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WYOMING POLITICAL SURPRISES IN THE LATE 1980s

DEVIATING ELECTIONS IN A CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN STATE

CAL AND JANET CLARK

Wyoming is typical of the states in the upper Great Plains region (Montana, Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota) in many but not all aspects. In socioeconomic terms, the Great Plains are basically agricultural and rural with fewer prominent urban centers than elsewhere in the nation. Politically the region is generally viewed as conservative and Republican, but this image is subject to several important caveats. First, agrarian crises have periodically fueled insurgent political movements, such as the Populism of the 1890s, Progressivism in the early twentieth century, strong support for Roosevelt's New Deal, and support for populist or liberal Democrats, especially in congressional elections, during times of agricultural downturn in the postwar period. Second, the political party structures and partisan loyalties of the electorate in most of these states

have not been particularly strong; consequently, important Democratic politicians periodically emerge (e.g., George McGovern in South Dakota or Robert Kerrey in Nebraska) on the basis of idiosyncratic or personal appeals.¹

The political victories of Democrats, Progressive Republicans, or Populist third parties in the Great Plains, therefore, have taken two distinct forms. First, they can represent a "realignment" in which the electorate rejects the dominant conservative Republican philosophy, usually in response to economic crisis, for what have so far been short periods. Second, election losses of conservative Republicans can simply represent "deviating elections" in which personal triumphs do not really challenge the dominant position of the majority party.²

Wyoming has a well-deserved reputation as a staunchly conservative and Republican state, and its political hue has changed little over time despite the boom-and-bust nature of its economy. For example while the effects of populism at the end of the nineteenth century and the New Deal of the 1930s certainly reached the state, Wyoming was never dominated by populist political groups, such as the Nonpartisan League of North Dakota, and did not produce

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great Progressive leaders, such as George Norris of Nebraska, although the Progressives did elect three governors and a U.S. senator between 1910 and 1920.³ Thus, the rare victories of Democrats running for major state office generally appear to have been "deviating elections" that call for special explanations.

This paper examines two recent Wyoming elections in which Democrats did much better than expected, the 1986 upset of Pete Simpson by Mike Sullivan for governor and the very near upset of incumbent U.S. Senator Malcolm Wallop by John Vinich in 1988. In particular it asks whether they represent "deviations" from the normal pattern of politics in Wyoming or might constitute harbingers of some type of "political realignment." The first section discusses the economic and political context of Wyoming, the second describes the two campaigns, and the third considers why different types of voters supported specific candidates.

THE WYOMING CONTEXT

Wyoming is an essentially rural state. Each of its two largest cities, Cheyenne and Casper, has only about 50,000 inhabitants, and only one other city has even 25,000. Before the energy boom of the mid-1970s, only five cities and towns had even 5000 people residing in them. Wyoming now has the smallest population of any state in America and the second lowest population density.

The state's economy is primarily based upon its rich mineral endowment: oil, natural gas, coal, trona, and uranium. This dependency on natural resources has resulted in a tremendous boom-and-bust cycle of rapid development followed by depression-like conditions. In the latest cycle, the energy boom brought a 41 percent increase in population during the 1970s in contrast to an actual loss of population during the 1960s. It also made the state one of the most prosperous in the nation. In 1967 Wyoming ranked 24th in per capita income, which was 4 percent below the national average. By 1981 the state had skyrocketed to 5th, 13 percent above the national average. The collapse of the

oil market in the mid-1980s devastated the state's economy. By 1987 Wyoming's per capita income rank had fallen to 37th, 18 percent below the national average. Between 1982 and 1987, total gross state product actually declined by 11 percent in current dollars and a whopping 24 percent in constant (inflation adjusted) 1982 dollars, and the state lost 4 percent of its population.⁴ Moreover, there were few signs of economic recovery as the decade ended. In fact Wyoming had the slowest growth rate in the nation for the year ending September 1988.⁵ The state's economic collapse clearly affected the citizenry's outlook. In 1980, 44 percent of the population believed that their personal economic situation was improving compared to 25 percent who saw it deteriorating. In 1986 and 1988, however, these percentages were almost exactly reversed (22 percent to 42 percent).⁶ Thus, by the late 1980s almost half of Wyoming's citizens perceived themselves to be losing out economically.

The descent of Wyoming into a recession might well be expected to have political consequences. Studies of national politics have concluded that favorable economic conditions promote the electoral chances of incumbents and the majority party while voters are much more likely to "throw the rascals out" during economic hard times. Whether this economic dynamic operates at the state level is more of an open question. One preliminary study concluded that economic conditions have little impact at the state level and that voters tend to blame the president and his party, rather than state officials, for economic distress.⁷

This latter expectation evidently applies to Wyoming and explains an important characteristic of the state's politics—a remarkably high level of popular support for incumbents regardless of their party affiliation or the state of the economy. For example, the mid-1980s economic recession did not produce surprising upsets of previously popular politicians such as occurred elsewhere in the Great Plains with the losses of U.S. Senators Mark Andrews of North Dakota and James Abdnor of South Dakota in 1986.

TABLE 1.
APPROVAL RATINGS OF TOP POLITICAL OFFICIALS

	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988
Carter, President, D	27%	---	---	---	---
Reagan, President, R	---	54%	64%	66%	53%
Wallop, Senator, R	75%	47%	60%	59%	47%
Simpson, Senator, R	82%	61%	71%	69%	65%
Cheney, Representative, R	76%	60%	71%	63%	64%
Herschler, Governor, D	77%	63%	65%	63%	---
Sullivan, Governor, D	---	---	---	---	63%

This popularity of incumbents is illustrated by Wyoming's approval ratings of incumbent politicians during the 1980s (Table 1). Except for the Democratic President Jimmy Carter in 1980, all these approval ratings were quite high, whether for the Republican congressional delegation of Richard Cheney, Alan Simpson, and Malcolm Wallop and the Republican President Ronald Reagan or for Democratic Governors Ed Herschler and Mike Sullivan. A significant drop in all the approval ratings occurred between 1980 and 1982, but this was primarily caused by a change in the wording of the survey question.⁸ Since the state's economy was starting to stagnate at this time, it might be thought that this drop could represent a response to the economy, but the advent of real recession later in the decade was accompanied by high approval ratings across the board. Otherwise, most of the approval ratings fell in the very strong range of 60 percent to 70 percent with two significant exceptions.

