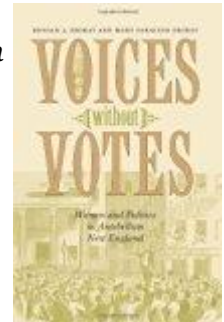


**Ronald J. Zboray, Mary Saracino Zboray.** *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England.* Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010. x + 306 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-868-9.



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## Women and Political Action before the Civil War

Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, well known for their scholarship on reading among antebellum women, have expanded on their earlier work with their ground-breaking new book, *Voices without Votes*. With this latest tome, the Zborays explore political involvement by New England women during the antebellum period.

Based on extensive research collected during the couple's studies of women and reading, this new book successfully disputes the prevalent theory that antebellum women were excluded from public life by a society that confined them to "the private sphere." Instead, this husband-wife couple from the University of Pittsburgh have demonstrated definitively that the lived experience of antebellum women of New England did not always bear out this widely accepted historical interpretation. Instead, the Zborays' new work provides convincing evidence that women of both races—not just those fighting for the cause du jour—were politically aware and politically active.

The Zborays' thesis can be summarized with a slightly edited quotation from their book: "Women's sphere be damned, [antebellum women] loved rough-and-tumble politics" (p. 137).

Antebellum women, the Zborays found, participated in local, state, and national political cultures to the fullest extent allowed by law and custom. This was true throughout the period on which they focus, one that corresponds to what political historians refer to as the Second Party System, which began in the 1840s with the "reign" of "King Andrew" Jackson in the 1840s and continued on through the late 1850s, when the Whig Party collapsed. The Zborays continue a bit beyond that period to include the turbulent late 1850s and Civil War in their study.

This was a contentious period in American politics. America was moving more and more toward real democratic politics at the same time that it was engaging in debates that threatened the country's very existence. Women, this work ar-

gues, were just as engaged with the debates as men. Their lack of a vote did not stop them from having their say, often publicly though sometimes only in their journals, or from having strong opinions—sometimes even in opposition to those of their husbands. In extreme cases, those husbands were politicians of the opposing party. If antebellum women were confined behind the household gate, as some historians have claimed, they clearly had no compunction at all about shouting their opinions out over it. Many had no problem opening that gate and streaming out to do as much political business as law and custom permitted.

The Zborays clearly make the case that the majority of women they studied coped pragmatically with the hand life had dealt them. They did not see themselves as oppressed, as modern scholars might, but as political actors whose voices could be used in support of issues and candidates they believed in. Some women did develop certain strategies to help render their political activities more socially acceptable—deferring to a man's superior understanding or apologizing for having an opinion—but many obviously believed they had as much a right to express their political thoughts as any man they knew. The evidence the Zborays present builds to the inescapable conclusion that, even without the right to vote, women had public voices in antebellum America, and they were not afraid to use them.

Women used their political voices in a variety of ways, according to this book. They participated in rallies, wrote political essays for publication, cultivated supporters for their politician husbands, mounted petition campaigns, raised funds for causes, even demonstrated in the streets when matters called for it. Short of voting, the Zborarys mount a solid argument that women were just as involved politically as their husbands, fathers, brothers, and uncles. Further, this book argues that political engagement by women followed a similar trajectory to that of the Second Party period in general, peaking in the 1840s and early

1850s and then falling off after the collapse of the Whig Party in the mid-1850s. The coming Civil War, of course, brought renewed interest in political affairs.

The Zborays' point of departure for this study is letters and diaries written by New England women throughout the antebellum period. The writings they examine were left by women from a variety of backgrounds and ages, ranging from teenagers to octogenarians. Most were at least middle class, some were political wives, but many had no formal association with the political culture of the time other than a keen interest. Interestingly, as with many of the best studies, the Zborays stumbled upon this evidence by accident while they were working on their other projects related to women and reading. As they perused journals and letters in those other studies, they became increasingly aware of the depth of women's engagement with political matters, ranging from upcoming local elections to issues such as the Dorr Revolution in Rhode Island, which sought to expand suffrage to all free men. This evidence, they decided, was fodder for a new book since it was so contrary to established thinking regarding women and politics in antebellum America.

To some degree, the Zborays' findings come as no surprise. As long ago as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville recognized that antebellum Americans were consumed with politics, and as recently as 2000, Glen C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin produced a sound study, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, that documented Americans' exceedingly high level of engagement with politics throughout the nineteenth century. Altschuler and Blumin noted in their work that the women's journals they consulted showed evidence of interest in politics that equaled that of men, but they devoted only two pages to this discussion, leaving ample room for the work the Zborays have produced.

It must be noted, in all fairness, that the Zborays' work is limited by the same problem all

historians face when they try to make generalizations about the past: They can only base their interpretations on existing evidence. However, this study is based on more than just a handful of sources. They examined more than two thousand documents, penned by more than four hundred women. Additionally, the book does an extraordinary job of contextualizing the evidence with historical fact. In fact, it does a better job of chronicling a readable political history of the Second Party System than many works specifically on that topic.

If there is a weakness in this book, it is that its chapter introductions belabor the points to be made within. It is one thing to give a reader some idea of where a chapter might be going. It is quite another to give them a plodding, "First we're going to tell you this, then we're going to tell you that, and then...." Simply letting the stories unfold and allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about whether the thesis was proven would have improved the narrative.

This work is also limited by its examination of women solely from New England. While it might be logical to assume that their experience was similar to that of women from other regions, this study does open the door for investigation into political engagement by women in other parts of the United States. A particularly interesting region to examine would be the South, given that the political and sectional debates over the existence

and expansion of slavery that dominated the antebellum period would have resonated there as they would have nowhere else.

Despite these minor flaws, the Zborays have produced another high-quality study that makes an important contribution to our knowledge about the Second Party System and about the experience of American women who lived in that period. It is an important work that should be in the library of any historian of the nineteenth century.

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