

Sex and the Single Voter

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Want to attract single voters? Drop the underpants.

This should be my moment. I'm a single woman, and at last, the political world has discovered me. People in my demographic, it has been reported, stayed away from the 2000 presidential election in droves, and wow, could we have made a difference if we had shown up. The single women who did make it to the polls supported Al Gore overwhelmingly - about two-thirds voted for him, while a little less than one-third voted for George W. Bush, according to surveys.

In contrast, married women split their votes about evenly for Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore. But pollsters indicate that 68 percent of them showed up to vote, compared to just 52 percent of the women who were divorced, widowed, or had always been single.

In theory, I like where this is going. I have strong opinions about human health and well-being and about the place of America in the world, and I'm ready to voice them.

To appeal to me, though, the Democratic Party is offering me underwear. The panties sport slogans like "Kiss Bush Goodbye." I can pick them up at nightclubs or PantyWare parties.

Not to be outdone, CNN did a cute segment on "lipstick liberals." A reporter took to the streets to try out her guess about why single women do not vote more often. "Is it scary to think about politics?" she asked a young, successful, single woman.

No, it wasn't.

A pollster, Kellyanne Conway, offered her own explanation: "Women who have what we call the four magic M's - marriage, munchkins, mortgages and mutual funds - are much more likely to vote than their unmarried, non-stake-holding, non-ownership counterparts." Ms. Conway also had a tip for single women to help them get to the polls: "Pretend it's a hair appointment we would not miss."

I get the message. The political players are not out to engage me in a serious discussion of the issues. As a single woman, I'm too preoccupied with lipstick, hair and underwear. They need to find a way to get me to the polls only this one time. Then, by the next presidential election, perhaps I'll be married and have a mortgage.

I have a different view about 2000. I don't think singles were cowering in fear of politics, or too dazzled by the whirl of their social lives, to get to the polls. I think they were singled out of a system that ignored them. In one of the debates in the 2000 election, a woman from the audience tried to focus the candidates on her demographic. "How will your tax proposals affect me as a middle-class, 24-year-old single person with no dependents?" she asked. Neither candidate acknowledged that she was one of millions of single voters. Neither promised to fight for the votes of single people. Mr. Bush had the facts on his side; the questioner would keep more of her money under his plan rather than under Mr. Gore's. But Mr. Bush did not mention that. He did, though, describe the great prescription drug plan she would get under Medicare.

Singles are getting another message this year. No matter how many thousands of lives you may have saved with your lifelong, relentless advocacy for safer cars and workplaces, and purer food and water; no matter how doggedly you have pursued the causes of government and corporate accountability, and inspired countless others to do the same, you can still be dismissed as immature and irresponsible if you are not married.

Chris Matthews, host of the MSNBC program "Hardball," captured that sentiment when he said this to Ralph Nader about the current president: "He's raised two daughters; he's had a happy marriage. You've never been married. Isn't he more mature in his lifestyle than you are?" The unmarried Mr. Nader, Mr. Matthews said, lives "a life

that's about as responsible as what's on the movies tonight."

So what's a candidate to do? Here are four suggestions.

1. Hit the books. Learn about the real place of singles in contemporary American society. Singles account for more than 40 percent of the electorate and work force. Households consisting of two parents and their children are slightly outnumbered by households comprised of a single person living alone. And most singles do not live alone. About nine million households are single-parent homes. Singles are also homeowners. Last year, they accounted for 46.7 percent of house sales. Singles are not predominantly youthful; only a third are aged 18 to 29. Singlehood is no longer a way station on the road to marriage. Women on average now spend more years of their adult lives single than married, and men are not far behind.

2. Learn the actual voting patterns. Despite the hype, it was not single women who had the lowest rate of voting in 2000, but single men. In their candidate preferences, the men stood out in their support of Ralph Nader (7 percent, compared to 4 percent for single women, and 2 percent for married men and women).

3. Master the issues of concern to singles. You will find, for example, that singles would like to make a decent living, have affordable health care and enjoy retirement. Their values are not antifamily - they are human values. The language of singles is the language of inclusiveness. Here is an example: "If you are willing to work hard and play by the rules, you are part of our family, and we're proud to be with you." It is from Bill Clinton's 1996 speech accepting the Democratic nomination for president.

4. Oh, and about those panties? Kiss them goodbye.

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Singles shall overcome

Favoritism for those who choose to marry grows more unfair, as marriage grows less essential

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In a country that has lived through decades of struggles over civil rights and has an organization for almost any cause, there remains a group of 86 million Americans who are practically invisible. They are in cities and towns coast to coast, adults of all sizes, shapes and ages. Yet except as nubile mate-seekers in TV shows like "Sex and the City" or "The Bachelor," they are hardly ever noticed in the news, in popular culture or in policy debates. They are people who are single.

"Nightline" keeps these Americans out of sight in its broadcast about seriously wounded soldiers whose lives have changed forever: "That means that the lives of their spouses are changed forever too." The New Yorker is not thinking about them when it calls its column of restaurant reviews "Tables for Two." A political ad proclaiming how "troubling" it is that John Kerry has opposed tax relief for married couples, assumes no equal right for citizens who are divorced, widowed or have always been single.

