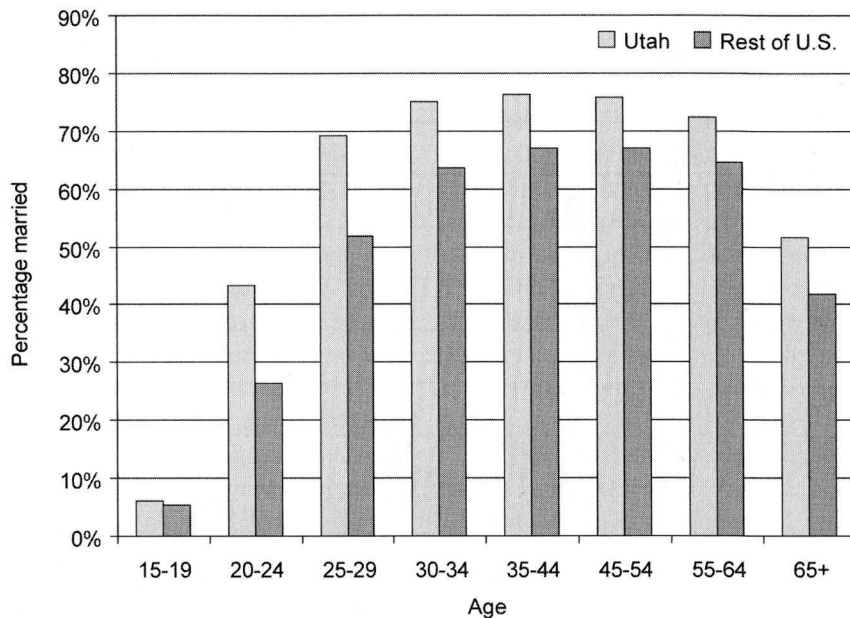


FIGURE 4.1. *Percentage of women married by age and region, 2000.*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000.

over; these figures and all others from the 2000 census are based on data from the 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Overall, 52% of American women were married as of 2000. In Utah the figure was 58%. Utah's greater propensity for matrimony appears at all ages and is especially great for women in their 20s, where the difference is 16 percentage points. Forty-three percent of Utah women age 20–24 were married, compared to only 27% elsewhere in the United States. For women age 25–29, 69% in Utah were married compared to 52% of other American women in this age range. Past age 30 the percentage of Utah women who are married exceeds national levels by 10 percentage points.

Consistent with this pattern are the smaller proportions of Utah women who have never married. Figure 4.2 displays 2000 U.S. census data on the percentage of women age 15 or older who have never married by age and region. Compared to Utah, the rest of the United States has a consistent advantage at all ages in the percentage of women who have never married. The differential is greatest for women in their 20s. In Utah, 52% of women age 20–

24 have never married, compared to 69% in the rest of the United States. For those age 25–29, only 22% of Utah women have never married, compared to 38% elsewhere. Differentials are smaller for older women but persist even for those over 65.

The prominence of marriage is also reflected in the age at which Utahns first marry. Whereas median marriage ages have increased for the nation as a whole, the change in Utah has been much slower. Figure 4.3 shows 1968–95 median ages at first marriage for Utah in comparison to 39 other states for which marriage license data are available (National Center for Health Statistics 1997, 2002). During the early 1970s, Utah's marriage-age pattern approximated national trends, although even then female Utahns wed slightly earlier than other American women. From 1968 to 1976, the median age at first marriage for women both in Utah and elsewhere was about 20, with the median for Utah never more than a half year lower than for the rest of the United States. However, the increase in median marriage age observed in most of America since the late 1970s, from 21.0 to 24.8 by 1995, did not materialize in the Beehive State. Not until

