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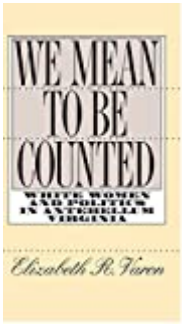


**Elizabeth R. Varon.** *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. x + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-2390-3.

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## The Ladies are Political

Elizabeth Varon, assistant professor of history at Wellesley College, successfully refutes the notion that elite and middle-class white women were uninvolved in the politics of antebellum Virginia. To be sure, they were not allowed to vote or hold public office, but they wrote, spoke publicly, raised money, and lobbied powerful men in support of their civic and political causes. As Varon explains in the introduction, "Rather than define politics narrowly, as the business of running the government, or broadly, as a signifier for all power contests and relations, I have sought to recover the antebellum meanings of the term" (p. 2). She designates as "political" the most important of the activities taking place in the public sphere, in both the literal sense of physical spaces outside the home and the figurative senses of published texts and the social entity constituting "the public." Women began their public activities as participants in benevolent work, but as the scope of their volunteerism broadened, the line between nonpartisan altruism and political involvement quickly became blurred (p. 2). By the beginning of the Civil War, partisan politics among women was the rule. Postbellum Virginia saw a return to the more traditional volunteer endeavors characteristic of the early decades of the century. The structure of *We Mean to be Counted* effectively mirrors these transformations.

Participation in certain civic activities was viewed as a logical extension of women's domestic roles of nurturing children and providing for their educational, spiritual, and moral guidance. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, women established boarding schools for poor white girls in five Virginia cities. Organizers sought funds both locally and from the Virginia General Assembly. An array of societies to aid the poor and orphaned followed. Prescriptive literature of the period encouraged women to contribute to such good works as evidence of their piety, compassion, and civic-mindedness. Many women were swept up in evangelical religious movements and participated in the local branches of national religious societies or in local groups. Temperance societies began to attract large numbers of followers by the middle 1820s. Efforts to build a memorial to Henry Clay and to preserve Mount Vernon engaged a number of women. Issues related to slavery preoccupied many white Virginia women. A few elite ladies appealed directly to the General Assembly to assure that their freed

black servants be allowed to remain in their employ despite the 1806 rule requiring their departure from the commonwealth within a year of manumission (p. 15). By the 1830s, a decidedly controversial group was attracting hundreds of female followers. Founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) promoted the emigration of slaves and freedmen to Liberia. This would serve the dual goals of ending a practice which many found troubling, and "seeding" Christianity in Africa. Scores of women devoted considerable time, energy, and money to the ACS and to Richmond's Virginia Colonization Society (VCS), established in 1828. In the aftermath of the 1831 rebellion lead by Nat Turner, however, women's involvement in colonization societies and their efforts to prepare slaves for freedom was viewed by some, including Virginia Governor John Floyd, as subversive (p. 48).

Turning to more traditional political involvement, Varon observes that women were extraordinarily visible in Whig politics, beginning prior to the 1840 election. Although earlier scholars have noted this in passing, this author looks below the surface, finding that women were important and influential players in the political drama, in both the public and the private spheres. "The Virginia evidence suggests that to characterize women's partisanship as passive or ephemeral is to obscure the transformation in women's civic roles that the election of 1840 set in motion. Newspapers, pamphlets, and speeches, taken together with women's diaries, letters, and reminiscences, charts this transformation" (p. 72). Whigs claimed that the majority of women favored their party and established a public rhetoric in which women were empowered and encouraged to contribute to party politics as both partisans and mediators. They could influence the thinking of voting males and by their very presence cast the party in a superior moral light. By 1852, the ascendant Democratic Party strove to acquire women's support and participation as the Whigs had done previously. Influential secession leaders worked hard to garner female support as the Civil War loomed closer.

Varon has a profound knowledge of the scholarship relevant to the issues treated here and has also immersed herself in the diaries, letters, newspapers, literary periodicals, and novels of the period. Her familiarity with the primary sources leads her to question many common assumptions related to antebellum Virginia women. For example, she asserts that it is overly simplistic to polarize Southern elite women into only two distinct groups according to their feelings about slavery. She sees distinctions among the women of different geographical areas and also considers changing views as the decades of the 1800s advanced. While some women defended slavery, a great many opposed the institution, often supporting colonization as a compromise solution. They readily expressed this view through writing and speeches (p. 42). During the 1860 election, a great many women supported the Constitutional Unionist Party, which promised to maintain both slavery and the union. She questions the assertion of historians that the majority of Virginia women supported the Confederacy long before the state seceded from the Union and provides a beautifully nuanced view of the process through which the ideology of Confederate womanhood–an ideology that demanded the unanimous support of secession–was established during the winter and spring of 1860 (p. 154 ff.). Throughout *We Mean to Be Counted*, Varon notes subtleties, ambivalence, and conflict in women's attitudes towards political questions. Activist women strove to reconcile the conflict between their loyalty to the traditional place of females in antebellum society with their profound interest in politics and desire to have a public voice. Through the colonization movement, they tried to reconcile their opposition to abolition and their abhorrence of the institution of slavery. As secession became increasingly threatening, they tried to reconcile their role as mediators with their sectional loyalty. A number of historians have investigated Southern women's participation in benevolent, memorial, and political organizations.[1] Elizabeth Varon contributes to this rich area of scholarship by extending her exploration into the first half of the nineteenth century, closely examining the evidence of political participation, discussing the political divisions among women and questioning many of the assumptions of other scholars. *We Mean to Be Counted* is original, insightful, impeccably researched, and gracefully written. This is an important book that will change forever a number of commonly-held assumptions about antebellum women in Virginia.

Notes

[1]. Some of the best recent scholarship treating Southern women's public contributions: Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990): 3-22; Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

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