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Intersectionality in Electoral Politics: A Mess Worth Making

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Prior to the recent reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I was involved in numerous conversations regarding strategies for its renewal.[1] These conversations prompted me to reflect not only on the impact of the Voting Rights Act for African-American citizenship but in particular on the ways in which it did for African-American women what the Constitution and its amendments had previously failed to do. After all, it is not until the passage of this legislation that African-American women are first extended a modicum of citizenship in the United States.

Although we typically think of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as affecting representation for people of color, we would do better to recognize the increased representation of women following its passage. Shortly thereafter, 1,469 African Americans served in elected office from the national to local levels, and only 160 were African-American women. As the numbers of African-American officeholders increased, African-American women were central to that growth. By 2001, there was a reported 9,101 black elected officials, of whom 3,220 were African-American women. Since 1990, African-American women have outpaced African-American men in elective office success, and over the last decade, all of the growth in the number of black elected officials is attributable to these women. This reverses the trends of the 1970s immediately following the passage of the Voting Rights Act when 82% of the growth in black elected officials was attributed to African-American men (Bositis 2001). Similarly, the overall numbers of women serving in state legislatures steadily grew between 1976 and 1996.

Yet to the puzzlement of women and politics scholars, these numbers began to plateau in the mid-1990s and remain static today (Sanbonmatsu 2006). This is not, however, the trend for African-American women and other women of color. Their numbers, though small, have continued to increase at a steady pace (Smooth 2006). The impact of the Voting Rights Act extends beyond increasing representation for racial minorities, as women's representation also increased with its passage.

A consideration of the impact of the Voting Rights Act at the intersection of race and gender politics makes conversations messy. It requires the interaction of two parallel yet divergent areas of scholarship and activism: race and politics and women and politics. Such interaction requires each to yield space and to recognize their shared interests. For race and politics scholars and activists, this means relinquishing their proverbial hold on the Voting Rights Act as a racial policy. For women

1. These include two recent conferences: "Lessons From the Past, Prospects for the Future: Honoring the 40th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965" at Yale University, hosted by Khalilah Brown-Dean; and "Who Draws the Lines? The Consequences of Redistricting Reform for Minority Voters" at the University of North Carolina's School of Law, hosted by the Center for Civil Rights.

and politics scholars and activists, however, this means making an investment in the ongoing battles to protect and extend voting rights.

Examining the significance of the Voting Rights Act to multiple communities requires us to consider more broadly what seriously engaging intersectionality means for electoral politics. The primary purpose of this essay is to illustrate the usefulness of an intersectionality framework for understanding electoral politics. Here, I reflect on three issues in electoral politics that are traditionally considered within the realm of gender politics or race politics. I offer a rereading of these areas using an intersectionality framework. As is typical of intersectionality politics, the focus of each area shifts and new issues emerge for consideration. From these thought exercises, it becomes clear that we as scholars, pundits, and political strategists miss important aspects of these critical issues when we adhere to using race or gender as separate, distinct spheres of inquiry. In this discussion, I primarily engage race from the perspective of African Americans, but these issues manifest themselves in similar ways when we consider additional racial groups. Although the focus here is primarily on African-American women in electoral politics, the core issues have implications for all women of color.

I begin by considering how the narrative of the voting rights struggle shifts when we view it from the intersection of race and gender. I follow by discussing what I call the "the new black voter," who emerges as a result of the increasing numbers of African-American women voting in relationship to their male counterparts. I link the new black voter to the increased incarceration rates of African-American men, and point out that when we look at this issue as an issue of race or gender, we miss the larger story. Next, I examine the gender gap as a social construction in electoral politics that resists the realities of intersectionality and, in doing so, limits the possibilities of progressive campaigns. The remainder of the essay focuses on examples from the 2004 elections in which political strategists effectively used an intersectionality framework as an asset in their campaigns.

Strategists, pundits, and scholars will find that employing an intersectionality framework further complicates electoral politics and likewise comes with costs. Across history, when African-American women have pointed out their positioning at the intersection of race and gender politics, they were accused of being race traitors, operating with a false consciousness or, in contemporary parlance, selling out. Essentially, they have been accused of making a mess of what many see as discreet domains of politics: race politics and gender politics. In this essay, I argue

that attentiveness to the intersections of race and gender in electoral politics is indeed a mess worth making. We can look back to the 2004 elections and look ahead to 2008 to see that the fate of progressive politics may depend upon the degree to which those at the intersections—women of color—are made visible during elections. Encouraging women of color to turn out to the polls and even to become candidates may be the best way to ensure the future of progressive politics. Resisting the desires to make tidy categories of voters and candidates, and allowing the messiness of categorizing voters and candidates to come to the forefront, will build better models for studying electoral politics and will help in devising more effective political campaigns.