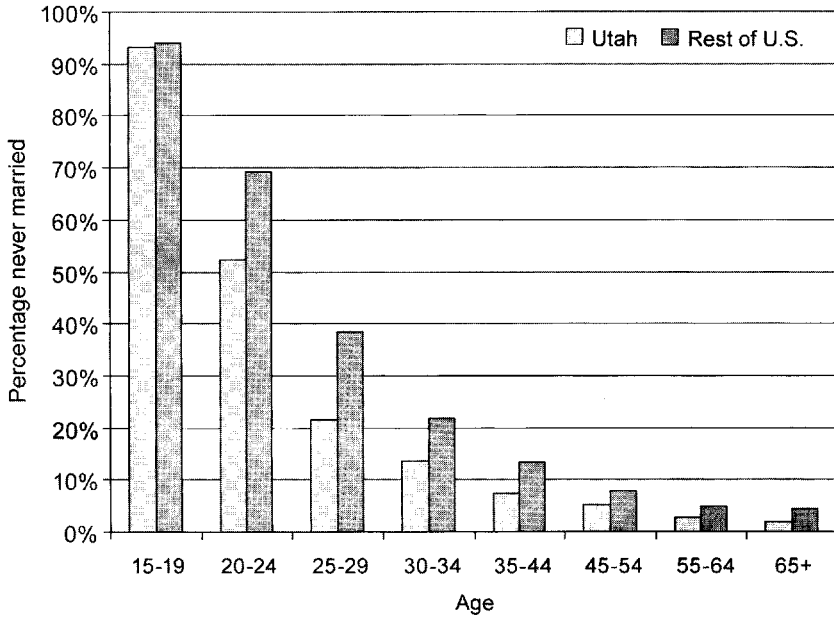


FIGURE 4.2. *Percentage of women never married by age and region, 2000.*
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000.

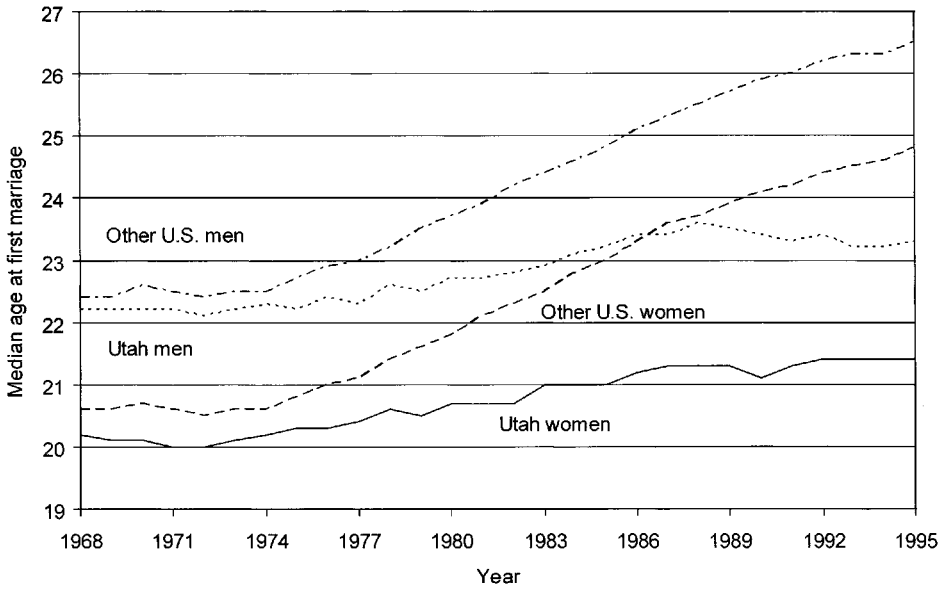


FIGURE 4.3. *Median age at first marriage by sex, region, and year, 1968-95.*
 Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

1983 did Utah brides' median age at first marriage rise to 21 and by 1995 it had risen to only 21.4, a full 3.4 years lower than the national figure. In other words, the median marriage age for women in the Beehive State in 1995 was identical to national levels of the late 1970s.

The small changes in Utah marriage ages are remarkable given the dramatic social changes occurring nationally over the past 30 years. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Utah's marriage timing at the end of the twentieth century is consistent with patterns observed for Mormons during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century (Skolnick et al. 1978; Mineau et al. 1979). During that earlier period, women's median age at first marriage ranged from 19.4 to 21.4, well in line with contemporary figures. This consistency in marriage patterns across two centuries supports the notion that the LDS Church continues to have a strong influence on marriage behavior in Utah.

