

Family Structure and Voting

Janice Compton
Department of Economics
University of Manitoba

Abstract:

The impact of divorce on children has been widely studied at the micro level. Most studies demonstrate negative outcomes for children of divorced parents compared to children whose parents are married (Dooley et al (1997), Kerr and Beaujot (2001), Sigle-Ruston et al, (2005)). Less studied is the impact of divorce on children at the macro level. Between 1950 and 2005, the percentage of the U.S. adult population currently divorced or separated increased from 4.3% to 13.5%. Over the same period, the proportion of children living with two parents fell from 86.6% to 64.3%. In this paper I argue that such a large shift in the demographic makeup of communities affects all children, regardless of their particular situation. The mechanism I consider is the impact of family structure on voting outcomes, due to the decreased weight placed on children when they reside with one voter rather than with two. This is especially important for local votes – such as some school board issues – where the non-resident parent may not reside in the jurisdiction. I use a simple OLG model to illustrate the polarization that arises when divorce rates are correlated with income and determine the extent to which divorce may impact the level of child related public services. Using county level U.S. data, regression analyses indicate that controlling for income and poverty, education spending is negatively correlated with the proportion of female-headed households. This result is less in counties that are more homogenous, where we might expect higher rates of external altruism towards the community children.