Catching Up With Republicans: Democratic Marriage Rates Are on the Rise*

An Analysis of 2014-2021 U.S. General Social Survey Data

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Political identification is an important indicator of marital status within the United States and helps develop understandings of solidarity and division within the U.S. This paper investigates the relationship between political identification and marital status using four years of data from the U.S. General Social Survey. The analysis of this data reveals that marriages among left-leaning U.S. citizens is on the rise despite variances in the reporting of political identification.

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*Code and data are available at: https://github.com/cthierst/marital_status_politics_gss_analysis.git

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1 Introduction

Marital status, especially marriage, is a vital indicator of both solidarity and division within the United States (Wang 2020). It is often thought that politically right-leaning couples are more likely to be happily married in comparison to those who are politically left-leaning, resulting in higher marriage rates among this group (Bromley 2015). Yet, key factors in discerning how individuals identify politically are not always clear and the impact of political identification on other marital statuses are not often explored.

This paper seeks to explore the importance of the relationship between political identification and marital status in the United States. To conduct this analysis, I utilized data from the 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021 U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) to analyze the relationship between political identification and marital status. The estimand being explored in this paper is, how does political identification, as measured through self-described identification with a political party and self-described placement on the political spectrum, influence marital status.

Key insights found from this analysis are that marriage rates among U.S. citizens who identify with the Democratic Party as well as those who identify as left leaning on the political spectrum have risen significantly since 2014. I speculate that this rise can be due in part to the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 which allowed LGBTQ2SA+ individuals, who often identify with the Democratic Party, to get married at significant rates (Kiley and Maniam 2016). Additionally, it was found that there are variations in how U.S. citizens choose to disclose their political identity resulting in mixed results covering other marital statuses outlined in this analysis. From this result, I further discuss trends in media around "extremism" as potential influencing factors for these variations.

This paper is structured as follows, Section 2 provides discourse over the data source, sampling, biases and ethical considerations, and central data points. Section 4 provides a discussion of the results of this paper. Following this, Section 4 overviews the importance of the results against current literature, Section 4.1 discusses the limitations and weaknesses of my analysis, and Section 4.2 briefly covers future research further to grow our understanding of American marriage demographics.

2 Data

2.1 Data Management

This paper uses the R statistical programming language (R Core Team 2022), along with several packages, tidyverse (Wickham et al. 2019), janitor (Firke 2021), here (Müller 2020), and (Wickham et al. 2022). All figures in this paper were created using the packages ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) and the tables were created using knitr (Xie 2023) and kableExtra(Zhu 2021). Combinations of figures were created using the patchwork package (Pedersen 2022) The color styling of graphs has been created using RColorBrewer (Neuwirth 2022).

2.2 Source

The data within this paper was extracted from the 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2021 United States General Social Survey (GSS). This survey is a series of nationally representative cross-sectional interviews that collects data on contemporary American society to explain and monitor trends in attitudes, opinions, and behaviours (Davern et al. 2021). It began tracking these trends in 1972 and has primarily used in-person data collection as its method of data collection (Davern et al. 2021). In 2021, the survey moved to an address-based sampling method with a focus on web-based self-administered questionnaires (Davern et al. 2021).

2.3 Sampling

The United States General Social Survey (GSS) samples adults over the age of 18 in the United States who are not currently living in institutional housing (Davern et al. 2021). Table 1 shows the total number of responses collected by the GSS and the total number of responses used in the analysis of this paper, per year.

Table 1: Number of Responses

Year	Total # of Responses	Total # of Responses Used in Analysis
2014	2,538	2,322
2016	2,867	2,641
2018	2,348	2,143
2021	4,032	3,529

2.4 Key Features

This paper explores the estimand, how does political identification, as measured through self-described identification with a political party and self-described placement on the political

spectrum, influence marital status. This exploration is conducted through an analysis of the sample populations described in Table 1 under "Total # of Responses Used in Analysis." Responses were removed to account for unanswered or not applicable responses. I did this to ensure the representative and completeness of all variables analyzed. Additionally, in the data cleaning process, the cohort variable was manipulated to combine respondent's birth years into their generational cohort for more coherent analysis. The variables selected for analysis can be viewed in Table 2 and their measurement levels can be viewed in Table 3. Responses were measured using Likert scales which measure respondents' opinions to questions, and multiple-choice questions.

