

The Coming Divorce Decline

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Abstract (150 words)

This paper analyzes the odds of divorce from 2008 to 2016 (soon 2017), using multivariate models of marital events data from the American Community Survey. I find that the falling observed divorce rates over the last decade are apparent in the fully adjusted model as well. Further, age specific divorce rates show that the trend in the last decade has been driven by younger women (despite higher divorce rates among older women than in the past). Finally, I analyze the characteristics of newly-married couples over the last decade, and identify trends that portend further declines in divorce rates. Marriage is become more selective, and more stable, even as attitudes toward divorce are becoming more permissive, and cohabitation has grown less stable. The U.S. is progressing toward a system in which marriage is rarer, and more stable, than it was in the past, representing an increasingly central component of the structure of social inequality.

Data and code for this paper are available, under Creative Commons CC0 license, here:
<https://osf.io/yb4hr/>.

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Extended abstract

The odds of divorce in the first decade or two of marriage fell for U.S. cohorts married from 1980 to 2010 (Rotz 2016), and the refined divorce rate – divorces per 1,000 married women – fell as well (Hemez 2017), although problems of data comparability make that assessment less definitive. However, Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) make a convincing case that the decline in divorce in the three decades after 1980 reflected the aging of the most divorce-prone cohort, the Baby Boomers. As the Baby Boomers aged through adulthood, they sparked the gray divorce boom (Brown and Lin 2012), but even though their divorce rates were higher than those of previous generations, their numbers were insufficient to produce continuously increasing divorce rates overall. Thus, national refined divorce rates (divorces per married person) fell or were stable, but age-standardized rates rose through the first decade of the 2000s. Nevertheless, however one interprets the trends before 2010, all signs now point toward decreasing divorce rates, on a cohort and population basis, in the coming years. This is remarkable, occurring as it does along with an increase in less-stable cohabiting relationships (Guzzo 2014), and the growing cultural acceptability of divorce (Cohen 2016 and below).

We now have enough data since the 2008 introduction of the marital events questions on the American Community Survey (ACS) to analyze the most recent decade of change in divorce rates in a multivariate context.¹ In this paper I analyze that decade in the context of the historical analyses and results from previous studies, and present evidence for future declines in divorce.

In the paper I first present some descriptive statistics on trends in divorce, to set up a model for predicting divorce using the ACS from 2008 to 2016. After establishing the association between demographic variables and the odds of divorce, I demonstrate that the trend in new marriages is toward

¹ I assume the 2017 data will be available in time for the PAA presentation

those with lower divorce risks. The composition of new marriages, along with the shrinking demographic influence of the Baby Boom cohorts, all but guarantees falling divorce rates in the coming years.

Methods

For description of the overall trend, and age-specific trends, I use simple tabulations from the ACS of all married women and all women divorced in the 12 months before the survey. In the regression models, I model divorce probability on a dataset that includes women who are currently married and those who divorced in the year before the survey, with membership in the latter category as the dependent variable in logistic regression models (Cohen 2014). In the regressions I exclude women whose most recent marriage was in the survey year. The regression sample is 6.18 million. Variables in the analysis are survey year, age (and its square), years married, marriage order, nativity, education, and race/ethnicity (see Table 1).

For the analysis of newly-married couples, I select all women who report having married in the 12 months before the survey, and consider their age, marriage order, nativity, education, race/ethnicity, and presence of own children. To illustrate the trend toward divorce-protective factors, I take the same variables for their newly-married spouses, and then, for each couple, assign a score from 0 to 9, based on one point for each spouse who has the following characteristics: age 30 or more, White or Hispanic, BA or higher education, first marriage, and no own children (for the focal woman²). All analyses are weighted.

