

November 1989

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Janet and Clark, Cal (1989) "Wyoming Women's Attitudes Toward the MX: The "Old" v. "New" Gender Gap," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol17/iss1/11>

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Wyoming Women's Attitudes Toward the MX: The "Old" Vs. The "New" Gender Gap

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so, the relationship between gender and political orientations in the United States has been "stood on its head." Before the mid-1970's, a significant difference, which may be termed the "old" gender gap, existed between men and women in their levels of voting and other types of political participation. There was little gender difference, however, in partisan preferences or voting behavior or in attitudes toward most political issues with the exception of women's greater reluctance to risk the use of force in foreign affairs and greater support for using politics to enforce morality (e.g., temperance laws). This gender differentiation in political participation and in a few political attitudes, in turn, was usually explained by the sex-role typing engendered by the socialization process which made women more passive and home oriented and concerned with personal relations than men.¹ Consequently, women were less interested in the public sphere but, additionally, were alienated because male political leaders tended to ignore the issues in which they were most interested (social welfare legislation, morality issues, war and peace, and political corruption) and because neither major party favored women's positions on all these issues.²

In the 1980's, in contrast, a "new" gender gap has emerged—one that has drawn more concern from many scholars and politicians because of its directly partisan implications. The principal component of the "old" gap, women's significantly lower participation rates, largely vanished; and, if anything, younger and more educated women began to participate even more than their male counterparts.³ Conversely, differences in political attitudes between the sexes have emerged or expanded in such areas as "social compassion," protection of the environment, and basic economic issues to greatly augment the initial limited attitudinal gap concerning peace and morality. Thus, during the 1980's, there has generally been a "gender gap" in American politics reflected in an approximately 7%-10% differential between men's and women's support for Republican and Democratic candidates and attitudes toward a wide range of domestic and foreign issues—a gap that had not been present before in American politics.⁴

Socialization theory can be used to explain these changes, but it implies a more complex process than the relationship between role socialization and the "old" gender gap. Women's changing roles, especially in moving outside the home, provide a straightforward stimulus for their growing interest and participation in politics which has eradicated most of the "old" behavioral gender gap. The "new" attitudinal gender gap arose, in contrast, because women brought their old value systems to the political realm; and, as their interest and participation grew, they began to take increasingly different positions from men because of their different basic values. Thus, women's growing participation in national political debates has created politics "in a different voice."⁵

Wyomingites and the MX

This paper examines the attitudes of Wyomingites during the 1980's toward President Reagan's proposed deployment of an MX densepack near Cheyenne in the southeast corner of the state as a case study in distinguishing between the "old" and "new" gender gaps. This study should provide an interesting analytic example both because of the nature of the issue and because of the special mix that composes Wyoming's political culture. The MX issue should involve both the "old" and "new" gender gaps. It clearly concerns passivism/aggressiveness in foreign policy which is part of the "old" gap; and, in addition, as a major initiative of President Reagan, it might well also stimulate feelings of partisanship which form the "new" gap.

Wyoming's political culture contains some crosscutting elements regarding the role of women. On the one hand, the state is clearly quite conservative and traditional which should inhibit the development of new women's roles and political perspectives. On the other hand, the state's culture is highly individualistic, emphasizes a historical commitment to women's equality and participation (Wyoming was the first state to grant women suffrage and equal rights and was the site of the only recorded lynching of a woman in America), and suggests that women might not be confined to traditional roles.⁶ This possibly unique political culture, it might be hypothesized, should produce a distinctive blend of the "old" and "new" gender gaps.

