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Religion and Attitudes Toward Divorce Laws Among U.S. Adults

Charles E. Stokes and Christopher G. Ellison

Abstract
This study examines religious differences in attitudes toward divorce laws among U.S. adults. Using pooled data from the 2000-2006 NORC General Social Surveys (N = 5,683), we find that frequency of religious attendance and belief that the Bible is the Word of God are strong predictors of support for stricter laws governing divorce. Indeed, these religious indicators are much more important than conservative affiliation. Conversely, more secular individuals, that is, those who do not attend religious services and consider the Bible only a book of fables and moral teachings, are substantially less supportive of tightening existing divorce laws. Understanding the role of religion in shaping Americans’ attitudes toward divorce laws can illuminate the scope and boundaries of connections between the institutions of marriage and religion in the contemporary United States as well as inform policy implications for the future of divorce law reform.

Keywords
divorce, religion, public policy

For better or for worse, marriage in the United States has changed radically since the early 20th century and especially from the 1960s onward. Among the
most important changes are the rise of cohabitation, the large increase in non-
marital childrearing, and the rapid growth in divorce rates. Scholars suggest
that underlying these demographic trends are important shifts in the mean-
ing of marriage. Whereas Americans once experienced marriage primarily in
institutional terms, like a business partnership, it has since become more of
an individual attribute—a status one acquires in order to achieve certain goals
of self-fulfillment (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Cherlin, 2004).
All of these changes have led some scientists to argue that marriage in America
has become deinstitutionalized and faces an uncertain future (Cherlin, 2004).

Although scholars debate whether the demise of marriage is positive or
negative (Amato, 2004), several groups have undertaken efforts to bolster
the flagging institution. From political committees to individual churches and
community organizations, a loose coalition of marriage advocates has launched
a myriad of initiatives aimed at defining, promoting, and sustaining marriages
(Hawkins, Nock, Wilson, Sanchez, & Wright, 2002). Religious groups have
played a central role in the so-called promarriage movement. Several scient-
ists note the close ties between religion and marriage, pointing out the
complementary goals and similar benefits of the two institutions (e.g., Thornton,
1989; Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Moreover, many
religious groups view intergenerational transmission of their faith as a criti-
cal practice and thus have a vested interest in sustaining families. Conservative
Protestants in particular, represented by large, visible organizations like
Focus on the Family, have shifted some of their zeal from saving souls to
saving marriages.

Among other goals, promarriage groups seek stricter divorce laws.
Although scholars debate the impact of no-fault divorce laws on the divorce
rate (Glenn, 1997; Nakonezny, Shull, & Rodgers, 1995; Rodgers, Nakonezny,
& Shull, 1997), the laws are targeted by promarriage groups for making
divorce too easy to obtain, reducing both the symbolic and structural value of
marriage. Although religious groups are clearly important players in the
efforts to strengthen divorce laws, no study to date has examined the effect of
religiosity on public opinion toward divorce laws. Understanding the role of
religion in Americans’ attitudes toward divorce laws would assist scientists
and policy makers alike in mapping the scope and boundaries of institutional
connections between marriage and religion in the United States.

Using pooled data from the 2000-2006 NORC General Social Surveys
(GSS), we explore the associations between multiple dimensions of religi-
osity and attitudes toward divorce laws. Specifically, we investigate the
following research question: Are religious affiliation, beliefs about the Bible,
and religious service attendance independently and/or contingently associated
with attitudes toward divorce laws? After presenting our findings on this issue, we discuss their possible implications for institutional linkages between religion and family in the United States.

The Role of Religion in Attitudes Toward Divorce

Scholars note that religion is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon involving direct, indirect, and reciprocal influences (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995; Regnerus, 2003; Stark & Glock, 1968). Moreover, aspects of religious life vary in their associations with family-related behaviors and attitudes (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007; Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Thus in this study, we investigate the links between three dimensions of religiosity and attitudes toward divorce laws. Note that throughout this study we refer to individual religious characteristics as aspects of “religiosity.”

We propose three ways by which Americans’ opinions on divorce laws could be associated with their religious affiliation, beliefs, and attendance. First, Americans might affiliate with certain religious organizations whose adherents share conservative attitudes toward divorce laws. These organizations have prominent leaders and media outlets that act to promulgate and sustain the group’s views on various issues. (For many Americans, religious affiliation is part of their identity and is not dependent on their consistent participation.) Second, because high views of marriage and a low tolerance for divorce often come with the “package” of conservative religious beliefs, Americans holding such conservative beliefs may also be more likely to express more conservative attitudes toward divorce. Third, Americans who consistently participate in institutionalized religious practices (i.e., attendance at religious services) may also be more likely to desire stricter divorce laws because they are more likely to be exposed to promarriage teachings and norms. Although there is certainly some conceptual and empirical overlap among these three dimensions of religiosity, we follow the recent practice of several researchers in investigating these dimensions both individually and concurrently (e.g., Myers, 2004; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Moreover, conceptually and empirically untangling these pathways will help us to better address our broader question about institutional linkages between religion and family.