Results

Figure 1 shows the unadjusted divorce rate, and the result of the regression model (see Table 2 for detailed results). The unadjusted trend corresponds to that reported by Hemez (2017), with an 18 percent drop in the divorce rate from 2008 to 2016. However, the sample changed over the period. For example,

² I discussed in Cohen (2014) why the presence of children was not an appropriate control in the models predicting divorce.

the mean age rose from 49.9 to 52.3, and the mean years married increased from 22.9 to 24.2. The second line in Figure 1 shows the marginal predicted probability of marriage from the full model, which controls for these and other factors. It shows a less steep decline –8 percent– but the pattern is the same. The predictors of divorce are as expected, with increased age, marital duration, fewer marriages, foreign-born status, more education, and White or Hispanic identity all being associated with lower odds of divorce.

Examination of marginal results by year shows no dramatic changes in the effects of the key predictors across the most recent decade, although the higher odds of divorce for young women has converged somewhat with those of older women. However, despite the higher tendency to divorce among older women compared with earlier eras (Brown and Lin 2012), this model shows no increase in the adjusted odds of divorce for older women in the last decade (Figure 2).

The age patterns are worth closer examination. As Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) showed, divorce rates have risen for older women while falling for younger women. But if the increase for older women mostly reflects the experience and orientation of the Baby Boom generation, then we would not expect today's younger women to join their upward trajectory. And if people marrying now are showing less proclivity for divorce, then we would expect them to reach longer marital durations, at which divorce rates are lower, for lower divorce rates at older ages. To see the lower-divorce trajectory exhibited by younger cohorts, consider Figure 3, which shows the divorce prevalence by age for 1950-2016. While divorce prevalence for older people continued to increase after 1990, rates plateaued for those under age 45, which may portend lower divorce rates later in life, and for their children (Amato and Patterson 2017; Li and Wu 2008). In fact, closer examination of age-specific divorce rates for the most recent decade shows that the overall drop has been driven entirely by younger women (Figure 4)³. It seems likely these women, who will reach longer marital durations, and who are less likely to be divorced and therefore remarried later in life, will have lower divorce rates than today's older women.

³ Note the anomalous under-20 age group is only 0.2% of the total.

The final piece of this analysis is an examination of newly-married couples. Since the analysis to this point has focused on women, I next present demographic characteristics of newly-married women that are relevant to their divorce risk, from 2008 and 2016 (Figure 5). Over the last decade, newly married women have become more likely to be in their first marriages, more likely to have BA degrees or higher education, less likely to be under age 25, and less likely to have own children in the household – all of which suggests falling risk of divorce (the race/ethnicity change is a wash, with fewer Whites but more Latinos). This trend is confirmed in Figure 6, which shows the distribution of combined spouse scores for newly-married couples. This composite score is just an illustrative device. It shows that the percentage of couples with positive scores below 5 has dropped, while those with scores 5-9 are more prevalent, implying reduced risks of divorce.⁴

Conclusion

The analysis shows that, as refined divorce rates have fallen since 2008, they are also lower in a multivariate regression model controlling for other demographic and marriage characteristics. There is no doubt that divorce has declined since 2008. Further, although divorce prevalence has continued to rise for women at older ages, the regression models show no increase in adjusted divorce odds at any age. Finally, because divorce rates have continued to fall for younger women, and because the risk profile for newly married couples has shifted toward more protective characteristics (such as higher education, older ages, and lower rates of higher-order marriages), it appears certain that – barring unforeseen changes – divorce rates will further decline in the coming years.

The current decline in divorce, and the coming further decline, is all the more remarkable as cohabitation grows both more normative (Sassler and Miller 2017) and less stable (Guzzo 2014), and as attitudes toward divorce continue to grow more permissive. Figure 7 shows that both the General Social Survey and the Gallup morality poll have reached record high acceptance levels for divorce. Working

⁴ No couples have scores of 1, and less than 1% have scores of 2, so I combined them with those scoring 3.

against these factors, apparently, is the increasingly selective nature of marriage – at least on demographic and socioeconomic traits (Lundberg and Pollak 2015) – and the greater stability of the couples who persist through cohabitation and enter marital unions at high levels of economic interdependence (Killewald 2016). The trends described here represent progress toward a system in which marriage is rarer, and more stable, than it was in the past, representing an increasingly central component of the structure of social inequality.

