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Ronald J. Zboray, Mary Saracino Zboray. *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England.* Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010. x + 306 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-867-2; $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-868-9.

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Women and Political Culture in the Early Republic

As political historians have noted, the rise of the second party system represented a high water mark in American political culture. Americans were deeply engaged in the political process during this era, as evidenced by high voter turnouts, mass meetings, parades, torchlight processions, and the publication of numerous partisan papers. Although they lacked the vote, women also participated in the practices and rituals of this vibrant political culture. As the book's title suggests, antebellum women were determined to have their political voices heard, even though they lacked access to the franchise and elective office. *Voices without Votes* moves beyond familiar narratives of women's work on behalf of temperance, antislavery, and women's suffrage to show how women identified not merely with such issue-driven reforms, but also with *partisan* politics in decidedly *partisan* ways.

Authors Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray have amassed an impressive primary source base, examining thousands of personal papers written by hundreds of New England women. While originally mining these sources for evidence of women's reading practices, the Zborays discovered that discussions of political matters were almost commonplace in women's diaries and letters.[1] With their strong evidential base, the authors seek to "shift the focus of discussion from whether women appeared in the political scene"–as they clearly did–to "what [women] self-reportedly did in campaigns" (p. 11). *Voices without Votes* explores how women's voices were articulated and received in an era in which women's political writings could be seen as transgressing the boundaries of women's "proper" sphere. As the Zborays note, women's writings employed rhetorical strategies that allowed them to "act politically and even influence voters without social reprobation." Antebellum women often employed the rhetoric of "female diffidence"–denying or apologizing for their ardent interest–even as they eagerly participated in political discussions and assumed explicitly partisan identities (pp. 12-13).

The book is organized chronologically and divided into two sections. Part 1, "The Rise of the Second Party System," discusses how this development created numerous spaces for women to express partisan identities. The authors examine the various ways in which women acted not merely as "passive beneficiaries," but rather as "co-participants" in the rise of the second party system (p. 19). Chapter 1 sets the stage with a compelling case study of one woman's emerging anti-Jackson sentiments. The daughter of a wealthy Salem merchant, Harriet Low traveled to Macao with family members during Andrew Jackson's presidency. Living abroad, she eagerly sought news from home about the changing political climate. Low's developing political consciousness provides a vivid look at how women engaged with and witnessed the birth of the second party system. While Low began by identifying as "anti-Jackson," women's political rhetoric eventually morphed into more explicit partisan identification, especially with the emergence of the Whig Party.

By the mid-1830s, women were more likely to identify not just *against* Jackson, but *with* specific party platforms. During this time, women increasingly "took sides" in the numerous partisan battles being waged at local and state levels. *Voices without Votes* does an impressive job demonstrating how women's partisanship was energized at the local and state levels, not just on the national political stage. The evidence presented helps us to remap the wide range of women's partisanship during this critical time period in American party politics. By the election of 1840, as the authors demonstrate, women had been actively engaged in partisan campaigning and politicking for years.

The first section of *Voices without Votes* asks us to consider the ways in which women's political roles, "however small," had real effects, often shaping campaign trails and election outcomes (p. 16). Chapter 5 presents a key study illustrating women's crucial influence in electoral politics. Eliza Davis, a longtime "political wife," found herself at the center of local, state, and national politics during the pivotal election year of 1840. Her husband John Davis, then serving as a U.S. senator, was running for a term as governor of Massachusetts. As thousands of delegates flooded her hometown of Worcester for the state convention, Eliza was expected to play the role of political wife to perfection. With her husband still in Washington DC, Eliza was responsible for housing, feeding, and entertaining the hundreds of delegates who "invaded her house" during the convention (p. 87). Her willingness to provide them with cheerful and generous hospitality–despite the financial costs involved–played an essential role in her husband's campaign and the overall success of the Whig Party in Massachusetts.