Religious Affiliation

At the most basic level, religious affiliation indicates affinity for or exposure to a certain religio-cultural framework. Therefore, even among persons who
are not active church members, identification with a conservative religious group likely carries some association with the various tenets of that group. For some Americans, though, religious affiliation is a core marker of identity, and among these persons denominational affiliation implies a distinctive package of religious beliefs and a tightly consolidated social network (Alwin, Felson, Walker, & Tufis, 2006; Roof & McKinney, 1987; Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, Wilcox, & Woodberry, 2000; Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

Several studies have shown that individuals who report affiliation with any religious group are more likely to hold profamily attitudes when compared with those claiming no affiliation (Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996; Hertel & Hughes, 1987; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Indeed, at least regarding issues of family policy, the religiously unaffiliated form a distinctive group of their own. Studies in the 1950s showed that only a small percentage of Americans (5% or less) reported no religious preference. The religiously unaffiliated of the 1950s tended to have lower levels of education and exhibited other indicators of social marginality (e.g., fewer social connections). Today the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans is roughly three times higher than in the 1950s (around 15%), with significant expansion in recent years. Hout and Fischer (2002) explored (using GSS data) the reasons for the recent growth of this survey category and concluded that some of these individuals are ex–mainline Protestants and nominal Catholics who have rejected religion altogether in response to the highly visible conservative religious forces on the contemporary social and political scene. According to Hout and Fisher, these disaffiliated Americans take special umbrage at the Religious Right rhetoric on “family values.” So their lack of affiliation with organized religion may be part of a set of lifestyle commitments and network ties that would make them unlikely candidates for supporting tougher government regulation of marriage (or any other action that would defend traditional marital forms as superior). We expect, then, that respondents who report any religious affiliation will be more likely to favor stricter divorce laws than those who report no religious affiliation (Hypothesis 1).

Many groups across the religious spectrum value strong marriages and discourage divorce, but during the past 30 years conservative Protestants have probably been the largest and most vocal promarriage group in America. Indeed, conservative Protestant involvement in the politics of family values and “culture wars” has inspired a number of popular and scholarly works (e.g., Hunter, 1991; Smith, 2000). During this same time frame, American Catholics have lost much of their once distinctive conservatism toward family issues, and public opinion studies show that Catholics now resemble mainline Protestants on many measures (Alwin, 1986; Gay et al., 1996;
Hoffman & Miller, 1997; Lehrer, 1999). Although other religious groups in America hold conservative beliefs about marriage (e.g., Latter-Day Saints [LDS]/Mormons, Orthodox Jews, and most Islamic groups), the GSS, like many national surveys, does not register enough of their adherents to permit valid inferences (e.g., Brodbar-Nemzer, 1986; Dollahite, 2003; Heaton, Goodman, & Holman, 1994). Thus in our study, we focus on conservative Protestantism as the primary conservative religious affiliation. Conservative Protestants disseminate strong antidivorce messages through teachings at religious services, meetings of conservative Protestant parachurch organizations (e.g., Focus on the Family), and various media such as books, radio, television, and the Internet (Burdette et al., 2007). Affiliation with a conservative Protestant denomination likely indicates some exposure to these antidivorce messages and may also indicate reinforcement of antidivorce norms by coreligionist peers (Burdette et al., 2007). Therefore, we expect that conservative Protestants will be more likely to support stricter divorce laws, compared with other religious groups and the religiously unaffiliated (Hypothesis 2).

**Religious Beliefs**

Since the end of World War II, denominations have become more internally heterogeneous in terms of social class, theology, and sociopolitical views as the traditional social sources of denominationalism have been eroded. As Wuthnow (1988) and others have shown, this shift in identify has been driven partly by socioeconomic and geographical mobility, intergenerational assimilation of Euro-American ethnic groups, rising rates of interfaith marriage, and other large-scale social changes that swept America during the second half of the 20th century. These processes have diminished the significance of denominational labels and identities and fueled the emergence of broad, interfaith/interdenominational coalitions based on common theological, ethical, and political beliefs. Family issues, including marriage and divorce, are particularly salient rallying points for these coalitions.

