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Add Gender and Spin: Rethinking Political Coalitions in the U.S.

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“In at least the advanced democracies, and perhaps in all democracies, and perhaps in all countries regardless of the nature of political institutions, the primary struggle among citizens is and has been over the distribution of economic resources.”

Woojin Lee, John Roemer, Karine Van Der Straeten
Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution

How do gender differences shape the “primary struggle” among citizens over the distribution of economic resources? This question echoes a long history of dialogue between the Marxian and feminist traditions that has seldom been heeded by a larger crowd. Even the stage whispers and cat calls that once interrupted the grand performances of both traditions have lapsed into silence, perhaps because each has moved to separate venues in a reconfigured theatre district. Tiptoeing back to old haunts, I see promising signs of renovation. Class theorists remain reluctant to confront gender. But their engagements with race/ethnicity are thickening the plot and heightening the drama.¹

My reflections on John Roemer’s contributions begin with consideration of his work in progress with Woojin Lee and Karine Van der Straeten, *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution*. This important work represents a dialogue between Marxian and liberal political theory that can be enlivened by feminist emphasis on parallels between race/ethnicity and gender. It also provides potentially important insights into interactions

between preferences and interests and leads into a more abstract discussion of concepts of exploitation.

I begin with a summary of the basic approach outlined in *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution*. Next, I explore possibilities similarities in the impact of racial/ethnic and gender differences in political behavior, emphasizing the importance of both “bundling” and “framing” in the development of party affiliations. I summarize evidence that the political gender gap in the U.S. , while relatively small, is both significant and likely to increase in the future.

As the quote above suggests, political theory requires consideration of economic interests. Turning to this underlying issue, I argue that Lee et al. rely on an excessively sharp distinction between preferences and interests, and should devote more attention to the possibly circular—or at least reciprocal--relationship between identity and collective action. Both Marxist and liberal political theorists tend to define distributional outcomes too narrowly in terms of household-level market income. Distributional conflict also takes place over the distribution of opportunities within the wage labor force, over unpaid work within households and, even more broadly, over relative contributions to public goods, such as children and communities.

Many theorists influenced by the Marxian tradition, including Charles Tilly and Erik Wright (1994, 1997), have moved toward broader definitions of economic interests. As Robert Goodin points out (2005), Roemer’s own concept of exploitation can be extended to gender inequality. Here, however, Roemer’s insistence that that individuals are entirely “responsible” for their preferences creates a roadblock. An emerging feminist perspective emphasizes the social construction of norms and preferences, and in a sense,

the importance of distributional struggle over that process. Put in more technical economic terms, endogenous preferences imply “internalized oppression,” and forms of exploitation that are less subject to rational choice—and analytical models—than Roemer might prefer.

Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution

The basic plot of *Racism, Xenophobia and Distribution* is familiar to many economic historians: Racial conflict has divided the American working class, and helps explain why many working class voters vote against their economic interests (Reich, 1981). Similar dynamics have emerged in many other developed capitalist countries as increased immigration has increased both economic and ethnic heterogeneity. The value-added of the Roemer et al. manuscript lies in its clear analytical treatment and development of a formal model that can be used to explore counterfactuals.

At its most schematic, the model describes a voter’s position in terms of two issues: redistributive taxation (t) and racism (r) where t and r each lie in the interval $[0,1]$. A large value of t denotes support for redistributive taxation, and a large value of r denotes racism. A line drawing a boundary between views of Democrats and Republicans can be drawn, although of course its exact location is unclear (See Figure 1). A voter with characteristics $1, 0$ should vote Democratic, and $0, 1$ should vote Republican. Many voters find themselves somewhere in the middle, and both the salience and the accuracy of their perceptions of race/ethnicity and redistributive taxation come into play.

Perceptions of race/ethnicity are decomposed into two sub-effects: the anti-solidarity effect (ASE) and the policy-bundle effect (PBE). The ASE effect closely resembles what traditional Marxists once called “false consciousness”—belief that people

of color are lazy, exploit the welfare state, and are generally undeserving. The PBE effect, though described as a component of the race/ethnicity factor, seems to represent the interaction between race/ethnicity and redistribution: the existence of some voters with high levels of racism makes it easier for the Republicans to compromise less on redistributive issues than they might otherwise, which in turn pulls Democrats to the right. In effect, anti-solidarity makes it possible for Republicans to “divide and conquer” voters just as, in Roemer’s earlier model of racial discrimination (1979), employers did the same to workers.