Table 2: Variable Descriptions

Variable	Variable Description
partyid	Self-described identification with a political party
polviews	Self-described placement on the political spectrum
marital	Marital status of respondent
sex	Self-described sex of respondent
cohort	Generational cohort that respondent belongs to

Table 3: Variable Measurements

Variable	Variable Measurement
partyid	Strong Democrat, Not Very Strong Democrat, Independent (Close to Democrat), Independent (Neither), Independent (Close to Republican), Not Very Strong Republican, Strong Republican
polviews	Extremely Liberal, Liberal, Slightly Liberal, Moderate, Slightly Conservative, Conservative, Extremely Conservative
marital	Married, Never Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed
sex	Female, Male
cohort	Post-War, Boomer, Gen X, Millenial, Gen Z

2.5 Bias and Ethics

2.5.1 General Social Survey

It is important to acknowledge that observations and data from the 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021 US General Social Survey (GSS) may have been influenced by social trends occurring in the world around participants. These could include and are not limited to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as a result of police brutality in 2014, the presidential election in 2016, the immigration crisis in 2018, and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. However, this is in part, part of the importance of the GSS, to track social trends. This is why I have chosen to compare four years of survey results, to gain a better perspective of these social trends with acknowledgement of the global circumstances in which they are reported under. Although it

is important to note that these cannot be direct comparison as the number of those surveyed is different between years as can be seen in Table 1

Another point of bias that needs to be addressed is the difference in surveying techniques. The US General Social Survey (GSS) was conducted in person in the years 2014, 2016, and 2018, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was changed to being an online survey resulting in a higher rate of non-response. The 2021 GSS controlled for this by adjusting population totals to ensure that the weighted totals closely matched the U.S. Census Bureau's estimates of sex, age, education, race, region, and ethnicity (Davern et al. 2021). Additionally, due to the survey being online, household enumeration was impossible, so households were asked to identity the adult with the most recent birthday (Davern et al. 2021). This is problematic as it may have missed some household residents who were temporarily living abroad, adult children, etc. (Davern et al. 2021). Measures were taken to control for this by conducting tests of significant to look for differences in trend estimates (Davern et al. 2021). Additionally, in the years where the survey was conducted in-person, there may have been instances of variance in how interviewers asked questions which could have led to bias in the results.

2.5.2 Marital Status and Generational Cohort

Additionally, another important point of bias to acknowledge is the effect of generational cohort on marital status. As can be seen in Figure 1, the effects of age on generational cohorts largely impacts the marital status. For example, in 2014, there are significantly more respondent's belonging to the "Post-War" cohort and no respondent's belonging to the "Gen Z" cohort. This is influential as the 2014 data is missing marital rates from the "Gen Z" cohort as they were not old enough to be surveyed, thereby distorting marital rates in that year when compared to the follow three years. Additionally, due to the young age of "Gen Z", respondents many have not reached the age where they are looking for long-term relationships resulting in very few being married and even less being divorced and widowed, as shown in Figure 1. However, it is important to include them in this analysis as they are a growing and extremely relevant cohort in demographic studies. Additionally, it is noticeable that trends in marriage between generational cohorts are shifting as can be seen by the increase of "Never Married" respondents between cohorts each year. This is significant as it may act as a co-indicator of marital rates in the U.S.

