

## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC POLICY ATTITUDES

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*Persistent differences between men and women in regard to their public policy attitudes have been found by various researchers. In this article, a state-wide survey in Pennsylvania is used to compare attitudes of men and women in the state with those at the national level. Using these data, three hypotheses frequently offered to explain attitude differences are subjected to evaluation. The major finding is that the male-female differences in policy attitudes may be related both to the sex-role behaviors learned by children and to economic conditions experienced in later life.*

Studies of gender differences in policy preferences indicate that there are significant and persistent differences between men and women in their attitudes on public policy issues. These differences are especially apparent in four broad policy concerns: 1) the use of force and violence as an instrument of policy; 2) government regulation and protection of individuals and the environment; 3) compassion issues such as aid to minorities and spending for welfare, education and health; and 4) social conservatism and traditional family values (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986; Smith, 1984; Klein, 1984; *Public Opinion*, 1982; Andersen, 1975).

Explanations advanced to explain these differences may be grouped under three broad hypotheses: "economic deprivation," "sex-role stereotyping," and "political culture." The first of these, most commonly expressed in the "feminization of poverty" literature (Weitzman, 1985; Smeal, 1984; Freeman, 1975), suggests that the economic deprivation of women, resulting from disadvantages in the labor market, inequitable divorce settlements, and the increase of female-headed households, leads to a general state of economic insecurity and dependency. As Weitzman (1985, p. 351) states, "The structure of the job market is such that only half of all full-time female workers are able to support two children without supplemental income from either the children's fathers or the government." Since women

are more economically insecure, this hypothesis suggests they tend to be more favorably inclined toward government assistance through social welfare programs. A second, the "sex-role stereotyping" hypothesis (Andersen, 1975; Greenstein, 1961; Poole and Zeigler, 1985), holds that women have been socialized into nurturing behaviors, thus causing greater compassion toward the deprived members of society. A third explanation is also explored in this article. Called the "political culture" hypothesis, it claims that persistent male-female differences in age, education, income, and occupation result in general feelings of powerlessness, a withdrawal from participation in public life, and resultant attitudes of dependence upon authority on the part of women (Poole and Zeigler, 1985, pp. 127-140).

### **Survey Research on Gender and Policy Attitudes**

Shapiro and Mahajan (1986) systematically studied national opinion surveys of six polling firms taken over a twenty-year period (1964-83) yielding a data base of responses to 267 different reported policy questions. They concluded that the gender differences are substantial. On "the use of force and violence in domestic policy" they found an average gender difference of 8 percentage points, with women less inclined to select the violent option. In two other policy categories, similar, but slightly smaller, differences were found. These showed women more supportive on "government regulation and protection of individuals and the environment," and the "compassion" issue (additional aid in welfare, health, education & civil rights).

Another series of studies supports the finding of gender differences in public policy attitudes. Using the "don't know" responses often given in public opinion surveys, Smith (1984) and Rapoport (1982) found that women are significantly more inclined to express uncertainty than are men. Rapoport (1982), using data sets from the Center for Political Studies National Election Study of 1972, 1974, and 1976, found that the spread ranged from 6.9 to 1.4 percentage points depending upon the level of knowledge about politics held by the respondent. Among politically-knowledgeable individuals, gender difference on use of "don't know" responses was slight; but, among less knowledgeable men and women, the women were considerably more inclined to give the "don't know" responses.

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### **The Pennsylvania Poll**

There is a lack of systematic study of gender and differences in policy attitudes at the state level. In an effort to add to our knowledge regarding these gender differences and their possible causes, a public opinion poll using standard survey research methods was conducted in January and February, 1987, by researchers at the Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg (*PA POLL*). The survey is based on a random sample of 671 Pennsylvanians 18 years old or older, 329 males and 342 females. Interviewing was conducted by telephone between January 16 and February 2, 1987, using standard random digit dialing sampling procedures. The survey questionnaire consisted of 34 questions covering a range of public policy issues and demographic information. The poll has a sampling error of plus or minus 3.8% at the .05 significance level.<sup>1</sup> All data in the tables are from this poll.

