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POLYGYNY

Polygyny in American Politics

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Abstract. Biographical data were collected on members of the U.S. executive, legislative, and judicial branches, in George Washington's first through Ronald Reagan's last administration, from *Who Was Who in America*, the *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress*, *Vice Presidents and Cabinet Members*, and *Burke's Presidential Families of the United States of America*. They suggest that serial polygyny in this sample has declined over the last two hundred years. Census data on average American men suggest that the number of wives per man has stayed the same or increased at the same time. These trends imply that mating equality may have increased over the last two centuries of American history. What sketchy evidence exists on extramarital opportunities tentatively suggests a similar trend.

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THE VAST MAJORITY of the world's societies allow, or have allowed, harem polygyny (e.g., Murdock and Wilson, 1973; Betzig, 1986; White, 1988). In most cultures the most powerful men collect, or have collected, the most women. Among others, Iranian Yomut (Irons, 1979), Venezuelan Yanomamö (Chagnon, Flinn, and Melancon, 1979), Utah Mormon (Faux and Miller, 1984; Mealey, 1985); Paraguayan Ache (Kaplan and Hill, 1985), Micronesian Ifaluk (Turke and Betzig, 1985), rural Trinidadian (Flinn, 1986), sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Portuguese (Boone, 1986), eighteenth-century English (Hughes, 1986), Kenyan Kipsigis (Borgerhoff Mulder, 1987), Aka Pygmy (Hewlett, 1988), nineteenth-century Swedish (Low, 1990), Kenyan Mukogodo (Cronk, 1991), Efe Pygmy (Bailey, 1991), eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Norwegian (Røskft, Wara, and Viken, 1992), and twentieth-century Canadian (Perusse, 1993) men with extra status or resources have enjoyed extra marriages or matings (reviewed in Betzig, 1988). Dominant men have had access to harems of hundreds or even thousands of women (Betzig, 1986).

For powerful men, monogamy is clearly the exception. But for millennia, powerful men in the West have confined themselves to just one wife at once. That is, they have had access to one "legitimate," heir-bearing wife at a time (e.g., Goody, 1983). Monogamous marriage, though, may have little to do with monogamous mating. In some cases, in fact, it probably coexists with high variance in male reproductive success—a measure of polygyny (see Bateman, 1948; Wade, 1979; and Daly and Wilson, 1983:153). For example, emperors and other wealthy Romans, who married just one legitimate wife, were notoriously adulterous (e.g., Carcopino, 1940; Syme, 1960; Veyne, 1987); they kept as many as three

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hundred socially sanctioned “concubines” at once (Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Commodus Antoninus*, v. 4); and they had potentially reproductive intercourse with tens or even hundreds of household slaves (Betzig, 1992c). An association between monogamous *marriage* and highly polygynous *mating* has been common across civilizations (Betzig, 1992a,b,d).

There are at least two ways in which men who marry monogamously might mate polygynously. One is by having children by more than one wife in sequence, that is, by serial polygyny. The other is by having children by women other than their wives, that is, by harem polygyny.

So far, it is unclear how much monogamous mating and marriage have converged in the West, including the United States. More and more attention is being paid to the problem (e.g., Rogers, 1990; Turke, 1990). From a Darwinian perspective, it is a critical one. If men who have what it takes to support more than one mate do not, then why not? One possibility is that people have failed to respond adaptively to environmental change (see Barkow, 1989; MacDonald, 1990). The other possibility is that people are responding to change adaptively.

Monogamy has been argued to be an adaptive response to the increased importance of competition between coalitions (Alexander, 1975, 1979, 1987) and to the division of labor that culminated in industrialization (Betzig, 1982, 1986, 1991). To Alexander, “monogamy is a way of leveling the reproductive opportunities of men, thereby reducing their competitiveness and increasing their likelihood of cooperativeness” in the face of “extrinsic threats” (Alexander 1975:71-72). To Betzig, subordinates should be in a position to bargain with dominants—for equal rights, equal resources, and equal access to mates—to the extent that their services are essential and irreplaceable. A division of labor should make them more of both (see Betzig, 1986:103-6).

But any attempt to explain the trend toward monogamy in modern societies must first document that trend. This paper starts at the tip of the iceberg. It shows how serial polygyny among politicians in the United States has declined over the past two hundred years.