2.5.3 Marital Status and Sex

The last points of bias that must be acknowledged is the response rate of females versus males to the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) and the effect of sex on marital status. As Figure 2 shows, every sample from the GSS contains more females than males. This is important as women are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party and align more closely to the left of the political spectrum, whereas men are more likely to identify with the Republican Party and align more closely with the right of the spectrum (Center for American Women and
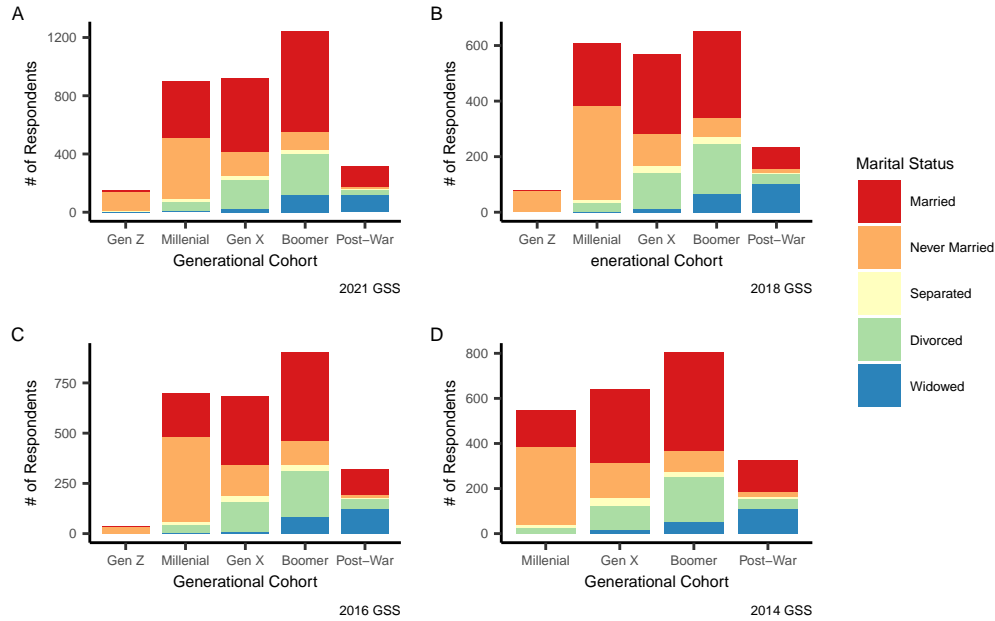
Figure 1: 2014-2021 Comparison of Respondent's Generational Cohort Against Marital Status

Politics 2023). Meaning that responses may lean more to the left of the political spectrum, regardless of marital status.