Belief that the Bible is the literal word of God is the most well known of conservative Christian beliefs (Hempel & Bartkowski, 2008), and scholars have noted that conservative scriptural interpretation is linked with a number of issues involving family life, marriage, and sexuality (Burdette, Ellison, & Hill, 2005; Burdette et al., 2007; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997). Biblical literalism, then, has clear implications for attitudes toward divorce. Regarding divorce, biblical literalists often refer to Jesus’ famous statement (included in many religious wedding ceremonies) “Therefore what
God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:6, New International Version). From these teachings and several others, biblical literalists conclude that divorce is a sin on par with adultery and that divorce should only be allowed in cases where a spouse is unfaithful (via adultery or abuse). Some churches that teach biblical literalism do not allow divorced or formerly divorced (remarried) persons to hold key leadership positions (Adams, 1986).

Building their case from the biblical account of creation in Genesis, most biblical literalists believe that marriage is an institution founded by God for all people, not just Christian believers. Thus, in addition to a negative view of divorce, they hold views of marriage as sacred and worthy of preservation as a legal institution. Dr. James Dobson (2004), chairman of the conservative religious group Focus on the Family, goes as far as saying that “marriage, when it functions as intended, is good for everyone—for men, for women, for children, for the community, for the nation, and for the world” (p. 17).

Earlier, we hypothesized that any religious affiliation would be more closely associated with conservative attitudes toward divorce laws than would no religious affiliation. A similar dynamic may be the case regarding Bible beliefs; any attribution of sacred significance to the Bible may be associated with more conservative attitudes toward divorce. In this case, we expect that persons who believe that the Bible is either the literal word of God or inspired by God but not literal will be more likely to prefer stricter divorce laws, compared to persons who believe that the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men (Hypothesis 3a).

Like many religious texts, the Bible is complex and multivocal. Religious adherents understand and interpret their sacred text in “interpretive communities” consisting of religious teachers, religious media, and coreligious friends and family (Bartkowski, 1996; Fish, 1980). Many religious persons consider the Bible to be “inspired” by God but not God’s “literal” word. In general, groups who consider the Bible as inspired but not literal tend toward more metaphorical interpretations and therefore may tend to treat issues such as divorce as matters of individual conscience rather than as taboos deserving blanket proscription (Burdette et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible that persons with the most conservative religious beliefs will be more likely to favor stricter divorce laws than either the nonreligious or those who believe the Bible is inspired but not literal. If this is the case, we expect that persons who believe the Bible to be the literal word of God will be more likely to favor tougher divorce laws, compared to those who believe the Bible to be inspired by God but not God’s literal word and persons who believe that the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men (Hypothesis 3b).
Religious Participation

Although much of the religion–family literature has centered on distinctive religious subcultures, others have argued that it is the level (rather than the type) of religiousness that may be most important in shaping family orientations (e.g., Alwin, 1986). Religious attendance taps a number of separate but interrelated factors, each of which helps explain how religious participation could be related to opinions on divorce. First, higher levels of attendance imply higher levels of commitment to organized, institutionalized religion. Other measures of religiosity (such as religious salience) explore more personal and subjective religious commitment, but attendance implies attachment to a group. Moreover, greater levels of attendance indicate greater levels of exposure to the teachings and culture of the group. Those who attend regular worship meetings also have a greater chance of exposure to the additional promarriage services—such as classes, retreats, counseling, and social services—offered by many religious groups. Finally, individuals who attend more frequently are also more likely to be socially involved with other members of the religious group and to crystallize their religious values through these interactions with like-minded coreligionists (Ellison, 1991). As for the distinctly secular (even in some cases, antireligious) nonattenders, their emergence as a significant segment of the population may further contribute to a divide between those who are religiously engaged and those who are not (Hout & Fischer, 2002). For these reasons, we expect that persons with higher levels of religious service attendance will be more likely to indicate support for stricter divorce laws (Hypothesis 4).

Combining Dimensions of Religiosity

Although the three religious dimensions we are considering (affiliation, conservative beliefs, and attendance) are likely to be empirically correlated, there are conceptual and empirical reasons to distinguish among them. First, because mean levels of religious attendance and biblical literalism tend to vary by denomination and are typically highest among members of conservative groups (Roof & McKinney, 1987; Steensland et al., 2000), one must control for these indicators in order to specify the net influence of religious subcultures per se in shaping attitudes toward divorce laws. Moreover, viewed in statistical terms, these three dimensions of influence can have any of three different types of effects on attitudes toward divorce laws: (a) additive (i.e., largely independent of one another), (b) substitution (i.e., high levels on one may offset the influence of low levels on another), and (c) multiplier (i.e., one may
reinforce and magnify the effects of another). Thus, we estimate the net effects of religious affiliation, beliefs about the Bible, and attendance separately, concurrently, and also interactively.