Thus, the nature of Wyoming's political culture might well be expected to produce an ambiguous mix of gender's relationship to political orientations because of the crosscutting nature of several cultural stimuli. This in fact turns out to be the case as documented by the correlations in Table 1 of gender with an array of political beliefs and measures of voting participation

during the 1980's (women are scored higher than men on gender;

Table 1

**Relationship Between Gender and
Political Attitudes in Wyoming**

	1982	1984	1986
Develop MX	-.07	-.20	-.15
Deploy MX in Wyoming	-.44	-.33	--
Spend more on defense	-.21	-.19	-.13
Tougher stance toward USSR	-.06	-.01	.01
Fear nuclear war	.30	.29	.29
Favor nuclear freeze	.15	.05	-.10
Support SDI	--	--	-.06
Favor Contra aid	--	--	-.30
Reduce domestic income difs	.18	--	.13
Raise taxes not cut services	.25	.08	--
Govt. pride minimum for poor	--	.19	.14
Favor gun control	.38	.40	.41
Favor abortion	.09	-.05	-.13
Greater regulation of oil & gas exploration on public lands	-.01	--	--
Favor selling federal lands	-.09	--	--
Favor ERA	.02	--	--
Alcohol serious community problem	.15	--	--
Family abuse serious community problem	.24	--	--
Belief in God	.43	--	--
Literal Bible	.16	.10	.13
Conservatism	-.13	-.10	-.08
Republican ID	.04	-.07	-.09
Reagan approval	-.07	-.12	-.07
Reagan cares for poor	.06	-.10	--
Vote last election	-.02	.00	.06
Vote this election	.10	-.11	.03
Registered to vote	.05	-.20	-.04

so that a positive gamma indicates that women are more approving or more participant for the item in question).⁷

A striking difference occurred between the participation items and the attitudinal ones. There was little difference between men and women in terms of voting participation, indicating that the behavioral component of the "old" gap had faded away. In contrast, the relationship of gender to attitudes still generally followed the line of the "old" gap. There was little difference between the sexes on partisan preferences and on many domestic issues which normally evoke a liberal-conservative split. Women were, however, much more supportive of gun control (suggesting a fear of violence) and more likely to hold traditional and religious values, as well as being somewhat more concerned with the problems of alcoholism and family abuse. Gender was more strongly associated with foreign policy attitudes. There was a marginal-to-moderate tendency for women to fear the outbreak of nuclear war more, to oppose expanding the defense budget, and in 1986 to oppose US aid to the contras, suggesting the greater pacifism and fear of war of the "old" gap. On the other hand, these differences did not extend to all foreign policy issues since men and women differed little in their perceptions of the Soviet Union or in support for a nuclear freeze.

In sum, one strand of Wyoming's political culture emphasizes individualism and gender equality (at least the "frontier spirit" version thereof); and, as a result, the principal component of the "old" gender gap—women's lagging level of political participation—is now absent in Wyoming. However, the conservative political culture of Wyoming has also held back the "new" gender gap of broad issue differences between men and women, although the "old" gap concerning pacifism and morality clearly exists.

During the autumn of 1982, the Reagan administration advocated the deployment of the MX missile in a "densepack" to be located at Warren AFB near Cheyenne in the southeast corner of Wyoming, although the plan was subsequently modified under strong national public pressure. Wyoming was evidently chosen as the site of densepack both because of its strategic location and, perhaps more importantly, because of the state's apparent support for the missile which was lacking in other potential sites, even the normally conservative and pro-defense Utah. Wyoming is fairly conservative politically and, in recent years, has been one of the most Republican states in the Union.⁸ While some anti-MX groups existed at this time and were to become much stronger later, public opposition to and protest against the MX was still

fairly muted; and the MX was supported by most political leaders and a majority of the citizenry.⁹

The survey used here contained two questions directly concerning the MX. The first asked whether the respondent favored or opposed the development of the MX in general; and the second queried support for the densepack deployment at Warren AFB. In 1982, Wyomingites favored the development of the MX by a fairly substantial margin of 47% to 32%. This contrasted to an almost similar margin of opposition among the American population as a whole.¹⁰ However, Wyoming citizens were almost equally divided about bringing densepack to their own state (40% for vs 41% against), indicating a significant amount of qualms about local deployment even among people who believed that the development of the MX was desirable.

Only a slight increase occurred over time in support for the MX system which rose to 53% - 34% in 1984 and 1986. A major change occurred in feelings toward basing the MX in Wyoming, however. In 1982, there was an almost even division of public opinion on this issue, but just two years later Wyomingites favored placing the MX in Wyoming by a 49% - 33% margin, approximating the division on the MX in general (unfortunately a separate question for MXWYO was not asked in 1986).