A History of Mess Making: African-American Women and the Struggle for Voting Rights

What is often overlooked in discussions of the road to democratic inclusion for both African Americans and women is the exclusion African-American women experienced in both of these struggles. African American-women's vantage point complicates the dominant narratives of the voting rights struggle. The words of former slave and suffrage activist Sojourner Truth in her speech "Ain't I a Woman" are indicative of African-American women's predicament at the intersection of the suffrage debates. In her impassioned rhetoric, Truth sought recognition from both white female suffragists and black male suffragists, who willfully neglected the fate of African-American women in early suffrage debates. In subsequent speeches, Truth and other African-American women activists made arguments for bestowing on African-American women the full inclusion and citizenship that voting would ensure. Making such demands epitomizes early mess making, yet despite the best efforts of these early mess makers, it is not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that African-American women reach this moment of full citizenship and inclusion.

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act, African-American women went from zero inclusion under the constitutional provisions of the United States to political inclusion and citizenship. At its inception in 1787, the U.S. Constitution disregarded the humanity of African-American women by classifying them as three-fifths of a person and thereby limiting any rights to citizenship. Ironically, we can now look at the three-fifths classification and regard it as "inclusive" and "pro-

gressive" since African-American women later lost *all* status under the Constitution. Mamie Locke (1997) points out that African-American women would move from three-fifths of a person under the Constitution to total exclusion from constitutional protections with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which extended the right to vote to black men only. Even when women secured the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, large numbers of African-American women were still denied access to the franchise through the cultural norms of the Jim Crow South and the political structures of literacy tests, poll taxes, the grandfather clause, and all-white primaries. In light of these de facto and de jure means of exclusion, we see the heightened significance of the Voting Rights Act for African-American women. To the extent that voting and citizenship are linked, it was not until 1965 that the United States included African-American women as full citizens—the first time in the country's history.

Once extended democratic citizenship, African-American women exercised their right to participate both in informal and formal politics. A recent study of black political participation at the macro level concludes that since the 1980s, African-American women have been as likely as their male counterparts to engage in political work activities, such as attending a rally or speech and carrying membership in a political party or other political organizations (Harris, Sinclair-Chapman, and McKenzie, 2005). Like African-American men, following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, African-American women ran for and won elected offices on all levels, and they now outpace their male counterparts. As voters, they are also exceeding their male counterparts in turning out at the polls, marking the emergence of what I term the new black voter, a voter who is centrally defined by gender. Simply examining the differences in voting between African-American men and women, however, masks a larger issue for the African-American community.

The Emergence of the "New Black Voter"

Women and politics scholars have made us aware that women generally turn out to vote in higher numbers and in higher percentages than do men. This has been true for all groups of women except Asian-American women across the last five presidential elections. In 2004, Asian-American

women also slightly outvoted their male counterparts. For African Americans, the difference between men and women is the greatest (Center for American Women and Politics 2005). According to data from the Voter News Service, the numbers of African Americans casting their ballots increased by one million between 1996 and 2000 and by 4.1 million between 2000 and 2004. African-American women cast 60% of these votes in 2000 and 58% in 2004 (Bositis 2001, 2005). The higher turnout rate among female voters has become an important feature of electoral politics, particularly for women and politics scholars.

The increasing disparities in voting between African-American men and women are actually alarming when we focus attention on what these voting patterns signify from a race and politics perspective. These disparities signify a more critical problem that stands to impede democratic inclusiveness for African Americans for years to come and to further compromise the fragility of America's status as a representative democratic state. Using an intersectionality framework, the larger percentages of African-American women voting must be considered in tandem with the loss of voting rights for an ever-increasing number of African-American men through felony disenfranchisement laws. These laws, which differ by state, restrict access to the ballot for ex-felons, under conditions ranging from disenfranchisement only while imprisoned to permanent lifetime disenfranchisement. It is estimated that 13% of African-American men are currently disenfranchised as a result of felony disenfranchisement laws across the country (Mauer 2002).

