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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES ABOUT THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT¹

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The views of policymakers, activists, and citizens in Lawrence, Kansas, on seven local policy concepts are examined. Women are found to be more supportive than men of public welfare and neighborhood protection against economic development. Less pronounced gender differences are observed on other policy concepts associated with liberal and conservative ideology. These findings suggest that the "public-and-private-spheres" theoretical perspective provides a better guide than ideology to gender differences on local policy concepts.

Until recently social scientists have found few significant differences in the public policy orientations of men and women (see, for example, Pomper, 1975). However, public opinion polls discovered a significant "gender gap" in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections, with men more supportive than women of Ronald Reagan. Because Reagan was widely viewed as more conservative than both Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, it was thought that these gender differences in support for presidential candidates indicated that men had become more conservative than women (Schubert, 1985:21-31). Such assumptions have prompted social scientists to reconsider the question of gender differences in policy preferences (see, for example, Rossi, 1983, and Shaffer, 1985). However, such investigations have focused on national policy issues; gender differences in attitudes about the policy orientations of local governments have been inadequately explored (Githens, 1983:483; Sapiro, 1983:150).

Research concerning divergent preferences of men and women on local public policies needs to measure middle-range abstract policy concepts

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(Clausen, 1973:16-17), rather than measuring only preferences on specific public policies or more abstract ideological orientations. Gender cleavages have been found to be frequent occurrences on specific local issues (Burns and Schumaker, 1986), but if gender differences in preferences on such issues cannot be related adequately to broader policy goals, then general theoretical propositions about gender differences in politics cannot be developed. And differences regarding the overall ideological orientations of men and women are perhaps too general, as one's ideological perspective may be defined by national (or state) policy issues and because few people have unidimensional ideologies defining their preferences on a variety of policy concepts. In this research note, we argue that gender differences on local policy concepts are inadequately described in terms of a single liberal-conservative ideological dimension. To argue that women are more liberal than men is to imply gender differences on a wide variety of policy concepts. However, women may be more liberal than men on only some specific policy concepts, there being no significant gender differences on other policy concepts addressed in liberal or conservative ideology (Jennings and Farah, 1981:473; Sapiro, 1983:153; Baxter and Lansing, 1983:57). A more appropriate description of gender differences on local policy concepts is provided by the "public-and-private-spheres" theoretical perspective.²

According to Sapiro (1983:30-31), the public-and-private-spheres approach defines two endpoints of a value continuum which shapes men's and women's relationships with politics. Men's political concerns tend to center around business, competition, and power—concerns which have been labeled as "public." In contrast, women's political concerns tend to center "around the themes of social welfare and nurturance, both of which can be seen as extrapolations of domestic values and roles" (Sapiro, 1983:159)—concerns which have been labeled as "private." In this paper, this theoretical perspective is extended by (a) challenging the notions that "private" orientations are unconcerned with issues of public policy and thus are irrelevant politically and (b) suggesting some specific gender differences regarding policy concepts which result from these contrasting "private" and "public" orientations. More specifically, we argue that the public-and-private-spheres approach suggests gender differences on a smaller number of policy concepts than does an approach that focuses on the ideological differences between men and women. Since there is some overlap between liberal values and "private" values,

²Of the various theoretical approaches to the politics of gender, the public-and-private-spheres approach is most concerned with the content of the policy orientations of men and women. The socialization approach (e.g., Githens and Prestage, 1977) and the structural/situational approach (e.g., Welch, 1977) focus more on the source of political attitudes, especially as they relate to political participation. The power elite approach (e.g., McDonald and Pierson, 1984) assumes that women have different policy orientations than men, but does not specify these differences.

women seem to be more liberal than men—but only on policy concepts dealing with "private" values.