This model rejects the assumption that the policy space is unidimensional, departing from traditional political models associated with Downs and the associated median-voter theorem. It assumes that two political parties (Republicans and Democrats) propose different policies, because, as they put it “otherwise the policy-bundle effect would have no bite.” The stage is set for application of a “party unanimity-Nash-equilibrium” (PUNE) model previously developed by Roemer (1999, 2001). Rather than assuming that all politicians aim to maximize their probability of being elected (as in a traditional Downsian model) or that they hope to maximize the welfare of their constituents (as in the Wittman model) political parties seek a payoff that reflects a combination of strategic and substantive concerns. Parties consist of factions that include groups such as Opportunists, Reformists and Militants.

This approach is compelling because it entertains a more realistic level of strategic complexity than previous models. But is it realistic enough?

Parallels and Divergences

Like race/ethnicity, gender has often been interpreted as a secondary issue for the left, or perhaps even a tertiary issue, even less likely to have implications for class politics. Gender differences receive hardly a mention in the *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution* manuscript. Yet important parallels are obvious. For instance, Lee et al. write “racism reduces ‘compassion’ among citizens” (p. I-3) and ‘compassion’ is the term often invoked to describe male-female differences (Eagly et al. 2004). Social psychologists hypothesize that social disadvantage in general enhances support for compassionate policies. Gender gaps in political attitudes are smaller among African Americans and Hispanics in part because members of these racial-ethnic groups have more compassionate attitudes than others.

Lee et al. note that the Republican Party has taken a conservative position on economic issues and race/ethnicity issues. It has also taken a conservative position on gender issues. Examples include opposition to affirmative action, pay equity initiatives, abortion rights, expanded public funding for child care and family leave, and gay/lesbian rights. The verbal analogue to racism is, of course, sexism. Just as many voters hold the view that Blacks and Hispanics are lazy and undeserving, many hold the view that women’s place is in the home, under the authority of a husband. This view is strongly associated with fundamentalist Christian doctrine. In June of 1998, the convention of Southern Baptists, the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, declared that a wife should “submit herself graciously” to her husband’s leadership.²

Such views clearly contribute to “divide and conquer” strategies in the workplace. An excellent example is afforded by the class action suit filed last year against the single largest employer in the world, Wal-Mart, alleging systematic discrimination on the basis

of sex. The plaintiff's brief requesting class action standing, posted on line at walmartclass.org, provides a detailed statistical analysis of the extent of differences in pay and promotion in the firm. It also offers the poignant personal accounts of women told they did not deserve higher pay or promotion because they should be home taking care of their families.

The resulting anti-solidarity effect could be described in terms analogous to those in Figure 1. "Political bundling" takes place, with Republicans winning votes from working class men who, though harmed by their tax policies, favor their gender policies. But there is no reason to simply substitute gender for race/ethnicity, because their effects on class are mutually determined: each complicates the anti-solidarity effect of the others. Having liberated us from the unidimensional approach, Lee et al. make us long for the multidimensional. However mathematically intractable this longing may be, it cannot be assuaged by simply leaving gender out of the model.

Race/ethnicity and gender have long had "bundling" effects on one another, independent of their effect on perceptions of redistributive policies. Feminism and abolitionism were closely related in the early nineteenth century. In the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, primarily a grassroots struggle against the segregation of blacks in the South, led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination against women. Famously, a Southern Congressman added wording protecting women in an effort to block its passage (Whalen and Whalen, 1985). That effort was unsuccessful, and women as a group have benefited from the legislation as much if not more than racial/ethnic minorities as a group.

Bundling effects are amplified by “framing effects” that are typically described in terms of worldviews and interpretive heuristics than economic interests (Lakoff, 2004). Both racial and gender discrimination were framed as violations of the principle of equal opportunity. This conceptual linkage helped build a political coalition that had a significant impact on access to education and jobs in the U.S. in the last third of twentieth century, despite some obvious tensions. Many feminist scholars have tried to disentangle the complex causalities that modify patterns of ethnic and gender inequality (Albelda et al., 1997; McCall, 2001). The political gender gap is some ways exemplifies this larger puzzle.