3 Results

3.1 Marital Status and Self-Described Identification With a Political Party

When looking at Figure 3, we can see that depending on the year, there are large variations in how respondent's choose to identify with the political parties in the United States. When comparing 2014 to 2021 in Figure 3, we can observe that in this period, respondents have become more likely to make a "strong" choice in what political party they identify with as there was a more even distribution of responses in the years prior to 2021. Additionally, we can observe that those identifying with the Republican Party, indicating as "Strong Republican" and "Not Very Strong Republican", have maintained strong marriage rates in each year when compared to other marital statuses. This contrasts with those identifying with the Democratic Party, indicating as "Strong Democrat" and "Not Very Strong Democrat" as their marriage rates seem to be less stable, increasing and decreasing based on the year, with the most significant increase occurring in 2021.
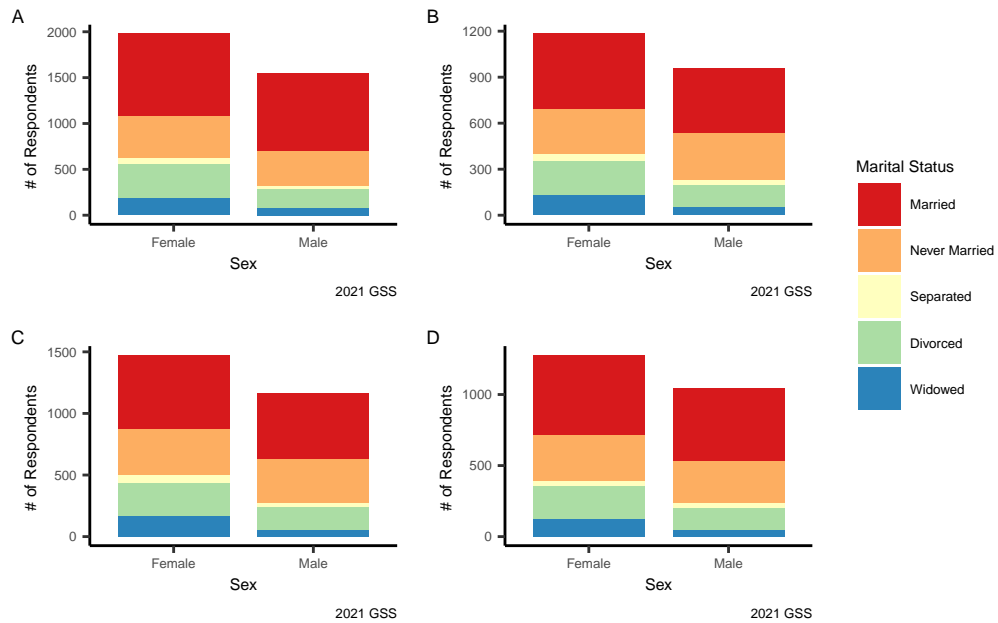
Figure 2: 2014-2021 Comparison of Respondent's Sex Against Marital Status
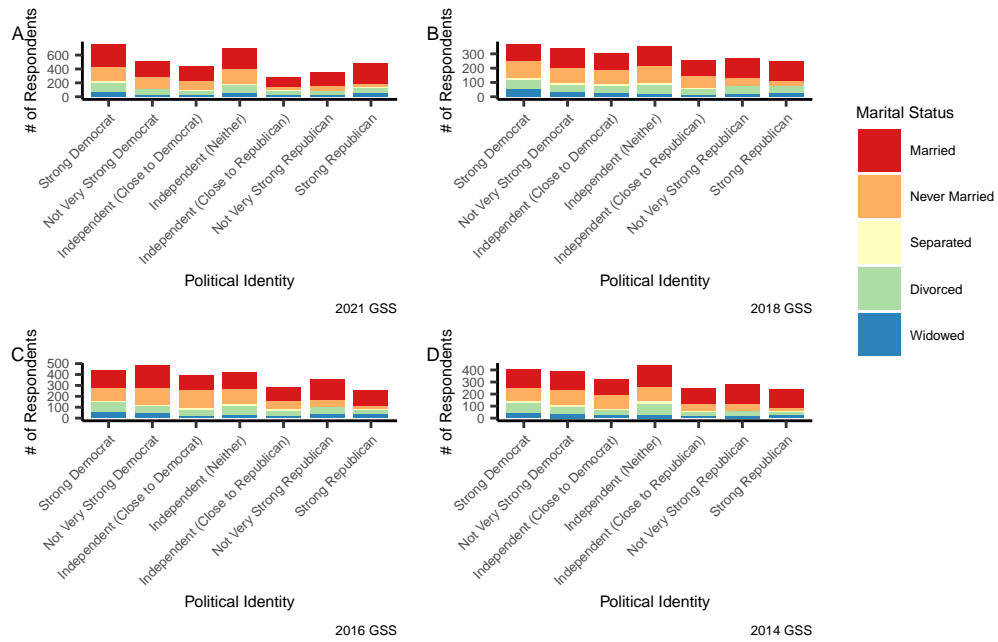

Figure 3: 2014-2021 Comparison of Respondent's Self-Described Identification With a Political
Party Against Marital Status

Table 4: 2021 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Identification with a Political Party

