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An Intensifying Urban–Rural Schism in U.S. Women’s Preference for Governmental Solutions to Social Problems

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During the Reagan Revolution, a significant gender gap emerged, accompanied by an urban–rural schism in party preference by gender, one manifestation of the nation’s widening urban–rural divide. Using the General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1972 to 2018, we explore this urban–rural schism in party preference by running several ordinary least squares models and specifications. Controlling for individuals’ traits, we find that differences in the preference for governmental action to address social problems lie at the heart of this gender gap and are further explained by location. Urban women are far more likely than urban men to call for the government to solve problems of income inequality; rural women, like rural men, are much more likely to emphasize individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. **Key Words:** compassion, gender gap, political geography, social geography, urban–rural schism.

在里根革命期间,严重的性别差异开始浮现,政党在性别偏好方面也出现了城乡分裂的现象,这体现出了美国不断加大的城乡差距。我们使用了1972年至2018年的《社会普查》(GSS)数据,并通过运行几种普通的最小二乘模型和参数,探索党派偏好中的城乡分裂现象。对个人特征进行控制后,我们发现解决社会问题的政府行动存在偏好差异,这也正是性别差距的核心所在,其可以通过位置来进一步解释。与城市男性相比,城市女性呼吁政府解决收入不平等问题的可能性更大;农村女性则如农村男性一样,更倾向于强调个人责任感和自给自足。关键词:同情心,性别差异,政治地理,社会地理,城乡分裂。

Durante la revolución Reagan apareció una brecha de género significativa, acompañada de un cisma urbano–rural en las preferencias de partido político por género, una manifestación de la ampliación de la divisoria urbano–rural en la nación americana. Usando datos del Estudio Social General (GSS) de 1972 a 2018, exploramos este cisma urbano–rural por preferencia de partido aplicando varias especificaciones y modelos ordinarios de mínimos cuadrados. Tomando en cuenta los rasgos de los individuos, hallamos que las diferencias en las preferencias por la acción gubernamental para afrontar los problemas sociales se ubican en el centro de esta brecha y además son explicados por la localización. De lejos las mujeres urbanas son más propensas que los hombres urbanos para demandar que el gobierno solucione los problemas de desigualdad de ingreso; las mujeres rurales, lo mismo que los varones rurales, están mucho más inclinadas a enfatizar la responsabilidad individual y la autosuficiencia. **Palabras clave:** cisma urbano–rural, compasión, brecha de género, geografía política, geografía social.

Empirical evidence documents a growing spatial polarization in recent years in the United States (Yamamoto 2007; Bishop 2009; Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011; Kemeny and Storper 2012; Sussell and Thompson 2015; Spicer 2017; Storper 2018). Of particular interest is the geographical polarization between rural–urban areas in political preferences, attitudes, and voting behavior by gender. Increasingly, gender has been playing a central role in U.S. politics and in many ways reflects a recent trend in politics. For many years it was believed that women saw political candidates and policies similar to men; therefore, it was assumed that their voting and gender patterns did not matter much in voting decisions in U.S. politics (Carroll and Fox 2010). Today the opposite proves to be true: Women and

men have different positions on many issues and tend to vary in their party identifications. This gender gap has led to the increased political influence and involvement of women in politics.¹

A deeper historical analysis of the gender gap in politics shows that at the onset of the suffragist movement women were perceived as mothers and caregivers and usually were not considered to have a distinctive woman’s vote. Women’s voting patterns did not change much after 1920 when women gained the right to vote. As Carroll and Fox (2010) argued, it was only after the 1980s that a sufficient number of women finally achieved the social and psychological independence necessary to bring divergence in the voting patterns of women and men. In addition, at that point in time, women became more and more

self-sufficient and economically independent from men, which shifted their political priorities. Several factors cemented the formation of a distinctive women’s vote: high divorce rates; more women living on their own heading their own households; women holding professional and managerial positions that provide them with sufficient incomes to support themselves with increased independence from men; and contemporary women’s movements starting with the women’s liberation groups in the 1960s, with women recognizing that they have their own distinct concerns.

The Ronald Reagan era was a catalyst for the gender gap. Although differences had emerged in the voting choices of men and women since the end of World War II, it was not until the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 that the gender gap appeared as a significant feature of presidential elections. Reagan’s stances alienated women and empowered men. Women reacted negatively to his support for defense spending and use of military power and to his plans to trim the welfare state. Men’s pride in being Americans and exercising world leadership led to a surge in their feelings of well-being. A 7 percent gap in party support—men favoring Republicans and women favoring Democrats—became a permanent feature of presidential elections. Much has been written about the gap, and both male- and female-centered theories have emerged, but to date no one has explored one manifestation of the gap: It is not consistent over all locations. Rather, there is an urban–rural schism. The gap is small to negligible in rural areas, small towns, and many suburbs but

increases with city size to a maximum in the nation’s largest cities. It is this urban–rural schism in the gender gap that is explored in this study.