Seven Policy Concepts

As part of a larger research project concerning gender cleavages and the resolution of local policy issues, we asked samples of 935 citizens, 206 activists, and 36 policymakers in Lawrence, Kansas,³ about their views on seven policy concepts concerning local government. To measure orientations on these concepts, respondents were presented with contrasting viewpoints concerning each policy concept and were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with these viewpoints. If a person agreed equally with both viewpoints or was neutral about them, a score of "0" was assigned. If a person agreed strongly or moderately with the conservative position on the policy concept, a score of "2" or "1," respectively, was assigned. If a person agreed strongly or moderately with the liberal position on a policy concept, a score of "-2" or "-1," respectively, was assigned. The seven policy concepts, their alternative liberal and conservative positions, and their alternative "private" and "public" positions are as follows:

1. Social Liberty versus the Regulation of Morality

Liberal Position: "The local government should not try to legislate individual behavior—even for those individuals whose actions are self-destructive—as long as these people don't harm others."

Conservative Position: "The local government should enact and enforce laws upholding the moral standards of the majority in the community."

While some research has suggested that women are more conservative than men in supporting the regulation of morality (Greenstein, 1965), women might increasingly oppose the regulation of morality given the diffusion of feminist consciousness and its stress on the individual's right to choose one's own life-style (Klein, 1984). The public-and-private-spheres approach does not assert that men and women will tend to have different positions on this issue.

³Lawrence is a progressive university community where women have been relatively involved in local issues as policymakers and activists. All 36 persons occupying the most important policymaking positions (city and county commissioners, school and hospital board members, and agency heads) between 1980 and 1984 were interviewed; 11 were women. We identified and interviewed 206 of the most visible activists on 30 community issues which arose between 1980 and 1984; 54 were women. Citizen data were drawn from two surveys employing random-digit-dialing techniques conducted in 1984 ($n = 406$) and 1986 ($n = 612$). There were few differences between our 1984 and 1986 results, so these surveys were combined for present purposes; omitting respondents with missing data on the policy concepts resulted in 935 usable responses.

2. Progressive versus Regressive Taxation

Liberal Position: "In local government, residents should be taxed mainly on the principle of the ability to pay, as when higher-income persons pay (proportionately) higher taxes."

Conservative Position: "In local government, residents should be taxed mainly on the principle of equal taxes for equal services, as when all residents are charged a common monthly fee for garbage collection."

Progressive taxes should be strongly linked to the liberal concern for redistribution and more economic equality. But economic class, not gender, should be the main determinant of preferences regarding tax distribution principles. The public-and-private-spheres approach offers no basis for predicting gender differences on this issue.

3. More versus Less Governmental Spending and Taxation

Liberal Position: "The city government should provide more and better services even if taxes must be raised proportionately."

Conservative Position: "The city government should reduce spending on governmental services to keep taxes down, even if the quality of services is reduced proportionately."

While large government is strongly associated with liberalism in recent U.S. experience, the public-and-private-spheres approach provides no basis for predicting that women would be more supportive than men of greater governmental spending and taxes. While women may be more supportive of governmental expenditures in certain areas (e.g., welfare), men may be more supportive of governmental expenditures in other areas (e.g., economic development). The public-and-private-spheres approach suggests that gender differences concern the distribution, rather than the level, of governmental services.

4. Public Welfare versus Private Giving

The Liberal and Private Position: "The city government should distribute more funds to social service agencies in the community—to better provide for the needy—even if taxes must be raised."

The Conservative and Public Position: "Social services should be supported by private contributions, such as through the United Fund, and local government should reduce allocations for social welfare purposes."

While support for governmental welfare provisions should be high among liberals, higher levels of support for public welfare should also be found among women generally—as local social services tend to be viewed as natural extensions of the nurturance functions associated with "private" values (Sapiro, 1983; Shaffer, 1985:8, 21; Gelb and Gittell, 1986).

5. "Justice" versus "the Public Interest"

The Liberal and Private Position: "If a project poses significant burdens on specific individuals in the community, it should usually be abandoned even if most citizens would benefit by it."⁴

The Conservative and Public Position: "If a project is generally beneficial for the community as a whole (or for most citizens in the community), city officials should approve and promote that project even if a few individuals are hurt by it."

Recent liberal theories of justice question the legitimacy of subjugating individuals to collective purposes (Rawls, 1971). Utilitarian conceptions of justice—stressing the greater good for the greater number, even if some individuals are harmed—seem more compatible with contemporary conservatism. However, the public-and-private-spheres approach may provide a better guide to this policy concept. According to Sapiro (1983:30–31, 104, 159) women exhibit greater sympathy for "least advantaged persons," again because of their greater concern for nurturance, harmony, and particularism (see also Gelb and Gittell, 1986).

