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Making Room for Women of Color: Race and Gender Categories in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

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Race and gender have never been more visible on the national political stage than during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, particularly during the months when Democratic Party rivals Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama battled in the party's state nomination caucuses and primaries. Clinton stood in for gender, representing all women, while Obama took his place in the category of race, standing in for all people of color. The success of these candidates and the addition of Sarah Palin as vice presidential nominee on the Republican ticket was a source of pride for many women and minority Americans. The "default" category for presidential candidates — the white male — had finally been displaced from the top of the ticket on the Democratic side and from the second in command for the Republicans.

Lost in the excitement of watching presidential candidates outside of the default category is the important reality of diversity within the categories that Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Sarah Palin represent. Of course, no one would argue that all women are white, and similarly, in a nation where Latinos are now the largest minority population, one would be foolish to suggest that race and ethnicity mean black. Nevertheless, one of the most persistent story lines of the 2008 election during the primary season reinforced the already prevalent notion that women equals white and race equals black. The pervasiveness of this perspective was evident from the recurring question journalists posed to experts and commentators: Are Americans more racist or more sexist? Alternatively, one must wonder what if discriminatory attitudes of both stripes exist simultaneously and in concert with one another? For those at the intersection of some race and gender categories, racist and sexist practices are inextricably intertwined and cannot be easily separated. Indeed, it is precisely the particular combination of the categories of gender and race for men classified as white that provides a double dose of advantage in U.S. electoral politics.

In this brief essay, I argue that while the range of race and gender categories in presidential politics has expanded beyond the default category to include a white woman and a black man, this important step forward has been accompanied by a sideways move. The reification of the vision of woman as white and person of color as black leaves less room to maneuver within the categories, and constricts the space available to women of color. Moving ahead from this one step forward—one step sideways position will require analysts to consider much more carefully not only what it means to displace the default category of the white man as political leader, but also how to refill the vision in the mind's eye of the American voter with what a politician should look like. Similarly, political leaders will need to think much more broadly about what the typical American voter looks like in terms of gender as well as race and ethnicity.

ONE STEP FORWARD, ONE STEP SIDEWAYS

I began this essay with the observation that race and gender have been more visible in 2008 than at any other time in the history of U.S. presidential campaigns. More accurately, it is that race and gender in forms other than the default category of white and male have never been more

prominently on display. To illustrate the power of the categorical invariance of American presidents, consider the following exercise that political scientist and African-American studies scholar Melissa Harris-Lacewell asks audiences to perform: Close your eyes and imagine in your mind's eye a picture after you hear a word.¹ That word is "apple." What picture do you see? How many see a red apple? How many a green apple? How many an Apple computer? Before the 1980s, a computer would have been unrelated to the word "apple" and unimaginable as a response to the cue in just the same way that a black man or a woman as U.S. president is unprecedented and therefore not visible in the mind's eye when one is asked to think about a national political leader. Until this federal election cycle, the image of a viable presidential candidate in U.S. politics has always been that of a white man.

But for both Clinton and Obama, existing in anything other than the default category of U.S. presidential candidates is cause for suspicion among many voters, and at the very least, the source of substantial cognitive dissonance. The anxiety accompanying what was unimaginable until the 2008 U.S. presidential election is the result of reconciling the fact that neither a woman nor a black person has ever held the highest elected political office in the land. Scrutiny of qualifications, experience, and temperament has always been a part of evaluations of presidential candidates, but the degree and intensity of that inquiry is magnified for anyone who falls outside of the categorical boundaries of the default category – in this case, that intersection of the more powerful status of being male and the advantaged position in the racial hierarchy in the United States of being white.

As others in this Critical Perspectives forum in *Politics & Gender* argue, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Sarah Palin have had to contend with a higher degree of scrutiny and, indeed, distinctive forms of examination by the media and voters alike. As with all trailblazers, newcomers can never make a mistake and must be twice as good as their competitors, who are treated with less suspicion about either their motives for running or their ability to govern. But imagine for a moment how, both quantitatively and qualitatively, that scrutiny would be different for a woman of color. Notwithstanding Cynthia McKinney's bid for the presidency in 2008, as political scientist and women and politics scholar Susan Carroll observed in her plenary address to the 2008 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, even children as young as Malia and Sasha

1. The Century Foundation, New York, July 2008.

Obama understand all too well why it is their father and not their mother who ran successfully for president of the United States.