Distinguishing among three dimensions of religiosity also gives us some leverage on our broader question about the nature of institutional linkages between religion and family. If religious support for stricter divorce laws is primarily driven by conservative religiosity (as Hypotheses 2 and 3b suggest) then our study lends evidence that religion and family may be linked primarily through conservatism; that is, traditional religion is supporting traditional family forms and norms. If on the other hand, more religious people of many stripes express a preference for stricter divorce laws (as Hypotheses 1, 3a, and 4 suggest), then our results give support to the claims of Wilcox and others who assert that religion and family are more foundationally linked (e.g., Wilcox, 2007).

**Other Predictors of Attitudes Toward Divorce**

To properly estimate the specific effects of religion on attitudes toward divorce, we must include a number of control variables that have been previously associated with both attitudes toward divorce laws and religion. Scientists have found that respondents’ political orientation, marital status, age, education level, region of residence, and race are significantly associated with their attitudes toward divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991; Call & Heaton, 1997; Martin & Parashar, 2006; South & Spitze, 1986; Thornton, 1985). These variables have also been found to be important predictors for various measures of religion. Among our control variables, political orientation is particularly important, because (a) this study is investigating correlates of attitudes toward a policy issue; (b) the specific domain of “profamily” policy has a high level of religious salience, particularly for many conservative Protestants; and (c) conservative religion and conservative politics are closely aligned in the current American context (Brooks, 2002). Thus, it is possible that attitudes seemingly based on potent religious influences are due instead to political views about changing social policy or the role of government in private affairs.

**Method**

The GSS is a national survey of Americans aged 18 and older and is designed to examine Americans’ behaviors and opinions in a number of areas (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2006). It is administered using face-to-face interviews of
noninstitutionalized Americans in the 48 contiguous states. Since 1972 it has been conducted annually or biennially by the National Opinion Research Center. Up until 2006, all its interviews were conducted in English only; Spanish interviews were added in 2006. For statistical power, we pool data from the four most recent years of the GSS: 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006.1

The GSS uses a split sample design for some of its questions so that not every respondent is asked every question. We delete any cases where respondents were not asked about their opinion on divorce laws, yielding an analytic sample of 5,683 cases. Except where otherwise noted below, we used the *ice* and *micombine* commands in Stata to perform multiple imputations for the small number of missing observations in our analytic sample. In all our analyses, we apply weights to account for internal sample design features of the GSS and to balance the previous years with the 2006 design.

**Dependent Variable**

Our key dependent variable is constructed from the item “Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now?” Respondents were asked to choose from two answers: *easier* or *more difficult*. If, however, a respondent volunteered that laws should *stay the same*, we coded this response as valid. In our analysis, we measure attitudes toward divorce as an ordinal variable reflecting increasingly restrictive opinions, with 1 = *easier*, 2 = *stay the same*, and 3 = *more difficult*. Our measure is directly comparable to a recent study using the same dependent variable (Martin & Parashar, 2006). Surprisingly, the question used to create our measure of attitudes toward divorce laws represents the only consistently asked item in the GSS that inquires about attitudes toward divorce. Other questions about attitudes toward divorce were asked in 1988 as part of a special module and one other question about divorce was asked in 2002, but only this question about divorce laws appears throughout the history of the GSS and in the two most recent administrations.

It is important to note that the GSS item we use as the dependent variable in our study is designed to force respondents to take a side on the issue of divorce laws. Even so, consistently about 20% of respondents have volunteered that divorce laws should stay the same, giving some indication that more would respond this way if given the choice. Because of this, any conclusions we draw must take into account the possibility that Americans may hold more moderate views about divorce than their responses to this question reflect. To explore this issue further, in ancillary analyses (available on request) we examined Americans’ attitudes toward divorce laws on the 1978 GSS, the
only year the GSS included a version of the divorce laws question where respondents were presented with “stay the same” as a response option. This ancillary analysis is not directly comparable to our present analysis for two reasons: (a) The 1978 opinions are more than 20 years removed from the 2000-2006 opinions and (b) we were not able to include measures of Bible beliefs for the 1978 analysis. Still, our general findings from this study were upheld using the 1978 experimental question, though more “moderate” religious positions (mainline Protestant, midlevel religious attendance) did tend to be more closely associated with respondents indicating that divorce laws should stay the same. Although our dependent variable has inherent limitations, we think the consistent and current availability of this question on the GSS, its previous usage in the family literature, and its direct application to policy make it a valid and useful tool for social scientists who study the family.