Figure 1. Women's divorce rate, 2008-2016:
Unadjusted and margins predicted from full model

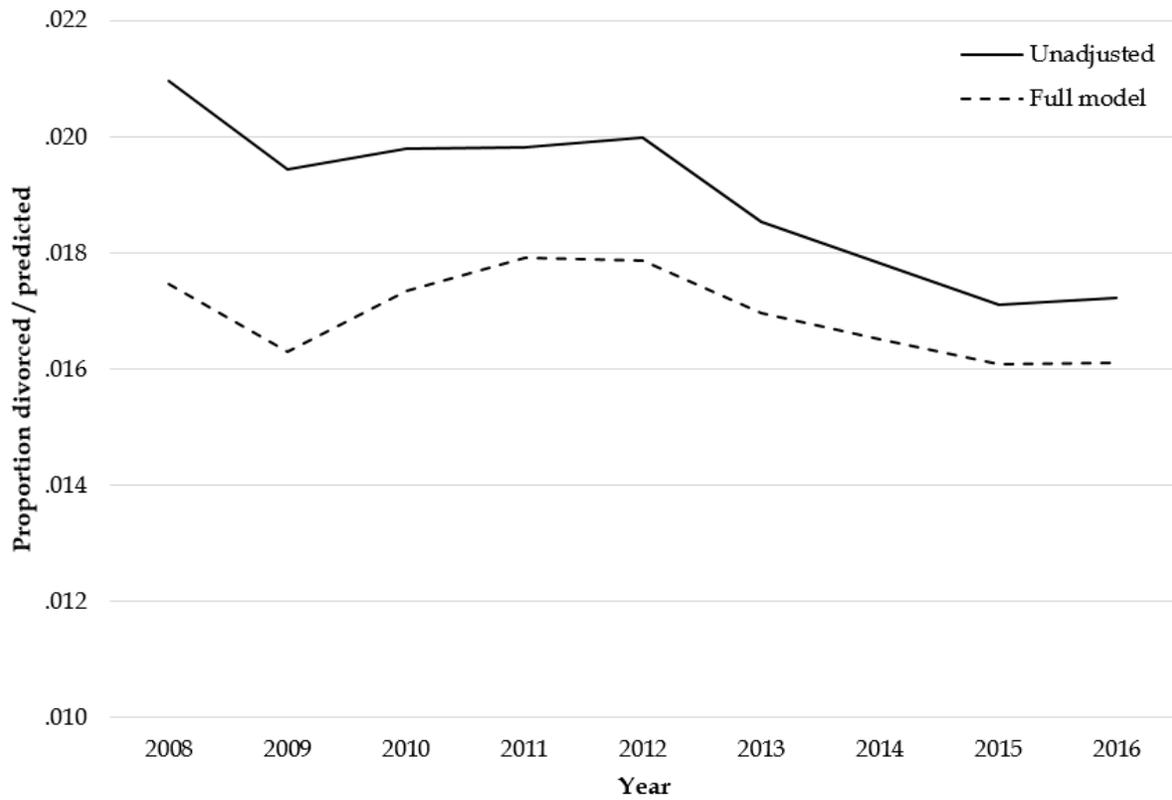


