Case Notes

Gender Blindness and the *Hunter* Doctrine

*Coalition for Economic Equity v. Wilson*, 110 F.3d 1431 (9th Cir. 1997). *reh’g en banc denied*, Nos. 97-15030, 97-15031, 1997 WL 528335 (9th Cir. Aug. 21, 1997).

As a factual matter, the recent reinstatement of the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI) withdrew many opportunities for racial minorities and women in important public sectors. As a legal matter, the Ninth Circuit decision that justified this result—*Coalition for Economic Equity v. Wilson* (CEE)—rests on questionable grounds. The court employed novel reasoning to distinguish the Supreme Court’s “political structure” equal protection precedent—the so-called *Hunter* doctrine—which invalidates initiatives that obstruct minorities seeking beneficial local legislation. The CEE court held that the *Hunter* doctrine provides “equal protection rights against political obstructions to equal treatment,” not “equal protection rights against political obstructions to preferential treatment.” Premising its argument on the heavy constitutional presumption against race-based preferences, the court explained: Since the Equal Protection Clause “barely permits” such preferences, given the

1. CCRI, now codified at *Cal. Const.* art. 1, § 31(a), provides in pertinent part that the government “shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin” in public contracting, employment, or education
2. See *Coalition for Econ. Equity v. Wilson* (CEE), 946 F. Supp. 1480, 1495-99 (N.D. Cal. 1996) (detailing findings of fact that prove the likelihood of “irreparable injury” suffered by racial minorities and women), *rev’d on other grounds*, 110 F.3d 1431 (9th Cir. 1997). *reh’g en banc denied*, Nos. 97-15030, 97-15031, 1997 WL 528335 (9th Cir. Aug. 21, 1997)
3. 110 F.3d 1431, *reh’g en banc denied*, Nos. 97-15030, 97-15031, 1997 WL 528335 (9th Cir. Aug. 21, 1997).
4. The doctrine’s two leading cases are *Hunter v. Erickson*, 393 U.S. 385 (1969), which invalidated an initiative uniquely requiring the city council to secure the electorate’s approval for antidiscrimination housing programs; and *Washington v. Seattle School District Number 1*, 458 U.S. 457 (1982), which invalidated a state constitutional amendment that barred local school boards from enacting desegregative busing. Under the doctrine, a state action involves an impermissible classification if it singles out an “issue of particular interest” to racial minorities or women and “impose[s] a novel political burden on all future efforts to enact” such legislation. *CEE*, 946 F. Supp. at 1500
5. *CEE*, 110 F.3d at 1445 (emphasis added)

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rigors of strict scrutiny, the "political structure" cases surely do not require unencumbered political access to them.\footnote{6}

In this Case Note, I accept for argument's sake CEE's interpretation of the Hunter doctrine. I argue that the court's use of strict scrutiny to do its heavy lifting involved significant slippage with regard to sex-based equal protection. Although CEE's holding applies to race- and sex-based programs, its analysis depends on factors unique to race-based strict scrutiny: the most restrictive means and purpose tests,\footnote{7} the underlying fact that courts persistently disfavor race-based preferences, and the rhetoric of colorblindness. None of these factors applies to current sex equality doctrine, however, rendering the application of CEE's final conclusions to sex-based preferences problematic.

I

The CEE court reached its conclusion by relying principally on the Supreme Court's race neutrality cases. Citing Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Pena\footnote{8} and City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.,\footnote{9} Judge O'Scannlain explained that race-based preferences are "prohibit[ed] . . . in all but the most compelling circumstances."\footnote{10} The court also cited United States v. Virginia (VMI)\footnote{11}—the first and last time a sex equality case was mentioned in the court's political structure analysis—for that case's strongest proposition: Sex-based classifications "demand an 'exceedingly persuasive justification.'"\footnote{12} Based on these precedents, the court explained that the Constitution "erects obstructions to preferential treatment by its own terms."\footnote{13} Yet the profound difference in "terms" that current doctrine mandates for race, as distinct from sex, and the resulting difference in "obstructions" were never discussed.

Instead, the court's subsequent analysis conflated race and sex further. The court reasoned that states can enact (or not enact) all other constitutionally
permissible classifications and that it therefore would be "anomalous" if states were required to make readily available "preferences based on the most suspect and presumptively unconstitutional classifications—race and gender." This analysis bootstraps sex into the same position as race.

In the remainder of the court's argument, sex-based analysis dropped out. The court submitted that the Fourteenth Amendment's commitment to colorblindness invites rooting out laws that erroneously claim "race somehow matters." The court also paraphrased Adarand's strongest language, a necessary step before its penultimate statement that the Constitution "barely permits" such programs. With these claims as its predicate, the court ultimately resolved, "It would be paradoxical to conclude that by adopting the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the voters of the state thereby had violated it."