The primary research questions are: What are the differences between Pennsylvania women and Pennsylvania men in relation to their attitudes on public policy issues; and how do these differences compare with those found at the national level? Will an examination of the findings of the state poll and a comparison of this information with findings from national-level studies yield support for one or more of the hypotheses posed above?

### **Gender Differences and Demographic Characteristics**

Responses to the poll show there are substantial demographic differences between men and women in Pennsylvania that mirror differences in the national population. Pennsylvania women in this survey, as compared to Pennsylvania men, are older, poorer, less well educated, and in lower status occupations (Table 1). Women in the state have the demographic characteristics normally used to identify lower socio-economic status populations. This finding raises the possibility that these status differences account for the differences in policy attitudes between the genders in the state. This hypothesis is examined below.

### **Gender Differences and Economic Attitudes**

As one might expect from the findings on demographic differences, Pennsylvania women are somewhat more pessimistic about their economic situations than are Pennsylvania men. When asked to compare their present

financial situation with that of one year ago, the state's women, more so than its men, consider themselves "about the same" or "worse off" at the present time. Only 19.6% of the women compared to 28.3% of the men consider themselves "better off" (See Table 2).

### **Gender Differences and Public Policy Attitudes**

As with demographic characteristics and economic attitudes, the *PA POLL* shows systematic differences between the policy attitudes of men and those of women in the state. Pennsylvania women clearly differ from their male counterparts on the use of force and violence in the state. Beyond this difference, Pennsylvania women clearly are more inclined than men to want the state government doing more to support social programs and to control dangerous or threatening activities. While these differences parallel those in the nation as a whole, they actually are somewhat greater than the male-female differences found in national opinion studies. These findings are discussed systematically below.

#### **Use of force and violence**

As with women across the U.S., Pennsylvania women are more strongly opposed to the use of force and violence than are the state's men. When asked whether they support stronger gun control laws on handguns, Pennsylvania women are much more inclined than men in the state to favor such laws (75.4% of women; 59.0% of men, Table 3). This 16.4 percentage point difference in Pennsylvania is somewhat higher than the 13 point difference found in national opinion on gun control by the Gallup Poll in 1986 (*The Gallup Report*, May, 1986, p. 17). In the Shapiro and Mahajan study (1986), an 8 percentage point gender difference was found nationwide on a series of "force and violence" questions in various surveys.

#### **Government regulation and protection**

On issues dealing with government regulation or with protection of consumers, citizens, and the environment, Shapiro and Mahajan (1986) found an average gender difference of 7.2 percentage points in surveys covering the period 1977-83, with women being more supportive. In Pennsylvania there is a similar, but apparently larger, difference in attitude between the sexes. On 7 questions covering a range of such issues, the differences between male and

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female attitudes were found in the Pennsylvania survey to range from 6 to 14 percentage points with women consistently favoring more state involvement.

The differences varied from 6.2 percentage points on protection of the environment (spending for toxic waste disposal, Table 4) to a range of 6.7 to 9.9 percentage points on protection of health (drug abuse, AIDS, Table 4), and to a range of 11.7 to 13.1 percentage points on protection of public safety (crime, seat belts, 55mph speed limit, and state control of liquor sales, Tables 4 and 5).