The Political Gender Gap

Between the 1950s and 1980s, women tended to vote more conservatively than men. Since that time, however, they have shifted to the left in most advanced capitalist countries. While modest in size, a gender gap persists even when controlling for class, race/ethnicity, and regional differences (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). In the U.S. public opinion research has emphasized persistent political differences between men and women since the 1980s (Smeal, 1984; Miller and Shanks, 1996). Women are more likely to vote Democratic than men.

To bring this point home, it is worth noting that if only women had voted in the 2004 presidential election, George W. Bush would not have won. He had a larger edge among male voters than his opponent John Kerry among female voters, and the rest is history (See Figure 2). The gender gap in 2004 was wider among unmarried individuals and among the college-educated. While differences are smaller among non-whites than among whites, they remained significant (See Figure 3).

Economic differences are often invoked as an explanation. Women's entrance into wage employment has increased their independence. Many now have "interests" that are separate from those of partners and husbands (Manza and Brooks, 1999). Rising divorce and non-marriage may play an even more important role. Edlund and Pande (2002) find evidence that support for Democrats has risen among middle-income women in states with higher divorce rates. Among women with moderate earnings, marriage may be a factor that tips them in a Republican direction. Since non-marriage is on the rise, the gender gap might be destined to increase.

Combining attention to changes in labor force participation and household structure Iverson and Rosenbluth (2003) are able to explain considerable variation in gender-based political preferences. They also introduce consideration of the role of general versus specific skills in particular countries, noting a tension between labor market organization and welfare state policies, since "the extent to which the state supports the ability to form independent households, especially through publicly provided services such as daycare...can compensate for the exclusion of women from good jobs in the private labor market" (2003:11).

The economic interests of women cannot be assessed as easily as those of men, because they are less related to the distribution of after-tax income, and more related to the distribution of public spending. Indeed, a large and growing literature emphasizes the impact of gender on welfare state dynamics (Orloff, 1993, Esping Anderson, 1999). Women depend more on the welfare state than men do for two reasons: they are more likely to take responsibility for children and they are more likely to outlive their spouses

in old age. The “social safety net” effect may nudge women in the Democratic direction(Deitch, 1988).

The argument can also be turned around: men may be less supportive of social safety net programs because they now derive fewer benefits from them than women do. Indeed, some programs, such as child support enforcement, explicitly redistribute money from fathers to children and their mothers. The so-called “male backlash” effect often takes the form of dismissive criticisms of the maternalist “nanny state.”³ In 2004 Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California famously referred to critics of the U.S. economy as “girlie men.”⁴

An alternative approach emphasizes women’s cultural values rather than their economic interests. As aforementioned, women tend to have more “compassionate” views than men, and to be more critical of force and violence (Eagly et al., Women tend to express more altruistic views than men, and to be more critical of force and violence (Eagly et al. 2004). Women are generally more skeptical of competition and free enterprise than men are. As the polling study cited earlier put it, women tend to vote Democratic because “from their own personal experience or their mother’s experience they understand the need for social programs. They know that government can’t be run like a business” (Lake, Snell, Perry, 2004).

Yet cultural values are partly shaped by economic interests. And despite a wealth of political survey data, voters’ preferences can seldom be mapped clearly onto their politics. If they could be, elections would be even less suspenseful than they are. The underlying constructs of “preferences,” “values,” and “interests” require closer consideration.

Preferences, Interests, and Identities

The Marxian legacy urges us to think of preferences as subjective, interests as objective. Preferences reside in the consciousness of voters, but interests are determined by the distribution of wealth. In their treatment of race/ethnicity and class, Lee et al. offer a fusion of liberal and Marxian political theory that seems to take racism as a “preference” and class as an “interest.” They do not always use this nomenclature, often referring to voter preferences that include both race/ethnicity and class. But racist preferences are taken as exogenously given factors that prevent voters from acting in their economic interests. Class preferences, on the other hand, are inferred from economic position: whether workers would or would not benefit from redistributive taxation, defined as transfers from the top toward the bottom.