Although men's marriage data are generally less reliable (Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991), their recent marital behavior, as shown in figure 4.3, reveals a divergence from na-

tional trends that mirrors women's. Until 1975, Utah men's median first marriage age, about 22, approximated that for the rest of the nation, with the Utah median never more than 0.4 years lower than its national counterpart. Starting in 1976 American men's median age at marriage began a steady rise, reaching 26.5 in 1995. In Utah, however, men's median marriage age did not reach 23 until 1983. Thereafter it remained relatively steady, creeping up to 23.3 by 1995. In that year men's national median age at first marriage exceeded Utah's by 3.2 years.

Considering the sequencing of marriage and education can provide a better understanding of Utah's uniqueness. Marriage may be seen as a major step on the path to full adulthood. Furthermore, secular increases in schooling for the United States as a whole have probably combined with declines in real male wages to produce national increases in marriage age, as people wait to marry until they have completed their education and attained a suitable standard of living. Since levels of educational attainment in Utah are comparable to those in the rest of the United States, Utahns' younger marriage ages cannot

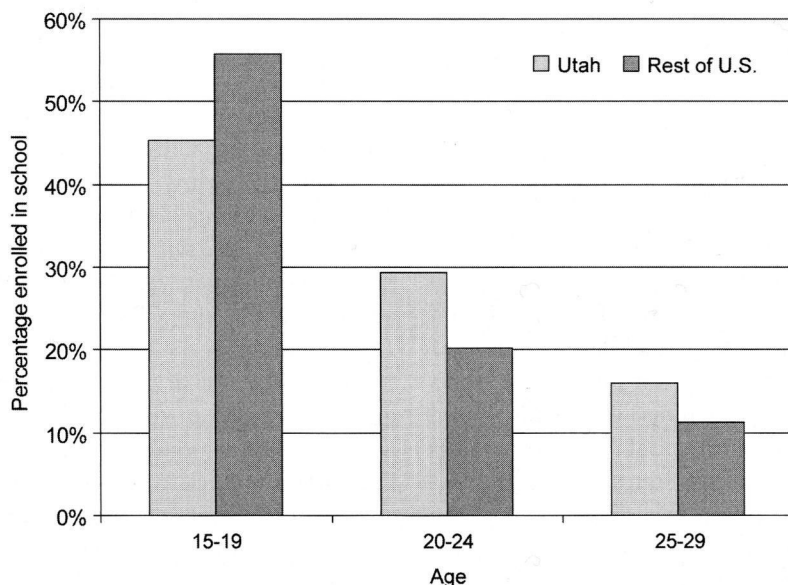


FIGURE 4.4. Percentage of married individuals enrolled in school by age and region, 2000.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000.

be explained by their earlier completion of schooling. Instead the sequencing of marriage and schooling is much less rigid in the Beehive State: Utahns are much more likely to combine marriage with schooling than other Americans.

Figure 4.4 shows 2000 U.S. census data on the percentages of married people enrolled in school, by age and region. In Utah, 29% of married individuals age 20–24 are enrolled in school compared to only 20% of other married Americans in the same age range. For married individuals age 25–29, 16% of Utahns are enrolled in school compared to 11% of other Americans. Married Utahns age 15–19 actually have lower rates of school enrollment than other Americans (45% in Utah, 56% for the rest of the United States), but they are greatly outnumbered by married people in their 20s. Thus, secular increases in educational attainment have not delayed marriage in Utah as they have in the rest of the United States because Utahns are more likely to marry before completing their schooling.

We do not have direct evidence of the influence of the LDS Church on marriage patterns. But we know that Utahns marry at younger ages and that Utah women of all ages are more likely to be married than are other Americans. Given that most Utahns are Mormons, it seems probable that Utah's religious proclivities have fostered a pro-marriage social climate.

COHABITATION

Utah's distinctiveness is also reflected in cohabitation behavior. Although cohabitation has increased substantially for the United States as a whole, it is much less common in Utah than elsewhere according to the 2000 census. In Utah 3% of household heads shared their households with cohabiting partners. In the rest of the United States, 5% of households—nearly twice the Utah rate—were headed by nonmarital cohabiting couples. These levels of current cohabitation are much lower than the percentage that has ever cohabited, because cohabiting relationships

tend to be short-lived and many people who are not currently cohabiting may have done so in the past.

