



Last week, Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens admitted to an extramarital affair with his former hairdresser, although he denied allegations that he subsequently blackmailed her.

Greitens issued a joint statement with his wife saying that they had dealt with the affair privately, while his attorney issued a statement denying the blackmail allegations.

The allegations came as a surprise to many, given Greitens' public persona as a family man, and a devout follower of Judaism. Critics have accused the governor of hypocrisy, and he recently cancelled a statewide tour promoting a new state tax plan.

But recent data shows that Greitens' infidelity is not the norm among religiously active people.

According to data gathered from the recent General Social Survey (GSS) by NORC, a non-partisan research institution at the University of Chicago, people who attended religious services at least semi-regularly were less likely to cheat on their spouses than people who attended religious services once a year or less.

The data was analyzed in a blog post by Wendy Wang, director of research with the Institute for Family Studies.

Wang said that while the data didn't indicate whether the type of religious service played a role, "it's a fact that people who regularly attend religious services are less likely to cheat."

"I think it's interesting how your faith could play a role in your relationship," Wang told CNA. "It probably has something to do with what the church or the synagogue is teaching you. A lot of religions emphasize the importance of family, marriage stability, so that's probably why it has such an impact," she said.

The data showed that attendance at religious services was the strongest factor among both genders that indicated a low likelihood of infidelity.

On the whole, factors that indicate chances of infidelity varied widely between the two genders, Wang noted. For example, race and age were strong determining factors of the chances of infidelity among men, while for women, political party identification and family background were significant determining factors.

However, religious service attendance remained a significant factor for both genders, even when controlling for other variables, Wang said.

Family background was also a strong determining factor in indicating whether someone might cheat, Wang said. While it was a stronger determining factor for women, family background played a significant role overall in determining whether people were likely to cheat.

“Overall, Democrats, adults who didn’t grow up in intact families, and those who rarely or never attend religious services are more likely than others to have cheated on their spouse. For example, 15% of adults who grew up with both biological parents have cheated on their spouse before, compared with 18% of those who didn’t grow up in intact families,” Wang wrote.

“I don’t know the reasons why exactly, but we do see that people who grow up with both parents married to each other, they’re less likely to cheat,” Wang told CNA. “I think it is important to see how a steady family, a stable marriage actually could help even in your children’s marriage quality.”

Wang’s research also indicated that cheaters - both men and women - are more likely to be divorced or separated than non-cheaters.

“Men who cheated are more likely than their female peers to be married. Among men who have cheated on their spouse before, 61% are currently married, while 34% are divorced or separated. However, only 44% of women who have cheated before are currently married, while 47% are divorced or separated,” Wang wrote in her post.

However, the data doesn’t indicate whether men are more likely to remain married to the spouse whom they cheated on, or to remarry after infidelity, Wang said.

“Basically the question is who’s more likely to forgive their cheating spouse? I don’t have numbers for that,” Wang said. “What I see here is we definitely see a consequence for cheating.”

Part of the reason for the discrepancy among marriage rates after infidelity could be the differing reasons why men and women cheat, Wang said. Cheating men may more often

act out of physical impulses, while women who cheat may be more likely to be emotionally involved in their affairs, and more likely to divorce as a result of them, she said.

“That might explain some of the gender difference there, but it’s hard to say,” she said.

Overall, Wang said that the data and analysis are important, especially as more accusations of sexual misconduct come out against celebrities and politicians, many of whom are married.

“That’s why I was interested to take a look and see the data; it is amazing to see how things have changed in a few months,” Wang said.

Wang said what couples can take from the analysis is that “there’s consequences to cheating...I just wanted people to be aware that there’s consequences to cheating and it’s very detrimental to a relationship.”