**OPINION**

**BUSINESS PULSE SURVEY**

If you could change one thing about your company, what would it be?

Next week’s question: If Amendment One passes, will North Carolina be more or less appealing to outside investment/business location?

Go to http://riad.bizjournals.com and click on Business Pulse Survey to participate.

Based on 157 respondents, numbers do not total 100 due to rounding.

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**VIEWPOINT**

**ANDREW BROO**

**Protect marriage. But how?**

On May 8, North Carolinians will go to the polls for primary elections and to vote on Amendment One. This amendment to the state constitution, also known as the Marriage Protection Amendment, would “prohibit that marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized” in North Carolina.

As indicated by its informal name, supporters of Amendment One believe that its passage would protect the institution of marriage in North Carolina. That’s a good goal, but how do we get there? Can economic policy help?

It’s well understood that economic stress is correlated with such marital life as domestic-violence.

Unemployment is always a key source of stress, but the Great Recession introduced other sources, such as home foreclosures. Sure enough, rates of domestic violence rose around the country in 2008 and 2009, more so in harder-hit states.

It’s not just a business-cycle effect. Economics matters at any particular point in time. Domestic violence is more common the lower one goes on the socio-economic ladder, even after accounting for the ability of more financially secure women to leave abusive situations and remain outside of the social-service system.

What about divorce? The lower the divorce rate, the stronger the institution of marriage, right? And yet divorce rates tend to fall during recessions.

Why the counter-cyclical effect? Some couples report pulling together when the going gets tough in a recession. But by and large, the data point to economic factors.

A 2011 University of Virginia survey found that the greater the number of financial stressors present in a marriage, such as reduced income or difficult paying bills, the less happy the marriage.

Economic insecurity discourages many couples that would otherwise break up from following through. One or both spouses may be unemployed, and a poor housing market makes it harder to divide up financial assets.

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So a stronger economy would lead to stronger marriages, even if a temporarily higher divorce rate. What about the rate of marriage itself?

Unfortunately, the long-term trend is negative. Marriage has been on the decline for more than 30 years. In 2010, for the first time, married households accounted for less than half of the total. In 1950 they accounted for 78 percent.

But here’s the key: The decline in marriage since 1980 is concentrated mostly among lower-income, lower-educated adults. That’s important because something else happened to less-educated workers during the same period.

Starting around 30 years ago, the returns to education started mattering more. A high-school diploma grew less valuable unless accompanied by a college degree. College became less accessible thanks to spiraling costs and stagnant financial aid. Less-educated workers have seen their real wages fall and their fringe benefits, such as pension plans and health insurance, nearly disappear. Changes in federal tax policy aggravated the problem.

So the recent decline in marriage, which is primarily a lower-income phenomenon, coincided closely with the decline in the economic prospects of lower-income workers. Think there might be a connection?

Would Amendment One protect the institution of marriage? That’s for every voter to decide. And maybe it’s beside the point.

But if protecting marriage is the goal, we know that creating jobs in the short run and reversing the long-term economic deterioration of the lower and middle classes will lead us a long way toward that end.

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