



**Robert J. Dinkin.** *Before Equal Suffrage: Women in Partisan Politics from Colonial Times to 1920.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995. 166 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-29482-2.



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### **Women in Politics—Not So Quiescent?**

If you thought women made minimal contributions to partisan politics before national suffrage, *Before Equal Suffrage* will be a convincing eye-opener. Robert Dinkin's latest book is filled with anecdotes about numerous women who were actively and variously involved in partisan politics between colonial times and 1920.

Dinkin argues that “portraying female partisans in previous epochs simply as ornamental figures without any influence does not provide a complete and accurate picture of either their status or their accomplishments” (p. 3). *Before Equal Suffrage* is an attempt to show that, though the role of women in American partisan politics was limited, “these women displayed more presence and had more impact...than they had been given credit for” (p. 3). His definition of partisan political involvement is broad enough to show the various and often behind-the-scenes contributions women made in the political sphere. Door-to-door canvassing, public speaking, writing, forming partisan women's clubs, sewing party banners, and eventually running for public office are all considered as types of partisan political activity. Dinkin shows how,

throughout the period covered, women's involvement in partisan politics was “gradually on the upswing, both qualitatively and quantitatively” (p. 4), believing that the full story of these active women needs to be told, “if we are to have a true understanding of how they reached their present position in the ever-changing field of partisan politics” (p. 5).

Unlike other similar studies, Dinkin does not limit his discussion to generalizations about citizens of the United States; indeed, he is effective in looking at the specifics of regions and individual states and distinguishing between urban and rural voters. Although he neglects Native American women's voices, he does look at the role African American women played in the world of partisan politics. Certainly much more could be said in this area, but Dinkin at least offers a starting place for further research.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this book is that he uses the lives and actions of individual women to show the contributions American women made to partisan politics. *Before Equal Suffrage* is replete with anecdotes of everyday women who never appear in history

books despite their significant contributions to the political well-being of Americans. One such woman was Mary L. Hall, a former slave from Georgia, who carried on vote-seeking activities in black communities to help black men to register and to vote. On election mornings, Hall went out “before the polls opened and stayed there until closing time to watch what transpired, looking to expose members of the opposition who tried to cast illegal ballots....she also helped some constituents who had difficulty reading to mark their tickets properly” (p. 80).

While *Before Equal Suffrage* contributes to the type of revisionist history work that feminists and women’s studies scholars have been doing, it does not draw upon

that parallel work. Creating a dialogue with previous work would have given Dinkin’s book a broader, more complex context. Nonetheless, *Before Equal Suffrage: Women in Partisan Politics from Colonial Times to 1920* is primarily a factual book and will make a contribution to our understanding of women in politics both past and present.

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