

H-Net Reviews

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Jo Freeman. *A Room at a Time: How Women Entered Party Politics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. xii + 353 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9804-2.

Reviewed by Kristie Miller (National Coalition of Independent Scholars)
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A Positive Slope Over Time

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“Sometimes myth becomes history,” Jo Freeman notes in her introduction to *A Room at a Time* (p. 2). Freeman challenges a number of still-common assumptions about women in politics: that suffrage marked the entrance of women into politics; that the only form of political expression women had was voting; and that, even with the vote, women were politically ineffective after 1920 until the second wave of feminism peaked in the 1970s. These myths have been challenged before, and Freeman summarizes and extends the findings that have undermined them.[1] But the strength of this new book is in the wealth of detail Freeman offers in describing the heretofore unrealized extent of women’s participation in party politics.

Freeman presents an overview of the topic accessible to students or interested general readers, as well as a rich resource for the committed scholar of women in partisan politics. “Context is crucial to political history,” she explains, and devotes one chapter to a discussion of social movements and party systems and another to suffrage and political parties (p. 9). Freeman describes women’s strategy after suffrage, staking out their own territory within the parties, and their disillusioning discovery that equal representation on the national committees did not mean equal influence. She then details women’s activities in local party politics as well as at the national level, their record in getting women’s issues included in party platforms, and their success in securing presidential appointments.

Freeman’s use of extensive primary sources certainly gives her the material to make important and original conceptual contributions. She defines three types of female political workers: feminists (i.e., suffragists), reformers, and party women. While there are many books about the first two types, Freeman emphasizes the third group, which has received scant attention until recently. During the period between the two major women’s movements, Freeman contends, only the third group thrived.

The scope of her book includes discussions not only about women’s activities but also about the differing strategies of the parties in assimilating women. Although Freeman is refreshingly candid about her own political preferences – “I am a Democrat, as are most of the people I speak to,” she admits (p. x) – she is scrupulously fair about crediting the Republican party with having been more welcoming to women for more than fifty years. She notes that the Republican party was more hospitable to feminists between 1870 and 1920, while the Democratic party became home to most of the reformers after 1920.

Women were not trying to change the parties, Freeman argues, but only wanted to be included in them, and to receive equal rewards for equal service. Their opportunities came during periods of uncertain electoral outcomes, “when both parties look[ed] for new sources of strength and often f[ou]nd them in women, whether as voters or workers” (p. 24). She notes that women were most successful when they had sponsors; wives and widows of important men were rewarded more than

the party workhorses. Still, she believes that the 1970s women's movement would not have been as successful without the groundwork laid decades earlier by party women. She draws a parallel in this regard to the suffrage work at the end of the nineteenth century that led to significant gains when the Progressive movement changed the political climate.

Women during the period between 1920 and 1970 sometimes voted as a bloc, another underappreciated phenomenon. Freeman's research turns up early "gender gaps," notably women's clear preference for Herbert Hoover in 1928, and for Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956. She shows persuasively that a "gender gap" may be due to two different components, turnout as well as preference, and explores the socio-economic basis for the former.

In addition to these larger themes, Freeman offers several other thought-provoking observations. Surprisingly, the early 1960s, not the 1950s, seems to have been the nadir of women's political effectiveness. Under John F. Kennedy, presidential appointments of women declined for the first time since 1912. The equal rights amendment, part of the Republican party platform since 1940, was dropped in 1964.

Freeman's clear and lively writing brings the stories behind these ideas to life. The book is helpfully organized by subject, rather than strictly by chronology. Freeman presents a good combination of overarching trends and themes, as well as specific state-by-state detail. To help organize the mass of detail, she uses an extended metaphor, the political house being infiltrated by women "a room at a time." However, a comparison in Freeman's conclusion would really seem to be more apt: "If one could plot women's entry into politics on a graph, one would see long periods of slow but steady increase, punctuated by a sharp rise for a few years, followed by a bit of a decline, and another slow, steady increase" (p. 227).

A Room at a Time is the result of thirteen years of research and six years of writing. Freeman cautions that those who want to write women's political history face myriad challenges. As Freeman well knows, "The study

of women and politics is the study of grassroots political activity," and "women's political history is scattered and buried in many places" (p. x). Despite her detailed treatment of the subject, Freeman modestly maintains that her book is just an introduction. She calls for new local studies to furnish the "building blocks" for a "solid edifice" on women's history in politics (p. x); she also argues that another book is needed on women in party politics after 1970, as well as a book on why the Democratic party is now feminist while the Republican party is not. Many of the women who appear briefly in her pages deserve chapters or even whole biographies. In the meantime, *A Room at a Time* is likely to keep us happily occupied for quite awhile.

Note

[1]. See for example, Kristi Anderson, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884-1933* (New York: Viking, 1992); *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, The Defining Years, 1933-1938* (New York: Viking, 1999); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Hope Chamberlin, *A Minority of Members: Women in the U.S. Congress* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Robert J. Dinkin, *Before Equal Suffrage: Women in Partisan Politics from Colonial Times to 1920* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995); Melanie Gustafson, Kristie Miller and Elisabeth I. Perry, eds., *We Have Come to Stay: American Women and Political Parties, 1880-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelly and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981), as well as biographies of individual women like Dorothy M. Brown, *Mable Walker Willebrandt: A Study of Power, Loyalty and Law* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

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