The first was approval of Senator Malcolm Wallop's job performance, which fell to just under 50 percent in the two years he was up for reelection, 1982 and 1988, suggesting that increasing his contact with the voters and the salience of his record might be counterproductive for his popularity. Second, President Reagan's popularity dropped from 66 percent in 1986 to 53 percent in 1988, implying that he might have been given some of the blame for

the state's depressed condition. Even if this were so, however—and Wyomingites actually blamed most of their troubles on Arab oil sheiks—the electorate was certainly not in the mood to retaliate against Republican candidates, as witnessed by George Bush's two-to-one victory in the 1988 presidential election.⁹

Wyoming's seeming love affair with incumbents raises the question of who becomes an incumbent. Historically the Republican party has maintained the strong advantage. Except for a brief period during the New Deal, the Republicans have almost always had majorities in both houses of the state legislature. Except for gubernatorial races, in which they have triumphed in slightly more than half the elections, Republicans have won all major national and state offices between 60 percent and 70 percent of the time. Democrats almost caught up to Republicans in registration, party identification, and state legislative seats during the mid-1970s, benefiting from Watergate and an influx of new voters, but the Republicans quickly reestablished their predominance and by the late 1980s had approximately 60 percent-30 percent leads in registration and party identification and two-to-one advantages in the state house and senate. In addition, there is a major regional division in Wyoming between the five counties along the southern border and the rest of the state. The southern counties tend to be slightly Democratic, reflecting the historical

legacy of labor associated with the Union Pacific railroad that goes through them, while the northern part of the state is overwhelmingly Republican and much more heavily influenced by agriculture and the oil and gas industries. In a comparative sense, Wyoming was the fifth most Republican state in the nation for the two decades between 1961 and 1981. Thus Wyoming clearly deserves its reputation as a dominant one-party Republican state.¹⁰

Given this one-party domination, two recent elections were quite startling. In 1986 incumbent Democratic Governor Ed Herschler retired after serving three four-year terms, the longest tenure in the state's history. Herschler's electoral success, incidentally, confirms that special circumstances are needed for Democratic victories. He was first elected in 1974 only after a highly divisive Republican primary and appeared headed for defeat in 1978 until he managed to convince voters that his championing of severance taxes was a way to shift the burden for financing state government to out-of-state energy consumers, not the persecution of private enterprise, as his Republican challenger charged.¹¹ By 1982, however, his middle-of-the-road policies and association with the oil boom had made him extremely popular, and he was easily reelected for a third term.

The Republicans in 1986 anticipated an easy reclaiming of the governor's mansion, but something happened on the way to the victory stand, and Republican Pete Simpson lost by a 54 percent to 46 percent margin. Two years later, two-term incumbent Republican Senator Malcolm Wallop was running for reelection against John Vinich. Wallop's strong approval ratings in 1984 and 1986 and the absence of a widely known Democratic candidate seemingly betokened an easy win, yet on election eve Wallop saw his margin cut to sixty votes with only a few precincts outstanding before finally winning by just over a thousand votes.

These surprising results in the last two general elections, however, certainly did not appear to be a harbinger of a political realignment within Wyoming. The Republicans maintained their overwhelming leads in party registration

and identification, there was little change in the composition of the state legislature, and other Republicans at the top of the ballot, such as Congressman Dick Cheney and President George Bush, coasted home. Furthermore, after Congressman Dick Cheney was appointed Secretary of Defense, Vinich lost the special election for his House seat by a fairly decisive 53 percent to 43 percent margin.¹² Thus, the Simpson and Wallop races can be seen as "deviating" from the normal pattern of Republican domination.

Pete Simpson and Malcolm Wallop were certainly an odd couple in a political sense, which makes the similarity of their loss of normal Republican support all the more striking. Wallop is a strong conservative who faced no realistic competition for renomination. In contrast, Simpson is a moderate Republican who won his party's nomination in an extremely close primary.

THE SIMPSON VS. SULLIVAN CAMPAIGN

In 1986 the majority Republicans had both advantages and disadvantages going into the gubernatorial election. On one hand, since there was no incumbent, the majority party did not have its usual advantage, but on the other, the absence of a strong Democratic contender boded well for the Republicans because of their two-to-one lead in registration. The Republicans certainly appeared quite optimistic. Thus, the promise of a return to the statehouse after a twelve-year exile drew a bevy of strong candidates into the Republican primary. Stan Smith, the incumbent state treasurer, appeared to be the initial leader, but he withdrew as the field grew and his expected political and financial support did not materialize. The front-runner then became Pete Simpson, brother of U.S. Senate Majority Whip Alan Simpson and former state senator from Sheridan. Simpson benefited from by far the greatest initial name recognition in the race, the popularity of his brother, and the fact that he had lived in several different regions of the state. Conversely he was hurt by his front-runner status, which drew most

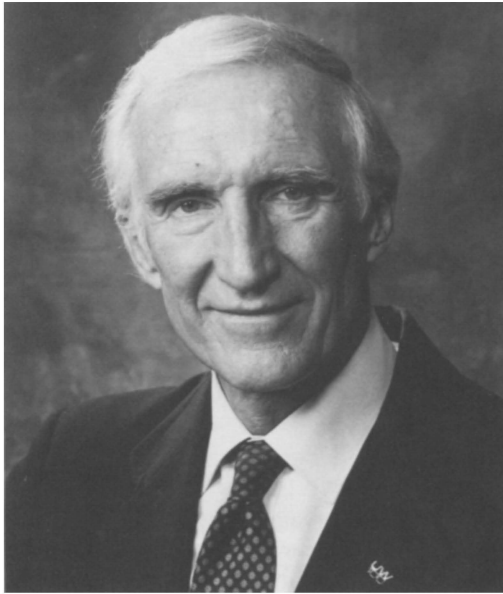


FIG. 1. *Pete Simpson, Republican candidate for governor, 1986, currently vice president for development, University of Wyoming. Photograph courtesy of Pete Simpson.*

of the other candidates' slings and arrows to him, and by his not altogether deserved liberal reputation, which stemmed from his days as a maverick state legislator whose views had diverged from the Republican caucus on such issues as education, labor, and the role of state government.¹³ Other prime contenders included Bill Budd, a mainstream conservative and leading lobbyist for energy interests; Russ Donley, former speaker of the House (by tradition in Wyoming speakers of the House serve one term and then retire) and the most conservative Republican in the race; Fred Schroeder, former Republican party chairman; and Dave Nicholas, a state senator who competed with Simpson for the moderate and liberal Republican votes.