Figure 2. Predicted probability of divorce, by age and year

Full model controls

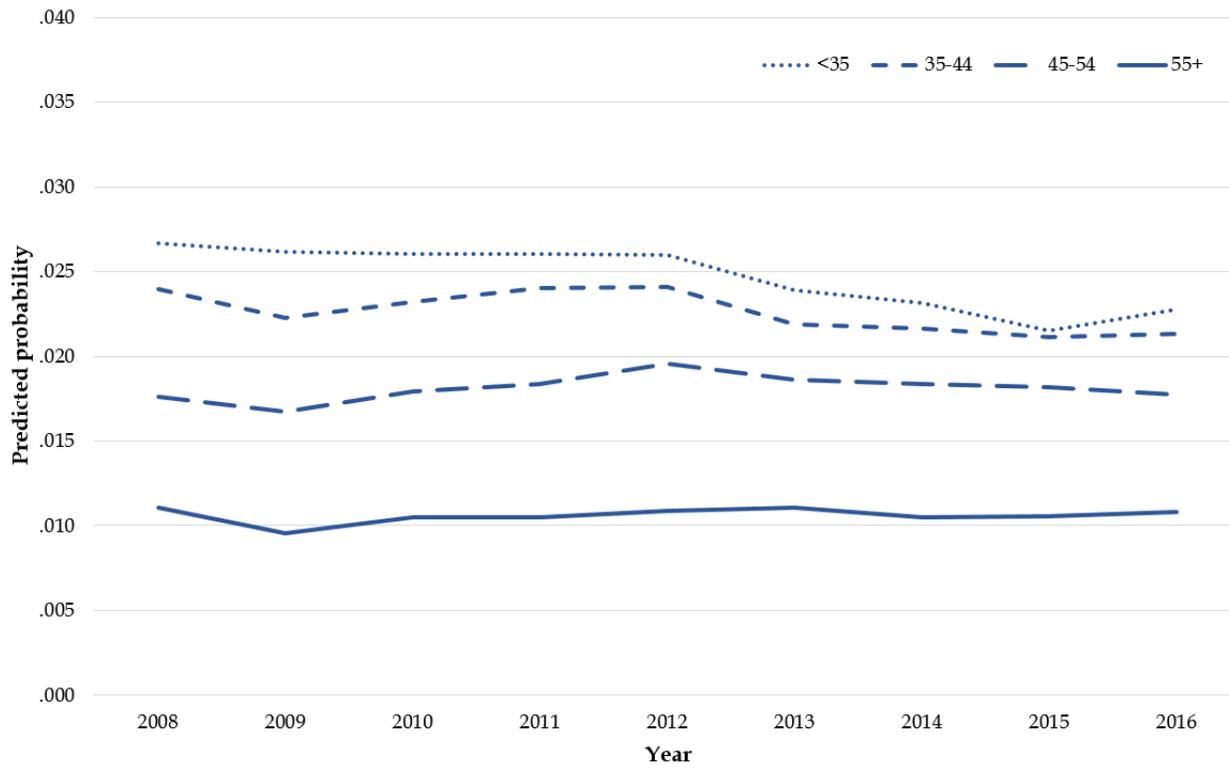


Figure 3. Divorce prevalence by age, 1950-2016

