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**Examining Gender Gaps in Sociopolitical Attitudes:
It's Not Mars and Venus**

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Abstract

This paper investigates a robust, important, and fairly recent phenomenon: Women as members of the body politic think and vote differently from men. Despite the frequent discussion of these phenomena in the press, gender has remained surprisingly underanalyzed in political psychology. Moving beyond the stereotypical interpretations often seized upon by the media, we present a feminist analysis by invoking the social positioning of women and men as the origin of the differing political stances of women and men. From our perspective, gender gaps in attitudes and behavior are shaped by the divergence of women's interests from those of men; in turn, these divergent interests derive from the gender division of labor.

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The American welfare state has had a feminine coloration from the very beginning . . . Women tend to be more sentimental, more risk-averse and less competitive than men—yes, it's Mars vs. Venus—and therefore are less inclined to be appreciative of free-market economics, in which there are losers as well as winners.

Irving Kristol (1996, p. A16)

Although most feminists would take issue with the stereotypical characterization of women put forth by Irving Kristol, he nonetheless comments on a robust and important phenomenon: Women as members of the body politic think and vote differently from men. Despite the frequent discussion of these phenomena in the press, gender has remained surprisingly underanalyzed in political psychology. Social scientists' apparent reluctance to investigate sex-related differences in political attitudes leaves journalists grasping at gender stereotypes to interpret the differences that they observe. Feminist analysis can make a contribution by moving beyond such superficial interpretations. We present such an analysis by invoking the social positioning of women and men as the origin of the differing political stances of women and men. From our perspective, gender gaps in attitudes and behavior are shaped by the divergence of women's interests from those of men; in turn, these divergent interests derive from the gender division of labor.

Although the interests of women have never been entirely in accord with those of men, this discrepancy has not always been expressed politically through gender-differentiated political attitudes. In fact, the contemporary gender gap is apparently a fairly recent phenomenon. When women's labor was confined mainly to the private sphere, politics was a male-dominated domain. Although women became politically engaged in campaigns for women's suffrage and prohibition, men were in general more politically involved, knowledgeable, and vocal on public issues than women and voted at a higher rate (Almond & Verba, 1963; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lipset, 1960; Sapiro, 1983). Political scientists maintained that women

followed their husbands' lead on voting and political issues (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960). When examining data from the middle of the 20th century, scholars of politics detected very few attitudinal differences (Sapiro, 1983).

Women's greatly increased participation in the paid labor force in the last decades of the 20th century strengthened their involvement with the public sphere, where political activity takes place. Concomitant with these changes, women enlarged their political knowledge (Rapoport, 1982; Slevin & Aday, 1993) and began to vote in elections at a slightly higher rate than men (Jamieson, Shin, & Day, 2002). Sex-related attitudinal differences emerged in survey data and caught the attention of a few social scientists (e.g., Goertzel, 1983; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986; T. W. Smith, 1984).

A simplistic analysis might suggest that women's shift into paid occupations would result in their adopting attitudes that are increasingly similar to those of men. However, the roles of men and women within the public sphere tend to be different, as shown by substantial occupational gender segregation (O'Neill, 2003; Wottoon, 1997). Women are concentrated in jobs that entail less authority (R. A. Smith, 2002) and that have lower wages (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004) than those of men. Also, despite men's increased domestic labor, women still have disproportionate responsibility for housework and child care (Bianchi, 2000; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Shelton & John, 1996) and care for ill or disabled family members (Cancian & Olinker, 2000). The research that we summarize in this paper has evaluated whether these differences in the roles and responsibilities of women and men are the key to understanding the attitudinal gender gaps that have arisen along with the increased political activation of women.

Consistent with our social-role theory analysis (see Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000), we hypothesize that the continued female dominance of the domestic sphere shapes women's sociopolitical attitudes to reflect the goals inherent in their traditional domestic responsibilities—for example, promoting the welfare of children and families. Also, we hypothesize that women's lesser status, reflecting their domestic obligations and their workplace disadvantage, shapes their attitudes to reflect the goals inherent in this lower status—for example, obtaining more equitable access to resources.