Independent Variables

GSS respondents were asked to give their specific religious denomination. From this information, we follow the RELTRAD classification scheme to sort Protestants into conservative Protestants and mainline Protestants (Steensland et al., 2000). Because we believe race is an important factor in attitudes toward divorce, we chose not to use the Black Protestant category, which necessarily conflates race and affiliation. Instead, we code Black Protestant denominations as conservative Protestant or mainline Protestant, depending on their historical theological commitments. Catholic respondents compose their own category as do respondents reporting no religious affiliation. Because of the small numbers of adherents to other religious groups, we include these in an “other religions” category. The various religions captured by this “other” category may differ widely in their teachings on marriage and divorce; thus we do not consider it a substantively interpretable category.

Religious attendance is measured on the GSS according to a 9-point scale ranging from never attending to attending more than once a week. In previous studies, scholars have transformed this widely used variable in many different ways. We experimented with several possibilities, all yielding substantively the same results. For this study, we retain the scale, coding it from no attendance (0) to attendance more than once a week (8).

The GSS asks one question about respondents’ view of the Bible: “Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?” Survey participants were given three statements from which to choose: “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it
should be taken literally, word for word,” and “The Bible is an ancient
book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.” Some
respondents also indicated “other.” For this measure, we created a dichoto-
mous variable for each of the four responses, though we don’t consider the
“other” category as substantively interpretable.

GSS respondents rank their political orientation on a 7-point scale, rang-
ing from very conservative to very liberal. We retain the scale, coding it from
very liberal (1) to very conservative (7). We include a number of sociode-
mographic controls in our analysis. Marital status is a known covariate of
divorce attitudes (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth, Johnson, White, & Edward,
1985). We use three dichotomous variables to control for marital status: ever
divorced, never married, and married but never divorced. The married but
never divorced respondents, along with the small number of widows, serve
as the reference category. To measure education, we follow the design of a
previous study on education and divorce laws (Martin & Parashar, 2006),
using the same three-category measure for both respondent’s education and
parents’ education: no high-school diploma, high-school diploma (including
GED and some college), and bachelors degree or higher. Note that for paren-
tal education we used the highest degree obtained by either parent.

We also include controls for gender, race, age cohort, region, urbanicity,
and year of survey (Amato & Booth, 1991; Call & Heaton, 1997; Martin &
Parashar, 2006; South & Spitze, 1986; Thornton, 1985). Because we expect
the age effect to be nonlinear and to account for possible life course and/or
period effects in a parsimonious fashion, we use three categorical variables,
roughly corresponding to young adulthood (18 to 29), middle adulthood
(30 to 59), and senior adulthood (60 and up). Because the American South
is associated with both religious conservatism and conservative beliefs about
marriage, we include a dummy variable for Southern residence. Year is single
ordinal variable measuring the year of administration. For the measures
using dichotomous variables, the small number of missing cases falls into the
reference category. For all other variables, we performed multiple imputa-
tions using the ice and micombine commands in Stata.

In our multivariate analyses, we estimate ordered logistic regression
models with the dependent variable increasing with the respondent’s level of
restrictiveness in attitudes toward divorce laws. The coefficients in our esti-
mations reflect the change in the log odds that a predicted response on the
dependent variable will be higher (vs. lower) for each one-unit increase in
the particular independent variable, controlling for the effects of all other
independent variables in the model (Powers & Xie, 2000). We explored alter-
native modeling strategies, including multinomial logistic regression and
simple logistic regression (easier and stay the same = 0, harder = 1). The results did not differ substantively with these other analytic strategies. We opted to use ordered logistic regression both for parsimony and to make our results more directly comparable with previous studies on attitudes toward divorce laws (Martin & Parashar, 2006). All multivariate models are estimated using the *micombine* and *ologit* commands in Stata and include appropriate sample weights. Finally, although it is common to assume that religious beliefs and behaviors influence various family attitudes and outcomes, a number of studies suggest that the causal relationships between religion and family attitudes are complex and bidirectional (e.g., Thornton, 1985; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Therefore, we avoid drawing specific causal inferences and focus our discussion instead on associations between attitudes toward divorce laws and multiple dimensions of religion.

**Results**

Table 1 presents summary statistics of the variables included in the primary analysis. Frequencies reported in Table 1 show that nearly half of respondents indicated that it should be more difficult to obtain a divorce in the United States. The remaining respondents were split almost equally as to whether divorce laws should stay the same or be made more lenient. These rates are roughly equivalent to those noted in earlier studies (Amato et al., 2007; Cherlin, 1992; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) indicating that, on the aggregate, Americans’ opinions on divorce laws have remained stable for nearly two decades.

