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## The good, bad and ugly of divorce

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Few people, if any, would call themselves pro-divorce, at least in polite company. But are you anti-divorce? Or anti-anti-divorce?

Consider some recent studies about divorce and its impact on wallets, children and adult relationships.

On April 15 - "tax day" - leaders of the Institute for American Values (IAV) and three conservative groups released a study that said divorce and unwed childbearing cost taxpayers \$112 billion a year in welfare, criminal justice, health care and lost tax revenue.

Their public-policy recommendations? Reduce the number of divorces and increase the number of married, two-parent families.

A few days later, the Council on Contemporary Families highlighted a study by Rand Corp. researcher Jui-Chung Allen Li called, "The Kids are OK: Divorce and Children's Behavior Problems."

Mr. Li crunched a lot of numbers and found that divorce exacerbates problem behaviors in some children, but reduces them in other children. Because these outcomes "cancel each other out," he said, the average effect of divorce on children's behavior problems is zero. "Divorce is neither harmful nor helpful for this measure of children's well-being," he concluded.

Mr. Li's public-policy recommendation? Stop worrying so much about preventing divorce per se, and give families some help before - or after - the deed is done. Government also should become "neutral" on marital status and base neither penalties nor incentives on it.

If Mr. Li's paper is anti-anti-divorce, so is research conducted by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, assistant professors at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

The professors disputed the IAV study's findings about the costs of divorce, saying IAV failed to account for the financial benefits that some women experience after divorce. Moreover, the professors said, no-fault divorce is associated with other positive benefits, such as an 8 percent decline in the suicide rate for women, 30 percent decline in domestic violence and 10 percent decline in the number of women murdered by their partners.

So I ask you, the reading public, which is it? Is divorce a mostly good thing or a mostly bad thing for couples, children and the country?

One thing's for sure: Without a public consensus on even a basic question like is divorce mostly good or bad, there's little political will to change divorce laws.

Certainly, many readers will have their personal answers about divorce. About 23 million American men and 27 million American women have experienced divorce, and each one has an answer to the famous "Dear Abby" question, "Are you better off with him or without him?" (Or her.)

U.S. divorce rates have edged down to the same level as in 1970, which is a good thing. But young adults' skittishness about marriage is causing them to delay marriage - or skip it entirely, in favor of cohabiting, which is another subject.

My question is what do you, the reading public, want to do about divorce?

Do you want to hear more about the "upsides" of divorce, i.e., how it provides essential relief for marital meltdown?

Do you want to hear more about the need for a stronger "good divorce" industry with support groups, mental-health counselors and move-on tools to speed recovery? If this is your view, please speak up.

Or, have you seen enough about divorce to conclude that it's mostly bad for adults, children and society. If that's the case, what do you want to do about it? Do you want no-fault divorce laws changed? Do you want to hear more about what divorce actually has meant to people's lives?

Do you think divorce rates can be "greatly" reduced, or do you think that's just a nostalgic pipe dream?

Please consider this column as the first in a long discussion. A lot of people already are talking about the future of divorce, but are you part of the conversation? Please speak up.

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