We begin by laying out some of the basic facts, as captured by the General Social Survey (GSS) for the period of 1972 to 2018, and then review the male- and female-centered theories advanced to explain this gender gap. The male-focused theories lead to the literature on happiness and to the hypothesis that the spatial variations of the gender gap are a manifestation of an urban–rural happiness gradient. The female-centered theories lead to the well-established concepts of big-city malaise and to women’s concerns about inequality and welfare. The third section of the article models and tests whether happiness and compassion hypotheses help explain the spatial schism in the gap. A final section assesses the results of the modeling exercise.

A Gap and a Schism

During the 1980s, the electorate moved toward the Republican Party, men more than women, as can be seen in Figure 1. The resulting cleavage, the “gender gap” (Wirls 1986, 316), was firmly established by the 1990s when a surge of voters self-identifying as independents stemmed further Republican gains. By then women had become “the majority of the Democratic party by default and not by active realignment,” even as their support for the Democrats sagged from pre-Reagan levels (Wirls 1986, 327; also see Miller 1991).

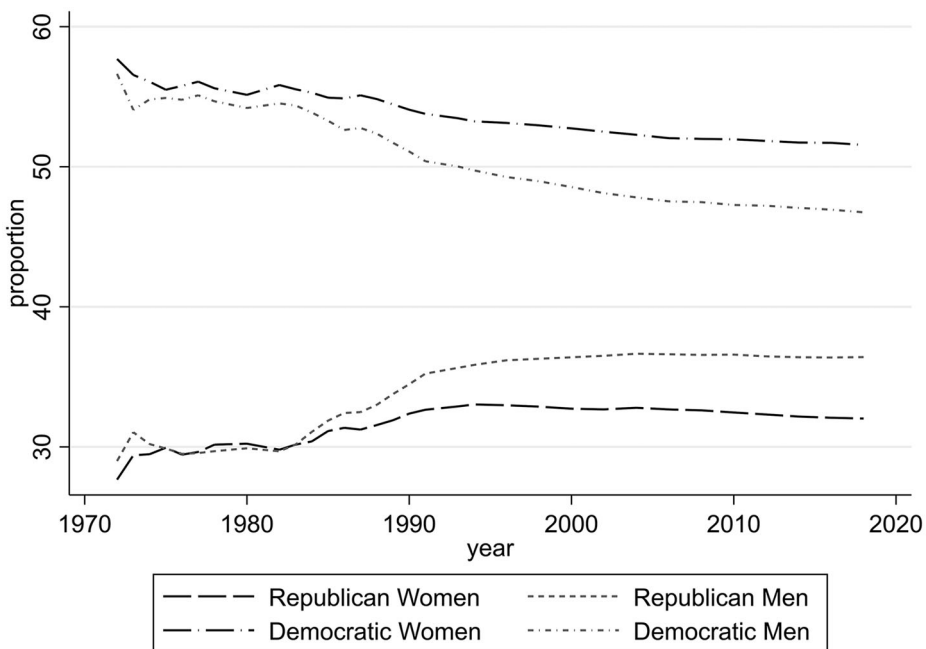


Figure 1 Political affiliation by gender, 1972–2018.

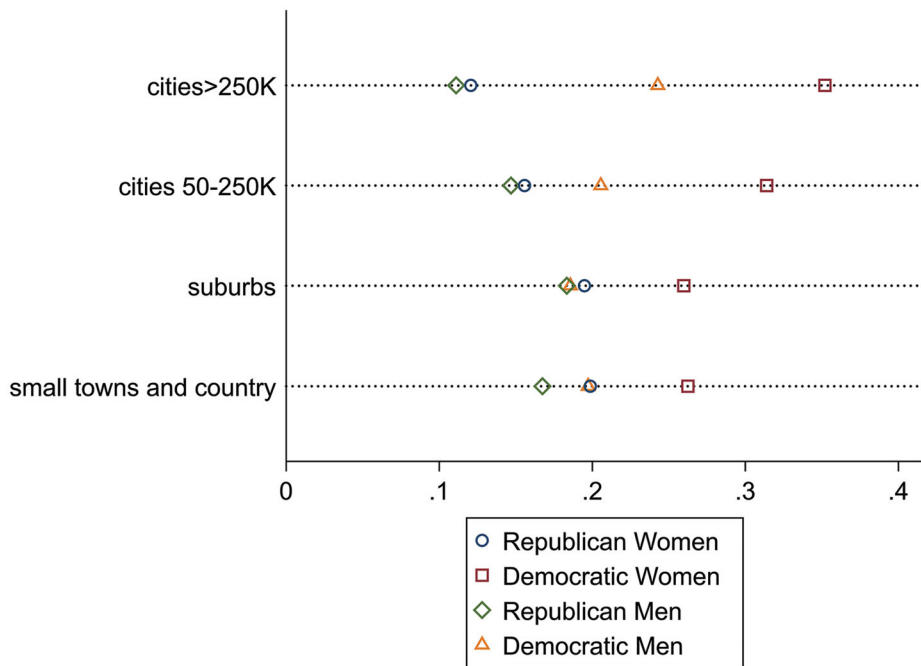


Figure 2 Party preference by location and gender, 1972–2018.