Since the 1980s, the national crime policy trends aimed at getting "tough on crime" have contributed to the incarceration of petty drug criminals by inducing harsher possession penalties, particularly in inner-city communities of color, while promoting treatment options in suburban, white communities (Maur 2004). Such policies have contributed to disproportionate numbers of African Americans and Latinos entangled in the criminal justice system. While African Americans make up only 13% of the U.S. population, as of 2004, they comprise 41% of those incarcerated. Latinos are similarly disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Latinos comprise only 13% of the U.S. population, yet constitute 19% of the nation's state and federal prisons and jails (Harrison and Beck 2005). As the prison industrial complex grows, the effect on African-American men is staggering, as they currently represent over 40% of the nation's prisoners and comprise only 6% of the national population (ibid.).

The impact of these statistics is even more compelling when viewed in the context of a single state's voting population. Ryan King and Marc Maur (2004) examined the impact of Georgia's felony disenfranchisement laws on African Americans in the state. By 2003, 12.6% of adult African-American men were disenfranchised in the state, meaning that one in every eight men in the state is ineligible to vote (King and Maur 2004). The decreasing population of eligible black male voters has had a deleterious effect on the electoral gains of African Americans in the state of Georgia over the last 20 years. This can mean big losses for African American-representation in Georgia, given that African Americans have elected the largest number of African-American state lawmakers and the largest number of African-American women of any state legislature (Smooth, 2006). In addition, African Americans have elected a consecutive run of African-American mayors in the city of Atlanta, including Shirley Franklin—the only African-American woman to lead a city with a population of more than 100,000.

The research of The Sentencing Project and work by political scientists[2] illustrate that the growth of the prison industrial complex marks the next phase of the black voting rights saga. The consequence of disproportionate incarceration rates, coupled with the severity of disenfranchisement laws across the country, is rapidly shrinking the pool of eligible voters in both African-American and Latino communities across the country (Dameo and Ochoa 2003; Manza and Uggen 2004; Maur 2004).

This analysis brings into focus how felony disenfranchisement laws and women's voting patterns both point to the effects of gender and race systems operating in tandem. The new black voter not only is symbolic of women's differing voting patterns but is also a symptom of the increasing decline in minority voting power. Using an intersectionality framework illuminates how an entire community is impacted, not just women alone as a traditional feminist analysis might explain. This directly addresses concerns of black feminists and womanist scholars who argue that feminism is inadequate for addressing the concerns of most women of color, given that their concerns reflect both the men and women of their communities (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1994; hooks 1984; Walker 1983). This approach takes into account the gendered and racialized

2. These include Adolphus Belk, Jr (2005), whose work focuses on the impact of the prison industrial complex on local communities, and Khalilah Brown-Dean's (2003) research on the impact of disenfranchisement laws on black voting populations.

processes that combine to impact electoral representation; a race or gender lens alone renders only a partial analysis.

What Is Black and Brown, Yet White All Over? The Gender Gap

Though African-American women now account for the predominance of black voters, the magnitude of their voting power goes largely unrecognized by scholars and politicos alike. African-American women have continuously supported the Democratic Party since the 1960s, and for many, any claim that the Democratic Party holds sway with women's votes is predicated on the support it enjoys from African-American women and Latinas (Scruggs-Leftwich 2000). Their loyalties were all the more critical during the 2004 elections, as more white women gravitated toward the Republican Party. Yet despite this ardent support, African-American women's voting patterns are largely dismissed by political party strategists and subsumed in scholarly discussions of the gender gap.

In discussions of the gender gap—the differences between men's and women's voting patterns—African-American women's and Latinas' contributions to this phenomenon are so often muted. This is particularly startling given the voting patterns of black and brown women in the last several presidential elections. Few scholars are attentive to the racial differences associated with the gender gap (Lien 1998). When the gender gap is examined by race, we see that African-American women's support of the democratic presidential nominee is greater than is white women's support. In fact, African-American women and Latinas heavily account for the consistent claim that women are more supportive of Democratic candidates. The story of the gender gap, the major frame for discussing gender and elections, most often focuses on the voting patterns of white women, whether they are discussed as the soccer moms of 1996, the security moms of 2004, or the single women of 2004. Remarkably, the Democratic Party clings to these frames, even as white women's support of the party wanes. In all of these constructions of so-called women voters, the silence around the intersection of race and gender is deafening.

With the 1996 presidential campaign, the so called soccer mom—the suburban, middle-class, white mother of school-age children—is typically accredited with delivering Bill Clinton's victory. What is obscured, however, in discussions of the soccer mom is the overwhelming support of black and brown women. Overall, the 1996 presidential election produced an 11-point gender gap among women voters in favor of Clinton. He received 31% of white men's votes and 42% of white women's votes,

a 10% difference in support for Clinton among white men and women. In contrast, 89% of African-American women and 78% of Latinas voted for him in 1996. As Carol Hardy-Fanta (2000) argues, Clinton would not have returned to the White House in 1996 had black and brown women stayed home.