Table 2 presents the correlations between support for the two MX items and an array of variables tapping a person's socioeconomic characteristics, partisan attachments, traditionalism and religiousity, economic situation, and foreign policy attitudes. The effects of these explanatory variables can appear in two ways. First, a moderate or high correlation shows a direct impact; second, a substantial difference between an item's associations with the two MX items is also significant in light of their strong logical and empirical ($\gamma = .88$) intercorrelation.

Gender exhibits both effects. In 1982, women's greater pacifism noted above did not translate into greater opposition to the MX per se ($\gamma = -.07$). In stark contrast, women clearly took the more pacifistic position on bringing the MX to Warren AFB. Men favored deployment by a 60% - 40% margin, while women opposed it by an even greater rate of 63% - 37%. The resulting γ of $-.44$ was the second strongest between the various independent variables and MXWYO, which contrasted greatly to the absence of a relationship between gender and position on developing the MX missile. Thus, while Wyoming women apparently did not see Reagan's defense build-up as represented by funding the MX as particularly threatening, the possibility of its being deployed close to their home communities

was perceived as much more dangerous.

Table 2

Correlates of Support for the MX

	Development of MX			Deployment of MX in Wyoming	
	1982	1984	1986	1982	1984
	Gender	-.07	-.20	-.15	-.44
Education	-.12	-.07	-.03	-.00	-.02
Income	.08	.22	.07	.13	.19
Age	.03	.03	.06	.16	.15
Belief in God	.30	--	--	.10	--
Bible Literal	.18	.28	.24	.01	.17
Econ Stress	-.02	-.25	-.07	-.06	-.23
Business Occup	-.09	.12	.11	.28	.26
County	-.10	.37	.38	.06	.36
Conservatism	.23	.28	.20	.21	.36
Republican ID	.12	.43	.34	.08	.35
Reagan Approval	.29	.65	.48	.34	.56
Suppt. More Def. Spd.	.75	.82	.74	.64	.73
Tougher on USSR	.58	.52	.48	.41	.45
Fear Nuclear War	-.13	-.25	-.20	-.22	-.28

Despite the large jump in total support for deploying the MX in Wyoming in 1984, this basic gender difference remained unchanged. Gender's correlation with attitudes about deploying the MX in Wyoming decreased slightly from -.44 in 1982 to -.33 in 1984 but still remained quite significant. In addition, a moderate tendency that had not been present in 1982 emerged for women to be less supportive than men of the entire MX system (gamma = -.20 in 1984 and -.15 in 1986). Thus, women's continued greater opposition to basing the MX in Wyoming

seemingly began to be generalized toward greater opposition to the MX as a whole. This, in turn, suggests a broader ideological division which could be the first step toward the development of the "new" gender gap in the state.

The strongest correlates of opinion about the MX, as might well be expected, were support for spending more on defense and for taking a tougher line toward the Soviet Union, indicating the existence of a defense-oriented attitudinal syndrome. The former had very high correlations averaging .77 with MX and .68 with MXWYO; and the latter, while somewhat lower, were still in the fairly strong .40 - .60 range. Between 1982 and 1984, the correlations of attitudes about deploying the MX in Wyoming to both defense items rose, indicating that it was becoming increasingly integrated into the "normal" defense syndrome. Fear of nuclear war had a surprisingly slight association with attitudes about developing the MX, but its correlation with deploying the MX in Wyoming was significantly higher ($\gamma = -.22$ vs $-.13$) implying that nearness made the danger of nuclear weapons more salient. Over time its correlations with both MX items increased significantly as well.

As would be expected in view of the strong partisan elements in the debate over defense questions and the MX, there was some association between partisan position and support for the MX. In 1982, this relationship was only moderate at best, with most of the gammas in the .20 - .30 range, probably because of the overall conservative and defense-oriented nature of the state's public opinion. Approval of President Reagan had higher associations than conservatism or Republican Party identification with both MX and MXWYO, indicating the strong personalistic component of this relationship. The impact of partisanship became much stronger as attitudes on defense elicited much more of a partisan cleavage in the middle 1980's than they did in 1982. For example, the correlation of Reagan approval rose from .29 to .65 with the MX and from .34 to .56 with the MXWYO between 1982 and 1984.

