

The New York Times

For Unwed Moms, 25 is the New 15

IN 1997, two prominent conservative writers, David Frum and Andrew Sullivan, debated same-sex marriage for the online magazine Slate.

Frum defended what was then the consensus conservative (and consensus national) position. Redefining marriage to include same-sex couples, he argued, would explicitly sever the institution's connection to the two interrelated realities, gender difference and procreation, that it had evolved to address. In so doing, it would replace a traditional view of matrimony with a broader, thinner, more adult-centric view, which would ultimately be less likely to bind parents to children, husbands to wives.

"Proponents of gay marriage can only get what they want," Frum wrote, "by weakening Americans' attachment to the traditional family even more than it has already been weakened," and speeding the "process of social dissolution" that the 1960s and 1970s began.

Sullivan countered that the "process" Frum feared was simply an established fact. Heterosexuals had already severed marriage from procreation and permanence, and so there was no more reason to deny same-sex couples marriage licenses than to deny them to the infertile and elderly. Indeed, far from being radical, gay marriage was more likely to be stabilizing, "sending a message about matrimonial responsibility and mutual caring" to gays and straights alike.

Half a generation later, Sullivan's view has carried the day almost completely. The conservative argument still has serious exponents, but it's now chuckled at in courtrooms, dismissed by intellectuals, mocked in the media and (in a sudden, recent rush) abandoned by politicians. Indeed, it has been abandoned by Frum himself, who is now energetically urging Republicans to embrace the redefinition of marriage he once warned against.

Yet for an argument that has persuaded so few, the conservative view has actually had decent predictive power. As the cause of gay marriage has pressed forward, the social link between marriage and childbearing has indeed weakened faster than before. As the public's shift on the issue has accelerated, so has marriage's overall decline.

Since Frum warned that gay marriage could advance only at traditional wedlock's expense, the marriage rate has been falling faster, the out-of-wedlock birthrate has been rising faster, and the substitution of cohabitation for marriage has markedly increased. Underlying these trends is a steady shift in values: Americans are less likely to see children as important to marriage and less likely to see marriage as important to childbearing (the generation gap on gay marriage shows up on unwed parenting as well) than even in the very recent past.

Correlations do not, of course, establish causation. The economy is obviously playing a leading role in the retreat from marriage — the shocks of recession, the stagnation of wages, the bleak prospects of blue-collar men. Culturally, what matters most is the emergence of what the National Marriage Project calls a "capstone" understanding of marriage, which treats wedlock less as a foundation for adulthood and more as a celebration of adult achievement — and which seems to work out far better for our disciplined upper class than for society as a whole.

But there is also a certain willed naïveté to the idea that the advance of gay marriage is unrelated to any other marital trend. For 10 years, America's only major public debate about marriage and family has featured one side — judges and journalists, celebrities and now finally politicians — pressing the case that modern marriage has nothing to do with the way human beings reproduce themselves, that the procreative understanding of the institution was founded entirely on prejudice, and that the shift away from a male-female marital ideal is analogous to the end of segregation.

Now that this argument seems on its way to victory, is it really plausible that it has changed how Americans view gay relationships while leaving all other ideas about matrimony untouched?

You can tell this naïveté is willed because it's selective. There are plenty of interesting arguments, often from gay writers, about how the march to gay marriage might be influencing heterosexual norms — from Alex Ross's recent musings in *The New Yorker* on the sudden "queer vibe" in straight pop culture to Dan Savage's famous argument that

straights might do well to imitate the “monogamish” norms of some gay male couples. It’s only the claim that this influence might not always be positive that is dismissed as bigotry and unreason.

A more honest, less triumphalist case for gay marriage would be willing to concede that, yes, there might be some social costs to redefining marriage. It would simply argue that those costs are too diffuse and hard to quantify to outweigh the immediate benefits of recognizing gay couples’ love and commitment.

Such honesty would make social liberals more magnanimous in what looks increasingly like victory, and less likely to hound and harass religious institutions that still want to elevate and defend the older marital ideal.

But whether people think they’re on the side of God or of History, magnanimity has rarely been a feature of the culture war.