The model that Lee et al. develop promises to show how electoral outcomes would change if racist preferences were reduced. It does not explore the possibility that racism itself might alter economic interests. But are preferences and interests really so easily separated? The growing literature on political and economic identity suggests not. Identity is shaped by past history and future possibility. As Benedict Anderson (1991) argues in his beautiful treatment of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, groups engage in collective action partly because their common cultural identity binds them together. At the same time, the potential to benefit from collective action creates and reinforces a common identity (Hardin, 1995). Modeled as a kind of path-dependent process of preference formation, the concept of identity weakens the traditional assumption that preferences can simply be taken as exogenously given (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000).

This interpretation thus undermines the distinction between class and race/ethnicity (and gender) as categories. If individuals manage to form common and solidaristic preferences, they can engage in forms of rent-seeking collective action that affect the distribution of economic resources. Likewise, if individuals find themselves in a position in which they may be able to extract rents by engaging in collective action, they may form common and solidaristic preferences. Many economists far outside the Marxian tradition are now exploring such models, including Jack Hirshleifer (1994) and Michelle Garfinkel (2004).

Yet these models were anticipated, in a way, by early efforts to conceptualize racial/ethnic conflict, including Edna Bonacich's classic "Theory of Ethnic Antagonism" (1972). By her reasoning, employees with a common racial/ethnic background and a similar standard of living act in concert to protect themselves from competition from members of other groups who are willing to work for a lower wage. It may be capitalist competition that sets them at odds, but it is the ability to pursue their collective economic interests that generates or intensifies racial/ethnic inequality. This argument is modernized, globalized, and extended more broadly to ethnic conflict in Amy Chua's recent *Worlds on Fire* (2004).

Scholars in the Marxian tradition often use the term "identity politics" in a derisory way to refer to an excessively subjective, even arbitrary departure from a materialist analysis of economic interests (Farred, 2000). But Bonacich and Chua essentially argue that ethnic identity creates interests, and vice versa. Feminists have often emphasized a similar link: a telling phrase in organizing efforts that I participated in

while a college student was “the need to empower women-identified women”—a phrase that seems redundant only at first glance.

The women’s movement has always had significant cultural dimensions that actively create, foster, and reinforce political activism. At the same time, feminists emphasize the important economic gains that women have realized through political mobilization and collective action: including laws outlawing discrimination, providing rights to contraception and abortion, and winning public benefits such as family leave and child care. These policies have economic implications that are just as direct as redistributive taxation.

From this perspective, racial/ethnic identity is to racial/ethnic interests as gender identity is to gender as class consciousness is to class. That is, all these dimensions of group difference have both a subjective and an objective aspect. Racist preferences coexist with sexist and classist preferences and racial interests coexist along with gender and class interests. The distribution of economic resources between racial/ethnic groups and between men and women may be just as important as the distribution of economic resources between those who own the means of production and those who do not. By “just as important” I mean simply that it may have implications for collective action—and for individual voting patterns—that are just as salient.

Lest this approach seem too abstract, consider the political implications. Having perhaps given up on the U.S. working class, Lee et al. urge us to believe that the Democratic Party, at least, would be stronger if it were not for the divisive impact of racist preferences on class interests. But one could argue, instead, that Democratic Party pursued policies that improved the relative economic position of Blacks, Hispanics, and

women, putting many white men in a somewhat contradictory economic position. The promise of redistributive taxation has been partially neutralized by the fear of redistributive job allocation (i.e. affirmative action) and redistributive educational spending (e.g. the school finance equalization efforts under way in many states).

The issue here is not the relative size of the collective gains at stake. I happen to believe that a majority of American voters would gain if they could forge the consciousness that could enable them to collectively pursue their class interests. But that class consciousness may be weak for objective reasons. Looking backward, white male voters in the U.S. see that organizing efforts based on race/ethnicity and gender have been more successful recently than those based on class. After all, women and minorities have made significant economic gains over the last thirty years, while non-college educated workers in general and the trade union movement in particular have taken a beating. Looking forward, white male voters anticipate that it will be easier to increase their share of wages (or of the larger “social wage”) than to claim a larger share of profits.

In the national arena defined by electoral politics, distributional struggle takes place only among those who cannot take their money and run. In an increasingly global capitalist system, national strategies offer little traction. The Democrats have been much maligned by Thomas Frank (2004), among others, for not putting more emphasis on the ill effects of capital mobility, outsourcing and offshoring in the last election. But what can the Democrats really do about these problems? And in the absence of a solution to them, is redistributive taxation a viable strategy?