The court's rationale has since prompted the plaintiffs to claim that CEE imported Justice Scalia's repudiated theory of absolute colorblindness. Their claim is convincing since CEE's holding effectively means racial minorities may seek only neutral programs under the Hunter doctrine. Perhaps most significantly, though, CEE concerns race and sex classifications. That is, Judge O'Scannlain's opinion ratcheted up the legal force of colorblindness while incidentally latching sex "equality" to it.

II

Under current law, the level of scrutiny given to sex classifications as compared to race classifications involves differences in both degree and kind. Consequently, whenever CEE notes special rigors that attach to race-based preferences, the argument strays further from applicability to gender.

14. Id. at 1446.
15. Id.
16. See id. ("The Constitution permits the people to grant a narrowly tailored racial preference only if they come forward with a compelling interest to back it up" (citing Adarand Constructors, Inc v Pena, 515 U.S. 200, 230 (1995))).
17. Id.
19. See Brief for Plaintiffs-Appellees at 18 (contrasting Justice Scalia's theory with controlling precedent), CEE, Nos. 97-15030, 97-15031, 1997 WL 528335, denying reh'g en banc of 110 F.3d 1431 (9th Cir. 1997); cf., e.g., Adarand, 515 U.S. at 239 (Scalia, J, concurring) (joining the opinion "except insofar as . . . [in my view, government can never have a 'compelling interest' in using racial classifications to remedy past discrimination]).
20. The Supreme Court may be moving the standards of evaluation for sex classifications closer to the strict scrutiny test. See Collin O'Connor Udell, Note, Signaling a New Direction in Gender Classification Scrutiny: United States v. Virginia, 29 CONN. L. REV. 521 (1996) (My argument, however, concerns the current case law, in which gender classifications are controlled by the "substantially related means" and "important governmental interest" tests See supra note 7, cf Christina Gleason, Comment, United States v. Virginia: Skeptical Scrutiny and the Future of Gender Discrimination Law, 70 ST JOHN'S L. REV. 801, 815-18 (1997) (analyzing the continuing divide separating intermediate scrutiny for gender from the rigors of strict scrutiny for race). Indeed, CEE accepts these conventional terms See CEE, 110 F.3d at 1440.
Indeed, the standards of intermediate scrutiny would likely favor many sex-based programs that CCRI bans. Numerous justifications for sex-based classifications can satisfy the “important state interest” test.21 And under the “substantially related” test the Court generally will not second-guess legislative uses of such classifications, even when neutral alternatives are conceivable.22 Sex-based preferences, in short, are far from “barely permit[ted].”

In practice, the level of scrutiny can decide the fate of preferential programs. As Justice Stevens explained in Adarand: Equal protection law now “produce[s] the anomalous result that the Government can more easily enact affirmative action programs to remedy discrimination against women than it can enact affirmative action programs to remedy discrimination against African Americans.”23 Indeed, this pivotal difference had not previously escaped Judge O’Scannlain and the Ninth Circuit.24

CEE discusses “the goal of the Fourteenth Amendment”25 only in relation to race; “the goal of the Fourteenth Amendment” in relation to gender, however, harmonizes with the pursuit of public sector preferences for women. A principal reason for heightening scrutiny of sex classifications has been to

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22. See Michael M., 450 U.S. at 473 (plurality opinion); id. at 481 (Stewart, J., concurring) (“[T]he issue, of course, is not whether the statute could have been drafted more wisely, but whether the lines chosen . . . are within constitutional limitations.”) (citing Kahn, 416 U.S. at 356 n.10)); see also Rostker, 453 U.S. at 70 (noting that the Court must decide whether the classification denies equal protection, not what alternative it would choose). But cf. Caban v. Mohammed, 441 U.S. 380, 392 n.13 (1979) (comparing alternatives to sex classification in evaluating the state’s asserted interest).

23. Adarand, 515 U.S. at 247 (Stevens, J., dissenting).

24. Two leading Ninth Circuit cases invalidated race-based preferences in city contracting while upholding sex-based preferences under the same legislative scheme. See Coral Constr. Co. v. King County, 941 F.2d 910 (9th Cir. 1991); Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal., Inc. v. San Francisco, 813 F.2d 922 (9th Cir. 1987). Notably, Associated General Contractors is the case Justice Stevens cited for his argument in Adarand. See 515 U.S. at 247 (Stevens, J., dissenting). In Coral Construction, Judge O’Scannlain himself expressly recognized that intermediate scrutiny uniquely permits local government “broad power” to adopt preferences for women:

Unlike the strict standard of review applied to race-conscious programs, intermediate scrutiny does not require any showing of governmental involvement, active or passive, in the discrimination it seeks to remedy. . . . [W]e [have] observed that the “government has the broad power to assure that physical differences between men and women are not translated into permanent handicaps, and that they do not serve as a subterfuge for those who would exclude women from participating fully in our economic system.” Coral Constr Co., 941 F.2d at 932 (citation omitted). Notably, the structure of the argument Judge O’Scannlain adopted in Coral Construction is remarkably different from the analytic organization of CEE. The former opinion separately analyzed the discrete questions raised by strict and intermediate scrutiny, rather than virtually collapsing them under one framework as CEE does.