Simpson remained the front-runner throughout most of the summer, but in the last few weeks of the campaign conservative Republicans began to unify around Bill Budd, and on

election day Simpson won with a paper-thin plurality of 453 votes over Budd—25,948 to 25,495 out of 94,000 cast. The campaign had been marked more by personal jousting than issue debate, and there clearly were some hard feelings on the part of the losers, especially in the Budd camp, that were to haunt Simpson in the general election.¹⁴

The assumption that the Republicans would easily reclaim the governorship seemed to be shared by Democrats as well. Their only "respectable" candidate was Mike Sullivan, a Casper lawyer who was making his first major foray into electoral politics. He received strong party support against several fringe candidates who seemed to be viewed as potential embarrassments by party leaders who sought to minimize their exposure before the primary election. Sullivan easily won the nomination with 70 percent of the vote compared to 13 percent for the

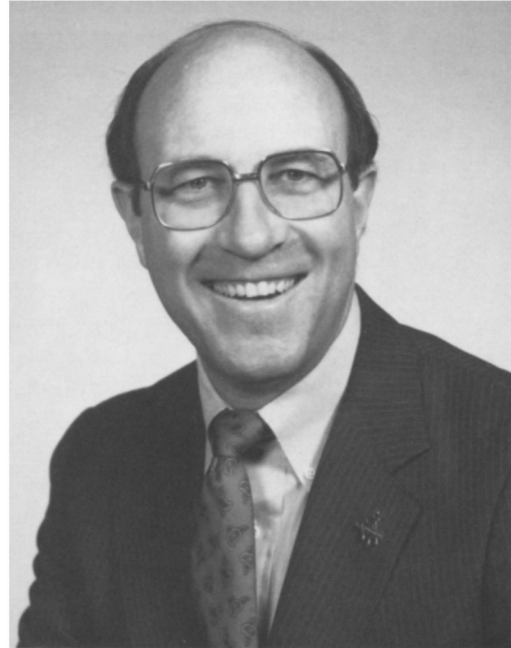


FIG. 2. *Mike Sullivan, successful Democratic candidate for governor, 1986. Photograph courtesy of Mike Sullivan.*

runner-up. A lawyer with close business ties, he had something of a conservative image that was probably helpful given the outcome of the Republican primary.

The general election campaign quite naturally focused on the gubernatorial race. Many observers assumed that Pete Simpson would have a fairly easy time in conservative Wyoming as the standard bearer of the dominant Republican party. This seemed to be the assumption of the Simpson campaign as, on the advice of national Republican consulting firms that it follow a Reaganesque style, it initially emphasized Simpson as a "sunshine candidate" who was closely tied to President Reagan and highly partisan in his political orientation.¹⁵

There were several indications, however, that such a front-runner's strategy might not be the best. The scars from the September primary were still raw and accentuated the perceptions of some that Simpson might be too liberal for mainstream Wyoming Republicans. Governor Herschler shrewdly took advantage of this by offering Bill Budd a major position in his administration, removing Budd from the campaign and exacerbating Simpson's problems in creating party unity. Moreover the growing economic depression and financial problems in the state belied the sunshine approach. Finally Mike Sullivan was emerging as a formidable challenger whose support went beyond partisan affiliation to intrastate and ideological considerations.

Intrastate politics are important in Wyoming, especially the rivalry between the two largest cities (both with populations of about 60,000 in the mid-1980s)—Casper, the normally Republican oil center in the north, and Cheyenne, the more Democratic state capital in the south. While Sullivan ran as a Democrat, he clearly became the "Casper candidate" and was endorsed by the *Casper Star-Tribune*, by far the dominant paper in the state. This clearly legitimized his candidacy in a manner unthinkable for almost any other Democrat. Sullivan was also able to pick up some conservative and business support that is normally not forthcoming to Democrats.

The course of the campaign probably involved style more than substance as the two candidates seemingly agreed on many of the major issues facing the state. Sullivan scored something of a public relations coup with a "me too" ad that listed the dates that the two candidates adopted various positions and pictured Simpson as simply saying "me too."¹⁶ This integrated well with Sullivan's major theme of strong leadership and evidently appealed to the many Wyomingites who felt that the state's economic crisis called for strong action. Sullivan's status as a political newcomer was an advantage since he could not be blamed for the current "mess."

Simpson seemed to struggle with his image as a Republican with a liberal aura and tried to handle the problem by creating an image of himself as a "thoughtful conservative." He won the endorsement of the state workers based on his past record as a state senator but then tried to reassure the normal Republican constituency with calls to cut state government and a firm pledge not to raise taxes. Such temporizing probably cost Simpson votes with both sides.¹⁷ Sullivan in contrast linked himself with the Herschler administration and said that while he had no plans to raise taxes, he would not rule out anything in the face of financial crisis.

A series of debates held around the state was generally beneficial for Sullivan. Both candidates emerged as capable, intelligent, and well intentioned about meeting the state's economic crisis, and no great ideological or issue differences emerged between them.¹⁸ Sullivan won, however, because the unknown and politically inexperienced Democrat had at least proven to be the debating equal of his more experienced Republican opponent. Candidate polls suggest that the debates probably worked to the challenger's advantage. In September, Simpson held a 10 percent to 15 percent lead, which, while significantly less than might have been expected, was still comfortable. Sullivan began to close by early October, and the two were running neck-and-neck two weeks before the election.¹⁹



FIG. 3. John Vinich, Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, 1988, currently Wyoming state senator. Photograph courtesy of Casper Star-Tribune.