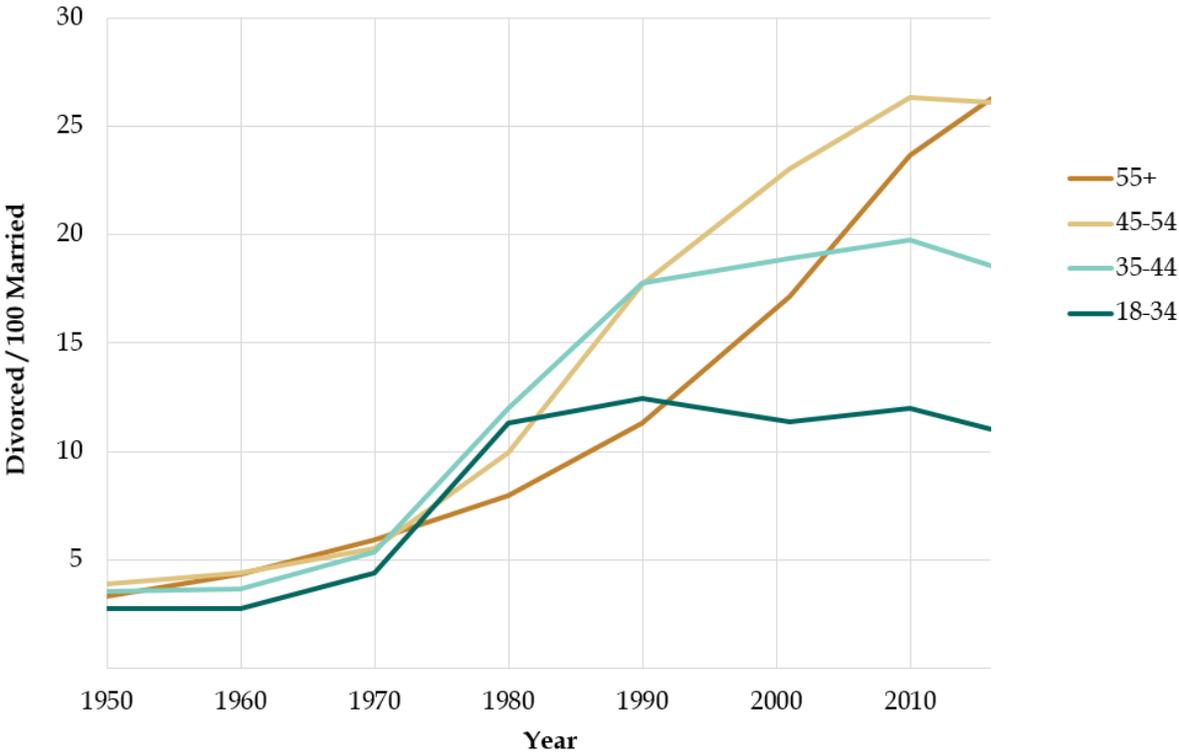


Figure 4. Age specific divorce rates, 2008-2010 and 2014-2016

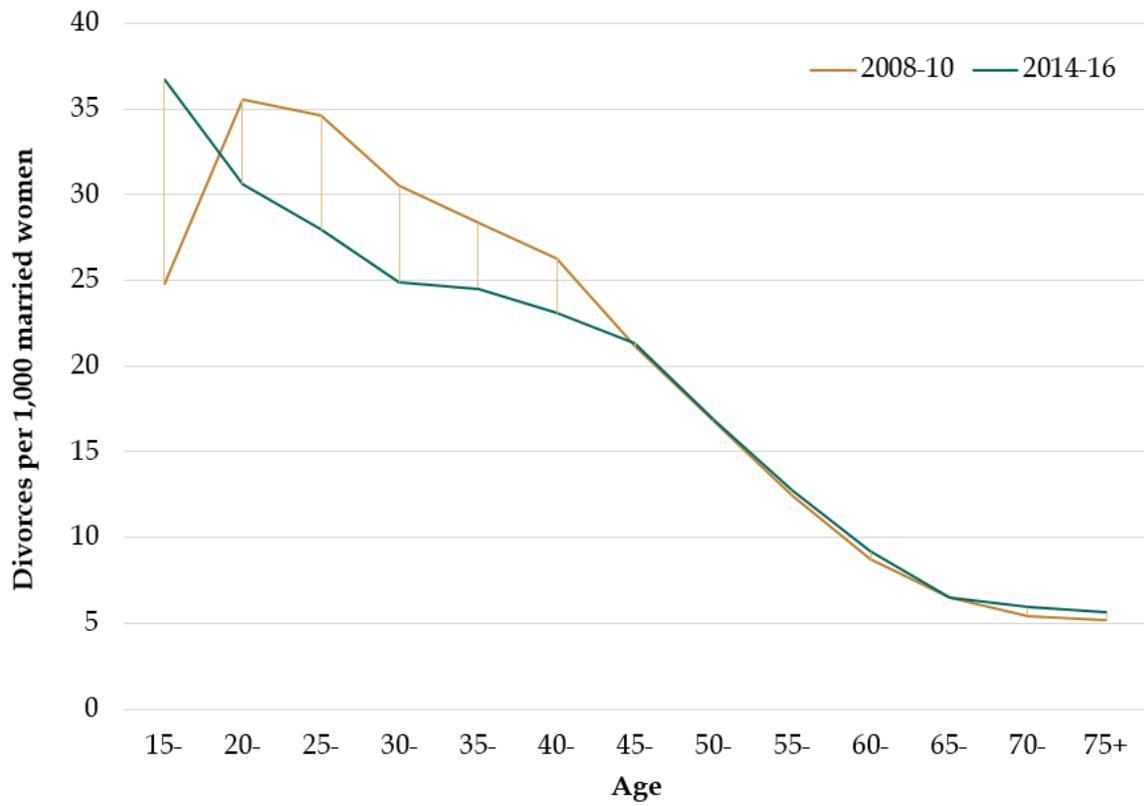