This Reagan-era movement also played itself out in differential geographic shifts. For men living outside the larger cities there was a sharp rightward shift in political views accompanying Reagan’s election, a shift that has continued to unfold across the rural United States. This belief shift was followed by rapid changes in men’s party preference in the decade from 1980 to 1990. For women there was a more modest rightward shift in beliefs and party preference, particularly in the suburbs and rural areas, but little change in large cities, where women remained staunchly liberal and Democrat.

The net result was a gender gap that opened in party preference after 1980. As can be seen in [Figure 2](#), the gap is smaller in rural areas but increases with increasing city size to a maximum extent in the largest cities, creating an urban–rural schism.²

Contrasting Explanations

As noted, there are both male- and female-centered explanations for the emergence of the gender gap but very little on its spatial variation, despite Kofman and Peake’s (1990) call for a gendered approach to political questions in geography. Indeed, a web search located only four papers that specifically discuss the geography of the gender gap, although there is a literature on urban–rural and urban–suburban voting patterns in the United States. Each of these papers was concerned with the decline of the Old South. Norrander (1999) stated that the gender gap emerged because, during the

Reagan realignment, both men and women in the South became more Republican, whereas in the North only men’s party preferences shifted rightward; those of northern women remained the same. Contesting this, Tien and Tronto (2003) hypothesized that regional variations in the gap emerged as a result of declining traditional family roles among northern women, Kaufman (2006) found that in the 2004 election the gender gap was smaller in the South than elsewhere in the United States, and Greene, Elder, and Saunders (2006) said that, after controlling for “the many clearly demonstrated demographic factors related to the gender gap, e.g. income level, race, region, etc., the only two variables which demonstrated a clear relationship with the size of the gender gap across the 50 states were percent Christian and percent women in the legislature—two variables much less closely tied to the concepts most commonly used to explain the gender gap” (12; also see Elazar 1966; Hill 1981; Arceneaux 2001; Norrander and Wilcox 2005).

The male-centered theory for the gap was initially advanced by Wirls (1986), who was the first to recognize that the switch in party preference was much sharper for Reagan-inspired men than for women and was preceded by a rightward shift in beliefs during the mounting stagflation crisis of the 1970s that intensified during the Carter presidency. Norrander (1999) and Box-Steffensmeier, Boef, and Lin (2004) extended this argument, saying that male–female differences in policy views are the primary explanations for gender differences in political behavior, concluding that men have become much

more conservative than women across many policy domains (Kaufman 2006). Greater conservatism is linked to a greater sense of personal well-being or happiness, and it is this link that leads to one hypothesis concerning the urban-rural schism. Political psychologists have confirmed that happier people self-identify as Republicans and unhappier people as Democrats (Taylor, Funk, and Craighill 2006; Brooks 2008; Napier and Jost 2008; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009),³ and because men are happier than women they are more likely to be Republican. Coincidentally, the gender gap appeared in the 1980s as male happiness surged and women's happiness continued on a long-term slide. There is clear evidence of an urban-rural happiness gradient in the United States (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011). There therefore should be a gradient in party preference. Big-city malaise has long been a central element in the theory of urban social life (Berry 1973), and it is there that women are unhappiest relative to men and the gender gap should be greatest.⁴

The alternative explanation for the gender gap and for the urban-rural schism is female centered. Frankovic (1982), Shapiro and Mahajan (1986), and Erie and Rein (1988) were among the first who argued that it is economic circumstances, group consciousness, and policy views of women that explain the divide. Similarly, Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler (1998) felt that the gender gap can be explained by men's and women's differing views on the economy, social programs, military action, and abortion: Women consistently take positions that favor the weak and less privileged. Continuing this line of thought, Sapiro and Conover (1997) theorized that greater insecurity of women plays a role. In any period of economic deterioration, the percentage of economically vulnerable single women increases and, with it, a turn to political choices that favor those advocating governmental intervention (Box-Steffensmeier, Boef, and Lin 2004). Other factors that are said to be of influence include the decline of marriage, the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce, and the rise of feminism. The decline of marriage has made men richer and women poorer, so that following marriage (divorce), women are less (more) likely to support parties of the left (Edlund and Pande 2002). The phenomenon might be much broader than the United States. Common elements are transforming the lifestyles of both women and men in postindustrial societies, strengthening differences between the sexes and moving women leftward, particularly in the younger age cohorts (Inglehart and Norris 2000).

