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Abstract

This paper assesses the validity of two alternative theories of group relations, in the context of policy attitudes concerning women's issues. The first theory is the symbolic politics approach, which states that an individual's affective response to groups as "symbols" affects views of those groups. Under this approach, structural relationships between the individual and the group are believed to be inconsequential. The second theoretical approach is the group consciousness hypothesis. This theory asserts that the structural relationship of individuals to groups, as well as subjective evaluations of those entities, define an individual's attitudes towards groups. In order to evaluate these competing perspectives, Sears, Jessor, and Gahart construct two classes of measures from relevant 1983 Pilot Study items: (1) Items aimed at describing the structural relationship between the individual and the group and (2) evaluative measures. The authors find that the Pilot Study data suggest that structure and evaluation are somewhat different components of individual's attitudes about groups. However, the affective measures have more potent political effects than the structural indices. Sears, Jessor, and Gahart conclude that there is little support for the group consciousness model, at least in the context of women's issues. On the other hand, the central role of feminism as a political symbol in evaluation of women's issues indicates that the symbolic politics approach has a great deal of validity.