Al Gore's story in 2000 is quite similar as he attempted to appeal to the same group of women. In 2000, an even larger gender gap emerged, with a 12 percentage point difference between men and women in support of Gore, the Democratic candidate. Overall, 54% of women voters and 42% of men supported Gore (Center for American Women and Politics 2000). Again, African-American women's immense support for Gore is masked in the commonly reported numbers. African-American women voted in even greater numbers for Gore than they did for Clinton in 1996, with 94% supporting Gore (Bositis 2001). African-American women contributed nearly 12% of all votes cast for Gore in 2000.

While the dominant frame of the 2004 elections emerged as the "security mom" or (a less prominent frame) the "single woman voter," neither of these groups of women supported the Democratic nominee as decisively as did women of color.[3] Fully three-quarters (75%) of women of color cast their votes for John Kerry, while fewer than half of white female voters (44%) supported Kerry. In all of these election cycles, women of color and their concerns were never made visible, despite such ardent support of the Democratic Party's nominee.

As women and politics scholars, our imperative is to consider what is gained and what is lost by the general inattentiveness to the racial and even class compositions of the gender gap, especially since these frames dominate the ways in which we discuss women and electoral politics. As Susan Carroll (2006) argues, some political pundits seek to minimize the impact of the gender gap by suggesting that it is not in fact a gender gap, but reflects race and class differences. In making such arguments, the goal of these pundits is clearly to diminish the decisive power of women's voting patterns and the power of women's voices in politics. Certainly, women and politics scholars and women-centered political strategists have significant investments in maintaining the power of women's distinctive voting patterns. On some levels, the potential power of the gender gap has proven to be a valuable tool for advancing women's

3. The available exit poll data from Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International Exit Polls used by the major media outlets released data disaggregated by white women and nonwhite women. At this date, data are not yet available for voting trends among each racial/ethnic group and gender group.

representation. After all, had feminist organizations not pointed to the differences between men's and women's voting patterns in the 1980s, the Reagan administration might not have made attempts to attract female voters with the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court (Mueller 1988).

Equally important, however, is the question of what is lost by how we have invested in the gender gap as a way to talk about women and electoral politics. Our investments in presenting this fictitious monolithic group "women" as the story of the gender gap engages a form of essentialist politics that limits voters to their race, sex, or class. In simplifying the gender gap into a story of the "women's vote," as if women are one homogeneous group, we reduce a complex subject into essentialist fanfare. Rather than bringing attention to the power of all women who vote, social constructions like "soccer mom" and "security mom" pick off the most desirable, sought-after voters. These voters are then targeted by the parties through elaborate recruitment initiatives, while women of color and other voters are rendered invisible. As scholars, we reinforce the construction of female voters as homogeneous when we teach gender gap politics to our students without interrogating its race and class limitations. Even more problematic are scholarly discussions of women and electoral politics that fail to discuss differences among women.

As scholars with investments in the advancement of women and women's interests—in all their diversity—a critical question is whether gender gap politics and all the social constructions of female voters that have evolved have yielded enough to account for rendering women of color and other groups of women invisible during election cycles. Has this strategy provided the type of access for women and women's interests? From a study of gender framing in elections, Carroll concludes that women realized few policy gains—despite all the emphasis on women's voting patterns and particularly the emphasis on the narrowly constructed soccer mom, following the 1996 election cycle. In fact, the attention to the gender gap frame allowed the 1996 candidates to appear to have concern for women yet dodge real policy commitments to organizations that represent women's interests (Carroll 1999).

This suggests that a change in strategy is warranted. Adopting a more intersectional approach to gender gap politics or, in general, increasing attentiveness to the diversity of women participating in electoral politics would present women as voters more accurately and possibly advance issues of interests to greater numbers of women. Beyond its strategic po-

litical advantages, engaging a more intersectional approach offers new scholarly opportunities as it remains an understudied area, particularly in electoral politics. Employing an intersectionality framework in electoral politics requires the development of new approaches for studying women and elections in which the differences among the women generating the gender gap in politics are recognized, exalted, celebrated, and, most of all, given serious scholarly attention.

Intersectionality in Campaigns and Elections: 2004

The political advantages of complicating the group "women" and the group "blacks" by engaging an intersectionality framework are demonstrated by two examples from the 2004 elections. Gwen Moore's successful congressional bid and the get-out-the-vote efforts of 527 organizations in key battleground states are examples of the ways in which both candidates and voters capitalized on the advantages of an intersectionality framework.