Identification with Political Party	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Strong Democrat	330	209	15	139	63
Not Very Strong Democrat	233	159	12	80	25
Independent (Close to Democrat)	216	122	13	64	22
Independent (Neither)	310	203	22	118	47
Independent (Close to Republican)	152	45	10	57	24
Not Very Strong Republican	214	62	6	51	27
Strong Republican	299	49	6	74	51

Table 5: 2018 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Identification with a Political Party

Identification with Political Party	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Strong Democrat	120	116	13	68	50
Not Very Strong Democrat	138	111	8	54	30
Independent (Close to Democrat)	118	97	13	51	24
Independent (Neither)	144	118	18	56	20
Independent (Close to Republican)	113	82	5	42	14
Not Very Strong Republican	139	52	6	52	19
Strong Republican	144	31	6	49	22

Looking at Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7, we can see clearly the marital status rates compared to self-described identification with a political party over the course of the four-year period. From these tables we can see that overall, there has been an increase in marriages from both those identifying as Democrats and as Republican. Interestingly, those who responded, "Never Married" or "Divorced" continue to identify more commonly with the Democratic party, although this is not consistent overtime as in 2018, although this is not linear. Additionally, looking further at Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7, we can see that the option, "Separated" is considerably less selected across all years and identification with political party, suggesting that separations may be uncommon in the United States. Furthermore, we can see from these tables that across all four years, those who identify with the Democratic Party report being widowed more often than those who are Republican. Although, this effect lessens in 2021, as reports of being "Widowed" become less varied across identification with political parties.

Table 6: 2016 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Identification with a Political Party

Identification with Political Party	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Strong Democrat	171	112	18	92	49
Not Very Strong Democrat	206	153	15	64	43
Independent (Close to Democrat)	136	164	17	64	14
Independent (Neither)	150	146	14	86	25
Independent (Close to Republican)	136	74	12	48	18
Not Very Strong Republican	189	59	9	60	36
Strong Republican	146	36	4	43	32

Table 7: 2014 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Identification with a Political Party

Identification with Political Party	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Strong Democrat	157	111	15	86	37
Not Very Strong Democrat	159	125	13	59	34
Independent (Close to Democrat)	139	113	10	46	19
Independent (Neither)	179	116	25	89	27
Independent (Close to Republican)	127	60	4	40	14
Not Very Strong Republican	167	59	4	35	17
Strong Republican	150	32	4	27	23

3.2 Self-Described Identification With a Political Party and Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

When looking at Table 8, we can see that there is an interesting variance in respondent's self-described identification with a political party and their self-described placement on the political spectrum. Meaning that those who describe themselves as either "Strong Republican[s]" or "Strong Democrat[s]" are not equally as likely to describe themselves as "Extremely Conservative" and "Extremely Liberal". Instead, respondents in this category choose less extreme points on the political spectrum to identify themselves with. this is important to keep in mind as we discuss placement on the political spectrum as there are generally more negative tones expressed towards either end of the spectrum in the public eye, which may influence these results.

Table 8: Comparison of Respondent's Self-Described Identification With a Political Party vs. Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

Identification with Political Party	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
Strong Democrat	110	322	103	174	26	15	6
Not Very Strong Democrat	19	125	147	169	34	14	1
Independent (Close to Democrat)	24	85	134	159	25	8	2
Independent (Neither)	14	22	54	450	83	53	24
Independent (Close to Republican)	3	6	9	70	95	91	14
Not Very Strong Republican	2	4	10	122	112	100	10
Strong Republican	4	4	6	70	49	252	94

3.3 Marital Status and Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

By looking at Figure 4, we can see that regardless of year, respondent reporting of being "moderate" on the political spectrum is significantly higher than any other point on the scale. However, we can also see that the levels of respondents placing themselves closer to either end of the spectrum has been on the rise since 2014. We can also see in Figure 4, that until 2021, those indicating to be closer to the left side of the spectrum, were less likely to indicate "Married", instead seeming to prefer to indicate "Never Married". The large growth of left-leaning respondent's choosing "Married" in 2021, indicates a large and rapid increase in marriage among liberal respondents. Importantly, Figure 4 illustrates the rise of marriages among left-leaning people in the U.S., more clearly than what could be seen in Figure 3.