When singles' friends marry and then socialize mostly with other couples, the slight is mindlessly condoned. An MSNBC web feature called The Knot, for example, offers this pearl: "Most married couples gravitate toward other married couples. It makes for a nice, even number."

The pressure to be paired is so relentless that single people sometimes will hide themselves, as when they bring a boor to a holiday party so as not to appear (horror!) single. Or they just stay home.

This shunning of singles, and its flip side - the fetishizing of couplehood - seems to be getting worse. Consider:

Why do so many television series end with a wedding? That's not how "MASH" ended.

Why did all four stars of "Sex and the City" end up coupled? Mary Tyler Moore didn't.

Cathy has graced the comic pages as a singleton for nearly a quarter of a century. Why is she now biting the marital dust?

In reality shows of decades past, such as "Queen for a Day," the lucky contestant might win a washing machine. Now she gets a bachelor.

All of this is happening at a time when married life takes up a smaller portion of our adult lives than ever. The age at which people first marry (if they marry) has grown steadily since the late 1950s, and the divorce rate is far higher now than it was then. Single-person households are more numerous than households of mom, dad and the kids. People who are not married represent more than 40 percent of the adult population.

Some will object out that of the 86 million official single people, 11 million are co-habiting, which is really the same as being married. But then, how many people listed as officially married are living as if they were, or wish they were, single? We don't know, but it's got to be a sizeable number.

One certainty is that marriage has less significance in our lives than it did decades ago. Sex outside of marriage is commonplace. Many women who want to live independently and even have children outside of marriage can pick up the check at work and the sperm at the bank.

That, I think, is a big part of the reason why matromania is at a fever pitch. For many who, years ago, chose the expected life path of marrying very young, having children and staying married, the new normal is unfamiliar and unnerving. Each new television show and movie plot that fetishizes marriage is a quiet but desperate plea for a return to a time that, at least in our minds, was safer and more certain.

To keep people grasping at the diamond ring at a time when marriage is increasingly inessential requires the two-pronged approach of aggrandizing marriage and demeaning singlehood. Stereotypes of singles suggest that single people are miserable, lonely, immature, irresponsible, promiscuous and selfish.

The fact that most singles are nothing of the sort rarely troubles those who would perpetuate the stereotypes. Here, for example is an observation by psychologist E. Mavis Hetherington, who devoted her career to the study of people who divorce. Women who stayed single after their marriages ended, she noted, "accompanied one another to important medical appointments, did volunteer work for charity organizations, devoted time to their children and parents."

Was Hetherington then forced to conclude that these single women were selfless? On the contrary. "Helping others gave women a way to feel good about themselves."

If singles can be kept on the defensive about their single status, then discrimination against them can proceed unchallenged. Workplace discrimination, for example, is

rampant. The assumption that singles don't have a life and therefore can cover for couples is just the beginning.

Because married workers can add their spouse to some benefit plans at discounted rates, their total compensation package can be substantially greater than that of single colleagues in the same job. Married men are often paid more than single men, even when benefits are not included and credentials are comparable.

There is even legalized discrimination at the time of death. Social Security benefits earned by a married worker can be paid to a spouse; the same benefits earned by a single worker go back into the system.

Singles underwrite the lives of couples in other ways too. When couples enjoy discounted rates for club memberships, travel packages and car insurance, they are subsidized by singles who pay full price.

Securing equality for singles will require changes at many levels. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission and Equal Opportunity Commission, for example, are charged with safeguarding against discrimination based on race, religion, sex, age, national origin or disability. To get marital status into the mix will take collective action, as is being spearheaded by groups such as the American Association for Single People. In the workplace, benefits could be distributed cafeteria style, such that all employees have access to the same dollar value and can choose the benefits that are most relevant to their lives.

In everyday life, singles can stand up for themselves by living their lives fully and openly, showing up at the polls so that government will take them seriously, and resisting any implication that all they care about is finding a mate.

My position is not anti-family or anti-child. I am against giving tax breaks or other rewards to two fully-grown, competent, able-bodied adults just because they are coupled. At the same time, I am happy to subsidize those who provide care to people who really cannot care for themselves. I include in the latter category not just children but the disabled, seriously ill and elderly who need help.

Those who believe the stereotypes fear that the growing number of singles puts society at risk for rampant individualism. I think it holds the promise for quite the opposite.

Whereas married people invest most of their emotional and interpersonal capital in just one other adult (and hope that the person does not turn out to be Enron), single people are more likely to maintain a diversified relationship portfolio. To many single people, friends are not "just" friends; relatives, neighbors and colleagues have important places in their lives. If a singles rights organization wrote the Family and Medical Leave Act, people other than just spouses, children and parents would be deemed worthy of care.

Full equality for singles is an idea that meets with with considerable resistance. It asks that we set aside our faith that there is just one road to a meaningful life: Find your soulmate and you will be fulfilled and complete and live happily ever after.

This is a difficult myth to resist, posing as it does as the ultimate embodiment of the American dream. People who choose to stay single - especially those living full and happy lives - are a threat to the myth. They need to be concealed and caricatured and denigrated so our fantasy can live on.

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