25. CEE, 110 F.3d at 1446.
remove barriers generated by past and persistent economic discrimination.26 Moreover, the Supreme Court's equal protection analysis takes account of societal discrimination against women27 and endorses preferences to equalize those conditions.28 As such, CEE's distinction between "political obstructions to equal treatment" and "political obstructions to preferential treatment"29 is patently incoherent in the context of sex.

CEE's use of colorblindness—to explain why minorities may seek only neutral interests in the political process—betrays a clear indication that the court's framework does not work for sex. Supreme Court doctrine has no colorblindness analogue for sex.30 In fact, the long line of "similarly situated" sex equality cases31 maintains a large divide between gender jurisprudence and conservative theories of constitutional colorblindness. That is, current doctrine recognizes that men and women are often not similarly situated—due
to sociological,\textsuperscript{32} physiological,\textsuperscript{33} or preexisting legal\textsuperscript{34} conditions—an acknowledgment that is conceptually incongruent with the proposition that individuals of different races are, in general, similarly situated.\textsuperscript{35} Also, in a "not similarly situated" case, the means and purpose tests may be suspended,\textsuperscript{36} and the constitutional presumption may shift to favor the legislation.\textsuperscript{37} In short, CEE's strong use of colorblindness to interpret the Hunter doctrine reveals the inappropriateness of applying its reasoning to sex.

III

The argument pursued here leads to several conclusions, a full elaboration of which is beyond the scope of this discussion. At a minimum, though, this Case Note exposes an error in CEE's reasoning, suggesting the need for review. The Ninth Circuit's confusion of sex-based equal protection and strict scrutiny—especially in a case justifying the permanent withdrawal of state preferences for women—runs afoul of doctrinal principles and precedent.

The Case Note's argument also puts into doubt the viability of the preference-focused framework itself. CEE recast the Hunter doctrine by shifting the focus of constitutional inquiry from the initiatives in question to the programs that the initiatives prohibit. Yet this framework—if faithfully executed—produces an anomalous result: broader legal protections for women than for racial minorities. Can the application of the Hunter doctrine—which has primarily focused on invalidating "[s]tate action [that] 'places special burdens on racial minorities in the political process'"\textsuperscript{38}—yield broader political rights for a group that occupies a lower rung of the equal protection ladder? Perhaps to avoid this anomalous result, hornbook law on the Hunter doctrine makes no distinction between "preferential treatment" and "equal treatment."\textsuperscript{39} CEE's ability to avoid this same anomalous result, on the other hand, arguably depends on its miscalculation of sex equality doctrine.

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\textsuperscript{32} See, e.g., Michael M., 450 U.S. at 471 (plurality opinion).

\textsuperscript{33} See, e.g., id. (plurality opinion); id. at 481 (Stewart, J., concurring).

\textsuperscript{34} See, e.g., Rostker v. Goldberg, 453 U.S. 57, 76, 78 (1981); Parham, 441 U.S. at 355; Schlesinger, 419 U.S. at 508.

\textsuperscript{35} See Michael M., 450 U.S. at 478 (Stewart, J., concurring).

\textsuperscript{36} See Rostker, 453 U.S. at 94 (Marshall, J., dissenting) (discussing differences in "similarly situated" analysis as illustrated by comparison of the majority opinion and Justice Stewart's concurring opinion in Kirchberg v. Feenstra, 450 U.S. 455, 463 (1981) (Stewart, J., concurring)).

\textsuperscript{37} See Michael M., 450 U.S. at 497-98 n.4 (Stevens, J., dissenting) ("In cases involving discrimination between men and women, the natural differences between the sexes are sometimes relevant . . . [making it] appropriate to presume that the classification is lawful."); Caban v. Mohammed, 441 U.S. 380, 409-10 (1979) (Stevens, J., dissenting); cf. Parham, 441 U.S. at 351-52 (1979) (noting a presumption of statutory validity absent invidious discrimination).


\textsuperscript{39} See, e.g., JOHN E. NOWAK & RONALD D. ROTUNDA, CONSTITUTIONAL LAW 659-61 (5th ed. 1995).