Red States/Blue States: Social Context and Early Marriage in Young Adulthood

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As median ages at first marriage have risen for both women and men (26.5 and 28.7 in 2011), ages at first union have stayed relatively stable (21.8 and 23.7), making cohabitation not only a normative experience but the modal path to marriage in the US (Census Bureau 2011; Manning et al. 2013). Yet, a significant minority (25% of women and 16% of men) continues to marry before age 23, now considered "early marriage." Religion, particularly Conservative Protestantism (CP), is thought to be a key social influence. CP and Mormon affiliated youth marry earlier than their peers and are more likely to choose marriage over cohabitation (Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Lehrer 2004; Uecker and Stokes 2008; Xu et al. 2005). Religious service attendance, salience, and belief in biblical literalism are also associated with early marriage (Uecker 2014). This association at the individual level leads most scholars to emphasize unique beliefs and values related to family life held by CP youth that are thought to motivate and guide their distinctive pattern of early marriage.

However, early marriage is also spatially concentrated within the United States in religiously and politically conservative parts of the country (Lesthaeghe & Neidert 2006, 2009). These "red state" areas also show higher rates of marriage and less cohabitation compared to more liberal "blue state" areas. One interpretation of this spatial pattern is that it reflects the aggregation of individual behaviors: given the association between CP affiliation and early marriage at the individual level, we should expect communities with higher concentrations of CPs to display more early marriage.

Another possibility is that CP concentrations have consequences for the structure and character of local communities that influence the marriage behavior *all* young adults in the area, regardless their religious affiliation. In communities dominated by CPs, shared values around premarital sex and the centrality of family life are likely to be woven more tightly into the social and institutional fabric of community life—what Peter Berger (1967) called a "sacred canopy." This same "canopy" may spill over onto non-CP young adults, shaping how they think about marriage and family and possible alternatives (e.g., education and careers). Marriage markets in CP communities may also be different. For instance, CP youth in these markets should be able to find a religiously matched partner more quickly, spurring early entry into marriage. Norms, scripts, and practices around dating may place greater emphasis on courtship and discourage cohabitation. Family, friends, and congregations—local brokers in the marriage market—should also be able to exercise greater social control to enforce these norms in CP-dominant markets, influencing the kinds of partners that young adults date and the trajectory of their relationships (cohabitation vs. marriage). Finally, stronger marital cultures in CP communities may lower the social barriers to early marriage and family formation—behaviors that carry more stigma in more liberal areas.

In the current study, I seek to better understand the relationship between religion and early marriage by testing not only whether being affiliated with a CP tradition is associated with early marriage but whether living in a CP-dominant community also matters. In doing so, I argue for a

broader conception of religion's influence on family formation. This study also contributes to the marriage market literature, which tends to focus on structural constraints to relationship formation (like the sex ratio and marriageability of partners) rather than cultural aspects of the local community (Laumann et al. 2004). Finally, this analysis is in dialogue with prior research demonstrating a link between CP religious affiliation, early entry into marriage, and higher risks of divorce and negative educational and economic achievement (Glass and Levchak 2014; Glass and Jacobs 2005; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008; Keister 2008). The results shed light on the connections between family, place, and social stratification.

METHODS

Data come from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997, a survey of 8,984 men and women born 1980-84. Respondents have been surveyed annually since 1997 and are asked, among other topics, about their family formation and employment histories. With the use of the sampling weights provided, the NLSY is designed to be nationally representative. The dependent variable measures entry into first union by age 23, distinguishing between cohabitation and marriage. I focus on first union timing because the choice for contemporary young adults increasingly is not just between marriage and staying single but also between marriage and cohabitation. In addition, the local religious climate is expected to influence not just the timing of first union but also its form. I converted the data into person-years using birthdates and dates of first marriage. This person-year data set begins with each respondent's 18th birthday and includes all person-years up to the year of first union or last interview. I use multiple-logistic regression to model the time to first union as a competing risk. I run models separately for men and women. Given CPs' emphasis on traditional gender roles and control of female sexuality, I expect the effect of the CP concentration to be stronger for women's union behavior.

The restricted version of the NLSY-97 data provides geographic identifiers of the state, county, and metropolitan area in which respondents reside. I utilize the county identifiers and define local community, or "marriage market," boundaries by commuting zones (Autor and Dorn 2010). Commuting zones are clusters of counties that share strong commuting ties (defined by the Census) and are the best present-day approximation to "labor market areas" used in previous marriage market studies from the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Lichter et al. 1992). There are 741 commuting zones that cover the entire United States and, importantly, are allowed to cross state boundaries—a drawback to other formulations such as Public-Use Microdata Areas. The link between counties and commuting zones provide stability to community boundaries over time and allow me to track NLSY-97 respondents across survey rounds as they move in and out of commuting zone areas. All local characteristics are calculated at the commuting zone level.

Data on the religious composition come from the 2000 and 2010 US Religion Censuses administered by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB). In addition, I account for other marriage-market and contextual characteristics that may be associated with first union timing and type and the local religious composition: the sex ratio, education and employment characteristics of opposite-sex partners, total population (logged), annual unemployment rate, racial composition, age structure, proportion married, and the proportion of 18-24 year olds enrolled in college. These measures come from the Census, American Community Survey or the Bureau of Labor Statistics. I also control for a number of individual characteristics. Respondents' own denominational affiliation is classified as CP,

Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Unaffiliated, and Other (see Steensland et al. 2000) and is measured at Round 1. I also control for demographic and family background characteristics (age, race-ethnicity, parental education, family structure at age 12) as well as time-varying characteristics associated with first union timing and type (educational attainment, school enrollment, employment status, annual earnings, first birth status, region and metropolitan residence).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the bivariate relationship between the local CP concentration, broken into quintiles, and the proportion of person-years entering first union, by union type, between ages 18-23. While there is little association between the CP concentration and the risk of cohabitation, there is a strong, linear relationship for the risk of marriage as a first union type. Among women, living in the top quintile (highest CP concentration) is associated with a 2.5 times greater likelihood of transitioning to marriage compared to living in the bottom quintile (lowest CP concentration). This effect is similarly strong for men, although men are entering first unions at a noticeably lower rate overall at these ages.

