

■ SATURDAY MAY 26 2001

Singles seek more attention from government

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Roughly 82 million strong, unmarried adults form one of the biggest demographic blocs in the nation. But converting those numbers into political clout is a daunting task.

When leaders of the American Association for Single People swung through congressional offices recently — complaining tax policies are stacked against them — one legislative aide challenged every point they made. Others were attentive, but some snickered and rolled their eyes.

"Family, family, family," was the message that the association's executive director, Thomas Coleman, kept hearing from Democrats and Republicans alike. At one point, he asked a Republican adviser why President Bush talks so often about families and so rarely about unmarried Americans.

"What's so wrong with the word 'single?'" Coleman wondered. "He's the president of all the people — why can't he once in a while say the word? It would make people feel wanted and needed."

Census data released this month shows that alternative household arrangements are increasing across the United States more rapidly than

Singles rights advocates' complaints

■ Employers often subsidize all or a large portion of health benefits for spouses of married employees without giving compensation to unmarried workers in some other form.

Singles-rights activists propose offering a menu of benefits to all workers, who could choose those that meet their needs.

■ Despite attention paid to the so-called "marriage penalty," singles-rights activists say a majority of married couples receive a "marriage bonus" that results in an unfair share of taxes being paid by single taxpayers.

■ Social security benefits can be extended to a surviving spouse, but not to a surviving unmarried partner.

■ Most states allow marital status to be used as a criterion in setting premiums for auto insurance. As a result, some insurers lump married drivers into a low-risk category and classify unmarried drivers as a higher risk.

■ Many states allow marital status discrimination in rental housing; unmarried renters have no legal recourse when a landlord gives preference to married couples or refuses to rent to an unmarried couple.

Source: American Association for Single People

households headed by married couples. There are larger percentages of people living alone — nearly 26 percent of all households — and of unmarried couples living together.

Yet lawmakers in Washington and state legislatures rarely target their speeches or bills at singles.

Instead, said University of Southern California sociologist Judith Stacey, unmarried adults often are disadvantaged by tax, insurance and employment policies. The government's emphasis is on making it easier to raise a

family, not to live alone.

"We have larger numbers of single people than ever in history, and yet we're actively promoting discrimination against them," Stacey said. "It's as though being single is a social disgrace."

For groups promoting the traditional family structure, however, it makes sense to place singles lower on the political totem pole.

"The institution of marriage has a whole spectrum of benefits for children, which spill over into benefits to society," said Matt Daniels, executive director of the Alliance for Marriage. "It's perfectly acceptable for a society to choose, as a matter of public policy, to provide special treatment for parents who are married and raising children."

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