WHY THE GENDER GAP IN THE U.S.? ASSESSING THE "FOUR C's"

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Since the 1980 presidential election, political attitudes and voting in the United States have been marked by a "gender gap" in which women are more liberal than men by approximately six-to-eight percentage points in voting in national elections. In voting at least, the 1996 elections reached the largest gender gap yet recorded when Democrat Bill Clinton ran eleven percentage points better among women (54%) than among men (43%) in what was labeled by the popular press the a "revenge of the soccer moms" (Clark and Clark, 1999; Mueller, 1988; Seltzer, et al., 1997). Thus, the gender gap appears to have become a permanent part of the American political landscape. The emergence of this gender gap is important for several reasons. It implies that women have become more participant and assertive in American political life; it underlines the need for the improvement of their woeful underrepresentation in public office; and it seemingly marks the culmination of several important socioeconomic and political trends in the United States..

Explaining the Gender Gap: Modeling the Links Among Consciousness, Countersocialization, Compassion, and Cost-bearing

Explanations of the gender gap can be divided, somewhat crudely, into those that emphasize “feminism” and those that emphasize “social structure.” These approaches are more complementary than competing (at least in theory), but the distinction between them is valuable. The former, which contends that rising gender **consciousness** has changed women’s political perspectives, tends to be primarily normative, theoretical, and literary. In contrast, the latter,

which argues that women's changing socioeconomic positions have made **compassion** and **cost-bearing** much more politically relevant, tends to be primarily descriptive or theory-testing in form and to employ social science methodology. Both approaches, though, point to **countersocialization** as a key factor in promoting the changes that they emphasize; and several prominent scholars, such as Ethel Klein (1984) and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart (1992), have combined the two approaches quite profitably. Here, we seek to meld these somewhat divergent theoretical approaches by directly linking their key concepts.

These elements of the gender gap, in turn, are consistent with two basic dimensions of issue cleavage in American politics: the traditional New Deal one on economic and welfare issues and the newer division on cultural and social issues (Shafer and Claggett, 1995). Compassion and cost-bearing clearly fit on the liberal end of the economic continuum, while feminist consciousness is one of the leading liberal positions on culture wars issues. Nevertheless, the relationship of gender to a person's stance on cultural issues is somewhat ambiguous. Women have in the past been more supportive of moral issues which now are on the conservative side of the skirmishes in the culture wars. The split between feminists and traditional women can be seen, for example, in the fact that there has *not* been much of a gender gap on several issues central to the Women's Movement, such as the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, because of the anti-ERA and pro-Life positions that many women with traditional values have taken (Conover and Gray, 1983; Sears and Huddie, 1990; Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986).

Many scholars, especially feminists, view the Feminist Movement, which began in the late 1960s, as the principal agent of the changes in women's gender **consciousness** which ultimately gave rise to the gender gap in political attitudes and voting. From this perspective, the gender gap resulted from the growing gender consciousness among women as the Feminist Movement became increasingly successful in articulating new social and political norms to which, over time, more and more women subscribed (Carroll, 1988 & 1989; Conover, 1988; Klein, 1984; Tolleson-Rinehart, 1992). Changes in consciousness, though, could only occur

because of women's **countersocialization** into new views about their appropriate role in American society. Susan Carroll (1988), for example, argues that women's increased economic and psychological independence from men during the postwar era was a major cause of the gender gap in the 1980s. Indeed, the major socioeconomic trends in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s were precisely those that should have stimulated greater economic and psychological independence for women: women's rising levels of education, greater participation in the labor force, increased control over fertility, and higher divorce rates (Carroll, 1989; Klein, 1984). Taken together, these trends represented a considerable "cultural change" (Conway, et al, 1997) that was very conducive to women's participation in the public sphere on their own terms.

The rise of the Feminist Movement, therefore, represents a multi-stage process which encompasses factors emphasized by both the "feminism" and "social structure" approaches. Figure 1 summarizes the stages in this model, as well as relating them to the dimensions of cost-bearing and compassion. The model starts at the lower left side of the Figure with the changes in social structure affecting women. As a result of them, women became more independent both economically and psychologically from men, creating a situation which Diane Fowlkes (1983) has termed countersocialization. The Feminist Movement, in turn, drew on these more educated, independent, and mobile women to challenge the constraints of traditional patriarchal culture and to articulate a truly autonomous political agenda for women. This vision, then, created the intellectual countersocialization on which women in the broader population could draw (Carroll, 1989). From the feminist perspective, thus, both **consciousness** and **countersocialization** directly generate the gender gap.