Methods

We focused on U.S. politicians for three reasons. First, data on Americans, as opposed to members of any other society, are most abundant in U.S. libraries. Second, more biographical, including genealogical, data appear to exist on politicians than on any other group in the U.S. Third, across cultures, heads of political hierarchies consistently have had more mates than anybody else (Betzig, 1986). We focused on serial marriage because data on other behaviors that should contribute to polygyny, including data on extra pair matings and on numbers of children produced by legitimate and illegitimate mates,

Data on serial marriages were collected on men in all three branches of U.S. government—the executive, judicial, and legislative—from George Washington’s first through Ronald Reagan’s last administration

are relatively unavailable and unreliable. What little information exists on extramarital opportunities is summed up in the discussion section.

In this study, the most complete data on U.S. politicians come from *Burke’s Presidential Families of the United States of America* (1981). Second best are data from three collections of short biographies, *Who Was Who in America* (1967), the *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress* (1978), and *Vice Presidents and Cabinet Members* (1979). Data were collected on men in all three branches of U.S. government—the executive, judicial, and legislative—from George Washington’s first through Ronald Reagan’s last administration. Members of the executive branch included presidents, vice presidents, and all major cabinet secretaries; members of the judicial branch included all Supreme Court justices; and members of the legislative branch included all speakers of the House and Senate presidents pro tem.

Data on all presidents and vice presidents were collected from both *Who Was Who* and from *Burke’s*; data on all cabinet secretaries from the Washington through the Nixon administrations were collected from *Who Was Who*, the *Biographical Dictionary of the United States*, and *Vice Presidents and Cabinet Members*. Since each of the last three sources turned out to be about equally complete (see Table 1), data on cabinet members in the Carter, Ford, and Reagan administrations, as well as on all members of the legislative and judicial branches, were collected from *Who Was Who* alone. For the cabinet members on whom three sources were consulted, the source listing the largest number of wives was used in each individual case. The assumption underlying that decision, which we think is a strong one, is that biographers are more prone to omit a marriage than to invent one. For presidents and vice presidents, *Burke’s*, always the most complete source, was always used.

These data have been compared to estimates of the number of marriages made by average American men at similar periods in time. Primary sources include the United States Bureau of the Census’ *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1975) and *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (1987); secondary sources include Jacobson’s *American Marriage and Divorce* (1959) and Cherlin’s *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (1981).

Table 1. Three Sources on Number of Wives Assembled by Major Cabinet Secretaries in U.S. History

Years of Inauguration	WWW	BDUS	VPCM
1789-1799	13/11	13/11	11/10
1800-1809	14/11	14/11	13/10
1810-1819	12/10	12/10	12/10
1820-1829	14/09	14/09	11/07
1830-1839	14/12	14/12	12/11
1840-1849	40/32	37/30	38/30
1850-1859	24/20	23/20	23/19
1860-1869	40/29	43/32	41/30
1870-1879	17/16	19/18	19/18
1880-1889	40/30	49/33	42/30
1890-1899	27/21	32/25	32/26
1900-1909	19/20	19/20	18/19
1910-1919	21/18	21/18	19/17
1920-1929	34/29	39/31	34/29
1930-1939	19/14	21/15	20/15
1940-1949	32/28	31/28	31/28
1950-1959	26/22	23/22	23/21
1960-1969	41/39	41/39	38/37
1970-1979	16/16	16/15	17/16

Note: Sources include *Who Was Who in America (WWW)*, *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress (BDUS)*, and *Vice Presidents and Cabinet Members (VPCM)*. Each column lists number of wives per number of men, for each decade of inauguration.

Results

As Table 2 makes clear, American politicians have, overall, had fewer wives over time. The most dramatic decline has been among the 94 male supreme court justices. Justices inaugurated under the first 20 presidents, Washington through Garfield, from 1789 through 1881, had 1.5 wives on average; those inaugurated under the last 20 presidents, Arthur through Reagan, from 1882 through 1988, averaged just 1.11 wives. Second most dramatic has been the decline in the legislature, where house speakers and senate presidents pro tem had 1.34 wives on average in the first cohort, and 1.09 wives on average in the second.

Least dramatic has been the decline among members of the executive branch, where a total of 523 presidents, vice presidents, and cabinet secretaries had 1.24 wives on average in the first cohort, and 1.16 wives on average in the second. For all 696 men in the legislative, judicial, and executive samples, the number of wives per man has declined from 1.29 to 1.16. All are significant changes. On average, men in all these samples had roughly 1.2 wives (Table 3).