Figure 5. Characteristics of women married in the previous year, 2008 and 2016

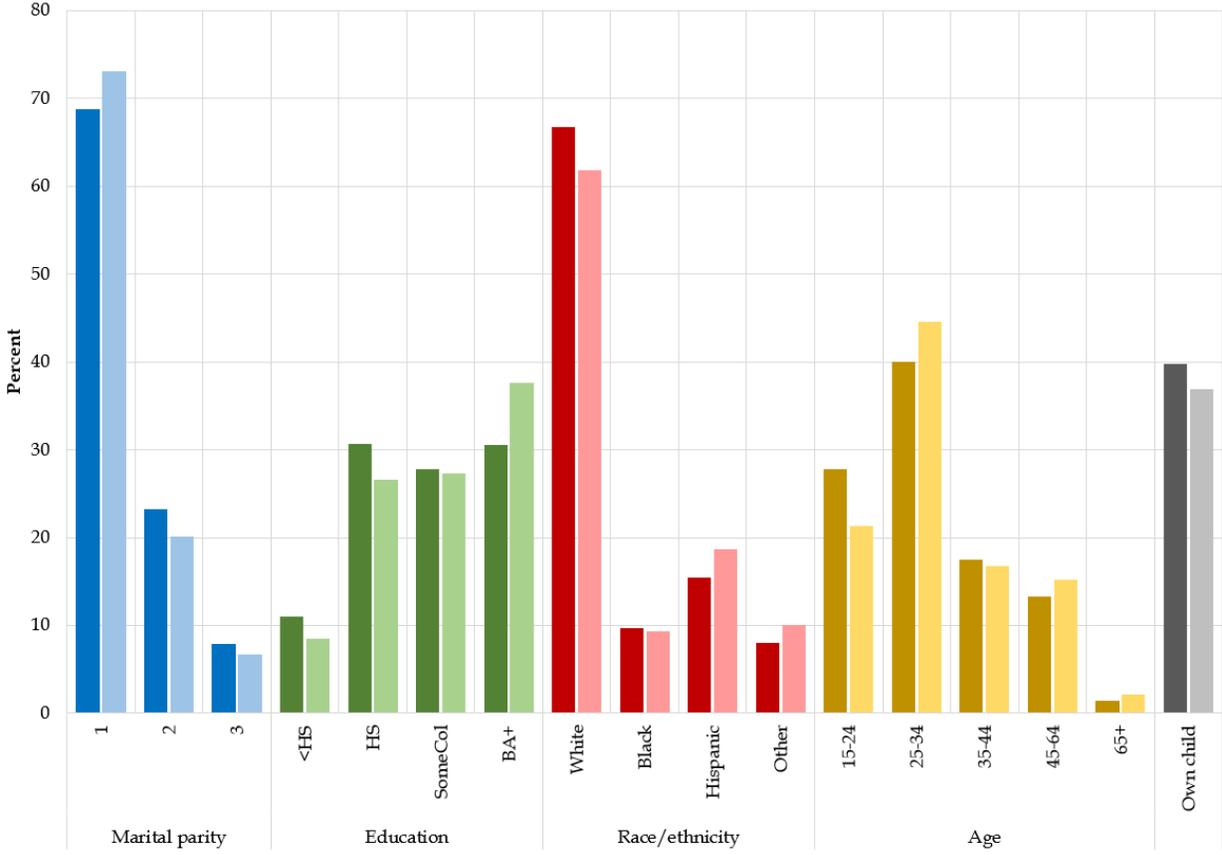