The changing social structures that helped shape the Feminist Movement were not entirely benign for women. In fact, such factors as the rising divorce rates, when coupled with the falling welfare expenditures of the Reagan era, created what has been called the "feminization of poverty" (Goldberg and Kremen, 1990; Misciagno, 1997). This **cost-bearing**, consequently, gave many women an additional "self-interest" in being liberal on social welfare

issues, thereby contributing to the aggregate gender gap because women were disproportionately likely to live in poverty and possess this motive for political liberalism. The relationship between consciousness (stressed by feminist theory) and cost-bearing (stressed in the social structure approach) is somewhat ambiguous, though. On the one hand, the political liberalism of the Feminist Movement generates considerable support for of aiding women in marginal social and economic roles. On the other hand, most members of feminist organizations are upper middle-class whites whose primary interests differ dramatically from those of the "pink collar proletariat" or welfare recipients or women of color.

The linkage between consciousness and **compassion** is even more ambiguous. As sketched at the top of Figure 1, this theoretical strand is rooted in the assumption that women have significantly differently values from men's. According to Carol Gilligan (1982), psychologically

Figure 1

A MODEL OF THE DYNAMICS UNDERLYING THE GENDER GAP



participation

3. More control over Fertility
4. Higher divorce rates

Dependence for women

COST-BEARING
Feminization of poverty

women react to the world in a *Different Voice*." According to this theory, women compared to men place more emphasis upon "connectiveness" in personal and community relations rather than abstract rights and power considerations and upon personal collaboration and issue resolution rather than competition and confrontation. This emphasis on interpersonal relationships implies that women, compared to men, have a higher "dispositional empathy" (McCue and Gopoian, 2000) which, in turn, explains why this "compassion" makes them relatively liberal on issues affecting the less fortunate in society (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986).

The ambiguity of these processes in relation to feminist consciousness stems from the fact that women's different values are generally assumed to be derived from their traditional family roles or what Tolleson-Rinehart (1992: 8) terms "their nurturance of and responsibility for the well-being of others." However, the Feminist Movement sees itself as dedicated to helping women overcome the restraints imposed by such traditional family and child-bearing roles (Klein, 1994). Thus, Figure 1 links consciousness to compassion by assuming that, as women became more involved in politics, they began to realize that their basic, family-derived values apply to a broader range of issues, such as helping the less fortunate, supporting racial equality, protecting the environment, and most especially demanding equal rights for women (Carroll, 1989).

Figure 1, to sum, sketches how the different types of factors emphasized by feminists and social-structuralists seemingly interact in a fairly complementary pattern, rather than presenting two contrasting or contending explanations for the emergence and maintenance of the gender gap. According to this model, changes in social structure in the 1950s and 1960s made a significant number of women much more economically and psychologically independent of men than they had been previously. This led to the rise of the Feminist Movement whose challenge to the dominant patriarchal cultural provided even nonfeminist women with a new way of viewing gender relationships. Thus, "consciousness" clearly contributed to the gender gap in political perspectives that arose in the 1980s and 1990s. How much this feminist consciousness shaped

women's self-interest in liberal policies due to the feminization of poverty) is much more difficult to judge, however, because both feminist and nonfeminist explanations sound plausible and because it is probably impossible to completely disentangle the competing hypotheses through statistical analysis.

Tentative Linkages In the Gender Gap Model

In seeking to provide empirical verification for the theoretical model explaining the gender gap developed in the previous section, we turn to data from the 1996 National Election Survey (NES) conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan.[1] The research on women's political attitudes predicts that there will be a significant gender gap in each of the following three areas:

1) women's rights issues, such as the ERA, abortion, and women's social roles (reflecting **consciousness**);

2) "economic issues" concerning governmental aid and redistributive policies for the needy in society (reflecting **compassion** and **cost-bearing**); and, as a result of the first two,

3) general ideology, partisan affiliation, and voting patterns.