This shift is further shown in Table 9, Table 10, Table 11, and Table 12, as we can observe that there were only minor variations in the frequency of respondents, identifying as "Ex-
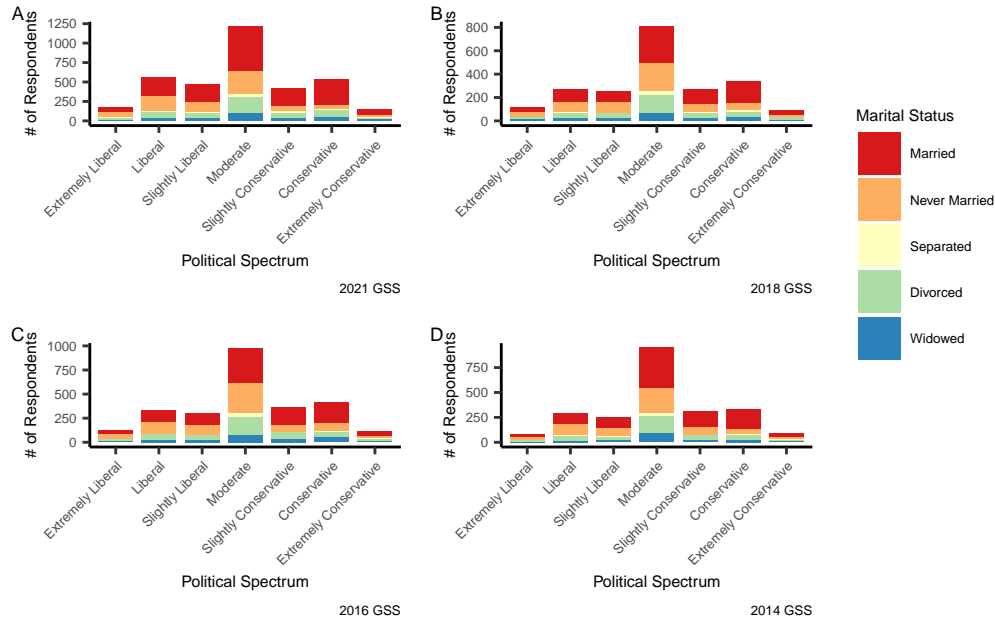
Figure 4: 2014-2021 Comparison of Respondent's Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum Against Respondent Marital Status

tremely Liberal", "Liberal", or "Slightly Liberal", selecting "Married" in 2014, 2016, and 2018. Whereas, in 2021, there was over a 65% increase in all categories of identification that chose "Married" as their status. This indicates that marriages among left-leaning U.S. citizens is on the rise, nearly matching that of right-leaning U.S. citizens. A similar trend is shown again from Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7, as respondents who identify more with the left side of the political spectrum maintain their likeliness to select "Never Married" over their right-leaning counterparts. However, in contrast, when comparing self-described placement on the political spectrum to marital status, those who identify on the conservative side are more likely to select "Divorced" over liberal identifying respondents. These discrepancies indicate that there are other variables that need to be explored to indicate correlation between political identity and marital status.

4 Discussion

Marriage is an important indicator of both solidarity and division within the United States (Wang 2020). Generally, it is reported that U.S. citizens who identify more strongly with the Republican party are more likely to be married, report marital happiness and be less likely to divorce their spouses over those that identify with the Democratic party (Bromley 2015).