UTAH DIVORCE RATES: CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Many people believe that Utah has a divorce rate somewhat higher than the national average. According to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), in 2001 there were 4.4 divorces (including annulments) in Utah for every 1,000 population. In contrast, the national average was 4.0. This differential has also held in past years. In 1990, for instance, the Utah rate was 5.1, compared to 4.7 nationally (U.S. Census Bureau 2004).

These figures present a misleading picture. As we have seen from figure 4.1, Utahns are more likely to be married at any point in time than other Americans. Even if couples in Utah face lower odds of marital dissolution than elsewhere, the rate per 1,000 may appear higher because more people are at risk of divorce simply by virtue of being married. Crude divorce rates therefore do not provide a good way of comparing Utah to the rest of the country. An alternative is the more accurate divorce rate per 1,000 married women, but the NCHS stopped calculating this figure after 1996.

Given the high numbers indicated by the NCHS, it comes as a surprise that the likelihood of ending a marriage in Utah is now substantially below the national average. Table 4.1 presents data from the 1995 *June Fertility and Marital History Supplement* of the *Current Population Survey*, hereafter referred to as the June CPS (U.S. Census Bureau 1995), that show the percentage of women in Utah and the rest of the United States whose marriages ended in divorce, by marriage cohort (the year respondents married). The June CPS offers a large national sample and detailed information on respondents' marital histories; unfortunately, 1995 marked the last year marriage data were collected.

According to table 4.1, divorce was more likely in the Beehive State than the rest of the

TABLE 4.1. *Divorce rates by state and marriage cohort*

YEAR	UTAH		REST OF U.S.	
1942-59	39%	(61)	30%	(4,957)
1960-69	32%	(69)	40%	(7,015)
1970-79	42%	(108)	43%	(8,847)
1980-89	25%	(108)	31%	(8,595)
1990-95	6%	(86)	12%	(4,854)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are cell sizes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1995.

United States for marriages formed between 1942 and 1959. Given the relatively small Utah sample this result is based on, we are loath to offer an explanation. Also, 1942-59 marked the only period in which Utah had a disproportionately high rate of marital dissolution.

Divorce rates in Utah have been below the national average for all marriage cohorts since 1959. Utah marriages formed in the 1960s were 8% less likely to end in divorce than were their counterparts elsewhere in the United States. For 1970s marriages, divorce rates in the Beehive State were only 1% below the national average. Then the gap widened again. For marriages formed in the 1980s, the divorce rate in Utah (25%) was substantially lower than the national average (31%). This trend continued for marriages formed in the first half of the 1990s, for which Utah's rate of dissolution, at only 6%, was half the national average. These figures are lower than they ultimately will be because the June CPS data were collected in 1995, so the marriage cohorts reflected had not been completed; in other words, respondents wedding after 1979 could only have been married for a maximum of 15 years and therefore still had many years ahead in which to terminate their marriages.

The statistically significant gap in divorce rates after 1979 between Utah and the United States as a whole is interesting for various reasons. Utah was the last state in America to liberalize its divorce laws, first gaining no-fault statutes only in 1987. Yet this legal innovation did not produce a swell in the rate of marital dissolution in the Beehive State, a

finding that is in accordance with studies seeking to explain the (non)-impact of changing divorce laws (Glenn 1997). More fundamentally, the growing disparity in divorce may reflect cultural and demographic differences between Utah and other states.

WHY DON'T UTAHNS DIVORCE MORE?

Two distinguishing features of Utah family demography—its pattern of early marriage and the uniquely Mormon composition of its population—probably go a long way toward explaining why divorce rates in the Beehive State have lagged behind the national average for marriages formed since 1959.

As we have seen, the gap in median first marriage age between Utah and the rest of the United States has widened in the past 30 years. The typical Utah woman is now three years younger than her national counterpart when she first weds. But this would suggest higher, not lower, divorce rates, given that age at marriage is one of the strongest known predictors of divorce. Study after study has shown that youthful couples are far more likely to end their marriages; conversely, it has been suggested that the divorce rate in America has declined since 1979 precisely because couples are waiting longer to tie the knot (Heaton 2002).