Our primary analysis is summarized in Table 2: ordinal logistic regression models predicting attitudes toward divorce laws. Model 1 provides initial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Compared with the religiously unaffiliated, respondents of all other religious affiliations are significantly more likely to favor stricter divorce laws. Changing the reference category in Model 1 to conservative Protestant shows support for Hypothesis 2 (not shown in table but described below). Conservative Protestants, compared to Catholics, mainline Protestants, and those with no religious affiliation, are significantly less likely to favor stricter divorce laws (no religion, odds ratio [OR]) = 0.51, \( p < .001 \); mainline Protestant, OR = 0.80, \( p < .05 \); Catholic, OR = 0.77, \( p < .01 \)).

Our initial evidence indicates that any religious affiliation in general and conservative Protestant affiliation specifically are important in predicting attitudes toward divorce laws.

Model 2 examines the associations between Bible beliefs and attitudes toward divorce laws. In support of Hypothesis 3a, both of the beliefs that the
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Analytic Sample, General Social Surveys 2000-2006 (N = 5,683)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorce should be easier to obtain</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce laws should remain the same</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce should be more difficult to obtain</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religion</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religious affiliation</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible is literal word of God</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible is inspired but not literal</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible is other</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible is just a book</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious attendance</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>0-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political conservatism</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married, never divorced</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever divorced</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever had children</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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<td>0, 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ages 60 and up</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 30-59</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 18-29</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
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Table 2. Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes That Divorce in the United States Should Be More Difficult to Obtain General Social Surveys 2000-2006 (N = 5,683)

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<td>(Bible is just a book)</td>
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<td>Bible is literal word of God</td>
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<td>0.699***</td>
<td>0.077</td>
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Table 2. (continued)

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(continued)
Table 2. (continued)

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*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Scoring for dependent variable: divorce in the United States should be easier to obtain = 0; stay the same = 1; harder to obtain = 2.
Bible is the word of God are associated with favoring stricter divorce laws compared with the secular belief that the Bible is a book of purely human origins (literal word of God, OR = 2.31, p < .001; inspired but not literal, OR = 2.01, p < .001). Even the fuzzy category of “the Bible is other” is significantly associated with support for stricter divorce laws (OR = 1.7, p < .05).

Hypothesis 3b is not supported. Although those with the more conservative belief that the Bible is the literal word of God have greater odds of supporting stronger divorce laws than those who hold the more moderate belief that the Bible is the inspired but not literal word of God (OR = 2.31 vs. 2.01), the difference between these two categories is not statistically significant. From this initial evidence, it appears that conservative Bible beliefs per se are less important than religious Bible beliefs in general for predicting attitudes toward divorce laws.

As Model 3 shows, religious attendance is a very strong predictor of more strict attitudes toward divorce laws. Each unit increase in the religious attendance is associated with 14% greater odds of favoring tougher divorce laws. To make the substantive significance of this finding more clear, we conducted ancillary analyses (not shown) where we found that even “less than monthly” attendance significantly (p < .05) predicts more than 30% greater odds of stricter attitudes toward divorce laws compared with no attendance, and respondents who report attending more than once a week have more than 3½ times greater odds of also reporting a more conservative stance toward divorce laws. So Model 3 offers strong support for Hypothesis 4. Moreover, comparing the model fit statistics among Models 1 to 3, religious attendance is relatively the strongest among the three religion measures we used.

Combining the three religion measures in a single model helps to untangle their respective effects. In general, the coefficients of all of the religion measures are reduced, but the overall model fit is significantly better than any of the single-measure models. The greatest change in estimated net effects occurs for the affiliation measures. Whether the comparison category is no religious affiliation or conservative Protestant (not shown), none of the affiliation categories are significantly different from one another after controlling for attendance and Bible beliefs. The respective estimates for Bible beliefs and attendance, although slightly weaker, still fit the same substantive patterns demonstrated in Models 2 and 3. Thus, the independent effects of religious affiliation observed in Model 1 appear to be explained by religious beliefs and participation whereas the effects of beliefs and participation are largely independent of one another. Association with a particular religious group, net of religious Bible beliefs and religious participation, does not appear to be a potent predictor of attitudes toward divorce laws.
In ancillary analyses (not shown), we tested cross-product interactions with affiliation, belief, and attendance (Affiliation × Belief and Affiliation × Attendance) to see if there were important subgroup differences in religious effects. Only a few of these interactions were statistically significant. Leaving aside interactions involving an “other” category (other Bible beliefs, other affiliation), the significant interactions were for conservative Protestant × Attendance (positive), Catholic × Bible Is Literal Word of God (negative), and Catholic × Bible Is Inspired But Not Literal (negative). We evaluated each “block” of interaction terms (i.e., Attendance × Bible Beliefs) separately, as well as evaluating them concurrently in a single model, and found substantively similar results. The positive interaction term for conservative Protestants and attendance is not unexpected; it indicates that at higher levels of attendance conservative Protestant affiliation is more likely to result in support for stricter divorce laws. The interpretation for the interaction terms for Catholics and Bible beliefs is less obvious. Catholic views on marriage and divorce come from a centuries-long tradition of Church teaching, based on the conviction that marriage is a Holy Sacrament and are not as bound up with debates about scriptural interpretation or the legacy of the fundamentalism–modernism debate. Nonetheless, it is unclear why believing the Bible is the literal or, inspired but not literal, word of God would reduce the odds of Catholics supporting stricter divorce laws.