How do these declines compare to trends among average American men? Figure 1 plots Jacobson's (1959) estimates of the number of men married in each year from 1900 through 1950 in the United States (from

Table 2. Mean Number of Wives of U.S. Politicians, 1789-1988

	n	\bar{X}	S.D.
All 696 Men			
Washington – Garfield	294	1.289	.630
Arthur – Reagan	402	1.157	.461
		$t = 3.202, d.f. = 694, p = .0007$	
Executive			
Washington – Garfield	202	1.243	.627
Arthur – Reagan	321	1.162	.439
		$t = 1.727, d.f. = 521, p = .0424$	
Legislative			
Washington – Garfield	67	1.343	.617
Arthur – Reagan	42	1.095	.431
		$t = 2.279, d.f. = 107, p = .0123$	
Judicial			
Washington – Garfield	42	1.500	.634
Arthur – Reagan	52	1.115	.615
		$t = 2.972, d.f. = 92, p = .0019$	

Note: Men in Washington – Garfield cohort were inaugurated 1789-1881; men in Arthur – Reagan cohort were inaugurated 1882-1988. All p values are for one-tailed tests.

Jacobson's Table 28, p. 68). This area plot is subdivided into three regions: Grooms single, widowed, and divorced at the time these marriages were made (from Jacobson's Table 30, p. 71). The high point on this plot coincides with the marriage boom after World War II; before and after that spike, the marriage rate gradually increased. Over this 50 year stretch, the average number of marriages rose from around 60 per 1000 men in 1900, to close to 100 per 1000 men in 1950.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to extend that slope in either direction with the data at hand. However, Cherlin (1981) notes that since the divorce rate has been rising at the same time that mortality rates have been falling, the total rate of marital *dissolution* (the number of marriages ending in either divorce or death in a given year per 1,000 existing marriages) hardly changed over the last hundred years. From 1860 to 1864 the combined rate was 33.2 dissolutions per 1,000 marriages; in 1970 the combined rate was 34.5. By 1978, however, a dramatic increase in divorce pushed the combined rate to 40.5 (Cherlin, 1981:25). In other words, marital dissolution

Table 3. Mean Number of Wives per Man in Each Branch of Government

	\bar{X}	Variance	n
All	1.213	.294	696
Executive	1.193	.271	523
Legislative	1.248	.318	109
Judicial	1.287	.422	94

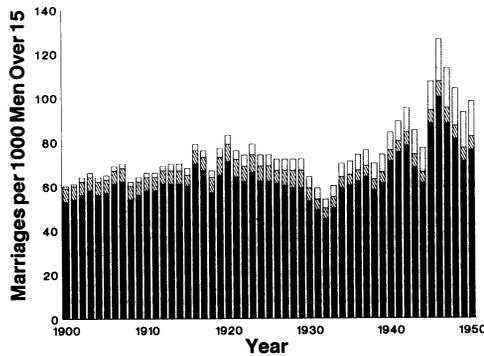


Figure 1. U.S. Marriages per 1000 men over 15, 1900-1950

Note: Dark area indicates marriages made by single men; striped area indicates marriages made by widowers; spotted area indicates marriages made by divorcees. Data from Jacobson (1959).

among average American men increased slightly between 1860 and 1970.

Whether or not this has corresponded to a higher marriage and remarriage rate is not clear. From 1970 through 1984, however, the remarriage rate among men in the United States increased (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987:83). In 1970, 75.9% of marrying men had never married before; and 24.1% were remarrying. By 1984, 65.1% of marrying men had always been single; and the proportion remarrying had risen to 34.9%. At the same time, the overall marriage rate per 1,000 population in the United States remained roughly the same (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987:83 and 1975:64).

To sum up, these figures suggest that while the number of wives per average American man has gone up, the number of wives among American public officials has gone down. Figure 2 supports this conclusion by showing a significant decline in number of wives among all 696 politicians in the sample.

Discussion

American politicians may have been able to collect more wives than average men for three reasons. One is that powerful men may have been divorced or widowed more often. Assuming that higher status correlates with lower mortality (e.g., Vinovskis, 1972; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975), it seems unlikely that these politicians were

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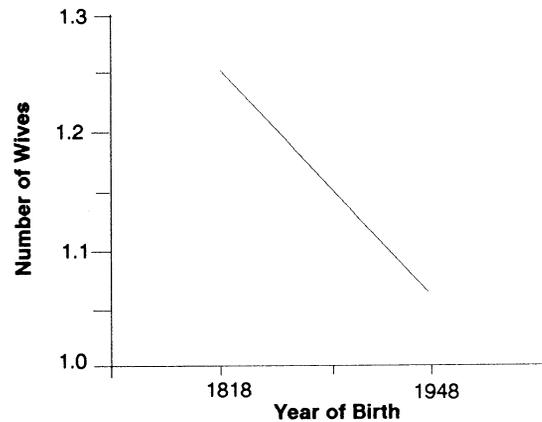


Figure 2. Wives per Man Regressed on Year of Birth of Each Man for All 696 U.S. Politicians