Extending this, Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler (1998) pointed to perceptions of economic insecurity among women, especially urban women, as a primary source of the gender gap, with women favoring Democrats because of that party's New Deal heritage. Box-Steffensmeier, Boef, and Lin (2004) added that in any period of economic decline the percentage

of economically vulnerable single women increases and as a result insecurity-related unhappiness increases more rapidly than material well-being (Conover 1988; Edlund and Pande 2002; Easterlin 2003; Stevenson and Wolfers 2009). Women are consistently more pessimistic about the state of the economy than men (Clarke et al. 2005), and with women's movement into higher prestige urban jobs that provide similar rewards and responsibilities to those of men have come tensions that arise from new social roles. Although the lives of many women have improved in the United States, their subjective well-being has declined both absolutely and relative to men (Stevenson and Wolfers 2009). Part of the reason might be feminists' expectations that the outcome of this movement should have been the same levels of satisfaction for women as for men. Increasing insecurity, though, appears to have led to political choices favoring those advocating governmental intervention among increasingly unhappier urban women.

The second possible explanation for the gender gap stems from this advocacy, compassion consideration that has its roots in the Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler's (1998) observation that women consistently take positions that favor the weak and less privileged.⁵ Kaufman and Petrocik (1999) formulated what they termed the Attitude Hypothesis to explain these gendered differences in policy attitudes but found it necessary to add a Salience Hypothesis because men and women were thought to apply different weights to their attitudes when making policy decisions. The differing attitudes and weights were said to stem both from the raw facts of gender and from women's social roles. Burden (2008) showed that the reported gender gap is reduced by survey questions that emphasize "feeling" rather than "thinking," with most of the reduction occurring among highly sophisticated women. In a complementary line of argument, Diekmann and Schneider (2010) pointed to the association of the gender gap with men's combination of agency and higher status and women's combination of communion and lower status. The agency versus communion difference is thought to have particular saliency: Women are more socially oriented (selfless), whereas men are individually oriented (selfish; Eckel and Grossman 1998).

What is at stake, according to this line of argument, are the attitudes and beliefs that derive from a culture that favors individualism rather than collectivism. Individualism and collectivism translate into self versus group, attitudes versus norms, exchange versus communal relationships, self-esteem versus group reliance, and idio- versus allo-centricity. Well established as social-psychological constructs, individualism and collectivism link into a cultural syndrome, "a pattern of shared attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions and values" (Triandis 1996, 408), the "collective programming of the mind" (Hofstede 1980, 13) that in the United States associates individualism with agency, power, and success and

collectivism with perceptions of inequality and lack of success, a compassionate concern for the disadvantaged, and a preference for collective solutions to their problems. In such a culture, greater proportions of women vote Democrat because of different “wiring” (Rosener 1990), which places them in greater proportions at the collective-compassionate end of the scale. They are more consensus-seeking, less competitive, more collaborative, less power obsessed, more group oriented, and likely to identify with and vote for candidates whose issue stances are closest to their own and typically are most favored by their own sex (Eagly et al. 2003). These role differences, captured by the distinction between agency and communion, lead directly to the conjecture that the partisan gender gap exists because proportionately more urban women are at the compassionate end of the individualism–collectivism dimension, implying a concern for the disadvantaged, a preference for governmental or familial rather than individual solutions to social problems, and an enhanced likelihood that women will self-select on Democrats (Cook and Wilcox 1991).

The difference can be seen in the gendered responses to four questions posed by the GSS and charted in Figure 3:

Should government do more? 1 (*does too much*) to 5 (*do more*)



Should government reduce income differences? 1 (*no action*) to 7 (*reduce*)

Should government improve standard of living? 1 (*people help themselves*) to 5 (*government action*)

Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on Social Security? 1 (*too much*) to 3 (*too little*)

What is notable is the consistency of the differences in responses by gender. Women show higher levels of compassion than men but with identical period effects over time, in particular the change of direction in the mid-1990s.

Hypotheses

The foregoing leads to two hypotheses—that the urban–rural schism in the gender gap is a product of the presence of an urban–rural happiness gradient or the greater compassion of urban women, when also controlling for the many other demographic factors posited in the literature to be related to the gender gap (age, marriage, race and ethnicity, income, education, etc.; Greene, Elder, and Saunders 2006). Fortuitously, by taking those factors into account, broader North–South, blue state–red state differences go away and thus do not feature in what follows.

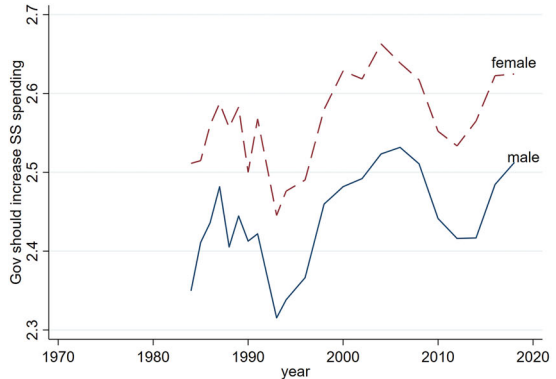


Figure 3 Variations in General Social Survey responses to compassion questions, by gender.