The association between early marriage and divorce is relatively straightforward. People who marry young have not had the time necessary to cultivate the resources—social, psychological, and economic—it takes

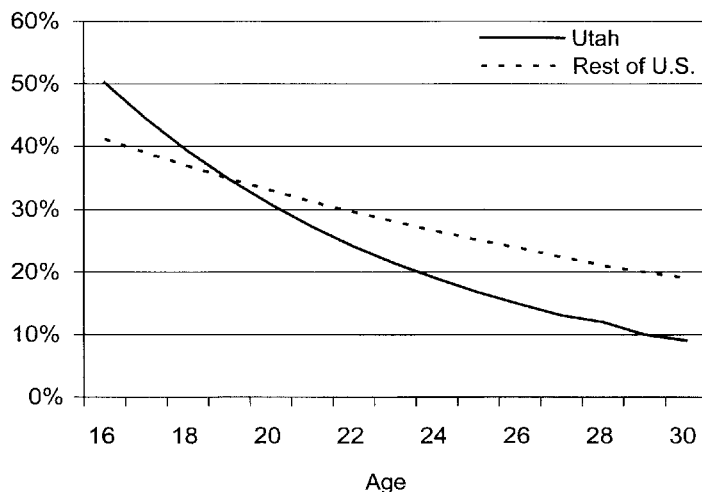


FIGURE 4.5. *Divorce risk by age at marriage and state.*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1995.

for successful matrimony. They may be immature, clinging to adolescent notions about what makes a relationship work. Furthermore, people who wed at an early age frequently do so despite disapproval from friends and family. If marital difficulties arise the young couple may be met with admonitions of “I told you so” rather than the support and advice that might facilitate reconciliation.

Figure 4.5 shows how divorce rates vary by marriage age in Utah and the rest of the United States. The numbers shown are predicted probabilities of marital dissolution, calculated via event history analysis of June CPS data (event history analysis, also called survival analysis, is a statistical technique for modeling the occurrence and timing of events such as death or divorce). In both the Beehive State and elsewhere, teenage marriage is strongly correlated with divorce. This association is much stronger in Utah than in the rest of the United States. Yet we would expect the association to be weaker in Utah, since the relative frequency of youthful marriage there might in theory create a social climate making teenage marriage more acceptable. But that is not the case: half of all women who marry at 16 divorce, compared to 35% of those who wait until 19. This marks the age at which divorce rates are identical for newlyweds in Utah and the rest of the United States. Past age 19, Utah

women have lower divorce rates than do women elsewhere. This trend continues unabated to 30 and beyond, thereby reflecting the lower overall divorce rate in the Beehive State.

The relative infrequency of divorce in Utah therefore represents something of a puzzle. After all, Utahns on average marry far younger than do their counterparts elsewhere. Nor can basic demographic differences explain the relative stability of marriage in Utah. Although Utahns have more children than do other Americans, fertility has minimal effects on divorce rates (Waite and Lillard 1991). Education is positively correlated with marital stability; according to the June CPS data, the typical Utahn has completed about as much schooling as his or her counterpart elsewhere. The Beehive State is ethnically homogeneous compared to many other states, approximately 10% Hispanic in 2000 but less than 1% African American (see chapter 18). Although blacks historically have higher divorce rates than whites, June CPS data show that the relative paucity of African Americans in Utah cannot account for its lower divorce rates.

In lieu of purely demographic explanations, the large number of Utahns who are members of the LDS Church stands as the most likely reason why divorce rates are comparably low. As noted, 66% of Utah residents

are members of the LDS Church and pressure for religious endogamy is strong. Furthermore, previous research suggests that marriages between Mormons have lower divorce rates than do endogamous unions involving Protestants, Catholics, or Jews (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). Although it is not possible with the data available to ascertain whether this finding holds true specifically for Mormons living in Utah, it seems likely. As we have seen, the LDS Church places heavy emphases, both theological and social, on the importance of families. Bolstered by such pro-family sentiments, Mormon Utah fosters a social climate that appears to be hospitable to traditional family life and inimical to marital dissolution.