Over the last week or so in the campaign, there was a decided shift in the Democrat's favor, as there was in many U.S. Senate races around the country. When the votes were counted, Sullivan had scored a fairly decisive victory, garnering 54 percent of the vote to win by a margin of 13,000—by all accounts much to the surprise of both candidates. Much of Sullivan's margin came from a 5000 vote majority in Natrona County (Casper) and a 4000 one in Laramie County (Cheyenne). Thus, Sullivan was able to use his regional affiliation to carry the normally conservative and Republican Casper and his partisan affiliation to win the more liberal and Democratic Cheyenne—quite a political feat for a supposed neophyte.²⁰

THE WALLOP VS. VINICH CAMPAIGN

In 1988 the party roles were reversed. Malcolm Wallop was a two-term incumbent Republican U.S. senator who drew no serious challenge from within the party. Four minor

candidates ran against him in the primary, but he easily won with 86 percent of the vote versus 6 percent for the second place finisher.

Despite his strong support by the majority Republicans, however, Democrats thought that he might be vulnerable for several reasons. Wallop was far less personally popular than Simpson and Cheney. While he had been elected as something of an environmentalist, he had become a very vocal member of Republican right wing.²¹ In addition, his national concerns with ideological and defense issues were viewed as overriding his ties with Wyoming, and the Sullivan upset gave Democrats some hope that miracles were possible in Wyoming politics. Initially there was speculation that Ed Herschler would come out of retirement to run. As one of the most popular politicians of either party in the state (polls in late 1985 suggested that Herschler was more popular among Republicans than any

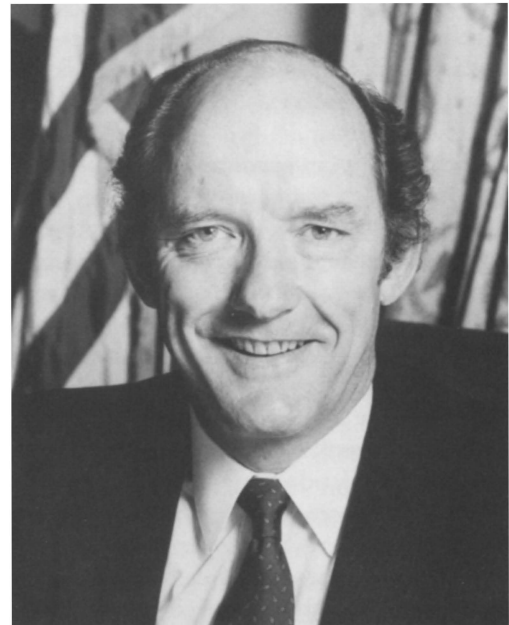


FIG. 4. Incumbent Republican U.S. Senator Malcolm Wallop, reelected in 1988. Photograph courtesy of Malcolm Wallop.

aspiring gubernatorial candidate of that party), "Gov Ed" would have presented Wallop with a strong challenge.²²

In the end, though, Herschler decided not to run, leaving the field for much less promising candidates. The first to announce was John Vinich, a state senator from Fremont County. Vinich was a strong and articulate campaigner, but he suffered from several decided handicaps. He was seen as too liberal for the state, and he was not well known in the population centers of Natrona and Laramie counties. He was challenged by Pete Maxfield, the former dean of the law school at the University of Wyoming, whose campaign was intellectually sophisticated but far from dynamic. Late in the contest, Lynn Simons, the state superintendent of public instruction, entered, presumably because of the perceived weakness of the other two candidates. Simons, who had handily won election to her statewide office several times, was presumed to be the front-runner, but on election day Vinich won easily with 47 percent of the vote, compared to 30 percent for Maxfield and 23 percent for Simons. Rumors suggest that Wallop may have asked some of his supporters to vote for Vinich in the Democratic primary, which Republicans could do easily in Wyoming, but the scope of Simons's defeat went far beyond any such gamesmanship.²³

With Simons out of contention, the Wallop forces relaxed in anticipation of an easy campaign. The late Wyoming primary, 16 August, gave the incumbent senator another important advantage since the short campaign for the general election limited the challenger's ability to gain name recognition and to get his message across. Vinich had two advantages that the Republicans sorely underestimated, however. First, he ran an aggressive grassroots campaign that struck a strong chord among Wyomingites. Second, he was supported by organized labor, which helped him offset the huge war chest that Wallop had accumulated before the campaign.

Beginning with the primary, Vinich attacked Wallop's record on a number of fronts. Most basically, he pictured himself as a populist and working man who was much more in tune with

the citizenry of Wyoming than was his elitist opponent who had "entertained the Queen of England." He argued that he was concerned with providing jobs and aid for the ravaged economy of Wyoming, without necessarily indicating what he would do, while Wallop had lost touch with his native state in his zealous pursuit of right-wing Republican politics in Washington. The argument that Wallop had lost touch was certainly understandable since the senator had used the same line of attack to unseat incumbent Democrat Gale McGee in 1976. Wallop had also pledged at that time that he would retire after serving two terms in order to avoid McGee-like forgetfulness of his political roots. Vinich, needless to say, was quite happy to throw the senator's words back into his face.

Vinich also pictured Wallop as an extremist who had gone beyond the pale of normal Republican conservatism. In particular, Wallop's opposition to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty negotiated by the Reagan administration was derided; much was made of Wallop's participation in the symposium "sponsored by the Moonies"; and Wallop was accused of undermining Social Security and Medicare. Wallop's basic strategy was to respond in kind, calling Vinich an ultraliberal extremist whose views were totally unacceptable to responsible Wyomingites. Vinich's dependence on the support of organized labor, which is fairly unpopular in Wyoming, was highlighted; and the challenger was mocked for "cleaning up" (i.e., shaving his sideburns and wearing suits) for the election and for being a "bartender."²⁴

In the early part of the campaign, Wallop had much more money and, thus, the ability to run a media campaign. Vinich offset this, though: while Wallop stayed busy in Washington Vinich's grassroots campaign of crisscrossing the state with individual appearances proved quite effective for the friends and neighbors politics of small Wyoming communities. Furthermore the *Casper Star-Tribune* was clearly anti-Wallop and helped boost the Vinich campaign.²⁵ Still, as the campaign entered its last few weeks, the incumbent appeared to have the

race well in hand with a comfortable majority of 55 percent to 60 percent, comparable to his 1982 reelection victory.