Economic factors also might have stimulated some support for deploying the MX in Wyoming. Three such items are examined here. First, businessmen who might perceive densepack as bringing more people and profits to southeastern Wyoming did not differ much from the general population in evaluations of the general missile system but were significantly more supportive about the Wyoming siting of densepack in both 1982 and 1984. Second, residency in Laramie County, the site of Warren AFB, was not significantly correlated with either MX item in 1982. However, the difference in these low correlations ($-.10$ for MX and

.06 for MXWYO) was large enough to at least hint at some economic effects. Moreover, location became a very significant factor later as residence in Laramie County had correlations of nearly .40 with both MX items in 1984, as opposed to its lack of association two years earlier, implying that the perceived financial benefits of the project had become much more salient. Third, people facing economic hardship might also favor the MX for its stimulative effects upon the economy, but an index of economic stress¹¹ was generally uncorrelated with either MX item. Thus, economic conditions exercised a limited, but far from overwhelming, influence on attitudes about the MX. In contrast, the other socioeconomic factors besides gender had little impact on support for the MX. Finally, belief in God and in a literal interpretation of the Bible, as indicators of traditional values, had their expected moderate associations with support for developing the MX. However, these relationships almost vanished for deploying the missile in Wyoming.

Determinants of Support

Multiple regression analysis was then applied to decipher the relative impact of these various potential predictor variables upon attitudes toward the MX. These regressions were run in a two-stage fashion. First, all the independent variables were entered into a regression analysis (somewhat surprisingly, none of their intercorrelations were high enough to cause problems of multicollinearity). On the basis of these initial results, a second multiple regression was performed with just those predictors that were statistically significant in the first runs. Table 3 presents these regression results for the two MX items in 1982 and 1984.

The regression results about influences on support for developing the MX missile system in Table 3 show that this issue is part of a larger defense-oriented syndrome. For 1982, the Multiple R of .52 is fairly high for an attitudinal item. Beliefs that the US should spend more for defense and take a tougher stance toward the Soviet Union were by far the strongest determinants of attitudes toward the MX with betas of .36 and .25 respectively. To a much lesser extent, people with traditional belief systems, as indicated by religiosity, favored the MX. The results for 1984 were quite similar. The Multiple R was slightly higher at .60, and defense orientation was still the strongest determinant. In addition, partisanship in the form of approval for President Reagan had become the second most important independent variable, and residence in Laramie County exercised a marginally independent effect as well.

Table 3

Determinants of Support for MX and MXWYO Items

	MX		MXWYO	
	1982	1984	1982	1984
Overall Impact	Mult R .52	Mult R .60	Mult R .45	Mult R .52
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
<u>Relative Influences</u>				
Incr Def Spd	.36	.39	.27	.31
Gender	--	--	-.19	-.13
Tougher on USSR	.25	.14	.15	.13
Reagan Approval	--	.20	.13	.17
Laramie County	--	.10	--	.11
Belief in God	.08	--	--	--
Income	--	.10	--	--

The causal pattern for support of deploying the MX in Wyoming was significantly different. As would be expected, attitudes about bringing the MX to Wyoming were clearly related to the "defense syndrome" discussed above. Support for more defense spending and for being tougher on the Russians ranked first and third in explanatory impact with betas of .27 and .15 in 1982. Yet, this tie to the other defense issues was somewhat weaker than for feelings about developing the MX system which accounts for the slightly lower Multiple R of .45. In addition, several variables that were not significant for explaining attitudes toward the development of the MX had a discernible impact here. Gender had a strong independent impact on support for using Cheyenne as the site of densepack as it had the second highest beta of -.19. Approval of President Reagan was also significant with a beta of .13 implying that for Wyomingites, a home-state deployment of the MX was more of a partisan matter in a generally pro-defense state than simply developing a new weapons system. As for the MX, partisanship and location had a stronger impact on MXWYO in 1984 than in 1982. Women continued to be significantly more opposed to deploying the MX in Wyoming than men even after other relevant attitudes and characteristics were controlled, although the strength of this impact declined a little (beta = -.19 in 1982 and .13 in 1984).