The average difference on these seven questions is 10.4 percentage points, somewhat larger than the 7.2 point difference found by Shapiro and Mahajan. It is risky to generalize on the basis of these findings since there is no assurance the questions are directly comparable. Therefore, specific comparable questions in national polls were sought. The *PA POLL* included questions on concern over AIDS and removal of the 55 mph speed limit, and two comparable questions were found in the Gallup Poll. In Pennsylvania, 59.7% of women and only 49.8% of men were greatly concerned about the issue of AIDS, a difference of 9.9 percentage points (Table 4). In a question that seems comparable at the national level, the Gallup poll (*The Gallup Report*, Jan/Feb, 1988, p. 34) found that 52% of men and 53% of women agree that the government is not doing enough about the problem of AIDS, a difference of 1 percentage point. On this issue, the gender difference in Pennsylvania is greater than that in the whole U.S. Similarly, in Pennsylvania, it was found that 49.9% of men and 29.3% of women strongly or moderately favor eliminating the 55 mph speed limit, a gender difference of 20.6 percentage points (Table 5). In the U.S. as a whole, the Gallup Poll (*The Gallup Report*, October, 1986, p. 30) found that 48 percent of men and 28 percent of women are opposed to keeping the 55 mph speed limit, a gender difference of 20 percentage points. The difference between men and women over this government protection issues is about the same in Pennsylvania as in the nation as a whole.

### Compassion issues

The *PA POLL* included a series of 6 questions dealing with public welfare, aid to cities, unemployment, and general state services. Pennsylvania women, when compared to men on these issues, were more inclined to favor liberalizing governmental aid.

Further, women were more concerned about unemployment and the quality of education, and were less inclined to cut state services (Table 7).

The percentage point difference between the sexes on these compassion issues ranged from 4.9 to 8.1 and averaged 6.7. Women consistently took the more compassionate position. These figures are somewhat higher than the 3.3 percentage point difference found by Shapiro and Mahajan (1983) in national opinion on compassion issues.

In order to find a more solid basis for comparison on the compassion issues, the gender difference on three questions from the Pennsylvania survey were compared to three similar questions from a national survey. On the 3 issues covered in Table 6 (welfare, aid to colleges, and aid to Philadelphia) women were more supportive of additional aid than were men, and the difference between the genders averaged 6.9 percentage points. In two national polls, gender differences were found on two related issues--increased spending for social programs such as education and medicare, (*The Gallup Report*, October, 1984, p. 11) and Reagan administration treatment of poor people (*The Gallup Report*, May, 1983, p. 12). Nationally, women are also more supportive of increased social spending than are men, and fewer women than men feel that poor people are being treated fairly. The gender differences nationally on these two questions averaged 6 percentage points. Once again the gender difference in Pennsylvania is comparable to that of the national as a whole.

### **Gender Differences and Alienation**

Three questions in the *PA POLL* were designed to look for gender differences in attitudes of support for, as opposed to alienation from, state government. Respondents were asked whether they voted for governor in 1987, what effect they feel the new governor will have on their lives, and how often state government officials can be trusted to do what is right (Table 8). Approximately the same percentage of the state's women (60.8%) voted for governor in 1987 as was the case for the state's men (59.6%). However, the state's women, more so than its men, feel the new governor will have a great deal of effect on their lives. Similarly, the women report a higher level of trust in state government than do their male counterparts.

### **Gender Differences and "Don't Know" Responses**

Rapoport (1982) argued that the tendency to give "don't know" ("DK") responses to questions on public policy issues is a relatively stable individual trait, and that women are considerably more inclined to respond in

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this fashion than are men. Rapoport found the women "DK" response rate to exceed the rate for men by as much as 6.9 percentage points.

In the Pennsylvania survey, 22 questions received "DK" responses in excess of 5% of the total respondents. On 17 of these 22 questions, women chose the "DK" response more frequently than men, and the gender difference on these 17 ranged from .3 to 7.7 percentage points, for an average difference of 3.75 percentage points. This finding seems compatible with the data presented by Rapoport.

## Conclusions

The *PA POLL* data reported so far support the following conclusions: First, Pennsylvania women are older, poorer, less well-educated, and more likely to hold lower-status jobs than are men in the state, and this parallels national census data. Second, Pennsylvania women, like women throughout the country, tend to be more supportive of "compassionate" government policies, more supportive of government protection of citizens, and less supportive of policies based on the use of force and violence than are men in the state. Once again, the difference between men and women in the state on these attitudes is slightly larger than the difference between men and women in the nation as a whole. Third, Pennsylvania women are more pessimistic about their economic situations than are their male counterparts, and they are more inclined to view government and politics positively, as factors critical to their well being. Fourth, Pennsylvania women are more inclined to give the "don't know" response than are men in the state. These findings plus other data presented below will allow some observations regarding the validity of the three hypotheses discussed in the introduction.