Table 1 presents the gender gaps for representative items in each of these three areas. Perhaps the most striking aspect of these results is how consistent they are. While the gender gaps for the individual items vary in size, all are in the predicted direction and meet the normal criteria for statistical significance. They average approximately ten percentage points, indicating levels of gender difference that are far from trivial. For example, women's greater support for Clinton than men's (60% to 47%) appears very congruent with their higher identification with the Democratic Party (58% to 46%) and their more liberal ideology (30% to 21%), their more positive feelings toward the women's movement (71% to 60%), their stronger support for equal economic and political rights for women (53% to 46%), and their greater desire to spend more on child care (56%

Table 1

Gender Gap in 1996 on Voting, Partisanship, and Selected Issues

	Men	Women	Gender Gap
Women's Issues			
Close to Feminists	6%	14%	8%*
Close to Women	18%	64%	46%*
Like Women's Movement	60%	71%	11%*
Equal Rights for Women:			
Strongly Agree	46%	53%	7%*
ProChoice	39%	44%	5%*
Economic Issues			
Want More Government Services	28%	34%	6%*
Spend More on Poor	41%	50%	9%*
Spend More on Child Care	46%	56%	10%*
Spend More on Welfare	9%	14%	5%*
Spend More on Social Security	39%	54%	15%*
Partisanship and Ideology			
Clinton for President	47%	60%	13%*
Democrat for House	44%	52%	8%*
Democrat Party Identification	46%	58%	12%*
Liberal Ideology	21%	30%	9%*

to 40%) and social security (34% to 35%). Thus, Table 1 certainly demonstrates that women have significantly higher levels of both consciousness and some combination of compassion (by more affluent women) and cost-bearing (by poor and disadvantaged women) than men and that, presumably as a result, they are more liberal in their partisanship and ideology.

Consciousness: An Ironic Mix of Positive and Negative Results

Data from the mid 1980s show that feminist consciousness by itself accounted for much of the gender gap in issue preference and voting at that time (Carroll, 1988; Conover, 1988). In Table 2, we control feminist identification as measured by whether a respondent said that she or he felt "close to feminists" (14% of the women and 6% of the men expressed such feelings). The results both confirm one part and disconfirm another part of the argument that feminist consciousness explains the gender gap in voting and partisanship. This theory assumes that feminists are much more liberal than nonfeminist women on most issues (which the data in Table 2 confirm). In the mid 1980s, this meant that the gender gap was primarily the result of feminist women being more liberal than men whose attitudes differed little from nonfeminist women (Conover, 1988). By 1996, in sharp contrast, this situation had changed dramatically. Nonfeminist women, despite being considerably less liberal than feminist women, have a gender gap with nonfeminist men approximately equal to the one between all men and women on our three indicators of partisanship. This creates a quandary for evaluating the consciousness hypothesis. Should it be declared a failure because feminists are no longer so distinctive? Or, should the Feminist Movement be credited with the success of creating intellectual countersocialization that evidently pulled nonfeminist women in a feminist direction? For our part, the second interpretation seems more congenial.

GENDER GAP ON PARTISANSHIP
CONTROLLING FOR FEMINISM

	ENTIRE POPULATION		
	MEN	WOMEN	GAP
Clinton Vote	47%	60%	13%*
Democrat	46%	58%	12%
Liberal	21%	30%	9%*

	NOT CLOSE TO FEMINISTS			CLOSE TO FEMINISTS		
	MEN	WOMEN	GAP	MEN	WOMEN	GAP
Clinton Vote	43%	56%	13%*	88%	81%	-7%*
Democrat	43%	55%	12%*	86%	78%	-8%*
Liberal	18%	22%	4%*	64%	64%	0%

*Statistically significant at the .05 level.

Countersocialization

Both feminists and social structuralists agree that the fundamental changes that occurred in America's economy and society during the 1950s and 1960s created broader opportunities for women to gain economic and psychological independence from men. Thus, these changes in social structure can be considered the countersocialization which stimulated the emergence of the Feminist Movement. Indeed, the characteristics associated with such countersocialization conform quite well with the stereotype of a feminist women as being predominantly middle and upper middle class whites with high education and professional occupations. Younger women are also seen as more likely to be feminists than older ones both because they are more likely to have these characteristics and because, as time passes, each succeeding generation of women is less subject to patriarchal socialization processes (see Cook, 1999 for a more sophisticated

than religious and favoring nontraditional life styles. Finally, the stereotype assumes that feminists are much more likely to live in large cities than in small towns and in the Northeast or on the West coast than elsewhere in the United States. Table 3 tests this countersocialization theory by comparing feminist and nonfeminist women in terms of these characteristics. In general, the data indicate that our suppositions about countersocialization hold, since women in all these categories except executive occupations are significantly more likely than all women to feel close to feminists.