Back in Washington, John Davis was moved to tears by his wife's account of the Worcester convention, proudly sharing her letter with Daniel Webster. As the Zborays note, Eliza's letter "became campaign propaganda in the Whig press and a joke in opposition papers." While Whigs praised Eliza's hospitality, Democrats "quipped that John wept because the conventioneers had demolished his wine and cake and that Webster sniveled because Eliza was the better rhetor" (p. 88). Such compelling anecdotes suggest how women's participation in partisan politics was embedded with contested gendered meanings–it is significant that Eliza's account of the convention served both party and opposition aims. Yet the Zborays leave these vignettes under-analyzed, concluding merely that "Eliza's words had become partisan fodder" (p. 88). This strikes the reader as a lost opportunity. Such scholars as Norma Basch, Kirsten E. Wood, and Elizabeth R. Varon have provided excellent models of how to mine such incidents for their complex articulations of gender, power, and politics.[2] *Voices without Votes* brings forth tantalizing voices, but often leaves the reader wanting more explicit analysis of how those voices resonated in the larger political landscape.

Throughout part 1, the reader continually senses the energy, enthusiasm, and excitement that women experienced as they read partisan newspapers, witnessed processions, and eagerly anticipated the results of highly charged elections. Yet as the political climate fractured in the wake of deepening sectional tensions, so did the tenor and tone of many women's political voices. Part 2 traces women's partisan expressions in the wake of "decline, realignment and new party formation" that marked the decades leading up to the Civil War. As "issue-oriented politics" came to dominate the political landscape, stable partisan lines crumbled (p. 134). Women felt the effects of these realignments in various ways: some retreated from active partisanship, some spoke out against the war with Mexico, and some directed their energies more explicitly toward antislavery activism. Overall, their reactions lacked the sense of excitement that characterized women's earlier involvement in partisan battles. As the Zborays note, women's relatively lackluster responses reflected the overall dissolution of the Whig Party and subsequent struggles at party realignment.

Unfortunately, the organization of part 2 also reflects the chaotic, often fragmented, state of party politics during the 1850s. Largely missing from this section are the dynamic case studies that bring such life and verve to the first half of the book. A chapter exploring Sarah Hale's growing disillusionment with the Whig Party after 1844 demonstrates one woman "slowly but surely silencing her political voice" (p. 138). But political withdrawal is less exciting than political engagement, and without the strong voice of an Eliza Davis or Harriet Low to guide the reader, the analysis lacks cohesion. Instead, section 2 rushes through the many controversies that permeated the 1850s–moving through such events as Daniel Webster's death to Charles Sumner's caning in rapid succession. The presidential election of 1856 could have served as an ideal moment to examine how the shifting political climate shaped women's evolving political consciousness. Yet John Frémont's presidential campaign–marked by Jessie Frémont's leading role as her husband's unofficial "running mate"–receives little attention in a chapter dotted by numerous vignettes of escalating sectional tensions. The second half of the book thus presents a familiar set of events without breaking new interpretative ground.

Voices without Votes clearly demonstrates women's extensive and enthusiastic engagement in American political culture. The book's greatest strength lies in its impressive archival base, yet it does not mine that evidence for its fullest possible conclusions. The authors catalog women's partisan political participation but not the gendered nature of that participation. While works by Catherine Allgor (*Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* [2000]), Varon (*We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* [1998]), Rosemarie Zagarri (*Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* [2007]), and other scholars are cited, the analysis of key anecdotes does not seem to engage fully

with this historiography. The Zborays interpret women's political activism as evidence of the various ways women challenged the era's doctrine of separate spheres, but they stop short of fully exploring how women's expressions and actions shaped public and political articulations of gender and power. Some partisan men clearly welcomed women's participation ("we are nominated," one candidate proudly informed his wife), yet as Eliza Davis's example illustrates, women's words were often charged with deeply contested meanings (p. 106). After reading this book, no one could deny that antebellum women enacted and expressed deeply partisan identities; yet one is left wondering how women's partisanship shaped the era's understandings of politics, gender, and identity formation.

Despite these criticisms, *Voices without Votes* succeeds as an engaging social history, bringing to life the many voices, actions, and aspirations of antebellum women who strongly identified with partisan politics. The Zborays provide impressive evidence of women's political engagement, and their efforts will undoubtedly inspire further studies highlighting the central roles played by women and gender in American political life.

Notes

[1]. The authors' analysis of women's reading practices can be found in their recent books on American literary culture. See Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socio-Literary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); and Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[2]. Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals and Politics in the Election of 1828," *Journal of American History* 80 (December 1993): 890-918; Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Kirsten E. Wood, "One Woman So Dangerous to Public Morals: Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 237-276.

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