The turning point was a televised debate that included the candidates for House and Senate seats. The House candidates, Richard Cheney and Bryan Sharratt, debated in gentlemanly fashion and showed themselves generally to follow the ideology of mainstream Republicans or Democrats. The Wallop-Vinich debate that followed demonstrated that these two were much further apart than Cheney and Sharratt and involved a good deal of personal vitriol. Vinich showed that he could exchange insults on a par with a U.S. senator and perhaps came off as slightly more articulate. What evidently happened, though, was that the widely watched debate convinced a significant part of the electorate that Wallop had lost touch with Wyoming as Vinich had charged. Consequently Wallop's lead narrowed. As Vinich's chances improved outside money flowed into his coffers, permitting him to run an aggressive media campaign over the last two weeks and setting up the election night cliffhanger.²⁶

INFLUENCES ON VOTING

Because Simpson and Wallop were so different, the reasons for each candidate's failure to garner the normal Republican vote of 57 percent should be expected to differ as well.²⁷ This section, hence, uses aggregate voting returns and survey data to try to answer the question of who voted for whom in these two elections.

As previously noted, Wyoming politics is largely regional in nature, with the five counties along the Union Pacific railroad in the south generally leaning toward the Democrats and the rest of the state heavily Republican. Table 2 examines how Simpson and Wallop did in each of the state's twenty-three counties, with Natrona County (Casper) being separated from the "rural Republican north." In addition to the share of the county's vote garnered by these two Republican candidates, the number of registered voters and Republican percentage of Re-

publican plus Democratic registration in 1988 are presented to indicate a county's electoral impact and normal political allegiance.

The Republican domination of the north is obvious from these figures. In over half the counties, more than 70 percent of the people registering as either Democrats or Republicans belonged to the majority party, and except for Platte County (55 percent), the lowest Republican share of two-party registration was an impressive 63 percent. The rural north, then, is the most conservative part of the state, and thus it is here that Simpson should have run well behind Wallop if the conventional interpretation that he lost because of perceived liberalism is correct. The data in Table 2 do support this interpretation since Wallop scored between 8 percent and 18 percent higher than Simpson had two years earlier in nine of the seventeen counties. In contrast, Simpson ran ahead of Wallop in only two of these counties, and the only one where the margin was significant (8 percent) was Vinich's home county, Fremont. Overall Simpson lost a third of the counties in the Republican heartland while Wallop carried all but Fremont. In addition, Simpson must have been quite disappointed with his narrow margins in Park County, his family's home county, and Sheridan County, which he had represented in the state legislature.

Given Sullivan's hometown advantage in the 1986 gubernatorial contest, Simpson should have been quite disadvantaged in Natrona County. In fact he only received 39 percent of the vote there, his third lowest total, and only slightly above the 36 percent he garnered in heavily Democratic Sweetwater County. (His other low county, Converse, borders on Natrona, and the two county seats share the same telephone book.) Wallop, then, should have done much better in this normally Republican stronghold. He did run significantly ahead of Simpson but still could only get 47 percent of the vote, a shortfall that made the election close. Wallop's poor showing, furthermore, deviated from the overall success of Republicans in Casper/Natrona County in 1988, when Republicans won both state senate positions and eight

TABLE 2.
VOTING DATA BY COUNTY

	Simpson 1986	Wallop 1988	Republican Registration *	Total Registration
<i>Rural North</i>				
Big Horn	52%	56%	78%	6,003
Campbell	59%	64%	83%	12,161
Converse	37%	54%	76%	5,421
Crook	56%	71%	78%	3,127
Fremont	50%	42%	62%	16,200
Goshen	43%	61%	60%	8,317
Hot Springs	49%	52%	69%	2,930
Johnson	53%	63%	85%	3,539
Lincoln	53%	54%	63%	6,744
Niobrara	45%	60%	87%	1,682
Park	53%	61%	80%	12,339
Platte	56%	52%	55%	4,977
Sheridan	53%	54%	63%	12,821
Sublette	56%	64%	85%	3,232
Teton	60%	59%	71%	7,477
Washakie	43%	58%	74%	4,613
Weston	49%	64%	76%	3,587
<i>Urban North</i>				
Natrona	39%	47%	61%	30,271
<i>South Tier</i>				
Albany	41%	43%	50%	14,300
Carbon	42%	44%	46%	8,317
Laramie	41%	45%	50%	36,208
Sweetwater	36%	37%	29%	16,910
Uinta	57%	52%	58%	7,242

*Republican percentage of Republican plus Democratic registration.

of nine state house seats in the county. (All legislative positions are elected at-large by county in Wyoming.) Perhaps the depressed economy of oil-dependent Casper created some ill will toward the incumbent senator.

The south is the best part of the state for Democrats, but even here the minority party really dominates only Sweetwater County. Party registration is about evenly divided in three others, including Laramie County (Cheyenne, the

other urban center in the state), and Republicans have a comfortable registration lead in Uinta County. Simpson and Wallop both lost all of these counties except Uinta. What is surprising, however, is that Wallop, the staunch conservative, ran 1 percent to 4 percent ahead of Simpson in all four. Thus, while the conservative counties in the rural north punished Simpson for his alleged liberalism, the most liberal counties in the state punished him as well,

not even giving him the level of support that Malcolm Wallop could garner. Simpson's poor showing in the south, therefore, sealed his defeat.

Surveys of actual voter attitudes confirm the conclusion from the aggregate voting data that Simpson's losses among conservatives and Republicans were not counterbalanced by gains among liberals and Democrats. Table 3 breaks down support for Simpson and Wallop according to party identification and ideology.²⁸ The percentages show what proportion of voters in each group (e.g., weak Republicans) supported Simpson and Wallop, and the overall strength

of the relationship between vote and party identification or ideology is measured by the correlation coefficient gamma.