So where does this shake-up of the race and gender categories during the 2008 election leave us? With Palin the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee and Obama at the top of the Democratic ticket, American voters will be forced to reform the image of a national political leader, not just in the mind's eye but in the White House. That the nation now can see visible manifestations of variation in gender and race among contenders for president is a step forward. At the same time, the very expansion of the gender and race categories to include Obama, Palin, and Clinton has also produced a sideways move, and in this case, it has been one that has been closer to the wall, for nominating a black woman, an Asian-American man, or a Latina would go further than simply decentering the default category. That there are fewer politicians of national stature in any of these categories, compared with white female and black male leaders, is an indicator in itself that the step forward taken in 2008 with the diversification of candidate characteristics is one that follows in line with hierarchies within the categories of gender and race. Among female candidates, it is the white woman who is the first in line; among African Americans, it is a man, and the implication of the sideways move is to leave less room to maneuver for women of color — both as candidates and as voters.

A second view of the sideways step is in the classification of Barack Obama as a black man. He is, according to his autobiographical writings and campaign speeches, a multiracial person: the child of a black African immigrant and a white woman from the American heartland. Yet despite efforts by Obama and his campaign to delineate his racial and ethnic background as multiracial, his default racial category returns to that of black. During Obama's first campaign for elective office at the federal level — a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives — skeptics wondered whether he was "black enough," but at no time during that election nor up to the 2008 presidential race was the question raised about whether Obama was "white enough." That there is no room to even pose that question of the other half of Obama's racial background provides a stark indicator of the sideways step that accompanies the step forward made by the trailblazing candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Thus, despite this progress, we must ask whether there is room for an in-between category of race and the extent to which the ambiguous multiracial category can step into the mainstream of racial categories.

MOVING AHEAD

As uneven as the path to national political leadership may be in terms of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity, patterns of demographic change are moving ahead much more rapidly. Similarly, the relationship between being a woman and engaging in politics — once negative and now strongly positive — continues to hold, and even strengthen in recent elections. American women vote at a higher rate than men, making up a larger share of the total American electorate. The composition of the population of women in America is shifting rapidly as a function of the large influx of immigrants, primarily from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean — the biggest number of immigrants the nation has seen in nearly a century. Nearly one in five Americans today is an immigrant or the child of immigrants, and one-third of the population of the nation classifies itself as a race other than white. Combine these two trends and it quickly becomes apparent that the American electorate is moving ahead, with women voters out in front.

Women of all backgrounds participate in electoral politics at a higher rate than do men who share their racial and ethnic classification. While the data are sparse and gathered less frequently for Latinas and Asian-American women, even these heavily immigrant populations show a move toward stronger female voting rates. Women voters — whether white, African American, Latina, or Asian American — only magnify their importance when one considers the significance of party identification and voting behavior for the socialization of their children. Voters in the last, great wave of international migration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were immigrants and their offspring. Together with the Democratic Party, it is these voters who built electoral coalitions over the course of several generations that culminated in the New Deal coalition and decades of progressive political reform. Women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who are active in politics and who vote — disproportionately for candidates from the Democratic Party — will have an important impact, not only through their votes during elections held during their lifetimes but also through the legacy of the socialization of partisanship and political activism passed on to their children.

The task in moving ahead, then, is to displace the default category and refill it with a new image of what political leaders should look like, plus a companion undertaking to refigure the composition of the American electorate as well. American politics needs to make room for women of

color as elected officials as well as voters. By midcentury, the United States will no longer be a nation composed primarily of people classified as white. “Soccer moms” and “hockey moms” 40 years from now will no longer automatically be coded as white middle-class women, and a new set of monikers will be developed to incorporate the more racially and ethnically diverse electorate. But if the trend of greater electoral activism among American women voters holds true into the next several decades, it will continue to be women voters that U.S. politicians must persuade.

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