

Slate

Why Is North Dakota the Best Place To Get Married?

By Jessica Grose

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Photo by Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

Amanda, the spread of gay couples across the country isn't the only fascinating thing about the new census report out today. The results of this state-by-state data mostly fall on predictable red sex/blue sex lines: People in conservative red states in the middle of the country tend to get married at younger ages and have a higher rate of divorce; people in liberal blue states tend to get married later and stay married at higher rates. There is one anomaly in this tidy theory, and it's North Dakota. According to the AP write-up of the census data, "North Dakota ranked among the top states in marriages while posting lower than average divorce rates." There's another way in which North Dakota has been an anomaly lately—it has the lowest unemployment rate in the country and has not been hit by the nationwide recession. Are these two phenomena at all correlated?

Not really. The reasons for the high rates and stability of North Dakota marriages have more to do with its particular population than with the state's economic growth. I spoke to Zhenchao

Qian, who is a professor of sociology at Ohio State University and studies marriage. While he doesn't have exact data on North Dakota, Qian speculated that North Dakota's high marriage and low divorce rates are due to age structure and selection. The population of North Dakota is older--and as people get married later and later, an older population means a more married population. As for the employment part of the equation, Qian figured, "People who do not have jobs typically do not stay" in North Dakota. (It ain't exactly a garden spot.)

Another reason for the high rate of marriage and low rate of divorce is that there's less migration into North Dakota than in the rest of the country--population growth in North Dakota was 4.7 percent in the last decade compared with a national average of 9.7 percent. More stable populations have lower divorce rates. As Johns Hopkins professor of sociology Andrew Cherlin told the AP: "The South and West also have many migrants from other parts of the region who have left their social support networks behind. When they have marital problems, they have fewer people to turn to for help."

The budget surplus in North Dakota has in part been due to an oil boom in the western part of the state. The state has also been able to add manufacturing jobs, its agriculture has been doing well, and the growth of the oil industry has created a need for all sorts of ancillary support businesses that are only starting to emerge. Even though there doesn't seem to be much of a relationship between the economic and marital stability of the denizens of North Dakota, if you're already living there, things are far less bleak than in the rest of the country.