Taken together our findings indicate that religious fervor in general (higher religious attendance or either belief that the Bible is the Word of God) is closely associated with preference for stricter divorce laws. We found less evidence that conservative religious subcultures per se are important predictors of divorce laws. Conservative Protestants do appear more likely to be supportive of stricter divorce laws than other groups, but this is mostly explained by their relatively higher rates of religious attendance. Also, the conservative religious belief that the Bible is the literal Word of God (closely associated with Christian Fundamentalism) proved no more potent a predictor of conservative attitudes toward divorce laws than the more moderate belief that the Bible is the inspired but not literal Word of God.

We also note that many of the control variables were statistically significant predictors of attitudes toward divorce laws in the full models. For example, each unit increase in political conservatism (from 1 = very liberal to 7 = very conservative) is associated with 19% greater odds of giving a more conservative response toward divorce laws. Compared with the reference category of “married, never divorced,” each category of marital status predicted lower odds of reporting stricter attitudes toward divorce. Adults aged 60 and up have about 140% greater odds of reporting the more conservative response
toward divorce laws, compared with adults aged 30 to 59. Respondents with no high school diploma or equivalent have 34% lower odds of supporting stricter divorce laws compared with high school graduates. Finally, compared with Whites, African Americans have about 60% lower odds (OR = .39, p < .001) of reporting more conservative attitudes toward divorce laws. These findings point to possible areas for future research.

Discussion and Conclusion

Surveys conducted during the past 20 years indicate that a plurality of Americans think divorce should be more difficult to obtain in the United States. Much of the actual effort to implement stricter divorce laws has been led by promarriage religious groups, but no previous studies have examined associations between Americans’ religiosity and their attitudes toward divorce laws. In this study, we offer three possible ways in which religiosity could be associated with opinions on divorce laws: (a) affiliation with religious organizations, (b) religious beliefs, and (c) religious participation. Using four recent editions of the General Social Surveys, we find strong evidence that Americans who believe the Bible is the Word of God or more frequently attend religious services are also more likely to favor stricter divorce laws than their less religious or nonreligious counterparts.

A particular strength of this study was our evaluation of different measures of religiosity both separately and concurrently to determine whether their effects are contingent or largely independent. We find that the effects of religious affiliation are explained by religious attendance and Bible beliefs. Those Americans who retain a religious affiliation but do not hold conservative religious beliefs about the Bible and/or participate regularly in religious services do not appear to differ from their religiously unaffiliated counterparts in their attitudes toward divorce laws. Religious participation and belief that the Bible is the Word of God (regardless of whether it is to be taken literally or not) exert largely independent effects on attitudes toward divorce laws.

We are particularly interested in how our findings inform the institutional linkages between religion and family, specifically religion and marriage. Several scholars have pointed out that religion and marriage share many benefits, interests, and vulnerabilities (Waite & Lehrer, 2003) and even that the two institutions’ trajectories seem tied together (Thornton, 1989). Wilcox has suggested that religion and family are fundamentally linked institutions, with most religious groups primarily dependent on families to sustain religious institutions through procreation and intergenerational transmission of the faith (Wilcox, 2007). Our findings provide more evidence for linkages
between religion and marriage; we demonstrate that general religiosity, more so than religious conservatism per se, is highly associated with more conservative attitudes toward divorce laws. This general (as opposed to conservative only) religious linkage implies a more durable and, perhaps, fundamental linkage between the two institutions. If this study and others like it are correct in identifying religion and marriage as linked institutions, then it is likely that the future of institutionalized marriage in the United States will remain closely tied to the future of institutionalized religion (Myers, 2004; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Future studies will help to further scout the boundaries of association between the institutions of religion and marriage.