To summarize using Marxist vocabulary, in game-theoretic terms: Why identify as a worker rather than as a white, or a man? The potential payoff from challenging the ruling class may be high, but the chances of success are low. And, of course, perceptions of the risk are manipulated and exaggerated by those who have the most to lose.

Exploitations and Opportunities

Within the Marxian tradition, economic interests have typically been anchored by concepts of exploitation. Appreciation of non-class forms of distributional conflict has grown, but the e-word tends to be reserved for class. Erik Olin Wright, for instance, refers to “nonexploitative economic oppression” (1994: 39-46, 1997, Chapter 1). Similarly, Charles Tilly (1999) refers to “opportunity hoarding” as a process distinct from but analogous to exploitation. Both terms are successfully deployed in at least some analysis of inequalities based on race/ethnicity and gender, and represent a distinct improvement over traditional Marxist scripts.

John Roemer has moved in a similar direction, but followed a more complicated route. First, he developed a concept of exploitation quite distinct from the traditional Marxian notion of surplus appropriation, based on a “just withdrawal rule”—what people could take with them if they withdrew from a given institutional arrangement (Roemer, 1982). For example, the rule that individuals should have the right to withdraw from any institutional arrangement and take their own labor and capital with them—is violated by feudalism but not by capitalism. Another rule—that individuals should have the right to withdraw and take not only their own labor and capital with them but also their fair share of the capital accumulated by society—is violated by capitalism, but presumably not by democratic socialism.

As far as I know, Roemer has not applied this particular reasoning to race/ethnicity or gender exploitation, but the extension is straightforward. With respect to race/ethnicity one could suggest that individuals should have the right to withdraw with reparations for acts of violence and expropriation carried out against their forebears. Robert Goodin aptly proposes a “feminist withdrawal rule” that pertains especially to the division of labor within the household, “one that allows both partners to take an equal share of all that has been invested in the household when they leave. By that standard, it is exploitative for the man to be able to withdraw a larger portion of his investments than the woman, simply because there are more 'caring' investments in her portfolio” (2005: 24).

What Goodin means by “caring investments” are efforts devoted to the care of children and the development of family relationships that are essentially public goods. This interpretation is entirely consistent with institutionalist analysis of the disadvantages that accrue from investments in family-specific rather than market-specific human capital (England and Farkas, 1986). And this interpretation could be broadened in a way that holds society as a whole—as well as individual families—accountable for the benefits they enjoy as a result of women’s acts of care and nurturance. This takes us back, in a way, to the quote that the pollsters highlighted: women presumably know that society can’t be run like a business.

But Goodin is perhaps overoptimistic about the applicability of Roemer’s approach. Elsewhere Roemer seems to insist that individuals should be held accountable for at least some of their preferences regarding “effort.” Indeed, this insistence frames the second, more recent effort to move beyond the traditional Marxian emphasis on class by

appropriating and sharpening the traditional liberal concept of equal opportunity (Roemer, 1998). Roemer's contribution here is to offer a rigorous definition of which factors individuals should be held responsible for and which are beyond their control by developing a theory of "types." If "type" (perhaps an ingenious synonym for what was once meant by "class") can be clearly defined and measured, and its relationship to outcomes statistically assessed, we can attribute the remaining variation to differences in individual effort. (The exercise inevitably reminds those of us who are required to teach human capital theory of the Oaxaca Decomposition). A good society should try to compensate for differences in type precisely in order to reward and encourage effort.

Obviously, both race/ethnicity and gender can be represented as "types." Here again, I cannot cite an example of Roemer himself applying his reasoning to gender, but he includes discussion of Amartya Sen's concerns regarding the "tamed housewife." (1998: 20). If women have been socialized to devote more time and energy to the care of dependents than men have, they lack an equal opportunity to compete with men for economic resources. Treating "caring preferences" as a form of positive, rather than negative addiction, they can be treated much like the smoking example that Roemer develops in *Equal Opportunity* (1998:20). Both women and smokers have been warned of the potential costs they will incur, but their preferences may reflect, in part, circumstances beyond their control. Society should provide them with "resources which might enable them to reconsider their preferences" (1998: 20).