Social psychological mediating processes intervene to translate differences in the social position of women and men into attitudinal differences (Eagly et al., 2000). These mediating processes are assumed to include the influence of socially shared expectations based on gender. These *gender roles* arise from the division of labor between men and women and encompass normative processes by which other people convey expectations based on gender. Also important are self-regulatory processes that follow from internalized gender roles—that is, people deriving social identity from their gender group. These normative and self-regulatory processes gain power as they are instilled through socialization, elaborated in cultural products, and enacted in daily life.

Research on Gender Gaps in Attitudes

Our analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) from 1973 to 1998 (Eagly, Diekman, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Koenig, 2004), showed that the most substantial gender gaps on sociopolitical issues are in two areas: *social compassion* and *traditional morality*. Demonstrating women's greater endorsement of socially compassionate policies, women are more opposed than men to racial discrimination in housing, police brutality, and the death penalty and more supportive of gun control, government spending for African Americans, and reducing income

differences between the rich and poor. Demonstrating women's greater endorsement of traditionally moral policies, women are more opposed to extramarital relationships, divorce, suicide, and the legalization of marijuana. In our analyses of the GSS, these attitudinal gender gaps showed temporal constancy (see Figures 1 and 2). In addition, primary research conducted in the year 2000 replicated and extended these findings by using a community sample and a wider range of attitudinal items than the GSS: In these data, the women's attitudes, more than men's attitudes, were supportive of equal rights for women and for gays and lesbians as well as socially compassionate and traditionally moral.

In one approach to understanding the sources of these attitudinal differences, the research compared gender gaps with gaps associated with other attributes of the respondents that reflect either social disadvantage (e.g., minority racial or ethnic status) or family responsibility (e.g., parenthood). If disadvantage or family responsibility underlies attitudinal sex differences, such attributes should, like sex, be correlated with higher endorsement of gender-gap attitudes. In general, these patterns held: Social compassion attitudes related mainly to indicators of social disadvantage, and moral traditionalism attitudes related mainly to indicators of family responsibility.

These similarities that we observed between women's attitudes and those of other disadvantaged groups and people with family responsibility are consistent with our hypothesis that attitudinal gender gaps reflect women's generally lower status relative to men and their greater domestic responsibilities. These differences in social position maintain gender roles, which then influence attitudes by means of self-regulatory processes and the impact of others' expectations. Given some political activation of women and men as social groups, these culturally shared beliefs about gender foster sex-differentiated policy preferences.

In Eagly et al.'s (2004) analyses of attitudinal data, the sex effects were diminished only slightly by controls for sociodemographic variables such as education, labor force participation, household income, and race. These findings are contrary to the logic that those men and women who are positioned in the same occupational and family roles should have the same attitudes. To understand these findings, it is important to allow for two ways that women's and men's roles may influence their attitudes (Eagly et al., 2000): (a) a direct influence of the currently occupied, specific social roles of individual women and men and (b) an indirect influence of the differing typical role occupancies of women and men. We assume that this indirect influence acts by means of shared beliefs about women and men—that is, gender roles, which influence social norms and social identities. These influences are present, regardless of individuals' placement in specific occupational and family roles. For example, female gender-role expectations may foster support for policies that favor children and education, even among childless women or women whose children are adults. If these gender role influences are taken into account, it is understandable that attitudinal differences persisted in the data, despite controls for sociodemographic variables.

In support of our argument about status disadvantage and domestic responsibility as shaping women's attitudes, other psychological variables that plausibly reflect these influences are also temporally stable. Specifically, the tendency of women to describe themselves as more communal (i.e., feminine) than men proved to be relatively constant from 1973 to 1993 when meta-analytically summarized, despite erosion in the tendency for women to describe themselves as less agentic (i.e., masculine) than men (Twenge, 1997). Similarly, research on the stereotypical traits that social perceivers ascribe to women and men of the past, present, and future showed that they view the sex difference in feminine, communal qualities as remaining

relatively constant over time and the sex difference in masculine, agentic qualities as eroding as women adopt these qualities (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). These changes in agentic, or masculine, qualities likely reflect the role shifts that have occurred on a large scale—that is, the increasing labor force participation of women. In contrast, the absence of change in communal, or feminine, qualities likely reflects the relative stability of women’s lower status and greater domestic responsibility. We argue that these relatively unchanging aspects of the gender division of labor also underlie the stability that we observed in attitudinal gender gaps.