Multivariate analysis, thus, confirms the bivariate results that gender was an important determinant of attitudes

about deploying the MX in Wyoming. Three separate effects might potentially exist here. First, in terms of the "new gender gap," women would be expected to be less supportive of President Reagan and the Republican Party; and, since these partisan factors affect attitudes toward defense and the MX, gender should have a pronounced indirect impact through partisanship. However, this affect is very limited in Wyoming because gender is only marginally associated with partisanship. Second, the "old gender gap" of women's greater pacifism could be reflected in two different causal patterns. One would be an indirect effect through women's lesser support of defense spending; and the other would be the direct causal impact of gender for deploying densepack at Warren AFB. The greater pacifism of women undoubtedly accounted for some of their opposition to MXWYO. However, since the correlation of gender with attitudes about bringing the MX to Warren AFB was significantly stronger than with generalized pacifism items, other influences must have been at work as well.

One possibility is suggested by the facts that women are considerably more likely to have religious values than men and that their religiosity had a substantially stronger relationship with support for developing the MX than deploying it in Wyoming. This implies that more traditionally oriented women (indicated here by religiosity)¹² were subject to fears that densepack might constitute a danger to their immediate family or community. While such traditional women are normally more conservative politically and, thus, less likely to express pacifist values, it might be hypothesized that their greater concern with family and community environment would make them especially sensitive to the potential threat of densepack.

Impact of Ideology and Traditionalism

Examining men and women separately provides a test of this hypothesis about the direct impact of gender on support for MXWYO. Normally, pacifism would be expected to possess a negative relationship to conservatism and traditional values. Table 4, which examines the relationship of defense orientations to conservatism and traditionalism controlling for gender, shows that in 1982 this was true for support of increased defense spending among both sexes. For men, this relationship remained about the same for attitudes on the two MX issues. For women, in contrast, there was a steady drop off in the correlation of conservatism and belief in God with attitudes toward defense spending ($\gamma = .27$ and $.29$ respectively) through their lower association with support for developing the MX ($\gamma = .18$ and

.23) to their absence of a significant relationship to attitudes about bringing the MX to Wyoming ($\gamma = .07$ and $.16$). This declining relationship, furthermore, primarily results from the much greater drop in support of conservative and traditional women, as opposed to similar men, for developing the MX in Wyoming as shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Impact of Ideology and Traditionalism on Defense Attitudes Controlling for Sex

	1982			
	Men		Women	
	Conser- vatism	Belief in God	Conser- vatism	Belief in God
Increase Defense Exps.	.34	.35	.27	.29
Develop MX	.27	.38	.18	.23
Deploy MX in Wyoming	.31	.23	.07	.16

	1984			
	Men		Women	
	Conser- vatism	Literal Bible	Conser- vatism	Literal Bible
Defense Spending	.41	.29	.30	.29
MX	.31	.37	.23	.23
MXWYO	.48	.35	.24	.04

Table 5

Percentage of Supporters for Defense Items by Sex and by Ideology and Religion

	Men		Women	
	Increase Defense Spending	Deploy MX in Wyoming	Increase Defense Spending	Deploy MX in Wyoming
Liberals	55%	49%	48%	31%
Conservatives	78%	68%	65%	39%
Atheists	41%	43%	23%	25%
Strong Believers	74%	63%	60%	38%

Furthermore, the tendency for more traditionally oriented women to oppose this deployment that was observed in 1982 was almost as strong in 1984, as indicated by the correlations in Table 4. As in 1982, conservatism and traditionalism both had the expected moderately positive correlations with all the defense items for men. For women, this association was a little lower but still significant for defense spending and for the MX system as a whole. Unlike 1982, conservative women were more likely to support basing the MX in Wyoming by similar margins to the other two defense items. However, there was no relationship at all between traditionalism and stance on this issue for women, again indicating the cross pressures on traditional women.