Note: $Y = -.001x + 3.555, R^2 = .017, p = .0006.$

more likely to remarry because their wives were more likely to die. Neither, at least until very recently, does divorce seem to have been more frequent among these powerful men. None of the biographical sources used here commonly lists whether marital dissolution was brought on by death or divorce. However, in the biographies of 19 men which do record such causes, 17 marriages were dissolved because of the wife's death, and only three were dissolved because of divorce. Second, powerful men may have been less likely never to marry. This seems probable. Of the 696 men in this sample, only 19 went through life without a wife, a rate of just 2.73% (see Table 4). Finally, powerful men may have had the option to remarry more often, following marital dissolutions which occurred equally often as, or even less often than, marital dissolutions among average men. This too is a possibility.

The important question remains unanswered: How much does this apparent decline in serial polygyny correspond to a decline in male reproductive variance? In order to answer that question, reliable data are required on the number of legitimate and illegitimate children produced by privileged and average American men.

Both are hard to find. Information on the number of legitimate children produced by U.S. politicians in each of the biographical collections used here is incomplete.

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Number of Wives

Wives	n	%
0	19	2.73
1	532	76.44
2	126	18.10
3	16	2.30
4	3	0.43

Often, no data whatsoever are provided about children; sometimes, the number of children is preceded by a qualifier like “at least”; and even at best, the reproductive history provided consists of no more than a list of children’s names, with no data on years of birth, or death, or sex. A fair comparison of the number of legitimate children produced by more- and less-powerful men will have to come from a more reliable source (both Johnson, 1989 and Chanley and Chanley, 1989 are trying to find such sources).

The greatest potential for male reproductive variance in a society where marriage is monogamous is through polygynous mating. The Roman example already cited makes this clear; it could be multiplied many times (e.g., Betzig, 1992a,c,d). It is hard to tell, though, what extramarital options have been open to powerful men at any period in American history. This is partly because the public has been consistently concerned with mating equality. As Miller notes: “Personal behavior which in other parts of the world would be considered inconsequential, or, at least, a public official’s private business, has been given enormous importance in our country” (1973:6). This might be in part because equality of mating opportunity has been a fundamental component of equality in other respects. Traditionally, human polygyny has borne a close relationship to dominance, or despotism, and monogamy has borne a close relationship to an absence of dominance, or egalitarianism (Betzig, 1986).

Some evidence does suggest, though, that opportunities for extramarital matings among high-status men have declined over the last two hundred years. Comparative data from Western Europe over the last several centuries suggest that well-to-do men have been the most likely fathers of illegitimate children (see Wrightson, 1980:187), though others suggest that these fathers have come from a broad occupational spectrum (see, e.g., Laslett, 1980:56, and other studies in Laslett, Osterveen, and Smith, 1980). Studies of illegitimacy in early American society suggest that in some cases servants, and in some cases masters, were the fathers (Wells, 1980:357).

In the antebellum south, well-to-do slave owners sometimes fathered children by slaves. Charles Lyell, in his *Travels in the United States*, noticed that “the anxiety of parents for their sons, and a constant fear of their licentious intercourse with slaves is painfully great”; and a sister of President Madison is supposed to have said, “We southern ladies are complimented with the name of wives, but we are only the mistresses of seraglios” (in Calhoun, 1918:308). In his early history of the American family, Calhoun concluded that “no system of exploitation ever respects the virtue of women of the subject class,” and that “often the greater number of the master’s children were born of the wives and daughters of his slaves” (pp. 290-95).

Table 5. Numbers of Slaves Reportedly Owned by Pre-Abolition U.S. Presidents

President	Number of Slaves	Source
George Washington (1)	216	Mazyck 1932:100
John Adams (2)	s	Peabody 1973:341-2
Thomas Jefferson (3)	More than 100	Brodie 1974:23
James Madison (4)	At least 118	Ketcham 1971:12
James Monroe (5)	?	Cresson 1946:474-5
John Quincy Adams (6)	s	Lipsky 1950
Andrew Jackson (7)	About 100	James 1938:349
Martin Van Buren (8)	1 + s	Niven 1983:381-5
Wm Henry Harrison (9)	s	Cleaves 1939-250
John Tyler (10)	60 odd	Seager 1963:12
James K. Polk (11)	?	McCoy 1960:155
Zachary Taylor (12)	More than 100	Hamilton 1951:18
Millard Fillmore (13)	0	Snyder 1975:324
Franklin Pierce (14)	s	Nichols 1958:64-5
James Buchanan (15)	s	Smith 1975:13-4
Abraham Lincoln (16)	0	Long 1930

Note: An “s” indicates employment of servants in the absence of slaves.