Implications of Attitudinal Gender Gaps

The consequences of these attitudinal gender gaps include gender gaps in voting. In the United States, a greater preference of women than men for Democratic candidates has been apparent in most presidential elections since the early 1970s and in congressional elections since the early 1980s (Seltzer, Newman, & Leighton, 1997). Correlational analyses of the relations between attitudes and these voting gender gaps are largely consistent with the claim that attitudinal differences, especially in socially compassionate attitudes, underlie these gaps (e.g., Chaney, Alvarez, & Nagler, 1998; Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999; Manza & Brooks, 1998, 1999; Seltzer et al., 1997). In addition, experiments portraying candidates with male-typical versus female-typical issue stances showed that attitudinal sex differences can account for voting gender gaps (Eagly, Diekman, Schneider, & Kulesa, 2003). Specifically, these experiments found that, regardless of the sex of the candidates who were portrayed, participants of each sex reported greater likelihood, compared with participants of the other sex, of voting for the candidate who endorsed positions typically favored more by their own sex than the other sex.

It is noteworthy that the political attitudes endorsed more by women than men support policies that have the potential to reshape women's status in society. Women tend to favor policies that would advance their own social position, such as affirmative action, as well as the position of other disadvantaged groups. Many of the policies that women endorse more than men thus prescribe increased resources and rights for women, children, and members of other disadvantaged groups, and many of these issues have a relatively high profile with the public as important problems facing the nation (e.g., Newport & Carroll, 2004). Intense debates surrounding issues such as children's needs, welfare, educational reform, and the gap between rich and poor display the strains inherent in policies that have implications for changing groups' status.

Our research has also shown that people quite accurately perceive the attitudinal positions of women and men on a range of sociopolitical issues when beliefs about these attitudes are evaluated against the criterion of GSS data (Diekman, Eagly, & Kulesa, 2002). Yet, there is one systematic deviation from this overall accuracy in perceptions of the attitudes of men and women: Observers assumed that men were more unfavorable than they actually were toward issues regarded as favoring women's group interest. Although women endorse these "women's issues" (e.g., government support for child care) more than men, men are generally favorable toward them. This perceptual error of exaggerating men's lesser support for such policies could undermine the acceptance of these policies. Nonetheless, the overall favorability of both sexes to many policies that serve women's interests should favor the greater gender equality that is the central goal of the feminist movement.

Despite these attitudinal trends that may foster increasing gender equality, women remain underrepresented in political roles. Although the representation of women in political offices has

grown in many nations, women are still the minority. In the United States, for example, the percentage of women in state legislatures has increased from 10% in 1979 to 23% in 2005, in statewide elective offices from 11% to 25%, and in the Congress from 3% to 15% (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2005). Even though women are far from equally represented in political offices, the face of politics is changing. Women have gained some political power, and observers perceive women as gaining this power (Diekman, Goodfriend, & Goodwin, 2004). This greater representation of women in political spheres has already led to greater promotion of policies that serve women's interests. Congressional voting patterns reveal that female legislators are more likely than male legislators to vote for policies such as family leave, birth control education, and improved public education (Panczer, 2002). Moreover, because women outnumber men in both voter registration and voter turnout (CAWP, 2002), the presence of women in elected office may continue to grow to the extent that they support policies that appeal to the female majority of the voting block. The result should be greater gains in progress toward feminist goals as the policies that are important to women are increasingly debated and adopted.

The greater visibility of women in politics has even led to some unanticipated results, such as the "President Barbie 2000" and "President Barbie 2004" dolls, which were marketed complete with platforms supporting education and equality, as well as information on the electoral process and real-life female politicians (BBC News, 2000; USA Today, 2004). As evident in this example, feminist goals have become more visible in mainstream domains.

In conclusion, emerging from empirical research is a picture of political gender gaps as consequential differences between men and women. These differences, moreover, reflect the societal positioning of women and men and women's invested interest in improving their status.