These data confirm several of our expectations about the Simpson and Wallop campaigns. First, Simpson lost a substantially higher share of Republican votes than he gained among Democrats. While 7 percent of strong Democrats voted for him, 21 percent of strong Republicans defected to Sullivan—a gap exacerbated by the fact that there are almost twice as many strong Republicans as strong Democrats in the state. Sullivan also did somewhat better among Republicans and weak Re-

TABLE 3.
IMPACT OF PARTY ID AND IDEOLOGY ON VOTE

	Simpson 1986	Wallop 1988
<i>Party ID</i>		
Strong Democrat	7%	9%
Democrat	33%	28%
Weak Democrat	30%	24%
Independent	35%	48%
Weak Republican	63%	65%
Republican	62%	68%
Strong Republican	79%	90%
Gamma	.55	.69
<i>Ideology</i>		
Strong Liberal	64%	23%
Liberal	49%	25%
Weak Liberal	31%	31%
Middle of Road	43%	43%
Weak Conservative	47%	68%
Conservative	62%	76%
Strong Conservative	53%	78%
Gamma	.18	.54

Gamma is a correlation coefficient that provides a statistical measure of how strong the relationship between two variables is. It varies from 0 when there is no relationship to 1 when there is a perfect relationship (i.e., the values of one variable can be exactly predicted from the values of another in all cases). As a rough scale for evaluating gamma, 0 to .15 shows no association; .15 to .25 shows a weak association; .25 to .40 shows a moderate association; .40 to .60 shows a fairly strong association; and .60 to 1 shows a very strong association.²⁹

publicans (38 percent) than Simpson did among Democrats and weak Democrats (31 percent). In addition, Sullivan carried the independents, who generally strongly support the Republicans in Wyoming,³⁰ by almost a two-to-one margin.

The distribution of Wallop's support by party identification paralleled Simpson's in several respects but differed substantially in two important categories. On one hand, Wallop, despite his much more conservative and partisan image, did only slightly better among Republicans and weak Republicans (67 percent to 62 percent) and worse among Democrats and weak Democrats (26 percent to 31 percent)—although this gap worked significantly in his favor because there are almost twice as many Republicans as Democrats in Wyoming. Further, Wallop actually did slightly better among strong Democrats (9 percent to 7 percent). On the other hand, Wallop substantially outpolled Simpson among two groups of voters whose support ensured his victory. First, he lost only half the strong Republicans that Simpson did (10 percent to 21 percent), and second, he did much better in appealing to independents (48 percent to 35 percent).

Thus partisanship was clearly a central factor in voting in both these races, but the relationship was stronger for Wallop than for Simpson ($\gamma = .69$ and $.55$ respectively). Given the tremendous numerical advantage of Republicans, therefore, Simpson's lesser ability to evoke a partisan division accounts for his loss, in contrast to Wallop's narrow victory.

As would be expected given the nature of the two campaigns, the contrast between Wallop's and Simpson's appeals is much sharper in terms of ideological breakdown. Responding to the harsh ideological debate between Wallop and Vinich, about three-quarters of conservatives in Wyoming supported the Republican and three-quarters of liberals supported the Democrat. Vinich comfortably carried the middle-of-the-roaders by 57 percent, but the conservative nature of the state worked to Wallop's advantage in this ideological division (the γ was a fairly strong $.54$).

The relationship between ideology and gubernatorial

vote in 1986 was more convoluted (the γ was only a moderate $.18$) as would be expected from the blurred ideological images of the two candidates. Simpson's liberal image was evidently picked up by the voters. He received an almost astonishing 52 percent of the vote from the tenth of the electorate who consider themselves liberals or strong liberals, while Sullivan garnered 40 percent of the vote of the conservatives and strong conservatives who constitute a third of the voters—a goodly accomplishment for a Democrat in Wyoming. In addition, Sullivan dominated the middle of the ideological spectrum—winning 60 percent of the votes from weak liberals and middle-of-the-roaders and carrying the weak conservatives by 53 percent.

In comparative terms, Wallop ran about 20 percent ahead of Simpson among conservatives, while Simpson had a 25 percent advantage among liberals and strong liberals, again indicating that Simpson lost votes because of his perceived deviation from the state's mainstream Republican conservatism. Thus these data for strong conservatives and liberals are consistent with the conclusion that Simpson's perceived liberalism was one of the major factors in the race—proportionately, he gained more among liberals than he lost among conservatives, but this meant an absolute loss of votes because there are so few liberals in Wyoming. Sullivan really won the election because he dominated the center of the electorate, however—a finding that is somewhat inconsistent with the picture of a Simpson candidacy that alienated conservatives and party workers attached to his primary rivals.

This suggests that other factors may well have affected these two deviating elections. One certainly would be Wyoming's economic collapse, and another slightly less obvious one might be alienation from the federal government. By the late 1980s, for example, Wyomingites by an approximately two-to-one margin believed that their personal financial conditions were deteriorating rather than improving and that a federal government dominated by "big interests" could not be trusted. People feeling economic

TABLE 4.
IMPACT OF FINANCIAL STRESS AND POLITICAL ALIENATION ON VOTE

	Simpson 1986	Wallop 1988
<i>Personal Finances</i>		
Worse	44%	47%
Same	52%	51%
Better	57%	60%
Gamma	.18	.17
<i>Wyoming Taxes</i>		
Reasonable	47%	52%
Too High	66%	54%
Gamma	.36	.04
<i>Trust Federal Government</i>		
Never	33%	37%
Some	47%	50%
Mostly	57%	60%
Almost Always	54%	67%
Gamma	.20	.24
<i>Federal Government Represents</i>		
Big Interests	45%	45%
Unsure	57%	69%
All Citizens	59%	72%
Gamma	.24	.46

stress might well be turned off by Simpson's sunshine campaign and receptive to Vinich's charges that Wallop was an elitist who had lost touch with his constituents. The relationship between alienation from the federal government and voting behavior is more problematic, though. On one hand, those feeling alienated might vote against the state's Republican establishment. On the other, Wyoming Republicans (as well as Ronald Reagan) have consistently appealed to the state's ill feelings toward the "feds"—Wallop's initial campaign denounced OSHA in a television ad that showed an outhouse being dragged around the prairie.

Table 4 explores these various possibilities. People feeling financial stress were about 12

percent more likely to vote against both Simpson and Wallop than those who believed their personal financial situations to be improving, producing moderate gammas of .18 and .17. Another measure of stress might be opposition to taxes. Simpson made opposition to tax increases a major platform plank, and Wallop denounced Vinich as a big spending liberal. Simpson did do very well among citizens who believed Wyoming's taxes to be too high, garnering 66 percent of their votes, but unfortunately for him, only 10 percent of Wyomingites felt this was the case. Simpson's antitax attitude partially explains his poor showings in Laramie and Albany counties, whose many state employees probably translated no new taxes into

no pay raises. Surprisingly (although U.S. senators have no influence over state taxes), feelings about taxes were unrelated to votes in the Wallop-Vinich race.