With her win in 2004, Gwen Moore became not only the first African-American woman but also the first African American elected to Congress from Wisconsin. Elected from the 4th Congressional District, which includes the city of Milwaukee, Moore ran on a traditional Democratic Party agenda of job creation, health care, and education. During the primary, she trailed behind her most formidable opponent in fund-raising. Her political fortunes changed once she received the critical endorsement from EMILY's List, which solidified her fund-raising efforts and pushed her to win the Democratic primary, having raised four times the amount of her closest opponent, Matt Flynn. Beyond ensuring critical campaign funds, the endorsement also constructed Moore as a candidate invested in building coalitions among African Americans, women, and progressives. She received support from an array of sources within the African-American community and the women's community, including campaign endorsements from the NOW Political Action Committee and the newly formed Future PAC, a political action committee that seeks to increase the numbers of African-American women elected to national office. In addition, Moore secured financial backing from five major unions, ranging from "teachers to truckers," which also confirmed her class-based concerns.[4]

4. See Larry Sandler, "Moore Nears Lead in Fundraising; Candidates Close in on $2million in Spending," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 4 September 2004.

Moore's success is even more striking given the last redistricting cycle, which changed the makeup of her district to majority white. This necessitated a shift in her campaign as well. Indeed, her positioning in Milwaukee politics as a state representative for 16 years played a big role in her victory. However, the national attention her campaign garnered with the endorsement from EMILY's List, which ensured her crossover appeal for white voters, cannot be minimized. The funds generated by her national visibility provided for television, radio, and print ads, allowing her personal story, her message, to enter the homes of white voters and increasing her appeal.

At the same time, Moore was able to maintain her connections with African-American and Latino voters. National Democratic Party notables, such as Jesse Jackson, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and several actors, appeared in her district at get-out-the-vote rallies. This allowed Moore to build a diverse coalition of African Americans, women, and progressives that extended beyond her district. These resources add to the uniqueness of her campaign, and point to what is possible by combining resources that are traditionally kept in discreet coffers. Moore embraced the fullness of her identity and employed an intersectional framework in which she drew upon race-based resources and women-based resources. Had she run as the "black candidate" only or the "woman candidate" only, she would not have capitalized on the crossover appeal needed to secure the vote in her majority white district. If the availability of majority minority districts continues to decline, as many scholars suggest, political strategies that draw upon multiple community identifications will become all the more necessary to elect candidates of color.

Get-out-the-vote campaigns launched by 527 organizations in key battleground states offer another example of an intersectionality framework at work in electoral politics. During the 2004 elections, race and gender converged, rendering African-American women visible as critical voters in key battleground states like Ohio.

Both parties recognized that in key battleground states, the difference between winning and losing the presidential election would depend upon the party that would be able to get its loyalists to the polls. For Democrats, African-American women in key states figured prominently in their plan, and various 527 organizations sought ways to deliver these voters to the polls on election day. Using direct mail campaign leaflets and door-to-door canvassing, these groups sought not simply to target African-American voters. These groups specifically targeted African-American

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Book Reviews

Men, Militarism & UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis. By Sandra Whitworth. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner. 2004. 225 pp. $49.95.

Dyan Mazurana
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Armed conflict, torture, murder, sexual assault, sexual enslavement, human trafficking and HIV/AIDS—United Nations peacekeepers are sent into conflict-torn countries to help prevent the further spread of these horrors. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan often highlights these brutalities when he publicly calls upon member states to send troops and resources to protect and assist vulnerable populations in conflict zones. In her most recent book, *Men, Militarism & UN Peacekeeping*, Sandra Whitworth provides a critical feminist analysis of a UN peacekeeping system that not only is failing to protect civilian populations but is also implicated in the spread of HIV/AIDS and in the torture, murder, sexual assault and enslavement, and human trafficking of the very populations the mission was purportedly sent to assist. Throughout, Whitworth uses sharp critical feminist analyses to help us understand why UN peacekeeping missions have too often become sites of violence and abuse.

Peacekeeping is often portrayed as an important alternative to the use of traditional military force, and its backers include not only a wide array of governments but also women's, peace, and human rights groups. Yet as Whitworth's at times disturbing and always challenging account makes clear, in a number of instances, the presence of peacekeeping forces has actually increased some populations' insecurity on the ground. In trying to understand why this is occurring, she contends that perhaps the two most important aspects to which we must pay attention are militarization and masculinity.

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