This is a fascinating line of reasoning. But apart from the empirical difficulties of defining types (and inevitable sub-types) and ascertaining their impact, the notion that preferences themselves can lead to economic disadvantage undermines the very concept

of the autonomous actor that underlies the concept of equal opportunity.⁵ Rejecting Ronald Dworkin's (1981) bright line between "preferences" (for which individuals should be held accountable) and "resources" (which are beyond their control) Roemer offers a substitute: a bright line between preferences that can be ascribed to "type" and those that are "autonomously chosen." But the harder we specify this bright line, the more it flickers and recedes.

Today, not all women choose to specialize in economic activities that yield little return in the market because they are difficult to commodify. Indeed, most professional women who have to time to come to conferences like this, on a Saturday, have explicitly avoided commitments for the care of dependents. Does this mean that women who do choose to specialize in care have made autonomous decisions, and should submit to the adverse economic consequences? I don't think so. Instead, women and men should engage in forms of collective action that ensure that care is evenly shared and generously rewarded. Perhaps, as appreciation of Carol Gilligan's (1982) work would suggest, I am simply being true to type, caring more about care than justice.

If we could neatly separate socialized choices from truly autonomous ones, we could proceed, like the famous economists on a desert island without a can opener, to enjoy a feast. Instead, here we are on the beach getting sunburned as well as hungry. Honestly, I never thought I'd be stuck on the same desert island as John Roemer and find his intellectual company quite consoling.

In Conclusion

Most social scientists are willing to throw gender in the theoretical pot, along with a few other spices. In the 1970s, when I first became engaged in the feminist intellectual

project, the derisory label for this strategy was “Add gender and stir.” The approach I advocate here may seem dangerously similar: “Add gender and spin.” But “spin” is a word that conveys the importance of political psychology, of framing and bundling. It also represents a more vigorous process than stirring, as with a centrifuge that separates a liquid into its component parts.

In this paper, I have argued that the Roemerian centrifuge creates questionable distinctions between preferences and interests and between socialized and autonomous preferences. In closing, I want to celebrate that way that Roemer pushes us beyond the so-called rational choice dictates of analytical Marxism. To start with individuals, and reason upwards is to take preferences as exogenously given. To take preferences as given is to abdicate responsibility for changing the way they are formed—and the way they are distributed. In his work on equal opportunity, in particular, Roemer forces us to confront that responsibility.

He and his coauthors could benefit from a closer look at the way theorists concerned with inequalities based on race/ethnicity and gender have grappled with concepts of “internalized oppression.” But feminist theorists obviously have much to learn from more serious engagement with formal analytical models. The point is not just to understand the centrifuge, but to improve it.