## Economic deprivation hypothesis

The hypothesis suggests that the economic deprivation of Pennsylvania women may result in a general state of economic insecurity and a greater desire among the state's women to see government provide higher levels of economic support and social services, and such an interpretation receives support from the data provided above. Pennsylvania women are considerably poorer than their male counterparts, and they are also more supportive of government aid and protection.

In order to test this hypothesis further, responses of a subgroup of Pennsylvania women - homemakers - were compared with all women in the state. In the Pennsylvania survey, 74 of the 627 respondents reported their occupation as "homemaker." Seventy-three of these are women. Pennsylvania homemakers are poorer than Pennsylvania women in general (60.8% of homemakers report incomes under \$25,000 compared to 52.9% of all women and 39.5% of men) and experience greater economic insecurity (77% of homemakers are "greatly concerned" over unemployment compared to 64.9% of all women and 56.8% of all men, Table 7). Following the "economic deprivation" hypothesis, low income should contribute to economic insecurity and more support for government social programs on the part of homemakers; and the data support this interpretation. On the issues of welfare and aid to the poor, aid to colleges, and aid to Philadelphia (Table 6), homemakers generally are more supportive of increased state spending than are all Pennsylvania women. In a comparable finding in national polling data, Poole and Zeigler (1985, p. 62) conclude that "housewives" are more inclined than "working women" to want the federal government to guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone.

Also supportive of the economic deprivation hypothesis is the pattern of responses produced by the following question in the *PA POLL*: When asked whether they are "better-off" or "worse-off" today than they were one year ago (Table 2) homemakers were significantly less inclined to see themselves as better-off today than all women, as well as the men in the state. Again, this finding clearly fits with the economic deprivation hypothesis since one would expect that homemakers, who clearly are poorer, would express greater economic insecurity on this question.

### **Political culture hypothesis**

A second hypothesis centers on political culture, and relates gender differences on socioeconomic variable in the nation to measures of political alienation (Milbrath, 1965; Lane, 1959; Buchanan, 1956; Poole and Zeigler, 1985).

While Pennsylvania women are more deprived on a number of socio-economic variables and more supportive of governmental assistance, they do not demonstrate attitudes of powerlessness, cynicism, or non-participation. The survey shows (Table 8) that Pennsylvania women voted in approximately the same or slightly greater percentages than men in the state in 1987, they are more inclined than men to feel that the gubernatorial

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election was meaningful to them and their families, and they express more trust in state government than their male counterparts. The demographic differences have not led to feelings of powerlessness and cynicism among Pennsylvania women as compared to men in the state. While Poole and Ziegler (1985, pp. 130-138) found that women at the national level have become more cynical about government and feel less efficacious politically than men, Pennsylvania women have not followed this trend. The political culture argument seems the least appropriate of the three to explain the survey findings of greater dependence of Pennsylvania women on government. Future studies systematically comparing state to state differences on attitude surveys and demographic variables may profitably test this hypothesis further.

### Sex-role stereotyping hypothesis

Also satisfying as an explanation of the findings is the sex-roll stereotyping hypothesis which suggests that women are socialized as children into nurturing roles and that this stereotyping influences them to support governmental protection and social welfare programs in later life. The data appear to fit with this hypothesis. As Tables 3 through 7 indicate, Pennsylvania women are considerably more supportive of governmental services and protective programs than men in the state.