The modeling strategy is as follows. We focus on differences in party preferences as the dependent variable and regress it on locational variables in two equations, *male1* and *female1*, to verify the existence of the urban–rural gradient in the gender gap. We then control for demographic factors that influence party preference in models *male2* and *female2*, per Greene, Elder, and Saunders (2006), to confirm that the gender gap still exists in the presence of these influences. The third pair of variables (*male3* and *female3*) tests for the influence of variations in happiness, and the fourth pair (*male4* and *female4*) tests for the effects of compassion. Details of the variables used follow. We also ran additional robustness tests and tested our models for interaction effects between the gender variable and the main independent variables (refer to the Appendix).

The Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was constructed from the GSS question:

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?

Republican (ASK A) 1

Democrat (ASK A) 2

Independent (ASK B) 3

Other (SPECIFY AND ASK B) 4

No Preference (ASK B) 8

A. Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or not?

Strong 1

Not very strong 2

B. Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

Republican 3

Democratic 4

Neither 8

Responses to this question enabled us to classify each GSS respondent into one of the following categories:

1. Strong Democrat
2. Other Democrat
3. Independent-leaning Democrat
4. Centrist independent
5. Independent-leaning Republican
6. Other Republican
7. Strong Republican

For the years 1972 to 2018, the GSS yielded 64,814 individual observations (28,614 men and 36,200 women). Although the dependent variable is ordinal, several recent studies have shown ordered logit and ordinary least squares (OLS) to be comparable (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004; Van Praag, Van Praag, and Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2004; Blanchflower and Oswald 2011); thus, to test our model we employed OLS.⁶

Location

The first pair of models regress party preference on place of residence to confirm the presence of the gender gap using the GSS's classification of cities with greater than 250,000 population, cities with population between 50,000 and 250,000, and suburbs, with rural areas as the base case. The varying presence of the gender gap is assessed by comparing the coefficients associated with these variables in the two models.

Control Variables

The second pair of models controls for the GSS respondents' social and demographic characteristics; that is, by the individual differences in party preference revealed by earlier researchers: income, highest year of school completed, marriage, race (black household), national origin (foreign born), and condition of health. Other candidate variables were omitted to avoid problems with multicollinearity. Information on each of these variables also came from the GSS. Income was specified by quintiles. By including these variables, we were able to control for connections between life course and party preferences that result from the interplay of aspirations and attainments. Early in life, women are more likely than men to fulfill their material and family life aspirations, but as they move into the retirement years this advantage is reversed. Men surviving to old age benefit disproportionately from the positive effect of retirement, whereas women suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of widowhood (Easterlin 2003; Plagnol and Easterlin 2008).⁷

The coefficients associated with these variables appear in the *male2* and *female2* models in Table 1. Because the data we used were collected by the GSS in successive samples over the time period from 1972 to 2018, we also included controls for time. With individual records derived from a succession of samples, it is normal to think of equations being estimated in fixed effects format to control for time. The GSS is not a panel survey but a succession of repeated cross-sectional random samples for which the appropriate controls are time period of the survey, age of respondents, and the respondents' birth cohort (Yang and Land 2006; Yang 2008a, 2008b).

Table 1 Ordinary least squares regressions on party preference by gender

Variables	male1	female1	male2	female2	male3	female3	male4	female4
City > 250k	-0.51***	-0.68***	-0.28***	-0.32***	-0.29***	-0.32***	-0.31***	-0.24***
City 50k–250k	-0.19***	-0.39***	-0.15***	-0.21***	-0.14***	-0.18***	-0.13*	-0.11
Suburbs	0.15***	0.02	0.05	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	0.09	-0.04
1981–1992 Reagan–Bush			0.06	0.17	0.03	0.19	-0.33**	-0.17
1993–2000 Clinton			-0.05	0.01	-0.07	0.01	0.04	-0.06
2001–2008 Bush			-0.30**	0.05	-0.32**	0.05	-0.20	-0.03
2009–2016 Obama			-0.16	-0.07	-0.19	-0.07	-0.23	-0.07
2017–present Trump			-0.19	0.00	-0.207*	0.00		
1946–1973 Boomer/Gen. X			0.08**	0.07**	0.09***	0.08**	0.24***	0.29***
1974–2000 Millennial			0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.28***	0.26***
Income (quintiles)	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.01	-0.00
Education	0.04***	-0.01	0.04***	-0.01	0.04***	-0.00	0.00	-0.04***
Married	0.12***	0.18***	0.10***	0.15***	0.05	0.05	0.19***	0.19***
Race (black)	-1.48***	-1.40***	-1.45***	-1.39***	-1.09***	-1.09***	-1.21***	-1.21***
Foreign born	0.35***	0.08*	0.37***	0.07	0.20**	0.07	0.20**	0.00
Health	0.11***	0.12***	0.09***	0.10***	0.01	0.01	0.06**	0.06**
General happiness			0.09***	0.07***	0.07*	0.07*	0.04	0.04
Government do more							-0.25***	-0.22***
Government reduce income differential							-0.20***	-0.16***
Government improve standard of living							-0.15***	-0.18***
Government improve social services spending							-0.18***	-0.13***
_constant	3.33***	3.43***	2.56***	3.01***	2.42***	2.91***	5.83***	6.10***
Year and region dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	27,853	35,471	18,047	22,166	16,914	20,682	6,217	7,203
R ²	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.10	0.11	0.10	0.24	0.20