The data in Table 4 also clearly demonstrate that Wyomingites who felt alienated from the federal government were about 10 percent more likely to vote for Democrats than Republicans in these two races, producing moderate gammas in the .20 to .25 range for three of the four relationships. In the fourth case the gamma was a strong .46, as Vinich won 55 percent of those who saw Washington dominated by big interests

(71 percent of the electorate, incidentally), while Wallop carried 70 percent of the less cynical. This is a rather ironic reversal of Wallop's initial appeal in running against Gale McGee. It also suggests that Republicans in Wyoming should rethink some of their boilerplate rhetoric attacking Washington.

Demographic factors, only marginally related to candidate choice, are shown in Table 5. While Republicans usually do better among the middle and upper classes, both nationally and in Wyoming,³¹ the Republican advantage among people with greater education and in-

TABLE 5.
IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON VOTING

	Simpson 1986	Wallop 1988
<i>Education</i>		
High School or Less	48%	50%
College	51%	54%
Gamma	.03	.08
<i>Family Income</i>		
Under \$20,000	47%	46%
\$20,000-\$35,000	48%	50%
Over \$35,000	52%	57%
Gamma	.05	.15
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	51%	54%
Female	49%	51%
Gamma	-.04	-.06
<i>Age</i>		
18-29	65%	54%
30-49	47%	54%
50-65	44%	51%
Over 65	52%	50%
Gamma	.12*	.03

*Cramer's V because the relationship does not follow an ordinal continuum. That is, Simpson did best with the very old and the very young. V is a correlation coefficient like gamma. Its values tend to be slightly lower than gamma, so a V of .12 denotes a weak relationship. (See note 29.)

come was only significant ($\gamma = .15$) for income's impact upon the Wallop-Vinich contest. Even here the degree of association is surprisingly low given Vinich's stridently populist appeal. In addition, the gender gap that has emerged in national politics in recent years³² was not a factor either.

An interesting relationship exists between age and gubernatorial choice in 1986, however. Simpson won strongly among the young, getting about 65 percent of the vote from those under thirty, and also carried those over sixty-five by 52 percent. These are the groups who might be expected to feel the least threatened by the state's recession because retirees do not have to worry about losing jobs and young people are the most economically mobile. Sullivan, in contrast, did best (56 percent) among those between fifty and sixty-five. Many people in this latter group obviously have deep roots in the state and limited mobility. Thus there is again the suggestion that economic strains may provide a subtle key to understanding this political upset. Such economic logic, however, would also imply that a similar relationship should exist for the Wallop-Vinich race, where it clearly did not. Perhaps Wallop's strong conservatism was less appealing to young voters than Simpson's more moderate Republicanism.

This section has examined several potential influences on voting in the two deviating elections under consideration. Pete Simpson's perceived liberalism evidently affected voting patterns significantly and resulted in his loss compared to Wallop's win, but the poor showing of both Simpson and Malcolm Wallop compared to normal Republican voting patterns indicates that other factors must have been at work as well. Economic stress and political cynicism provide part of the explanation for the surprisingly poor showings of Simpson and Wallop, but their effects are moderate even in these two elections.

IMPLICATIONS

This paper has examined two recent elections that deviate from the normal pattern of

Republican domination over Wyoming politics. In particular, it asked whether Pete Simpson's loss of the 1986 gubernatorial race and the extremely narrow victory of incumbent Malcolm Wallop in the 1988 U.S. Senate race primarily reflected the political idiosyncracies of the two candidates' appeals or were a more structured consequence of economic crisis and voter alienation.

The answer to this question, unfortunately, is rather ambiguous and not entirely straightforward. At one level the economic crisis was amazingly inconsequential. Most statewide and legislative election results followed a business-as-usual pattern, long-term political trends in the states were almost totally unaffected in both years, and voter support for incumbents remained exceedingly strong—all belying any possibility of an economically stimulated realignment in state politics. Thus economic distress in Wyoming has not reached the point where the voters inflict wholesale punishment on the political establishment.

The strong showings by Sullivan and Vinich basically derived from the negative images of Simpson's liberalism and Wallop's patrician style of leadership, but given the strength of the Republican party in Wyoming, these idiosyncratic disadvantages by themselves should not have threatened either candidacy. Thus although the relationships were only moderate in strength, economic stress and political alienation clearly had some impact on voting for governor in 1986 and senator in 1988, as the economic crisis hypothesis would predict.

These contradictory tendencies suggest that the economic crisis probably did have an effect on the elections but one that was highly constrained by an important trait of the Wyoming electorate. Unlike voters in many other parts of the U.S., Wyomingites appear quite faithful to their leaders even when times turn bad. Times of crisis, then, provoke sympathy for embattled leaders rather than an irate "throw the rascals out" mentality. (The bankruptcy of a ranch owned by Governor Herschler stimulated an outpouring of public sympathy in 1986.) As a result incumbents are protected, and a seem-

ingly business-as-usual atmosphere continues.

The high degree of political cynicism among Wyomingites and its correlation with voting for Sullivan and Vinich, however, indicates that the economic crisis probably had significant negative effects for Simpson and Wallop. The former had an establishmentarian reputation because of his family ties but had not acquired the "halo effect" of political incumbency, while the latter lost his "halo effect" for reasons that are not entirely obvious, given his strong public approval in nonelection years, because alienation from the federal government normally works to the advantage of conservatives and Republicans in western states like Wyoming. Wyoming, therefore, represents an interesting reversal of the normal American tendency for citizens to give much more "diffuse support" to the "general regime" of the American system as a whole than the "specific support" that they are willing to extend to individual governmental leaders, especially in times of political or economic stress.³³

The partisan implications of this situation are somewhat contradictory as well. Republicans can certainly be greatly heartened by the fact that despite the economic crisis, the loyal electorate is not yet disillusioned with the state's dominant party. They can be less happy, though, with the fact that the Democrats did so well in two important elections just at the time when the last viable statewide candidate from the Democrats' better days of the 1970s (others included former U.S. Senator Gale McGee and former U.S. Representative Teno Roncalio) was departing from the Wyoming political scene. Republican loyalty evidently does not necessarily extend to nonincumbents when legitimate alternatives exist. The ease with which Sullivan and Vinich established the legitimacy of their candidacies should be disturbing even (or perhaps especially) to a dominant party that enjoys an overwhelming two-to-one margin in registration and party identification.