* Of Monroe, Cresson writes that he advertised in 1825 “that he would offer at public sale on the first Monday of June his 3500-acre Albermarle establishment in Virginia, as well as another tract of land of 700 acres near Milton.... In August he wrote McLean, ‘My land and slaves have all been sold in Albermarle, as has been the tract of 20,000 acres in Clay county, Kentucky, in satisfaction of debts contracted in the public service.’” Of Polk, McCoy says simply, “It is a fact that Polk was a slaveholder and a plantation owner in Mississippi and that his sympathies were with the South, yet he was first and foremost a Union man.”

More recent authorities on American slavery have agreed that slaves were sometimes the objects of sexual and reproductive exploitation, but there is no consensus as to how often (e.g., Stamp, 1967; Blassingame, 1973; Fogel and Engerman, 1974; Genovese, 1974; Gutman, 1976; White, 1985). As Fogel and Engerman (1974) argue in *Time on the Cross*, the real question is whether such cases were common events only rarely reported, or rare events that were commonly reported. They cite census estimates from the rural south suggesting that the proportion of mulattoes in the slave population was 10.4% in 1860 and 7.7% in 1850. On that basis, they suggest, “The fact that during the twenty-three decades of contact between slaves and whites which elapsed between 1620 and 1850, only 7.7 percent of the slaves were mulattoes suggests that on average only a very small percentage of the slaves born in any given year were fathered by white men” (1974:132). At the same time, Stamp points out that census counts of mulattoes are likely underestimates, because census takers classified individuals solely by appearance, so that both whites and blacks of mixed ancestry would be excluded from that

category (1967:350-51). Few doubt that miscegenation, when it occurred, most commonly involved poor black women and well-to-do white men (e.g., White, 1985: Chapter 1).

Only one top executive in American government, Vice President Richard Johnson, ever owned up to fathering a bastard by a servant or slave. At the time of his 1836 election under Martin Van Buren, Johnson openly supported his two mulatto children by Julia Chinn, a black slave (e.g., Ross 1988:68). And only one chief executive, Thomas Jefferson, has ever been seriously accused of having produced illegitimate children by a slave—by Sally Hemmings, who was Jefferson's dead wife's half sister by a common father (e.g., Brodie, 1974; Cunningham, 1987). Biographies of the presidents are complete enough to suggest that—typical of well-to-do, landed men of their day—the first sixteen chief executives held, on average, at least 50 slaves. At least nine presidents from Washington through Lincoln held slaves themselves; and at least another five kept domestic servants (Table 5).

Obviously, this represents just one possible route to illegitimacy among the American political elite. The smattering of evidence that does exist on the illegitimates of U.S. presidents involves neither their servants nor their slaves. Only one president has ever admitted having fathered a bastard: Grover Cleveland got the widowed Maria Halpin with child in Buffalo early in his political career. And only one other president is thought likely to have fathered an illegitimate: Nan Britton accused Warren Harding, in writing, of having engendered her daughter (e.g., Miller, 1973; Ross, 1988).

Speculations abound about adulterous liaisons on the part of presidents and other important persons in American politics; the vast majority that have been taken at all seriously, however, involve women who would have been nearly their lovers' peers in status, and so less likely to bear them illegitimates (e.g., Hartley, 1975). Because their office is public, presidents may actually have been less inclined than other men to pursue these kinds of opportunities. This is suggested, in fact, by what we've found here: serial polygyny has been more common among holders of judiciary offices, all of whom are appointed, and less common among holders of legislative and executive offices, many of whom are elected (Table 3). It is possible, of course, that polygyny in the United States has been most common among the men least

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accountable to the public. Though heads of hierarchies have been the most polygynous across premodern societies, they may not be in modern democracies.

It is worth pointing out that public concern with the affairs of private men seems to have grown. It is hard to imagine that Richard Johnson could be elected vice president today as he was in 1836; and it is hard to imagine that the controversy over Grover Cleveland's admission would not keep him out of the presidency, which he won for the first time in 1884 (see Miller, 1973; Ross, 1988). In 1988, Gary Hart's leading candidacy for the presidency was squelched by rumors that he'd spent a weekend with a model; though more recently, Bill Clinton's candidacy outlasted allegations of a long-term affair.

At this point, then, the biographical data available suggest that one aspect of polygyny, that is, serial polygyny, has declined among powerful men in United States history. What sketchy evidence exists on opportunities to mate outside of marriage very tentatively suggests a similar trend. More and better data are needed to make the case that there has in fact been a decline in polygyny in American society, and then to determine whether or not that decline has been an adaptive strategy.

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