* $p < 0.10$.
 ** $p < 0.05$.
 *** $p < 0.01$.

Because there are time period effects in party preference associated with the party of the White House incumbent, we also included in our analysis time period controls associated with presidential terms in office. These time periods are set against a 1972 to 1980 base: 1980 to 1992 (Reagan–Bush), 1992 to 2000 (Clinton), 2001 to 2008 (Bush), 2009 to 2016 (Obama), and 2017 to present (Trump); these are the maximum possible to avoid multicollinearity.

For identification of birth cohorts we turned to the suggestions of Strauss and Howe (1992), who argued that a succession of cohort generations has dominated U.S. life since the earliest days of settlement. A cohort generation consists of everyone born in a particular twenty- to twenty-five-year time span or cohort period, sharing a common age bracket as they move through their life cycles, experiencing the same economic and social conditions and sharing a common sequence of life phases and a peer personality that derives from a combination of a common age location with respect to the background chronology of historic trends and events, perceived membership in a group that shares beliefs and behavior and a sense of social community. Such cohorts typically develop adherence to certain fundamental notions, a generational *weltanschauung* or web of beliefs and attitudes about fundamental questions, together with subgroups devoted to ritualized opposition to those beliefs. Two birth cohorts therefore were identified in the male2 and female2 models using the Strauss–Howe typology: Boomer/Generation X (1946–1973) and Millennial

(1974–2008), with those born earlier serving as the base case.

The combined time period–cohort specification confounded the effect of respondents’ age, so age was not included in the model estimates in which, as Table 1 shows, the social variables and the controls for time and cohort all are significant, working in the expected directions on party preference, with the coefficients greater for males than females. In all models, we also controlled for regional differences in the United States.

The Happiness Variable

Could variations in life satisfaction (happiness) account for the urban–rural schism in the gender gap? To answer this question, we included a GSS-derived happiness variable to create the male3 and female3 models:

Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

To facilitate our analysis, we reversed this scale so coding was 3 (*very happy*) and 1 (*not too happy*).

Compassion Variables

To test for the influence of variations in compassion, as expressed in varying preferences for governmental

action, we extracted several “female-congenial” or “compassionate” variables suggested by Eagly et al. (2003) that are available in the GSS. These are the variables plotted in Figure 3, and they were used to complete the male4 and female4 models.

Results

The four sets of regression results appear in Table 1. We begin by comparing the coefficients associated with the locational variables in the male1 and female1 models. Big-city men are seen to be 0.51 points less likely to be Republican than rural men (the base case). For women the difference is 0.68 points. The gender gap is $0.68 - 0.51 = 0.17$ points and for smaller cities (50,000–250,000) the gender gap is 0.20. These differences are statistically significant. Note that there was no significant difference between party preference for women in the suburbs and rural areas (base category).

Next, in the presence of the individual social characteristics and controlling for time and cohort, the male2 and female2 models reveal that coefficients of the spatial variables are reduced in size and the gender gap is decreased or is less relative to rural areas across other locations (0.32–0.29 in big cities, 0.21–0.15 in smaller cities, etc.). We conclude, therefore, that much, but not all, of the urban–rural schism is simply a reflection of the ways in which the Reagan Revolution played out across the nation’s social geography, as revealed by spatial variations in the control variables.

What of happiness? The variable is significant in the male3 and female3 models, but the spatial coefficients have barely budged from their male2 and female2 levels: Happiness affects party preference but does not appear to be associated with spatial variations in the gender gap.

In contrast, inclusion of the compassion variables in the male4 and female4 equations produced dramatic results. Each of the four variables is significant and the power of the models is twice that of the male3 and female3 models. Baby Boomer males are strongly Republican but educated women are more likely to be Democrats. Dramatically, the urban gender gap has shrunk as shown in Table 2, which compares differences in coefficients between Models 1 and 2. *Ceteris paribus*, men and women who live in the nation’s cities have party preferences similar to those who live in rural areas once urban women’s

compassionate stance is taken into account, with one exception—the suburbs remain.