Table 9: 2021 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

Placement on Political Spectrum	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Extremely Liberal	66	70	1	31	8
Liberal	256	186	11	87	28
Slightly Liberal	221	133	9	69	31
Moderate	573	300	35	208	98
Slightly Conservative	230	76	14	73	31
Conservative	332	54	11	91	45
Extremely Conservative	76	30	3	24	18

Table 10: 2018 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

Placement on Political Spectrum	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Extremely Liberal	43	40	5	19	10
Liberal	111	86	7	43	22
Slightly Liberal	87	94	7	40	22
Moderate	318	241	27	156	66
Slightly Conservative	133	63	8	44	23
Conservative	181	66	11	49	29
Extremely Conservative	43	17	4	21	7

Table 11: 2016 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

Placement on Political Spectrum	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Extremely Liberal	45	44	8	23	6
Liberal	133	123	4	57	22
Slightly Liberal	131	98	7	47	21
Moderate	370	307	50	177	76
Slightly Conservative	190	73	5	66	33
Conservative	218	74	8	62	49
Extremely Conservative	47	25	7	25	10

Table 12: 2014 Respondent's Marital Status vs. Self-Described Placement on the Political Spectrum

Placement on Political Spectrum	Married	Never Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Extremely Liberal	38	26	4	14	4
Liberal	107	112	11	44	14
Slightly Liberal	115	74	9	38	16
Moderate	404	246	39	172	87
Slightly Conservative	167	78	4	49	19
Conservative	197	60	6	49	23
Extremely Conservative	50	20	2	16	8

Although this can be attributed in part to the demographic make-up of many Republican couples being white, which reduces their exposure to segregation, poverty, and discrimination, resulting in less strain being put on their relationship (Bromley 2015).

The analysis conducted within this paper presents political identification as an important indicator of marital status rates in the United States. As rates of marriages between left-leaning and Democratic identifying U.S. citizens have risen significantly since 2014, nearly catching up to their right-wing counterparts. A prime indicator that could be influencing this trend is the change in legislation in 2015 which legalized same-sex marriages in the U.S. Research shows that LGBTQ2SA+ U.S. citizens are consistently and overwhelmingly supportive of the Democratic Party (Kiley and Maniam 2016). This could indicate that the trends seen within this paper, increased marriages between left-leaning respondents, are indicative of a wave of marriages occurring within this group after 2014.

Additionally, this analysis shows discrepancies in how respondent's report their political identification between the two variables studied. This variance results in inconsistent findings around other marital status trends. This hesitation to identify strongly with a point on the political spectrum despite identifying strongly with a political party may be indicative of public opinion swaying the responses of respondents. This may be possible as the rise of divisive connotations regarding "Extremely Liberal" and "Extremely Conservative" identification have been seemingly streamed into the consciousness of many Americans from influential individuals, media, and politicians over the past couple of years. Resulting in the potential for individuals to be made to feel uncomfortable to report their true opinion. This is stated as extremism, especially from the far-right, is on the rise in the U.S. (Jones 2018).

4.1 Limitations and Weaknesses

One weakness of this paper that must be acknowledged is the reliance of this analysis falling on the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS). This is a weakness as the respondent's chosen to participate in this survey change each year of the survey, making it difficult to track true

marital status, and changes in individual's political identification. Additionally, due to the changes in how the GSS has been distributed over the four years analyzed in this paper, there may be missed dynamism and bias in the responses, reporting and recording of data. Additionally, no survey is perfect and response bias remains a high possibility within such large data collection samples. Additionally, the GSS does not report on sexual identity which is important to note as same-sex unions were not legalized throughout the United States until 2015, meaning that many respondents may not have had the ability to marry in 2014 and years earlier. This could have resulted in the data being skewed towards Republicans having higher rates of marriages, despite rates of common-law marriages being perhaps equal in scale.

4.2 Future Research

More research on this topic should be conducted to help us gain a more meaningful understanding of how political identification in the United States may influence marital status. Further research into this topic should explore, in-depth, questions surrounding cohort, sex, gender-identity, sexual preferences, and inter-political identification marriages to gain a more robust understanding of American demographics.

5 Acknowledgements

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