One limitation of our study is that we were unable to establish a causal order between the various aspects of religion and attitudes toward divorce laws. Using cross-sectional data makes it difficult to deal with possible selection issues. In a changing policy environment, it is conceivable that respondents who (perhaps with their own religious motivation) prefer socially liberal policies abandon certain religious groups or identities as a reaction to the rhetoric of the group’s leaders. And those who are more tangentially identified with organized religion could simply disidentify as a statement of allegiances (Hout & Fischer, 2002). We note, however, that the most robust effects we observed were Bible beliefs and religious participation. Belief and participation effects would be less subject to the kind of selection process described above, unless Americans are completely jettisoning all religion because of political concerns.

As we noted earlier, our dependent variable has some inherent limitations. Respondents were constrained to taking a position of making divorce harder or easier to obtain. Even with this restriction, some respondents volunteered that divorce laws should remain the same. We can only speculate about how many other respondents might have also given a neutral response toward divorce laws, were they given an explicit option to do so. Despite this limitation, we believe our dependent variable remains a highly useful and valid measure of attitudes toward divorce laws. Our robust findings here, along with previous uses of this dependent variable in the family literature (e.g., Martin & Parashar, 2006), bolster our case. Finally, our study was limited in that our measures and sample primarily reflected Christian affiliations and beliefs. Future studies would do well to investigate the impact of other religious beliefs and affiliations on attitudes toward divorce laws.

We conclude with a brief comment on the possible policy implications of our findings. Although a plurality of Americans may indicate on surveys that divorce should be harder to obtain, these opinions have not translated widely into legislative changes. As recently as 2005, a conservative legislator in
Texas made headlines by promising to follow up a gay-marriage ban with an assault on no-fault divorce laws; since then, no laws have been passed by the Texas legislature to roll back no-fault divorce (Garrett & Slater, 2005). Other states have considered bills making divorce more difficult to obtain, but none have passed. Thus far, the only kind of major changes in divorce laws to have passed have come as part of covenant marriage laws. These laws allow couples to choose “covenant marriage” over conventional marriage; covenant marriages have more stringent requirements for divorce (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). Four states have adopted covenant marriage but proposals for it have been rejected in other states (Hawkins et al., 2002). Results have been mixed within the states where covenant marriage has been adopted; in general, fewer couples than expected have chosen to utilize covenant marriage (Nock et al., 2008). Religious faith plays an important role in the marital decisions of those couples who have chosen covenant marriage (Baker, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2008).

Even in the most conservative states, divorce law reform is an arena into which few politicians may be willing to venture. Our findings indicate there may be a solid base of highly religious persons who would support efforts at divorce law reform, but our findings also suggest there could be significant opposition from the nonreligious and less religious. In a previous study, Martin and Parashar (2006) presented evidence that at least among women, support for stronger divorce laws is increasingly becoming the opinion of the well educated, with the less educated trending in the opposite direction. In addition, in both our study and Martin and Parashar’s study, the data indicate that African Americans are much less likely to support stronger divorce laws, net of all religious, political, and sociodemographic covariates; this is evidence of another cultural rift over marriage. Blanket attempts at divorce law reform are likely to alienate several groups.

Dangerous political territory though it may be, there are also reasons to believe divorce law reform will continue to be debated in state legislatures. First, as long as divorce rates remain high, social conservatives, along with many highly religious Americans, are likely to suggest legal remedies for what they perceive as a great societal illness. Although their efficacy in suppressing divorce rates remains to be seen, the covenant marriage laws in place in a few states may embolden conservatives in other states to pursue similar “couple’s choice” strategies for toughening divorce laws. Second, marriage has been distilled to a powerful symbol and is becoming increasingly a marker for class, racial, and religious differences (Cherlin, 2004). If the associations with education, religion, and race noted above grow stronger or harden into subcultural distinctives, it is possible that divorce laws could
become an important front in the culture wars. Making divorce more difficult to obtain may serve to further sharpen marriage’s association with class and status, especially as disadvantaged groups may find the risk of marriage too high and forego the arrangement altogether (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). If this were the case, ironically, legal measures designed to protect and promote the value of marriage may actually undermine the institution’s scope.

Notes

1. There was very little variation in the responses to our dependent variable over the four most recent administrations of the GSS. We also checked cross-product interactions between the year of administration and our key independent variables; none of these were significant. Thus, we are confident that pooling the data gives an accurate picture of public opinion on divorce laws thus far in the new millennium.

2. We tested other operationalizations of age (linear and quadratic) and our results did not vary. We believe our operationalization gives the best blend of interpretability and parsimony.

3. We experimented with using three dummy variables for year (2000 left out as the reference); this yielded the same results. Because we are interested in year only as a statistical control, we use the single variable for parsimony.

4. Using a standard test to compare coefficients (Clogg, Petkova, & Haritou, 1995), all the religion coefficients in Model 4 except attendance differ at the .01 level from previous models.

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