The LDS presence in Utah may also account for why marriage before age 19 produces a greater divorce risk here than elsewhere. Mormon men typically serve a church mission between 19 and 21, then marry within a few years of their return. Given that the average Utah bride is two years younger than her groom (Smith and Shipman 1996), 19 or so is the normative marriage age for many Utah women. The June CPS data bear out this supposition, showing that 19 and 20 are the modal marriage ages for female Utahns. Marriage license data (National Center for Health Statistics 1997, 2000) confirm Utah's two-year marriage age gap and the tendency for Utah men to marry between 21 and 23. Accordingly, female residents of the Beehive State who wed much earlier, especially before 18, may not be acting in accordance with local marriage norms and may therefore risk losing the support—cultural, social, and religious—that in general makes divorce so infrequent in Utah. This would account for why teenage Utah brides have atypically high divorce rates.

CONCLUSION

In recent years many Americans have expressed concern over the well-being of marriage. Yet in some ways these concerns have

been overstated. Almost 90% of American women are expected to marry at some point in their lifetimes (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Although remaining high, divorce rates have stabilized over the last 25 years (Goldstein 1999). Most young Americans continue to identify marriage and children as among their most important goals for the future (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). The American family is not perfect, but there are many positive signs.

Nowhere has this tendency been more the case than in Utah. Residents of the Beehive State are more likely to be married at any given point in their lives than are their counterparts elsewhere in the United States. The average Utahn marries several years earlier than his or her fellow American. Although youthful marriage is correlated with high divorce rates, this holds less often for most Utahns. Past age 18, newlyweds in Utah divorce less than do young adults elsewhere. As a result, divorce rates in the Beehive State have been consistently below the national average for marriages formed since the 1960s.

It is interesting to note that patterns of marriage and divorce in Utah have grown increasingly atypical in recent years. Thirty years ago the median marriage age in the United States was several years lower than it is now for both men and women—and was similar in Utah to other states. Since then Americans are waiting much longer to wed—but not in Utah, where median first marriage ages remain comparable to the national average of the mid-1970s. Divorce rates have changed more, although Utah couples are less likely to divorce than others. The lower divorce rate in the Beehive State is especially remarkable given the proclivity of its residents to marry young. Although we cannot know for certain, these demographic patterns are likely the result of the strong Mormon influence on Utah families. The local culture seems to encourage early marriage, discourage divorce and cohabitation, and in general place considerable stock on the development and sustenance of “traditional” families.

FAMILY DEMOGRAPHY AND
DIVORCE LAW IN UTAH

Concern about high divorce rates has spurred a widespread backlash against easy divorce laws that has extended to Utah in spite of its comparably low divorce rate. Language urging the repeal of no-fault divorce appeared in the 2000 Republican platform. Since 1990 over 30 states, including Utah, have entertained legislation to restrict legal access to divorce (Gardiner et al. 2002). Yet such legislation seems doomed to failure. Restrictive laws did not keep marriages together in Utah and the rest of the United States during the final years of fault-based divorce. Nor has divorce reform caught on so far. Only three states have revised their divorce laws, by way of covenant marriage laws. In Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas, couples can now opt for standard marriage, easily dissolvable in accordance with existing no-fault statutes, or binding covenant unions whose termination requires prolonged separation or proof of fault. Just 2% of newlyweds choose covenant marriage over the standard kind in Louisiana, the state where covenant marriage laws have been on the books the longest (*New York Times* 2000).

How can divorce be reduced in the absence of restrictive laws? One way to lower the divorce rate is to stop bad marriages before they start. As we have seen, youthful marriage is a powerful predictor of divorce in Utah. In the face of routine marital problems, teenagers lack the maturity, coping skills, and social support necessary for happy resolutions.

In Utah, as in almost every other state, minors with consenting parents or judicial approval are allowed to wed. We do not permit minors to drink or vote, so why should they be entrusted with the responsibility of marriage? By raising the minimum marriage age to 18 or higher, irrespective of parental consent but excepting instances of premarital pregnancy, divorce rates in the Beehive State might be lowered. Lower marriage rates would also keep more teenagers in school, which would eventually provide them with more social and economic resources to sustain marriages.

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