6. Opposition or Support for Economic Subsidies

The (Arguably) Liberal and Private Position: "The city should reduce its willingness to subsidize specific firms, as this often ends up costing tax dollars and giving an unfair competitive advantage to the recipient of the subsidy."

The (Arguably) Conservative and Public Position: "The city should be more willing to provide tax incentives, services, and other inducements to attract new industry and commerce to the community."

Of the seven policy concepts, the subsidy issue is the most difficult to characterize in terms of liberal and conservative ideology. Most conservatives and neoconservatives espousing free market approaches should, in principle, reject such subsidies. However, support for subsidies is here labeled "conservative" because it is often argued that the major cleavage in local politics is between conservative "growth machine" forces and "slow growth" forces on the political left (Kann, 1986:38–44).

The public-and-private-spheres approach may be a more useful guide than ideology in predicting one's position with respect to supporting subsidies for economic growth. Because male preferences tend to be influenced more by the values of the "public" world of business and enterprise, men should be more supportive than women of governmental encouragement of economic growth through subsidies. Moreover, the greater influence of the "private"

⁴In framing our liberal position, we retreated from a strictly Rawlsian perspective that defines disadvantaged persons in terms of socioeconomic class. Pretesting of this question suggested that few persons could give meaningful responses when the question was framed in more precise Rawlsian terms.

sphere upon women's values may lead to a greater concern about the disruption to community and neighborhood life that can result from such economic growth.

7. Neighbors' Rights versus Property Rights

The Liberal and Private Position: "City officials should be more sensitive to the rights of neighbors when developers want to build facilities that change the character of neighborhoods and adversely affect others in the neighborhood."

The Conservative and Public Position: "City officials should be more sensitive to the rights of property owners in the city, allowing them more latitude to use and develop their property as they see fit or in accordance with forces in the free market."

Both liberals and women seeking to protect and preserve their immediate environment (Gelb and Gittell, 1986) should support governmental regulation of development to protect neighborhoods, more than should conservatives and men.

If the liberal-conservative ideological continuum is to serve as a useful conceptual device for thinking about gender differences on public policy preferences, then men and women should exhibit significant differences on each of six policy concepts—only the subsidization for economic growth issue seems poorly defined on a conservative-liberal continuum. In contrast, only four of these policy concepts seem to have clear "public" and "private" positions. If women differ from men on the issues of public welfare, justice for the least advantaged, economic subsidies, and neighborhood protection—but not on the other issues—we would argue that the public-and-private-spheres approach provides a better guide to identifying gender differences on local policy concepts than does ideology.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the results. The first rows show that policymakers, activists, and citizens all have slightly left-of-center distributions on self-identified ideology (liberal views are indicated by negative signs in the last three columns of Table 1 showing the direction of men's and women's orientations and the distances between them). Women identify themselves as slightly more liberal than men, although the differences between men and women are significant for activists only.

The first two columns show how the self-defined ideological orientations of men and women relate to preferences on the seven policy concepts. As suggested above, support for social liberty, progressive taxes, more governmental spending and taxing, public welfare, and neighborhood protection tends to be found among self-defined liberals. Respondents' self-defined

TABLE 1
Gender and Abstract Policy Concepts

Contrasting Philosophical Orientation ^a	Correlations with Conservatism			Average Distances from Neutrality ^b			Distances between Women and Men
	Women		Men	Women		Men	
	Policymakers (n = 11) Activists (n = 54) Citizens (n = 450)	Policymakers (n = 25) Activists (n = 152) Citizens (n = 485)	PM ACT CIT	PM ACT CIT	PM ACT CIT	PM ACT CIT	
Liberal/conservative	—	—	—	-0.27	-0.08	-0.19	-0.67**
Social liberty/regulate morality	.37 .61** .17**	.44* .48** .15**	-0.45 -0.31 -0.10	-0.27 -0.18 -0.18	-0.09	-0.09	
Progressive/regressive taxes	.55* .04 .17**	.01 .42** .12*	-0.10 0.66 0.09	-0.10 0.12 0.16	-0.06	-0.25	
More/less government spending and taxation	.08 .10* .57* .72** .31**	.59** .48** .13* .43* .60** .23**	-0.91 -0.67 -0.48 -1.09 -0.71 -0.30	-0.60 -0.27 -0.35 0.32 -0.02 -0.05	-0.08	-0.08	
Public welfare/private giving							-1.41** -0.69**
Justice/public interest	-0.23	.13 .08 .04 .06	.22** .11* .057 .08	.027 .059 .057 .073	1.04 0.72 0.57 0.44	0.00 0.00 0.00 0.29	-0.13 -0.13 0.00 -0.25*
Oppose/support economic subsidies							-0.40* -0.77* -0.13 -0.25*
Neighbors' rights/property rights							