Rapoport (1982), in support of this hypothesis, argued that the tendency for women to give "don't know" responses more frequently than men is a product of sex-role stereotyping. He found that as the level of their knowledge of public affairs approaches parity with men, women tend to be less influenced by sex-role stereotyping, and their use of the "don't know" response in opinion surveys is virtually the same as that for men. This finding suggests that as women enter the work force, they become more knowledgeable about public affairs, less inhibited, and thus less dominated by sex-role behaviors such as responding "don't know" when questioned about public policy issues. Poole and Ziegler's argument (1985 pp. 13-19) that women's endorsement of feminist ideology increases with education and work experience outside the home lends additional support for this hypothesis.

To test this hypothesis further, it is necessary to return to the cohort of homemakers discussed above. Assuming that women who consider themselves homemakers are probably those most likely still to be influenced by sex-role stereotyping (Poole and Zeigler, 1985, p. 8), they should also

exhibit a greater tendency to give the "don't know" response than men in the state and also a greater tendency to do so than all Pennsylvania women. This hypothesis is supported by the data. On the 22 questions for which "DK" data are available, homemakers responded "don't know" more frequently than men and more frequently than all women in the state. The mean "DK" response rates for all 3 groups on the 22 questions are as follows: men, 14.4%; all women, 16.7%; and homemakers, 18.2%. Thus, as predicted by the hypothesis, women who remain at home are most inclined to give the "don't know" response.

Of the three hypotheses explored here, the "sex-role stereotyping" hypothesis and the "economic deprivation" hypothesis both fit with the findings of this survey. This article suggests, therefore, that the persistent male-female differences in policy attitudes are related both to the sex-role behaviors learned by children and to economic conditions experienced in later life.

#### NOTES

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1. For further information contact the author at The Division of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, PA 17057. Throughout the tables, Chi Square tests of significance scores are presented for response to individual questions. The use of data for which scores exceed the .05 level is deemed justified due to the large sample size used in the *PA POLL*. Weisberg and Bowen (1977, p. 166), speaking specifically about the use of Chi Square tests in surveys, state "Weak relationships are found to be statistically significant when sample are large, such as those for national surveys with a typical 1500 respondents. Thus, except for very small samples (especially those of size 100 or less) tests of statistical significance are not very discriminating."

**TABLE 1: Gender Differences on Selected Demographic Variables in Pennsylvania  
(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342)**

Age of Respondent	18-21	22-39	40-64	65+		No Response
M	10.0%	43.5%	35.3%	11.2%		
F	8.5%	36.5%	33.9%	19.9%		1.2%
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Education of Respondent	Some H.S.	H.S. Grad	Some College	College Grad	Post Grad	
M	13.1%	36.5%	24.3%	14.6%	11.6%	
F	16.7%	38.3%	21.6%	14.6%	8.5%	.3%
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Income of Household	Under \$15,000	\$15-25,000	\$25-40,000	\$40-60,000	Over \$60,000	
M	17.9%	21.6%	31.6%	16.7%	5.8%	6.4%
F	26.3%	26.6%	21.3%	14.6%	3.5%	7.6%
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Occupation of Respondent	Prof/Mgr.	Other White Collar	Blue Collar	Homemaker	Retired	Farmer
M	24.3%	21.6%	40.0%	.3%	11.8%	2.0%
F	18.0%	38.8%	5.6%	22.7%	14.0%	.9%

**TABLE 2: Gender Differences in Attitude Toward Economic Pessimism in Pennsylvania**

(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342; H = 74)

Financial situation today compared to 1 year ago:	Percent Responding			
	<u>Better Off</u>	<u>Worse Off</u>	<u>Same</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
M	28.3	16.1	53.5	2.1
F	19.6	17.3	62.6	.5
H*	6.8	16.2	75.7	1.4
p<.01				

\*Homemaker

**TABLE 3: Attitudes Toward Strengthening Controls on Handguns in Pennsylvania**

(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342)

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	<u>Percent Responding</u>		
	Strongly or Moderately in Favor	Strongly or Moderately Opposed	Don't Know
<b>Strengthen Hand Gun Control Laws</b>			
M	59.0	39.8	1.2
F	75.4	21.3	3.2

