

New IFS Analysis: Liberal Americans Have a Marriage Problem

Married liberals are just as happy as married conservatives. The problem is they're getting married at far lower rates and the gap is accelerating.

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA, UNITED STATES, May 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new analysis from Brad Wilcox and Grant Bailey at the Institute for Family Studies finds that the marriage divide in America is not just about class, it's also about culture, and liberal Americans are losing ground fast.

The piece, "The Left's Marriage Problem," responds to a surprising point of agreement at a recent Free Press debate at the University of Virginia. During the debate, Catholic conservative commentator Isabel Brown and progressive Gen Z influencer Harry Sisson both spoke in favor of getting married and having children. When Sisson asked the ideologically mixed student audience to raise their hands if they wanted the same, almost every hand went up.

But Wilcox and Bailey's data suggest a more complicated story. While the desire for marriage might be there on both the left and right, the follow-through and cultural support are not balanced.

KEY FINDINGS

54%: Liberal men and women aged 22–40 are less likely to be married than conservative peers even after controlling for education, race, ethnicity, and age.

16 points: Drop in marriage expectations among liberal teens since 2010

30%: Barely one in three college-educated liberals agree children are better off with married parents

3x: The happiness gap between married and unmarried young adults has tripled since 2000 with unhappiness being significantly higher among unmarried liberal singles.

It's not all bad news for liberals. Married liberals are nearly as happy as married conservatives. "Liberal (and conservative) young adults who are married are markedly happier with their lives today," the authors write. Research suggests liberals aren't skeptical of marriage's benefits,

they're simply being denied them.

WHAT'S DRIVING IT

Wilcox and Bailey challenge commentators like Matthew Yglesias, author of the *Slow Boring*, newsletter, who argues the decline is a class story mostly impacting working-class men. The authors do not discount the class aspect of the marriage divide, but their data show it is far from the whole story.

Among college-educated liberals only 30% believe children are better off with married parents. Among college-educated conservatives, more than 70% do. Elite liberals have become, “the most publicly dismissive of marriage’s cultural value” even as prominent liberal media outlets run headlines like “[t]he worst thing a woman can do, statistically speaking, is to get married to a man.”

The data on teenage attitudes may be the most concerning finding. Since 2010, marriage expectations among liberal high schoolers have fallen 16 percentage points. Among conservative teens, the trend is flat. Wilcox and Bailey attribute much of this to differences in messaging on social media, where anti-marriage content circulates heavily in left-leaning digital spaces.

FROM THE AUTHORS

“Bridging America’s marriage divide will require data-driven liberals — pundits like Harry Sisson and journalists like Yglesias — to willingly confront their own side, more boldly and more honestly, with the truth about marriage and family.” — Brad Wilcox and Grant Bailey, Institute for Family Studies

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brad Wilcox is Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, and author of *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization*. He is available for media interviews.

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ABOUT IFS

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