Attitudes toward the MX among men, hence, are part of an overall defense orientation syndrome that elicited the strongest support from conservatives and more traditional men. Women exhibited somewhat greater pacifism than men on general attitudes toward defense; and this pacifism explains some of their much greater opposition to deploying densepack in Wyoming. In addition, women who were conservatives and strong believers in God were much less supportive of bringing the MX to Wyoming than might have been expected given the relationships among these attitudes that were found in males. This opposition, it might be hypothesized, probably stemmed from the "home orientation" of many of the traditional women who, despite their normally conservative leanings, saw the nearby deployment of the MX as threatening their families and communities.

Conclusion

This paper examined the nature of the gender gap in Wyoming and used it to explain the fairly strong relationship that was found between gender and attitudes about President Reagan's proposal to deploy the MX missile in a densepack system in the southeast corner of the state. The gender gap in Wyoming appears to be a mix of what we called the "old" and "new" gaps. The difference in male and female participation levels, which formed the core of the "old" gap is absent in Wyoming. However, gender differences in political attitudes among Wyomingites still follow the "old" pattern of being limited to a comparatively few issues concerning international peace and personal/family morality and security. This mix of the "old" and "new" gender gaps reflects the state's political culture which blends conservative and traditional standards with elements reflecting individualism and a commitment to women's equality. More broadly, the fact that the state's political culture evidently influences gender

differentiation is consistent with the socialization approach to explaining women's political attributes which argues that cultural norms shape gender role definitions and differentiation.

While gender had surprisingly little association with support for the development of the MX missile in 1982, both bivariate and multivariate analysis showed it to be a strong determinant of attitudes about basing densepack in Wyoming. Gender's impact here almost totally followed the lines of the "old" gender gap as it exercised almost no influence through male/female differences in partisan evaluations. The contribution of the "old" gender gap to explaining attitudes about densepack took two distinct forms. The first was women's greater pacifism which tended to be expressed by more liberal women. The second, in contrast, came from the apparent fears of many traditionally oriented women, who would normally be expected to assume conservative political stances, that the advent of densepack would threaten their family and community environments. This indicates that even in the absence of the "new" gender gap very significant political differences may exist between the sexes and suggests that such a wide "old" gap on a highly salient issue, such as where to deploy the MX, could well be the first step toward stimulating the broader "new" gap, even in a conservative political culture like Wyoming's.

These findings are also consistent with Emily Stoper's argument that the "old" and "new" gender gaps are not diametrically distinct. Rather, women in the United States have always differed from men in terms of their primary issue interests. What has changed over time is the salience and partisan linkage of these issues.¹³ The data presented here demonstrate that women's family-related concerns became politically relevant when certain conditions (e. g., nearby deployment) bring home the relevance of more distant and abstract events (e.g., the development of a new strategic weapon). Thus, the gender gap results, not from the recent growth of issue and partisan differences between the sexes, but from a changed environment which brings long-standing differences into the political arena.

FOOTNOTES

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⁴Carol M. Mueller, ed., *The Politics of the Gender Gap: The Social Construction of Political Influence*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988).

⁵Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*; and Stoper, "The Gender Gap Concealed and Revealed".

⁶Tim R. Miller, *State Government: Politics in Wyoming* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1981), Chapters 1 & 7.

⁷Data for this study of Wyoming public opinion about the MX were taken from the 1982, 1984, and 1986 Election Studies of the University of Wyoming's Government Research Bureau that were conducted in late October with samples of about 1,000. These poll results were within two percentage points of the final election returns for almost all major Wyoming races.

⁸B. Oliver Walter, "Wyoming," in B. Oliver Walter, ed., *Politics in the West: The 1978 Elections* (Laramie, WY: Institute for Policy Research, University of Wyoming, 1979); and B. Oliver Walter, "Wyoming: Conservative and Republican But Not Always So," *Social Science Journal*, October, 1981.

⁹Kenyon Griffin and Joseph Hagan, "Thinking the Unthinkable for Your Own Backyard: The MX in Wyoming," *Western Governmental Research Journal*, Fall 1982.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹This index was calculated from a person's employment status, perceived likelihood of being laid off, and reported improvement or decline in family financial conditions.

¹²Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963).

¹³Stoper, "The Gender Gap Concealed and Revealed".