Figure 6. Newly-married couple divorce protective factor scores, 2008-2016

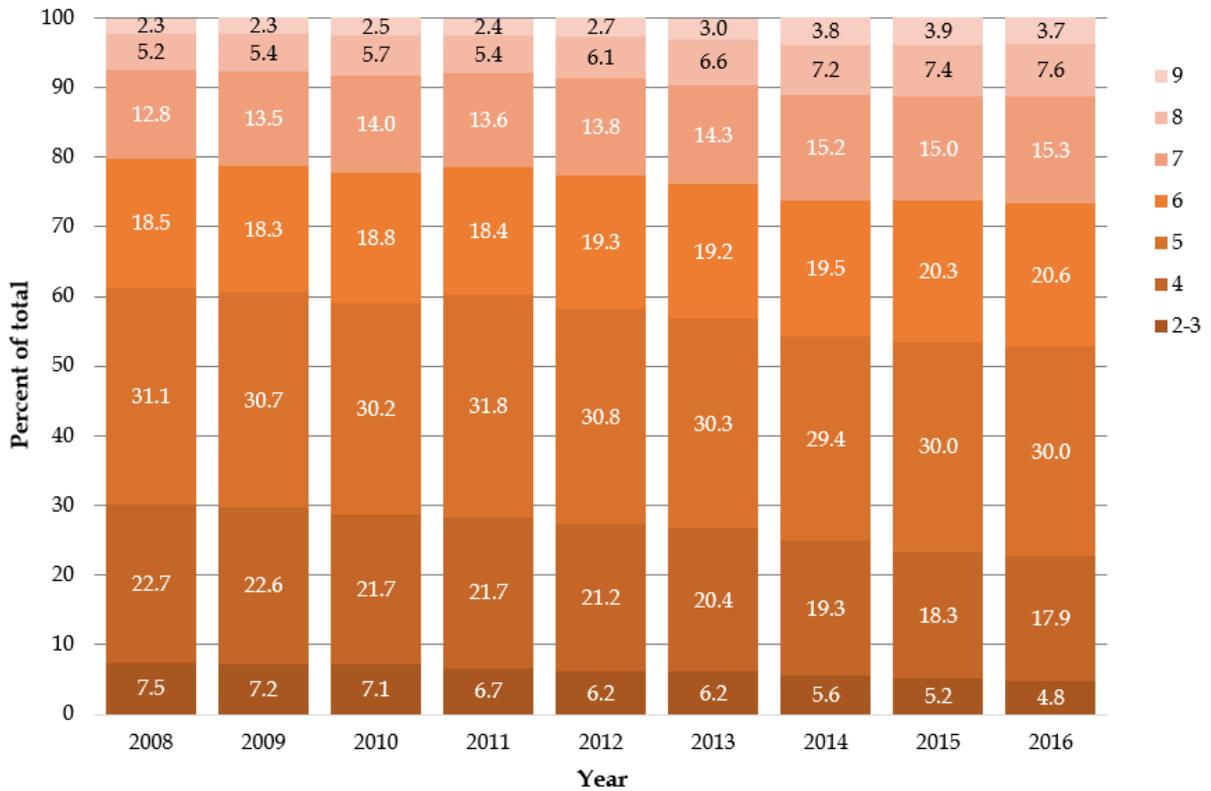
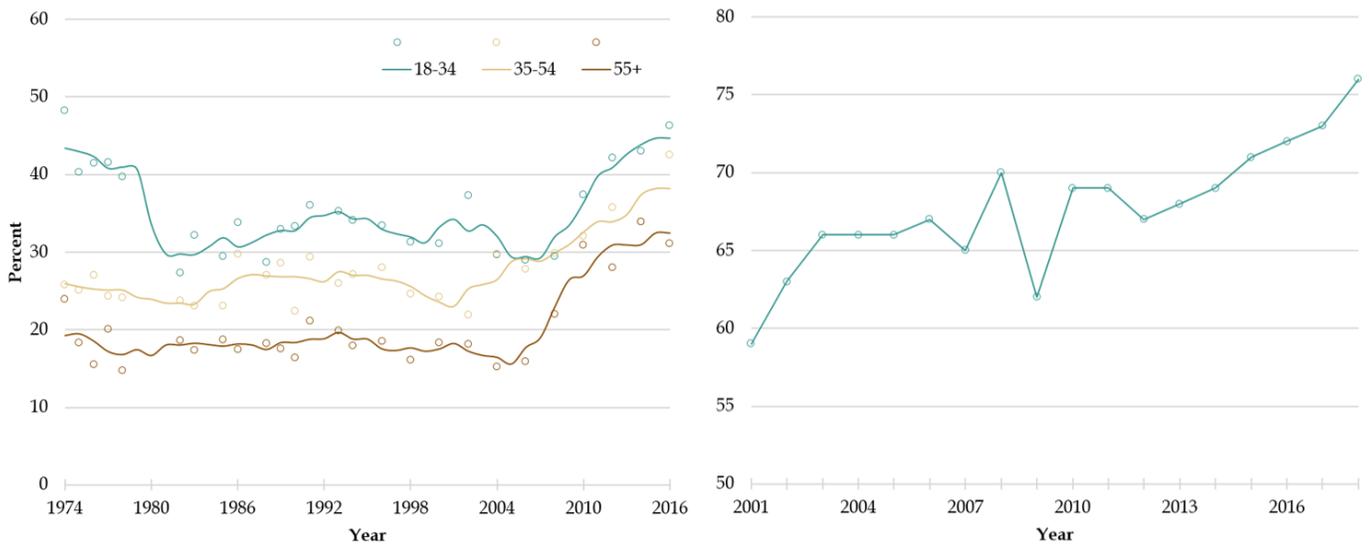