^aOrientations of women, as hypothesized by the public-and-private-spheres approach, are underlined.

^bNegative distance scores indicate liberal orientation; positive distance scores indicate conservative orientation.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

ideology is only weakly related to their policy concept dealing with "justice" versus "the public interest," and is unrelated to their preferences regarding economic subsidies. On the whole, men and women relate various policy concepts to ideology in similar manners. Interestingly, the most noticeable differences are between men and women policymakers. Men policymakers seem to locate their ideological orientation principally in terms of their preferences regarding governmental spending, while women policymakers seem to locate their ideological orientation in terms of their preferences regarding progressive taxation, public welfare, and neighborhood preservation.

The final three columns deal with gender differences on the seven policy concepts. The third and fourth columns indicate the average distance scores from neutrality (0) of women and men, respectively. Thus, men and women policymakers, activists, and citizens in Lawrence all tend to be left of center on the issues of regulating morality and increasing governmental spending and taxation, and men and women tend to be right of center on the issue of tax distribution. As indicated in the fifth column, men and women have few significant differences on these issues.

Our results also show that women are more liberal than men on the issues of public welfare and neighborhood protection. These findings are consistent with expectations from the public-and-private-spheres approach. Weaker gender differences were discovered on the "justice versus public interest" question, as only women policymakers were more liberal and "private" in their greater concern than men for "justice." Women activists and citizens were also less supportive of economic subsidies than their male counterparts, as predicted by the public-and-private-spheres approach. Thus, the greater liberalism of women than men is most pronounced on policy concepts dealing with the role of local government in protecting neighborhoods from unwanted economic development and in providing more extensive welfare services.

Table 1 also provides insights into the representation of these differing policy concepts in the policy process. Women policymakers in Lawrence seem to represent well private values regarding social services; indeed women policymakers are more liberal and "private" than women activists and citizens in preferring public welfare and being concerned with least advantaged citizens. But on issues of economic growth and neighborhood preservation, women policymakers have values which reflect the "public" concerns of their male counterparts better than the more "private" concerns of women activists and citizens. Thus the more "private" values of women activists and citizens are imperfectly represented at the policymaker level.

Conclusions

These results suggest both the value and the limitation of the assertion that women are more liberal than men in their attitudes about the role of local

government. Women seem to be more liberal in wanting government to regulate economic development to protect neighborhood values, and women seem to be more liberal in wanting local governments to provide more extensive public welfare. But women are not more liberal on a variety of other liberal policy concepts such as increasing governmental services and taxes and making the local tax base more progressive. The public-and-private-spheres approach correctly predicts the policy concepts where gender differences occur, and thus provides a more useful model than ideology for understanding gender differences on policy concepts.

This note concludes with the admonition that it may be premature to bury the public-and-private-spheres approach, which has been subjected to numerous criticisms (see, for example, Elshtain, 1981, and Githens, 1984). Perhaps the labels "public" and "private" are misleading. Women's "private" concerns for neighborhood and welfare are, of course, matters of "public" policy. What is private about these concerns is that they are derived from values that seek to provide neighborhood and family security, rather than the "unitary" public interest of economic development (Peterson, 1981). Despite this confusion, and perhaps with some revision, the public-and-private-spheres approach is valuable as an empirical tool for understanding women's and men's relationships with politics. The "public" sphere disproportionately occupied by men and the "private" sphere disproportionately occupied by women seem to continue to influence the political attitudes of men and women. SSQ

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