In contrast, stereotypical interpretations, for example, that women's sentimental or risk-averse qualities underlie gender gaps in attitudes and voting, obscure their true origins, which are deeply embedded in the gender division of labor.

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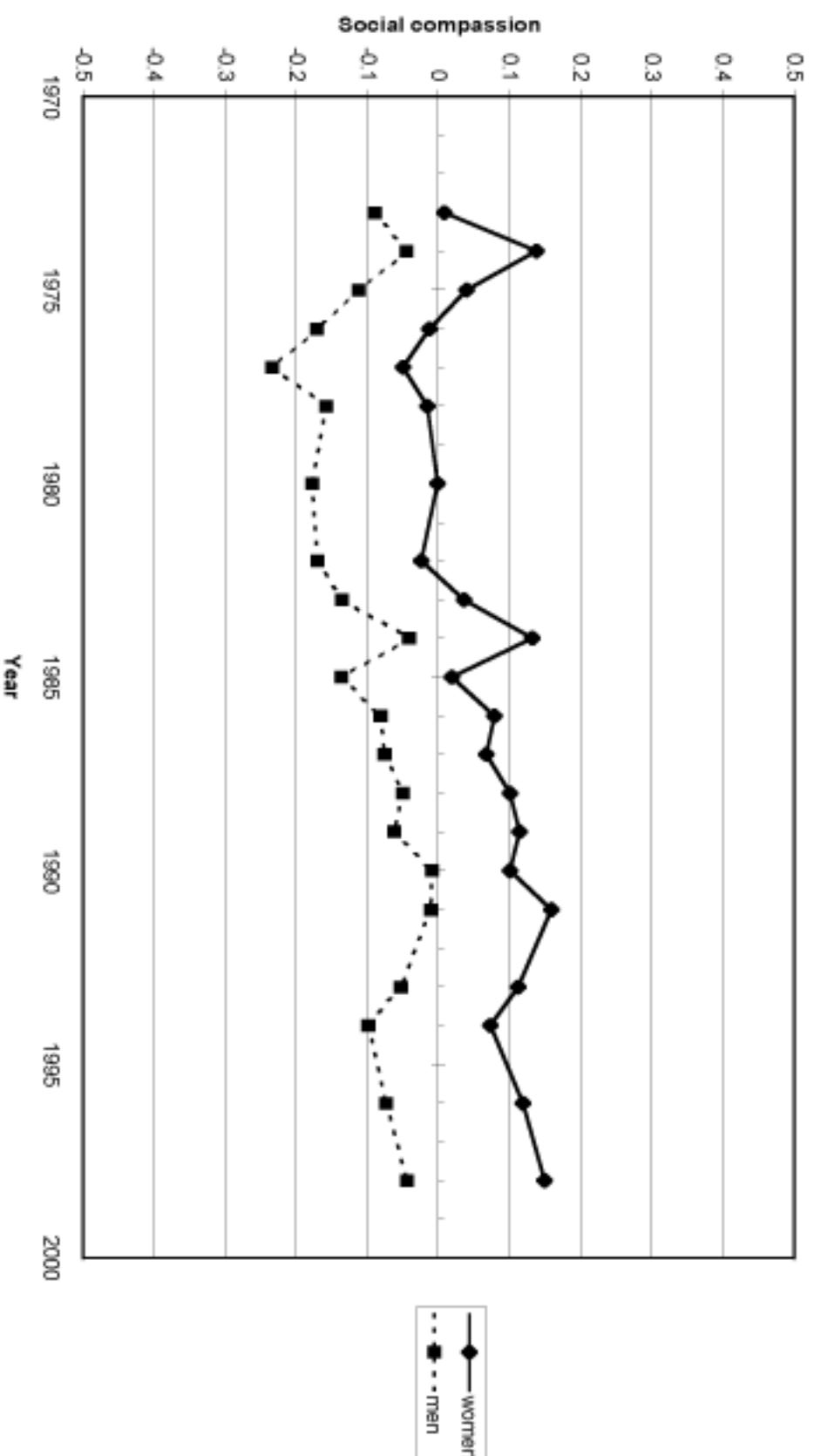
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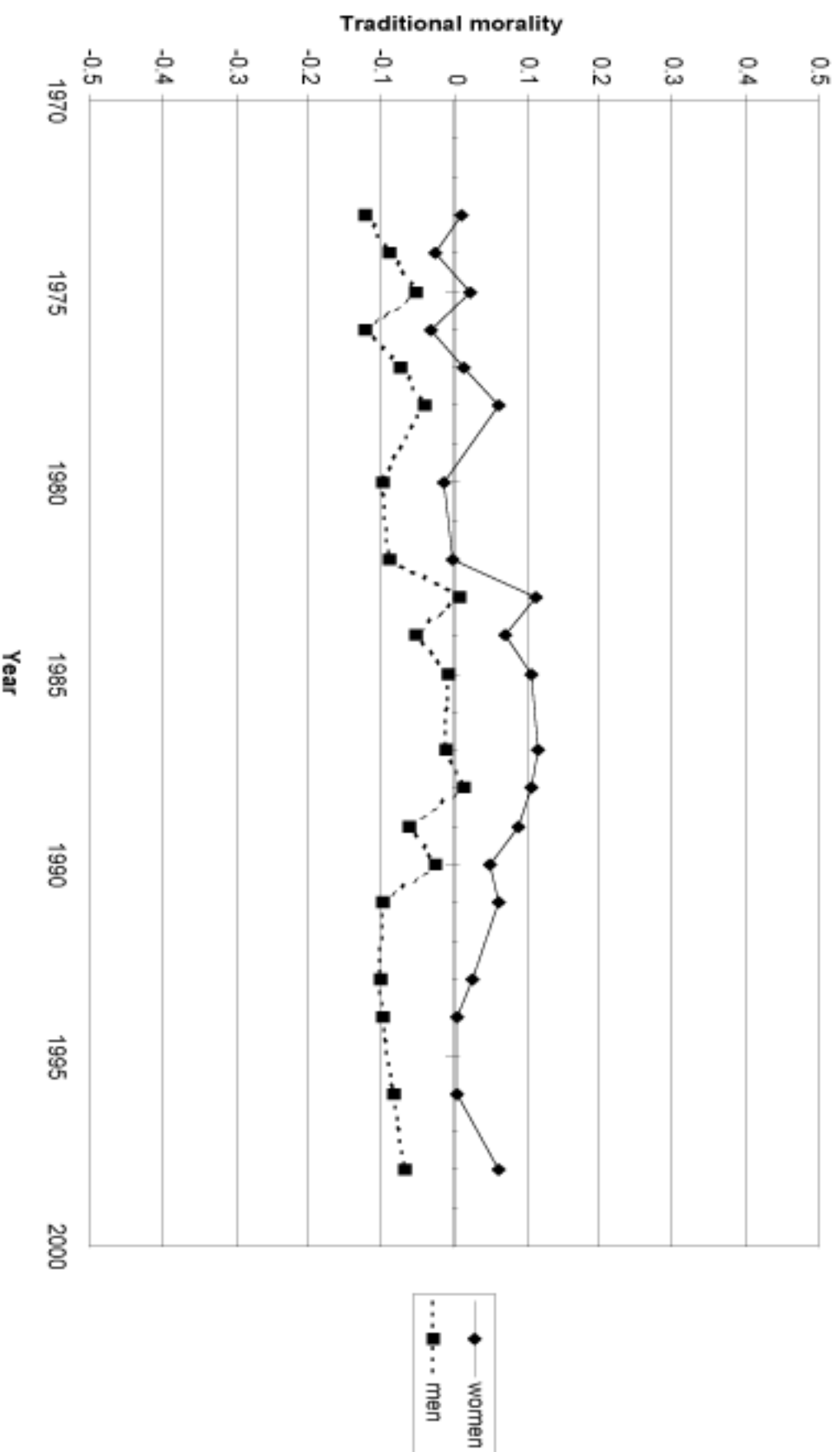
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Figure 1 : The Effects of Year and Sex on Social Compassion Attitudes



The attitude scores are standardized, with higher values indicating greater endorsement of socially compassionate policies.

Figure 2: The Effects Of Year And Sex On Traditional Morality Attitudes



The attitude scores are standardized, with higher values indicating greater endorsement of traditionally moral policies.