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p<.001

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**TABLE 4: Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Government Protection from Drug Abuse, AIDS, Crime, and Toxic Waste in Pennsylvania (N = 671; M = 329, F = 342)**

Policy Issue	Percent Responding									
	Great Concern		Somewhat Concerned		Little Concern		No Concern		Don't Know	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Level of Concern over Drug Abuse	60.8	67.5	25.8	23.7	7.9	5.3	5.2	3.2	.3	.3
Not significant at .05										
AIDS	49.8	59.7	27.4	25.1	9.4	7.3	11.9	5.3	1.5	2.6
p<.001										
Crime	57.8	70.2	29.8	22.8	8.5	5.3	3.0	.9	.9	.9
p<.001										
Policy Issue	Percent Responding									
	Spend More		Spend Less		Spend Same		Don't Know			
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
State funds: toxic waste	59.6	65.8	7.9	3.8	25.2	21.1	7.3	9.4		
p<.05										

**TABLE 5: Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Government Regulation of Seat Belt Use, Speed Limits, and Liquor Sales in Pennsylvania (N = 671; M = 329, F = 342)**

Policy Issue	Strongly Favor		Percent Responding				Strongly Oppose		Don't Know	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Mandatory Seat Belt Law	37.1	48.8	25.5	24.0	18.8	15.0	17.3	9.6	1.2	2.6
p<.001										
Eliminate 55 MPH Speed Limit	29.5	16.4	20.4	12.9	16.4	19.0	32.2	49.1	1.5	2.6
p<.001										
Policy Issue	State Quit		Percent Responding				Don't Know			
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
State Monopoly Liquor Sales	54.4	41.5	40.1	50.0	5.5	8.5				
p<.001										

**TABLE 6: Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Public Welfare,  
Aid to Colleges and Aid to Philadelphia  
(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342; H = 74)**

Policy Issue	Percent Responding											
	Spend More			Spend Less			Same			Don't Know		
	M	F	H*	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H
State Spend- ing; Welfare and Aid to Poor	35.0	41.2	47.3	21.3	19.6	12.2	40.4	33.9	35.1	3.3	5.3	5.4
Not signifi- cant at .05												
Aid to Colleges and Universities	54.1	62.0	64.9	7.9	4.1	5.4	35.3	32.2	28.4	2.7	1.8	1.4
Not signifi- cant at .05												
Aid to Philadelphia	16.1	22.8	24.3	41.0	26.6	23.0	32.8	36.3	33.8	10.1	14.3	18.9
p<.001												

\* Homemaker

**TABLE 7: Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward Education, Unemployment and State Services in Pennsylvania**  
(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342; H = 74)

Policy Issue	Percent Responding									No Concern			Don't Know		
	Great Concern			Somewhat Concerned			Little Concern								
	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H
Quality of Education	62.3	68.7	56.8	24.9	22.5	28.4	9.4	6.4	8.1	2.7	.9	0.0	.6	1.5	6.8
Not significant at .05															
Unemployment	56.8	64.9	77.0	30.4	26.3	14.9	6.7	6.7	6.8	5.5	1.8	1.4	.6	.3	0.0
p < .05															
To Solve Budget Shortage	Cut Services			Increase Local Taxes			More State Aid			Don't Know					
	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H	M	F	H			
	14.0	9.1	9.5	10.2	7.6	5.4	65.7	73.4	74.3	10.0	9.9	10.8			
Not significant at .05															

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**TABLE 9: Gender Differences on Participation, Alienation and Powerlessness in Pennsylvania**

(N = 671; M = 329, F = 342)

Did you Vote for Governor	<u>Percent Responding</u>		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
M	59.6	40.1	.3
F	60.8	39.2	.0
Not significant at .05			
Effect of new Governor	Great Deal or Some	Very Little or None	Don't Know
	M	31.3	59.9
F	37.7	52.0	10.2
Not significant at .05			
Trust in Government	Almost All or Most	Some or None	Don't Know
	M	39.8	58.3
F	43.0	54.0	2.9
Not significant at .05			

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