The second type of countersocialization included in our model is the "intellectual" type composed of the set of ideas emanating from the Feminist Movement that was seemingly attractive to even nonfeminists (see Figure 1). The analysis of consciousness in the previous subsection suggested that this type of counter-socialization may well have been significant. It is hard, if not

Table 3

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN WHO FEEL "CLOSE TO FEMINISTS" AND OTHER WOMEN

	CLOSE TO FEMINISTS	OTHER WOMEN
ALL WOMEN	14%	86%
College Degree	23%	77%
Executive Job	12%	88%
Professional Job	28%	72%
Technician Job	24%	76%
Under 30	23%	77%
Dislike Fundamentalists	29%	71%
Divorced, Separated	17%	83%
Never Married	24%	76%
City Over 100,000	17%	83%
Northeast	24%	76%
Pacific Coast	16%	84%

reacted to specific feminist ideas and arguments. A more indirect test of this supposed relationship is possible, though, by examining one of its implications. What this theory of intellectual countersocialization posits, in essence, is that the attractiveness of feminist ideals makes even nonfeminist women more liberal than they would normally be. If this were true, one would predict that the gender gap in liberalism between nonfeminist men and women would be widest in the groups most attracted to feminism, such as the young, the most educated, and those with the highest incomes. Table 4 shows that these expectations do, in fact, hold strongly for ideology and income and, to a significant but less dramatic extent, for education.

Table 4

GENDER GAP ON LIBERALISM BETWEEN *NONFEMINIST* WOMEN AND MEN, CONTROLLING FOR AGE, FAMILY INCOME, AND EDUCATION

	LIBERAL IDEOLOGY		
	Men	Women	Gender Gap
Age			
Under 30	15%	35%	20%*
30-44	23%	23%	0%
45-65	18%	20%	2%
Over 65	10%	25%	5%*
Family Income			
Under $15,000	16%	21%	5%*
$15,000-$29,999	18%	21%	3%*
$30,000-$59,999	19%	21%	2%
Over $60,000	18%	28%	10%*
Education			
High School or less	13%	17%	4%*
Some College	16%	21%	5%*
College Degree	23%	31%	8%*

*Statistically significant at the .05 level.

These findings concerning countersocialization again indicate that the social structure and feminist perspectives do not necessarily form competing paradigms. Rather, they fit together in two distinct ways. First, changes in social structure evidently worked to countersocialize significant groups of women by restructuring their adult roles. The greater autonomy that these women enjoyed, hence, was probably a prerequisite for the Feminist Movement itself. Second, although the evidence is a little more tenuous, the data do suggest that the Feminist Movement itself has produced an intellectual countersocialization which affects the attitudes of even nonfeminist women. Thus, our model views both the changing social structure in the U.S. and the Feminist Movement itself as important sources of countersocialization that have helped to shape the gender gap in contemporary political perspectives.

Cost-bearing Evidently Trumps Compassion

The data on the attitudes towards economic issues in the 1990s show a fairly consistent gender gap of about ten percentage points on a variety of issues (see Table 1). Women's greater liberalism than men's on economic issues presumably represents some combination of cost-bearing and compassion. To test the cost-bearing hypotheses, both of its premises must hold. First, women must be disproportionately situated in disadvantaged social groups. The results from the 1996 National Election Study unfortunately confirm the "feminization of poverty" in the United States. Among the respondents, women are almost twice as likely than men (29% to 15%) to live in families having total incomes of under $15,000 (approximately where the poverty line in the U.S. lies), while men are more likely to live in families with incomes over $60,000 by a three-to-two margin (28% to 17%).

The second premise in the cost-bearing explanation of the gender gap is that those with low income are more liberal than their more affluent compatriots. This tendency, in addition, should be much stronger for economic issues than for feminist ones, with partisanship falling somewhere in between. The data in Table 5 confirm these suppositions strongly. For both men

and women, higher income brings greater conservatism on both economic issues and partisanship.

In contrast, attitudes

Table 5

GENDER GAPS ON VOTING, GOVERNMENT SERVICES, AND FEMINISM, CONTROLLING FOR FAMILY INCOME

FAMILY INCOME	Men	Women	Gender Gap
	WANT MORE GOVERNMENT SERVICES		
Under $15,000	44%	47%	3%
$15,000-$29,999	34%	39%	5%*
$30,000-$59,999	23%	27%	4%*
Over $60,000	22%	22%	0%
	VOTED FOR CLINTON		
Under $15,000	73%	70%	-3%
$15,000-$29,999	52%	65%	13%*
$30,000-$59,999	45%	59%	14%*
Over $60,000	38%	48%	10%*
	FEEL CLOSE TO FEMINISTS		
Under $15,000	4%	13%	9%*
$15,000-$29,999	8%	18%	10%*
$30,000-$59,999	7%	15%	8%*
Over $60,000	6%	12%	6%*

*Statistically significant at the .05 level.

toward feminism among both women and men are hardly affected at all by family income. Thus, women as a group are more liberal than men on economic issues and partisanship to a notable

disadvantaged groups who are far more liberal than the average American on economic issues and partisanship, but not on feminist issues.