Figure 7. Public acceptance of divorce



Percent who say divorce in the U.S. should be easier to obtain, 1974-2016, from the General Social Survey (left), and percent who say divorce in general is morally acceptable, 2001-2018, from Gallup polls (right).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics. Married or newly-divorced women
2008-2016 American Community Survey**

	<i>Percent</i>
Divorced	1.9
Year	
2008	11.0
2009	11.0
2010	11.1
2011	11.1
2012	11.1
2013	11.1
2014	11.2
2015	11.2
2016	11.3
Age	
<35	18.3
35-44	21.7
45-54	23.3
55+	36.7
Years married	
1-9	27.3
10-19	24.0
20-29	18.7
30+	30.2
Marriage order	
1 st	76.7
2 nd	18.6
3rd+	4.7
Foreign-born	19.5
Education	
Less than high school	11.1
High school complete	33.3
Some college	23.9
BA or higher	31.7
Race/ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	70.4
Black	8.0
Hispanic	13.8
Other	7.8

N = 6,178,678

Weighted percentages.

Excludes women married in the same year as the survey;
includes separated and married, spouse-absent.

Table 2. Logistic regression coefficients for divorce

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>S. E.</i>
Year		
2008	ref	
2009	-.062	.017
2010	-.021	.016
2011	-.005	.017
2012	.018	.017
2013	-.045	.017 *
2014	-.070	.017 *
2015	-.098	.018 *
2016	-.081	.018 *
Age	-.001	.002
Age squared	-.00029	.00002 *
Years married	-.017	.001 *
Marriage order		
1st	ref	
2nd	.397	.012 *
3rd+	.822	.018 *
Foreign-born	-.367	.015 *
Education		
Less than high school	ref	
High school complete	.026	.016
Some college	.063	.016 *
BA or higher	-.326	.017 *
Race/ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	ref	
Black	.487	.013 *
Hispanic	.034	.015
Other	-.031	.019

$N = 6,178,678$; weighted. * $p < .01$

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