NOTES

1. Paul Klepper, "Politics Without Parties: The

Western States, 1900-1984," in Gerald D. Nash and Richard Etulain, eds., *The Twentieth Century West: Historical Interpretations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 295-338; and Neal R. Peirce, *The Great Plains States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Nine Great Plains States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

2. V.O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (February 1955): 3-18, developed the argument that certain elections constitute "critical realignments" in partisan constituency base and control of government. See also Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970); Bruce A. Campbell and Richard J. Trilling, eds., *Realignment in American Politics: Toward A Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); and Peter F. Galderisi, Michael S. Lyons, Randy T. Simmons, and John G. Francis, eds., *The Politics of Realignment: Party Change in the Mountain West* (Boulder: Westview, 1987).

3. T.A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 262-309, 386-410; and Tim R. Miller, *State Government: Politics in Wyoming* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1981), pp. 31-51.

4. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Significant Features of Fiscal Federalism*, 1989 Edition, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 2-9.

5. Martin Crutsinger, "Incomes Up Fastest in Nevada, Slowest in Wyoming," *Laramie Daily Boomerang*, 25 January 1989, p. 3.

6. Unpublished election year surveys conducted by the Government Research Bureau of the University of Wyoming.

7. James E. Alt and K. Alec Chrystal, *Political Economics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Edward R. Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and John E. Chubb, "Institutions, The Economy, and the Dynamics of State Elections," *American Political Science Review* 82 (March 1988): 133-54.

8. In 1980 respondents were simply asked whether they "approved" or "disapproved" of a politician's job performance. In 1982 they were asked to rank the politicians on a four-point scale—"excellent, good, fair, and poor." Following normal coding conventions, we scored "fair" and "poor" as "disapprove," even though some of the people rating a candidate as "fair" might have approved of him if given only the "approve" versus "disapprove" alternatives.

9. When Wyomingites were asked in 1986 who was the most responsible for the state's depressed economy, 35% cited foreign oil producers. The next highest categories were the U.S. oil and mining in-

dustry (17%), Congress (13%), and President Reagan (11%), Janet Clark and B. Oliver Watter, *Results of the 1986 Election Survey* (Laramie: Government Research Bureau, University of Wyoming, 1987), p. 49.

10. Gregg Cawley, Janet Clark, Michael Horan, Maggi Murdock, Alan Schenker, and Oliver Walter, *The Equality State: Government and Politics in Wyoming* (Dubuque: Eddie Bowers, 1988), pp. 19-41.

11. B. Oliver Walter, "Wyoming," in B. Oliver Walter, ed., *Politics in the West: The 1978 Elections* (Laramie: Institute for Policy Research, University of Wyoming, 1979), pp. 190-214.

12. Scott Farris, "Election Through a Rearview Mirror Darkly," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 28 April 1989, p. A10.

13. Joan Barron, "Smith Drops Out of Race for Governor," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 12 April 1986, p. A1; and Barron, "Wyoming Voters Show Their Independence," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 9 November 1986, p. A12.

14. "Simpson Beats Budd in Close Race," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 21 August 1986, p. A1.

15. Pete Simpson, Seminar on the 1986 Election, Department of Political Science, University of Wyoming, February 1987.

16. Liz Brimmer, "Simpson a Copycat, Declares Sullivan," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 10 October 1986, p. B1.

17. For general evaluations of the factors affecting the election see Barron, "Wyoming Voters" (note 13 above), and Paul Krza, "The Hat Was Only One of Many Factors," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 11 November 1986, p. A12.

18. Paul Krza, "Sullivan, Simpson Trade Jabs in First Debate," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 1 October 1986, p. A1.

19. Simpson, Seminar (note 15 above).

20. Joan Barron, "Sullivan Says He Never Felt Confident He'd Win," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 6 November 1986, p. A1.

21. Oliver Walter, "Wyoming: Conservative and Republican But Not Always So," *Social Science Journal* 18 (October 1981): 133-34.

22. Unpublished election year surveys conducted by the Government Research Bureau of the University of Wyoming.

23. Scott Farris, "Vinich Wins Senate Nomination," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 17 August 1988, p. A1;

and Paul Krza, "Thunder and Smoke Clear from Political Battlefield," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 19 August 1988, p. A14.

24. For general analyses of how these factors affected the election, see Scott Farris, "Wallop's Narrow Victory Surprises Many Wyo Politicians," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 10 November 1988, p. A1, and Andrew Melnykovich, "Simpson: Two-term Flap Caused Close Race," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 10 November 1988, p. A3.

25. Richard High, "Need a Senator with Two Feet in Wyoming," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 6 November 1988, p. A12.

26. Scott Farris, "Debate Gave Democrats No New Leverage," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 28 October 1988, p. A6; Farris, "Wallop's Narrow Victory" (note 24 above); and Matt Winters, "Sparks Fly in Debate," *Casper Star-Tribune*, 27 October 1988, p. A1.

27. Cawley et al, *The Equality State* (note 10 above), pp. 31-33.

28. The Government Research Bureau surveys on which this study is based contain two questions on candidate preference. The first is with a long survey taken one to three weeks before the election, and the second is a "call back" after the election, which asks how a respondent actually voted. The former was used for the Simpson election because there are a large number of missing cases in the call backs. The call back data were used for the Wallop race, however, because the substantial last minute change in voter preference made the pre-election survey unrepresentative of actual voting behavior.

29. See Hubert M. Blalock, Jr., *Social Statistics*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 421-26.

30. Walter, "Wyoming" (note 11 above), p. 209.

31. Robert S. Erickson, Norman R. Luttbeg, and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1980), pp. 153-68, 273-85. For data on Wyoming, see Cawley et al, *The Equality State* (note 10 above), pp. 38-39.

32. Carol N. Mueller, ed., *The Politics of the Gender Gap: The Social Construction of Political Influence* (Newberry Park, California: Sage, 1988).

33. Edward N. Muller and Thomas O. Jukam, "On the Meaning of Political Support," *American Political Science Review* 71 (December 1977): 1569-95.