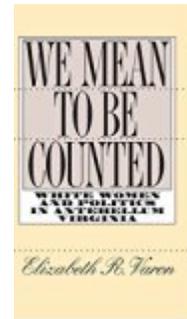


# H-Net Reviews

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Elizabeth R. Varon. *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. x + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-2390-3.

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## Petitioners, Partisans, and Patriots: White Women Embrace Politics in Antebellum Virginia

In *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, Elizabeth R. Varon, an assistant professor of history at Wellesley College, convincingly challenges the “received wisdom” (p. 2) that antebellum Southern women were excluded from participation in politics. She argues that throughout the nineteenth century Virginia women “played an active, distinct, and evolving role in the political life of the Old South” (p. 1). Varon traces this female political activism through several stages, characterized as “benevolent womanhood,” “Whig womanhood,” and, finally, “Confederate womanhood.” By so doing, she shows both that political engagement was not exclusive to Northern women and that “significant continuities” existed between Southern women’s antebellum and post-war political roles (p. 171). She also demonstrates that women’s political activism and aspirations were inextricably bound up with, and often circumscribed by, questions of emancipation, abolitionism, and sectional conflict.

Varon defines politics “first and foremost” as “electoral activity—campaigning, voting, office holding, legislating (p. 2).” Women were largely excluded from this formal political life. But, because of the inherently public nature of politics, women could find a place in the broader realm of letters and opinion. Antebellum Virginia women took on particular civic roles in this public sphere, first as exemplars of benevolence and morality, then as sectional mediators, and finally as model patriots. Varon’s subjects are self-described “ladies,” women of the slaveholding classes who were the wives, sisters,

daughters, and mothers of voters and politicians. They were literate, thus enabling them to communicate in the written world of politics. And communicate they did. Varon draws on a rich body of sources to construct her argument, including legislative petitions, tracts, poetry, association reports, and domestic fiction, in addition to the more standard sources of newspapers and personal papers.

Varon devotes her first two chapters to an analysis of female benevolence, looking closely at the nexus between politics and reform. Beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century, two generations of benevolent women, inspired by the belief that women were intrinsically superior to men in “matters of the heart,” sought to reform Virginia’s system of female education, advocated temperance and poor relief, and struggled over issues of emancipation and colonization for slaves and free blacks. These women consciously allied themselves with influential politicians, ministers, and editors, and through these relationships “benevolent women established a reputation as opinion-makers and even as architects of public policy (p. 10).” Women’s opinions sometimes clashed with those of men, as Varon ably demonstrates in her second chapter, an examination of women’s advocacy of colonization. Despite the fact that the views of women like Mary Minor Blackford, who saw colonization as a way to end slavery, did not prevail, Varon is quick to argue that they should not be relegated “to the files marked ‘loser’s history.’” For, she argues, together with their male allies, colonizationist women “offered up an influential ar-

gument about women's civic duty, one which resonates to the present day in the scholarly debate over Southern women's "covert abolitionism." In essence, colonizationists made the case that Southern women had a special moral perspective on slavery (p. 66)."

Varon's third chapter, "The Ladies Are Whigs," is her finest and most significant. While scholars have long noted that the 1840 Whig presidential campaign was the first to systematically include women in its public rhetoric and rituals, Varon goes beyond this observation to argue that these women were political actors in their own right. Varon calls this new ideology "Whig womanhood" and shows that, in contrast to previous decades, during the 1840s and 1850s women were encouraged to play active and public parts in campaign rallies, barbecues, and parades. Whig womanhood reconciled partisanship with the cult of domesticity in "its equation of female patriotism with partisanship and its assumption that women had the duty to bring their moral beneficence into the public sphere (p. 80)." In essence, women could transfer their moral stature to the Whig party itself. Women took their role seriously, and Varon uses the activities of the Virginia Association of Ladies for the Erecting of a Statue to Henry Clay to argue that women did not shy away from criticizing the moral and political failings of men. This notion that women had a particular place in the partisan contests of the Second Party System outlasted the Whig party itself, and, Varon argues, played a vital role in the brewing sectional tensions of the 1850s and early 1860s.

The final two chapters of *We Mean to Be Counted* examine the sectional and secession crises. During the 1850s, Varon argues, women were told that they had a special duty to promote sectional reconciliation. Looking first at the anti-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* domestic fiction of the 1850s (penned by women like Mary Eastman, Martha Butt, and Mary Virginia Terhune), Varon demonstrates that women grew increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of convincing Northerners to respect the South's unique culture and heritage. This growing literary disenchantment was countered somewhat by the activities of the avowedly national and non-partisan Mount Vernon Association. The MVA, dedicated to purchasing and restoring President George Washington's residence as an

emblem of civic virtue, provided women with an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism, a patriotism depicted as more pure than that of men. This patriotism came into play during the secession crisis in Virginia, where both Unionist and secessionist men sought the support of women. Gradually, beginning with John Brown's raid, continuing through the boycott campaign and the election of 1860, and culminating in the secession convention itself, "women became the exemplars not of fidelity to the Union but of fidelity to the South (p. 143)." Women were no longer needed as sectional mediators, but as examples of "Confederate womanhood" (a variation of Revolutionary War-era "republican motherhood") who would encourage their sons and husbands to enlist in the fight for Southern independence and would demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice these men on the altar of their new country.

Varon concludes with a brief epilogue, suggesting that "to a greater degree than scholars have admitted, white Southern women's postbellum political roles were extensions of their antebellum ones (p. 171)." Varon convincingly makes the case that after the war, Southern women continued to struggle with their roles as both partisans and public mediators, even as they sought to maintain their position as somewhat aloof from the rough-and-tumble of political life.

One hesitates to criticize such a well-argued, thoroughly researched, and compelling story as Varon's, but it does suffer from one flaw. Her focus on elite women is both understandable and important, but one wonders about their less-affluent and less-educated sisters. Varon alludes to yeoman women as signers of petitions and perhaps as contributors to the Clay or Mount Vernon associations. It would have been interesting had Varon discussed some of these less-active women more fully, in order to give us a clearer picture of the ligaments of family or geography binding them to the "ladies." But this quibble should in no way detract from Varon's significant achievement in this work.

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