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Singles Seeking Equal Status

By CORY REISS

Ledger Washington Bureau

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To the Midland, N.C., mom who founded the National Organization of Single Mothers, the proposal is a financial incentive for shotgun weddings doomed to abuse and divorce.

"This is taking away from poor single mothers," said Engber, who has a 16-year-old son and married for the first time last April.

The welfare bill would reauthorize the 1996 welfare reform law, which expires Sept. 30. Pressure is increasing for Congress to act. The House passed a bill that includes marriage promotion grants to states.

This debate is part of a broad discussion about public policies that hinge a great deal on whether a person wears a ring. The General Accounting Office in 1997 found 1,049 federal laws dealing with marriage. Fueled by trends that show nearly half of U.S. households were unmarried in 2000, marriage promoters and advocates of marriage-neutral policies are increasingly at odds.

Advocates for single people are trying to build a case for equal treatment on taxes, Social Security and other issues while social conservatives tend to side with married couples.

For example, a signature element in last year's \$1.3 trillion tax-cut package advanced by President Bush was a temporary phase-out of the so-called marriage penalty, a quirk in the tax code that caused many two-income couples to owe more taxes than they would have if they had remained single. More than half of tax-paying couples, however, receive what amounts to a marriage bonus, and that will remain in place.

Divorce, an increase in single parents and young people waiting longer to marry have driven the percentage of married households down over the years — from 71 percent in 1970 to less than 52 percent in 2000. Depending on the census figures used from 2000, 11 states either are on the cusp of becoming majority single households or already have crossed the line, including Florida, Louisiana, California and New York.

If trends hold, unmarried households will become the majority soon. Advocates of marriage-neutral policies, including eliminating joint filing on income taxes, Social Security reforms and long-term care financing, say they are counting on those trends to change 50-year-old policies written with the nuclear family in mind.

"The more onerous these policies become on single taxpayers the more people are going to rise to the occasion," said Celeste Colgan, a policy analyst for the National Center for Policy Analysis.

Bush promised in February that his administration would give "unprecedented support to strengthening families."

Policies that discourage marriage are under assault from social conservatives. And more seniors, who have growing political clout as the population ages, are discovering that marriage can be a liability when facing the need for expensive long-term nursing care.

George Blake is a singles guru and author in Sarasota who hosts mixers for singles in a city where about 65 percent of households are led by unmarried people. Blake said Medicaid rules are causing more older people to decide not to remarry after being widowed or divorced.

To get federal help with long-term care, a married couple must deplete their combined savings to qualify for Medicaid, a federal-state program for the poor that pays the bulk of nursing home bills. Staying single allows one partner to avoid that poverty requirement.

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Faith Mullen, a senior policy adviser on Medicaid for the seniors group AARP, said, "There is also some anecdotal evidence that people facing long-term-care costs divorce to avoid that problem."

Single people have never had a strong voice.

Last week, Thomas Coleman and five other single people, went door to door on Capitol Hill carrying manila envelopes full of reasons why elected officials should treat unmarried people as constituents with their own needs.

"Average people, they know something's wrong, but who are they going to go to? The politicians don't usually want to do something about it because it doesn't have the word 'family' attached to it," said Coleman, founder of the 3-year-old American Association for Single People. "This is a long-term uphill battle."

The California-based organization is small, about 1,500 members, but it is making progress. Governors in 14 states, including North Carolina, this year signed proclamations declaring Sept. 15-21 Unmarried and Single Americans Week.

Single people want fair treatment

Marriage trends pressure policies

By Cory Reiss

Washington Bureau

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Peterson

"They are very attentive to political conditions, local conditions, I think more so than a married couple," said Wilmington Mayor Harper Peterson, who

issued a singles week proclamation for his single-majority city at the request of Mr. Coleman's association.

Skeptics say it will take more than proclamations to turn single people into a political force, even though they number 82 million when counting people who are divorced, widowed, single by choice and gay.

"It's too heterogeneous, too diverse a constituency to be organized," said Steve Craig, a political scientist at the University of Florida.

Ms. Engber says she's enjoying some perks now that she's married, but they come with guilt. She and her husband got a \$3,000 income tax refund this year — thanks to the "marriage bonus." She said it was her first refund and a welcome change after owing the government when she was working and raising her son alone.

"It's not fair to single people," she said.



With this ring ... tax breaks, penalties

Public policies based on marital status spark debate as single households increase.

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MARRIAGES FROM 1B

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