What might explain the residual suburban difference, the difference in male–female coefficients that rises from 0.03 in Models 2 and 3 to 0.07 in Model 4? We suspect that it might be an artifact, simply the result of sample size differences caused by coverage differences in the GSS. Inclusion of the compassion variables reduced the sample sizes to 6,217 for males and 7,203 for females when the previous low *N* was 16,914 for males in Model 3. This is partly because the first time these questions appeared in the GSS was 1984 and partly because response rates were very low and apparently selective.

Additional results looking at the interaction effect between gender and place of residence are presented in the Appendix (refer to Table A.1). These results indicate that the effect of place of residence will differ if you are female, particularly in the larger areas where we find significant differences.

Conclusion

The Reagan Revolution not only produced a gender gap in U.S. politics but resulted in a gap that varied spatially, an urban–rural schism. Much of this schism is a reflection of social geography—urban–rural differences in residents’ economic and demographic characteristics. The rest is accounted for by gendered differences in compassion and preference for government action: Big-city women are far more likely than big-city men to look to government to help solve problems of income inequality, low levels of living, and social security; rural women, like rural men, are more likely to emphasize individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. As men moved rightward in the 1980s it was therefore in the cities that the male–female gulf in party preferences widened most.

These results contribute to a growing and ongoing debate on spatial polarization in the United States (Yamamoto 2007; Bishop 2009; Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011; Kemeny and Storper 2012; Sussell and Thompson 2015; Spicer 2017; Storper 2018). Our findings are congruent with a wave of regional economic polarization. Interregional economic divergence is greater than ever before and is accompanied by geographical polarization of political preferences, advances in populism and nationalism in some regions, and the broadening of socially liberal, protrade, and multicultural attitudes in other regions (Storper 2018).⁸ This geographical polarization of opportunity seems to be mirrored in geographical splits in political attitudes and voting behavior (Bishop 2009; Sussell and Thompson 2015; Spicer 2017; Storper 2018). According to Storper (2018), the “basic density gradient of employment, income and opportunity creates sharp cleavages in

Table 2 *The shrinking gender gap*

	Model 1	Model 4
Cities >250,000	-0.171	+0.070
Cities 50,000–250,000	-0.195	+0.013
Suburbs	-0.125	-0.138

Notes: Female coefficient minus male coefficient. Negative sign indicates preference for Democrats.

perceptions and politics” (248). This complex granularity can also be expressed between states or provinces, between metropolitan areas and less dense areas, and between bigger and smaller metropolitan areas, as illustrated by Yamamoto (2007). Thus, the rural–urban schism we observed is possibly just one of the ways in which political and economic polarization is expressed in geographical scales.

Our results also contribute to debates on gender, positionality, and intersectionality (Simandan 2019). The situated knowledge thesis provides a framework to better understand this urban–rural gender gap in politics. People’s perceptions, of the world are formed by their positionality, geographical location, interests, and biases (Pronin, Gilovich, and Ross 2004; Simandan 2019). One’s worldview is shaped by experiences, perceptions, and recollections that fuel the incomplete information one absorbs from different situations and drive the power imbalance across socioeconomic contexts (Hopkins 2017; Nash 2017). Specifically, gender and geographical location are important determinants of one’s situated reality: Urban women are typically exposed to substantially different social and economic contexts than rural women, which can elucidate the motives underlying their opposing political choices.

The Reagan Revolution enabled urban–rural differences to manifest in election maps dominated by Republican red, with blue spots marking the big cities where women are more likely to be poor, single parents, or old and more likely to support Democrats in the expectation that they will provide more governmental aid. This spatial separation contributes to increased party polarization, which in turn has polarized the gender gap. ■

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Notes

¹ A record 102 women are serving in the 116th U.S. Congress, nearly a quarter of its members—the highest percentage in U.S. history (DeSilver 2018). Nancy Pelosi became the first woman to be made speaker of the House in 2007 and repeated this feat in 2019. The candidacies of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton in 2008 were major breakthroughs for women, as was the 2016 Democratic nomination of Hillary Clinton for president of the United States. These advancements have propelled a record number of women to run in the 2020 presidential election. Concurrently, women have been organizing and protesting to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed. The Women’s

March in 2017 is an iconic example. It was the largest single-day protest in U.S. history, with more than 200,000 people marching just in Washington, D.C., and an estimate of 3 to 5 million protesters nationwide (Broomfield 2017).

² Figure 2 omits independents because for both men and women the percentage reporting that they are independent is constant over type of place.

³ There is also a literature that links it to brain chemistry. Happiness researchers point out that individuals’ feelings of well-being—their satisfaction with their lives—flow from the match between aspirations and achievements. Success is signaled by dopamine and serotonin levels in the brain (Hamer 1996; Inglehart and Klingemann 2000). Between 44 and 52 percent of the variance in happiness has been associated with genetic variation (Lykken and Tellegen 1996); that is, some people are born happier than others, but the rest is derived from life experiences and social setting, up to 4 percent from variations in income, and smaller contributions from education, occupation, age, marriage, health status, and religiosity (Myers and Diener 1995).