Figure 1. Hypothetical voter separation

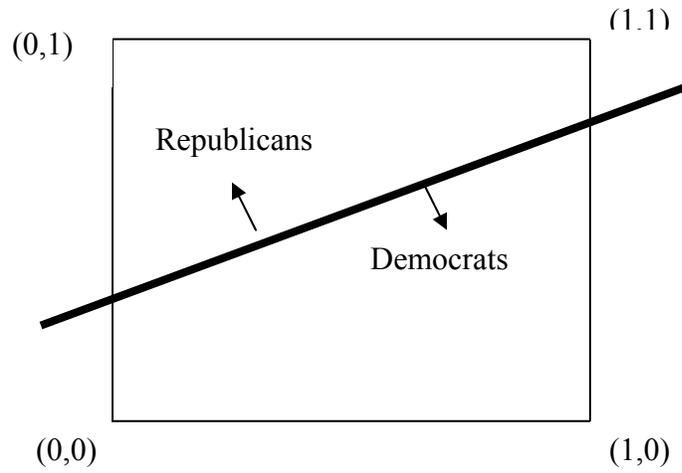
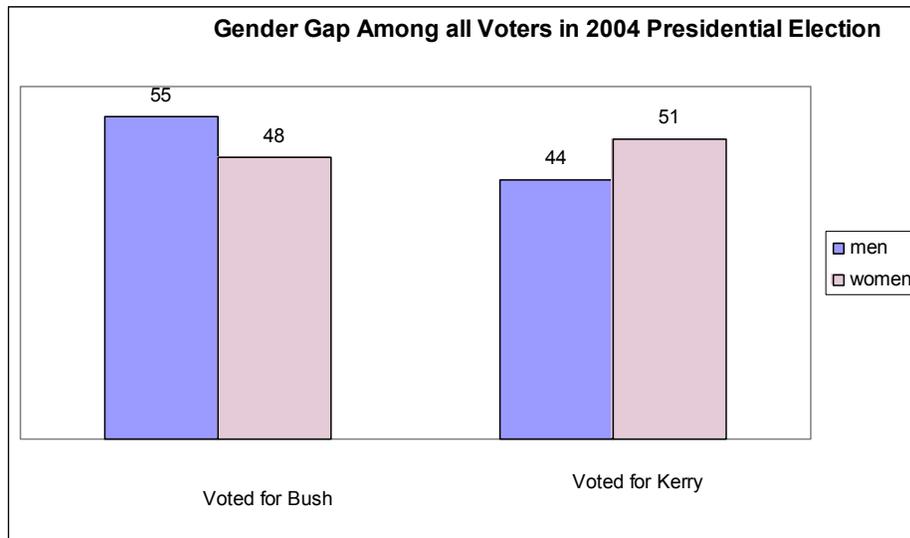
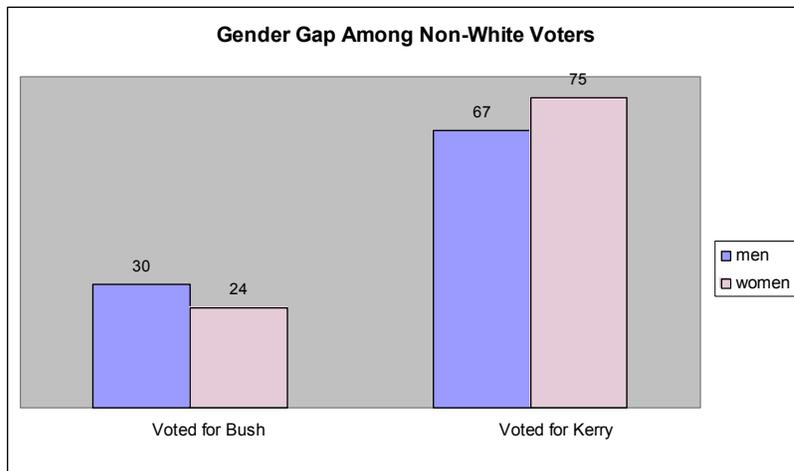
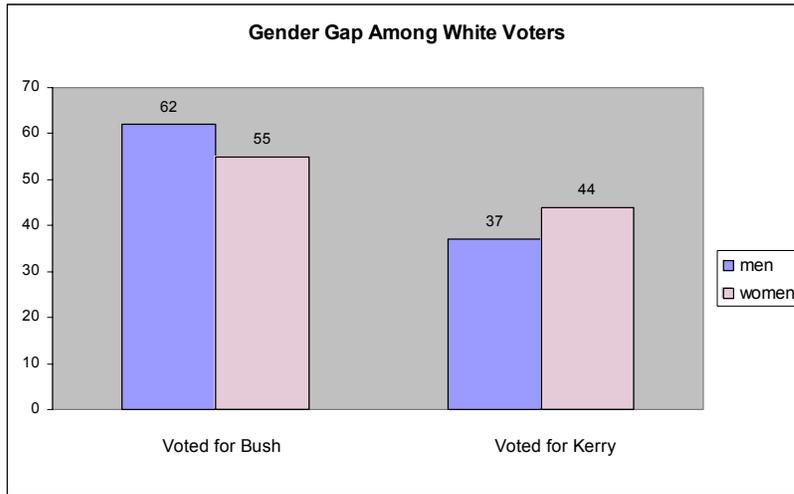


Figure 2.



Source: Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, 2004

Figure 3.



Source: Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, 2004.

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Notes

¹ I use the term “race/ethnicity” here because the term race conveys reliance on a biological category that does not bear up to scrutiny. What we call “race” should more properly be termed “ethnicity” but current usage in the U.S. often applies ethnicity only to Hispanics. In my view, ethnicity is to race as gender is to sex: a cultural construction based on biological differences that range along a continuum rather than always taking a simple binary form.

² *International Herald Tribune*, June 11, 1998, p.1.

³ See discussion of this term in Folbre, 2001.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Schwarzenegger

⁵ My understanding of this point has been greatly enhanced by reviewing a journal article by an anonymous author who I hope to be able to cite in due course.