

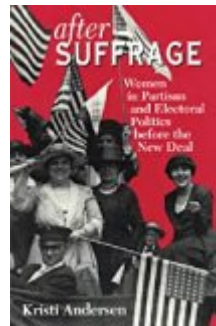
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kristi Andersen.** *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. viii + 191 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-01957-4; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-01955-0.

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Ever since American women won the vote in 1920, one question has dominated discussions of the aftermath: what difference did it make? In trying to answer this question, most commentators (including contemporary observers and journalists, and later, historians and political scientists) have looked at a narrow range of variables, such as how many women voted, how many won political office, how women voted in relation to men, and whether their having the vote led to any concrete political results. After reviewing the evidence, commentators tended to conclude that, in the grand scheme of things, women's suffrage was a relatively minor event. After all, only a few women voted and most of these chose the candidates their husbands favored. Only a tiny number of women won elected or appointive office and, although some legislative victories for a "women's political agenda" can be identified, after 1920 American politics were not transformed in any significant ways.

In recent years, these conclusions have come under considerable assault. We now have monographs on women's politics and reform at national and local levels in the immediate postsuffrage era and through the Great Depression, biographical works on women active in politics in the early twentieth century, and a rising number of articles on political issues that engaged women both before and after suffrage. Moreover, while recognizing the importance of woman suffrage, we now also acknowledge its limitations. On the other hand, we also know a good deal about the many ways women "did" politics before they had the vote and we have incontrovertible evidence of the impact women's suffrage had on political parties, legislation, and the development of public policies. Finally, we have enough examples of men's and

women's politics intersecting both before and after suffrage to allow us to draw some fresh conclusions about the larger meaning of female influence (and occasionally, power) in American political life.

*After Suffrage* not only offers us a brief synthesis of much of this scholarship but provides us with some new language for reframing the debate over suffrage's impact. Kristi Andersen, a professor of political science at Syracuse University, suggests that, instead of merely counting women voters or officeholders, or trying to figure out whether women voted differently than men or whether women's votes influenced public policies, we should look at a much broader question: how did women's suffrage affect the conception and practice of women's citizenship in the twentieth century? Articulated in this way, the question leads to an understanding of women's suffrage as an event of greater significance than many have previously acknowledged.

Andersen begins her own answer to the question by stating that she will focus primarily on the postsuffrage decade, the "critical period in the transformation of the relationship between gender and citizenship." First, she critiques the scholars who assessed suffrage's importance as negligible, showing how they either misinterpreted or used superficial or otherwise inadequate data as a basis for their claims. Then she provides examples of how women's votes became a factor in public policy. Finally, (and most originally) Andersen argues that suffrage's greatest contribution lies in its allowing women to "renegotiate the boundaries" of sex-typed political roles. Eventually, she says, women's functioning in political realms not only became "an accepted part of American

politics” but also forced political parties to change their rules. The old gender boundary between what was appropriate and expected for women and men in politics did not disappear, but by the end of the twenties it had been renegotiated. It had also shifted, and was never as solid as it had been before.

During the process of renegotiation, Andersen observes further, women’s own political culture underwent transformation. Excluded from political power in the past, women had achieved political ends before suffrage through pressure-group politics. After suffrage, they had either to learn how to “do” politics as men did or to devise new ways of action that made them feel more comfortable (as Emily Newell Blair put the issue in 1930, “Whether politics will make women into a fighting animal or whether women will make politics into a club—that remains to be seen”). Andersen’s final point is that women’s increasing activism in political parties transformed aspects of the larger political culture in the United States. By bringing their presuffrage advocacy techniques into the foreground of political life, women popularized interest group politics (a politics “based on information and education”), a step that contributed substantially to a trend already begun at the end of the previous century: the decline of party influence in American politics.

Andersen makes all of these points through an analytical treatment of major thematic areas in women’s political history in the 1920s. She analyzes, for a start, the discourse around issues of gender and public life in the suffrage era. Then, to help explain why turnout was so low in the early postsuffrage years, she exposes how unevenly the Nineteenth Amendment was applied in the early postsuffrage era. She turns then to the careers of women who, despite male resistance, carved

out political roles for themselves in the 1920s and then shepherded a women’s agenda through legislatures and executive offices. Finally, to explain women’s uneven progress through the ranks of party politics, she details some of the complexities of state variations in political party rules, and shows how American politics were slowly changed, as a result of female influence, into more of an educational experience than a competitive contest.

While *After Suffrage* is definitely suitable for class assignment, some students may find it too heavy with detail in certain areas, too skimpy in others. Andersen’s section on the reliability (or lack thereof) of data on women’s voting, for example, and its relationship to variables of social class, population density, and race, might be a bit sticky for the statistically-challenged to follow. Furthermore, she states more than proves her important point that women’s pressure-group politics accelerated the decline of political party influence. To make this provocative point convincing, she would have needed to provide more contextual background, especially for those uninitiated in the history of American political parties. Still, Andersen’s book will become, I would predict, standard introductory reading for anyone trying to understand the larger issues surrounding the impact of woman suffrage. She lays out the questions, themes, and topic areas in a well-organized, interesting, and concise fashion, occasionally adopting a highly personal approach that many student readers will enjoy. Her book is a welcome and much-needed synthesis of the growing scholarly literature in the political history of American women.

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