⁴ The circle of unhappiness extends to “feminist men and women, potentially feminist men and women, and non-feminist men and women” (Cook and Wilcox 1991, 1111).

⁵ Norrander (1999) quickly cautioned that this compassionate stance did not always extend to the principal feminist issues, notably abortion and equal rights.

⁶ We ran additional models and the ordered logit results were substantially the same as OLS. They can be provided on request.

⁷ We also considered interacting income quintile with region of residence but did not do so because of collinearity problems. Gelman et al. (2008) argued that rich Americans vote Republican and poor Americans vote Democrat but rich states vote Democrat and poor states vote Republican. Much of the difference, they say, is due to the behavior of the most affluent voters: Rich voters in rich states vote heavily for Democrats, whereas rich voters in poor states vote heavily for Republicans, with the difference increasing over time as Americans have become increasingly polarized in their beliefs.

⁸ For a detailed review on the theories driving this polarization, refer to Storper (2018).

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Appendix

To see whether the effect for women is statistically different from the effect for men, we ran one model combining both men and women and then

tested for the interaction effects between the gender variable and the size of one's place of residence. We use the variable *xnorciz* in its original form (note that in the article, we merged a few categories together). This variable categorizes areas into metropolitan areas, big cities, suburbs, and unincorporated areas. Also, *xmorsiz* takes into account the fact that populations cluster at differ-

ent densities; for example, suburbs are less dense than cities (the GSS does not provide density variables). As the results in Table A.1 indicate, the effect of place of residence will differ if you are female, particularly in the larger areas where we find significant difference. It is only when controlling for the compassion variables that the significance goes away in Model 4.

Table A.1 Ordinary least squares regressions of party preference on gender interacted with place of residence

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Female	-0.0315	0.00922	0.0161	0.1530
Size of place (ref. countryside)				
Small areas	-0.0349	0.0128	0.0041	-0.0129
Town gt 2500k	0.0521	0.1390*	0.1350*	0.2330*
City, 10k-49999	-0.1390**	-0.0721	-0.0561	0.1500
Uninc, med city	0.2400***	0.1230*	0.0905	0.2240*
Uninc, lrg city	0.2580***	0.1370*	0.1110	0.1980
Suburb, med city	0.2400***	0.2580***	0.2620***	0.338***
Suburb, lrg city	0.0062	-0.0128	-0.0099	0.1330
City, 50k-250k	-0.2030***	-0.0920	-0.0894	0.0024
City > 250k	-0.5400***	-0.2760***	-0.2760***	-0.1870*
Interactions				
Small areas*female	-0.0124	-0.0568	-0.0531	-0.0788
Town gt 2500k*female	-0.1340	-0.2120**	-0.2210**	-0.1430
City, 10k-49999*female	-0.1330	-0.1730*	-0.2380**	-0.3520**
Uninc, med city*female	-0.1190	-0.1340	-0.1080	-0.1850
Uninc, lrg city*female	-0.1230	-0.1470	-0.1170	-0.1960
Suburb, med city*female	-0.3040***	-0.3610***	-0.3760***	-0.4870***
Suburb, lrg city*large city, 50k-250k*female	-0.2430***	-0.1880**	-0.1990**	-0.3220**
City > 250k*female	-0.2990***	-0.2320***	-0.2250***	-0.2070
City > 250k*female	-0.2410**	-0.1420*	-0.1550*	-0.1350
1981-1992 Reagan-Bush		0.1340	0.1310	-0.2260**
1993-2000 Clinton		-0.0034	-0.0119	0.0065
2001-2008 Bush		-0.1030	-0.1120	-0.0977
2009-2016 Obama		-0.1190	-0.1320	-0.14
2017-present Trump		-0.0927	-0.0998	
1946-1973 Boomer/Gen. X		0.0735***	0.0855***	0.2590***
1974-2000 Millennial		0.0601*	0.0566	0.2670***
Income (quintiles)		0.0492***	0.0475***	0.0012
Education		0.0183***	0.0194***	-0.0173***
Married		0.1420***	0.1120***	0.1240***
Race (black)		-1.4270***	-1.4110***	-1.1600***
Foreign born		0.1880***	0.1920***	0.0794
Health		0.1120***	0.0952***	0.0365*
General happiness			0.0783***	0.0527**
Government do more				-0.2310***
Government reduce income differential				-0.1780***
Government improve standard of living				-0.1680***
Government improve social services spending				-0.1620***
Constant	3.418***	2.782***	2.670***	5.869***
Year and region dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	63,324	40,213	37,596	13,420
R ²	0.032	0.107	0.106	0.219

**p* < 0.05.
 ***p* < 0.01.
 ****p* < 0.001.