The theory of women's compassion does not just posit that women will be more liberal on economic issues and, as a result, on partisanship. Rather, it also implies that the gender gap between women and men should be considerably larger in some groups rather than others. In essence, the compassion hypothesis argues that women who would normally be expected to be conservatives will support aiding the disadvantaged out of compassion. For example, since poor women would normally be expected to take such a position out of self interest, the problem arises of how to separate "compassion" from self interest in reducing the "cost bearing" of poverty. If it is assumed that both men and women who are economically distressed will take liberal positions on government role and spending policies, then one would expect that the gender gap should be significantly wider among more affluent than less affluent groups. In the former instance, compassion would pull women away from men's normal attitudes, while in the latter both men and women would be pulled in the same direction by self-interest. Table 5 provides mixed support at best for this hypothesis. A greater gender gap on presidential voting does exist among higher income groups than among the poor; and, as predicted, the gender gap on feminism is not affected by income level. However, this pattern does *not* hold for the attitudes toward government services where it should have been the most pronounced according to the theory of women's compassion.

In sum, women are and have been more liberal than men on economic issues. The compassion and cost-bearing hypotheses offer two complementary reasons for this to be so. The cost-bearing brought on by the feminization of poverty clearly is an important factor here. In contrast, the support for women's supposed greater compassion for the poor and downtrodden is only marginal and mixed. Consequently, it appears to be quite secondary in explaining the gender gap on economic issues and partisanship.

Beginning in 1980, voting in the United States has been marked by a gender gap of about ten percentage points on which women are more liberal than men in their support of the Democratic Party. While this pales in comparison to the huge cleavages in public opinion on ideology and race, for example, it is approaching the extent of the divisions between high and low income and education groups (Clark and Clark, 1999). Certainly, then, it is a subject worthy of serious investigation both by those interested in the special problems associated with the adequate representation of women in U.S. government (Darcy, et al., 1994) and by those interested in general electoral dynamics.

We hoped that this paper might make two contributions to the emerging field of research on the nature of the gender gap in the United States. First, we wanted to bridge the gap to the extent possible between two distinct scholarly approaches to analyzing the gender gap: what we have termed the "feminist" and "social structure" perspectives. Thus, following a brief description of the gender gap, we presented a model of how it has been presumed to have developed which combines elements of these two approaches (see Figure 1). In doing so, we hoped to show that these approaches, despite fundamental disagreements between some of their advocates, are more compatible and complementary than generally supposed.

Of course, to cite an old adage, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Thus, our second goal was to provide empirical support for the theoretical model by using data from a recent national survey. As a first step, we found that the gender gap on voting seemingly mirrored very similar differences between the sexes on women's issues (**consciousness**), economic and redistributive policies (**compassion** and **cost-bearing**), and partisanship. Turning to more direct tests of the relationships modeled in Figure 1, we can say with a good deal of confidence that two of the presumed sets of influences on the gender gap seem to have clearly been at work. First, the major changes in America's economy and society during the 1950s and 1960s created more adult roles in which women could exercise considerably more autonomy from men, thereby setting off

which, in turn, helped shape the gender gap through feminist **consciousness**. Second, these socioeconomic changes did not bring entirely welcome results for women. In fact, they also led to the feminization of poverty which contributed to the gender gap through **cost-bearing**. In addition, although the statistical evidence is more indirect, the findings provide a fairly strong foundation from which to surmise that the Feminist Movement generated **intellectual countersocialization** that widened the gender gap through its appeal to nonfeminist women. On the other hand, the indications that women's distinct psychology leads to a **compassion** that influenced the gender gap fall short of being conclusive. Evaluating these results in their entirety, hence, indicates that much more complex analysis must be undertaken before we can model the gender gap with complete confidence.

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[1]All the public opinion data used in this paper are computed from the 1996 National Election Study of the Survey Research Center which are distributed by the International Consortium for Political and Social Research.