Table 2 presents the multivariate regression results for women and men. For women, the CP concentration is positively associated with entry into marriage (vs. remaining unpartnered) as well as entry into marriage over cohabitation as a first union type. Remarkably, this effect is net of women's own religious affiliation—which is also predictive of early marriage formation. There was no significant interaction between religious affiliation and the CP concentration, suggesting that the effect of local religious context is additive rather than multiplicative. Table 3 shows the results for men. While religious affiliation was associated with marriage and first union type (CP adherents were more likely to enter marriage compared to Catholics and the Unaffiliated), the CP concentration did not have a net effect on first union timing for men. However, in pooled models the effect of CP concentration was not statistically significantly different for women compared to men. These preliminary results are consistent with the idea that social context is an important dimension of religion's influence on young adults' union formation decisions—both the timing and type of first union.

FUTURE PLANS

I plan to test the robustness of my findings against other specifications of "early marriage" (e.g. age 25) and examine the association at later ages as well (up to age 31). I expect the effect of the religious climate to be much weaker later in the life course. In an effort to understand possible mechanisms, I will also explore differences between the CP concentration of respondents' community of origin (survey round 1) and their current residence. This will help distinguish between socialization effects—values inculcated in childhood that stick with respondents—from more immediate marriage market effects related to the supply of partners, dating practices, and community pressure. NLSY also asks respondents in Round 4 about their marriage and fertility timing expectations. Incorporating these will help tease out whether local contexts work through individuals' expectations and desires to affect union behavior. Finally, I also plan to consider other contextual factors related to local labor markets (occupational structure, gender gap in occupations) and educational opportunities that might connect the religious context to marriage.

Table 1. First union type by the local concentration of Conservative Protestants, for men and women ages 18-23. Data presented in person-years. (NLSY-97, weighted)

	Women		Men	
CP concentration rate	Cohabitation	Marriage	Cohabitation	Marriage
Quintile 1: 0-9%	9.2	1.8	5.2	1.0
Quintile 2: 9-13%	11.1	2.2	7.4	1.9
Quintile 3: 13-20%	12.2	3.2	9.0	1.6
Quintile 4: 20-36%	9.4	3.1	7.1	2.0
Quintile 5: 36-68%	11.9	4.4	8.5	2.7
Total	10.4	2.5	6.9	1.6

Table 2. Coefficients from multinomial logistic regression models of transition first union by union type for women and men, ages 18-23 (NLSY-97, weighted).

WOMEN	Cohabiting vs. unpartnered		Marriage vs. unpartnered		Marriage vs. cohabiting	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Conservative Protestant concentration	-0.004	(0.00)	0.022**	(0.01)	0.026**	(0.01)
Religious affiliation 1997 (ref: CP Prot.)						
Mainline Prot.	0.068	(0.09)	-0.678***	(0.19)	-0.746***	(0.20)
Catholic	-0.077	(0.09)	-0.466**	(0.17)	-0.389*	(0.19)
Jewish	-0.057	(0.33)	-0.152	(0.62)	-0.095	(0.70)
None	0.225*	(0.11)	-0.934**	(0.29)	-1.158***	(0.31)
Other affiliation	-0.168	(0.20)	0.447	(0.28)	0.615+	(0.33)
Region (ref: Northeast)						
South	-0.007	(0.11)	0.792**	(0.25)	0.800**	(0.27)
Midwest	0.383*	(0.15)	0.622+	(0.32)	0.240	(0.34)
West	0.173	(0.12)	0.739**	(0.26)	0.566*	(0.28)
Constant	-2.469*	(0.99)	-2.321	(2.00)	0.149	(2.17)
N	15,076					
MEN	Cohabiting vs. unpartnered		Marriage vs. unpartnered		Marriage vs. cohabiting	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Conservative Protestant concentration	0.000	(0.01)	0.011	(0.01)	0.011	(0.01)
Religious affiliation 1997 (ref: CP Prot.)						
Mainline Prot.	-0.006	(0.10)	-0.248	(0.19)	-0.242	(0.21)
Catholic	-0.206*	(0.09)	-0.830***	(0.18)	-0.623**	(0.20)
Jewish	-0.621	(0.50)	-0.511	(0.76)	0.110	(0.92)
None	0.226*	(0.10)	-0.669*	(0.26)	-0.895**	(0.28)
Other affiliation	-0.092	(0.21)	0.356	(0.35)	0.448	(0.40)
Region (ref: Northeast)						
South	0.265*	(0.11)	0.374	(0.27)	0.108	(0.29)
Midwest	0.044	(0.16)	0.540	(0.37)	0.497	(0.40)
West	0.009	(0.13)	0.415	(0.29)	0.406	(0.31)
Constant	-6.317***	(1.13)	-5.306*	(2.18)	1.011	(2.42)
N	18,377					

† p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Note: All models control for [individual characteristics]: age, race-ethnicity, first birth, parental education, family structure at age 12, educational attainment, school enrollment, employment status, annual earnings, first birth status, urban residence; [commuting zone characteristics]: the sex ratio, education and employment characteristics of opposite-sex partners, total population (logged), annual unemployment rate, racial composition, age structure, proportion married.