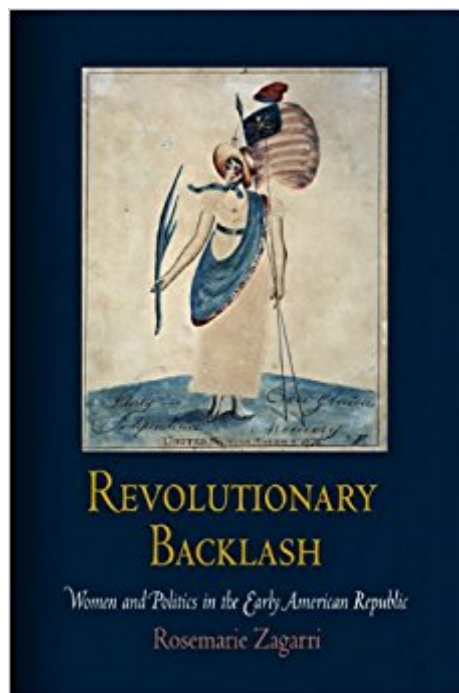




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Revolutionary Backlash: Women And Politics In The Early American Republic (Early American Studies)



Synopsis

The Seneca Falls Convention is typically seen as the beginning of the first women's rights movement in the United States. *Revolutionary Backlash* argues otherwise. According to Rosemarie Zagarri, the debate over women's rights began not in the decades prior to 1848 but during the American Revolution itself. Integrating the approaches of women's historians and political historians, this book explores changes in women's status that occurred from the time of the American Revolution until the election of Andrew Jackson. Although the period after the Revolution produced no collective movement for women's rights, women built on precedents established during the Revolution and gained an informal foothold in party politics and male electoral activities. Federalists and Jeffersonians vied for women's allegiance and sought their support in times of national crisis. Women, in turn, attended rallies, organized political activities, and voiced their opinions on the issues of the day. After the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a widespread debate about the nature of women's rights ensued. The state of New Jersey attempted a bold experiment: for a brief time, women there voted on the same terms as men. Yet as Rosemarie Zagarri argues in *Revolutionary Backlash*, this opening for women soon closed. By 1828, women's politicization was seen more as a liability than as a strength, contributing to a divisive political climate that repeatedly brought the country to the brink of civil war. The increasing sophistication of party organizations and triumph of universal suffrage for white males marginalized those who could not vote, especially women. Yet all was not lost. Women had already begun to participate in charitable movements, benevolent societies, and social reform organizations. Through these organizations, women found another way to practice politics.

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Customer Reviews

"Widely researched, gracefully written, and nicely illustrated. . . . A welcome corrective to both the usual women's history (without politics) and traditional political history (without women)." [—North Carolina Historical Review](#) "This book makes a significant contribution to the literature of American women's history by defining a period that has received too little attention. The writing is gorgeous. The research is first-rate." [—Edith B. Gelles, author of Abigail Adams: A Writing Life](#) "An engaging book that successfully marries political practice and political theory with gender ideology. It is also a persuasive book. . . . What makes [Zagarri's] study compelling is the pervasive presence of women; we hear their voices as they communicate privately in letters and as they argue publicly for rights. Visual evidences let us see them at political gatherings." [—American Historical Review](#) "'Pathbreaking' is an appellation reserved for few books; 'field-changing' is an even rarer designation. Nonetheless Rosemarie Zagarri's *Revolutionary Backlash* deserves both. She transforms the field of women's history and the standard political narrative that still dominates United States history." [—William & Mary Quarterly](#)

Rosemarie Zagarri is Professor of History at George Mason University.

Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic examines women's role in politics during the first fifty years of the American Republic. Zagarri draws upon the fields of women's history and gender history as well as legal history in her analysis. Zagarri seeks to understand women's political involvement following the American Revolution and what led to their removal to separate spheres. Additionally, Zagarri wants to know what methods were used to define inclusion and exclusion in American politics. Zagarri argues that women were politically active following the American Revolution and that men's fears of their political activism led to the end of their overt role in traditional partisan politics. Following the American Revolution, "many American women and men did understand the notion of women's rights in political terms." Women actively engaged in partisan politics and, "through their very presence, women eased

men's guilt about the ruptures caused by partisanship and provided a visible symbol of unity, linking the mythical patriotic consensus of the revolutionary era with a factionless era that lay in the (hopefully) not-too-distant future. Despite this hope, women played an active role in party conflict. Changing social mores, however, led to calls for women to act as mediators, calming partisan clashes. Zagarri claims that this eventually resulted in women's forced exit from party politics and the expectation that they would "exercise their political role indirectly," a part of the discourse of separate spheres. According to Zagarri, the concept of separate spheres was not used to prevent women's political activity, rather, "separate spheres ideology" may actually have been a reaction against women's more extensive involvement in politics, a convenient way to explain and justify excluding women from party politics and electoral activities. In the end, Zagarri argues that the triumph of the Republican party after the Federalist's downfall left little room for women's political activism. The creation of a racial and gender-based hierarchy finally justified women's exclusion from American politics. Zagarri works within a framework developed by Joan Scott and Mary Kelley to broaden the definition of political actions. She argues against Mary Beth Norton and Linda K. Kerber to suggest that women voting in New Jersey were not outliers, but part of a larger pattern of women's political involvement in American society. In her epilogue, Zagarri builds upon the foundation of political historian Louis Hartz to suggest that white masculinity stood as a bulwark against "the excesses of unfettered individualism" and reinforced a hierarchical structure to American life. Zagarri uses "traditional sources of male political history, including newspapers, legislative records, political pamphlets, and correspondence among political elites." She also expands her source base to include "popular periodicals and ladies' magazines; Fourth of July orations; fiction; satire; and the writings of women contained in letters to their husbands, friends, and relatives." This balance of sources enables Zagarri to contrast the role of women in politics as men understood it and as women themselves understood it.

This is an excellent piece of historical scholarship. It's well-written and accessible (for upper-division undergrads on up), yet painstakingly researched and full of nuanced arguments. More importantly, and unlike so many other similar books, it does not separate women's history from the mainstream into its own quaint narrative. Rather the author interjects the experiences and roles of women into the

mainstream, revealing their roles and responses in American history. Well worth the effort of scholars and grad students to read, but also potentially useful in an advanced undergrad class.

I bought this book because I was looking for one that might have original source material on what women of the Revolutionary War Era actually said or wrote. I am still in the midst of reading it, and while there is a lot of narrative (as one might expect), it also has some material of the type for which I was looking. So, overall I am very happy with this title. The reason I am giving this title only 4 stars is that it is written largely in academia-speak. It is almost as if this were a thesis that might have been tweaked a bit for wider publication. Some academics are gifted in being able to write for the general public. Others are not, or just cannot be bothered. Where this author falls on that spectrum is difficult to say. But the book would have been better if it had been written with the general public in mind instead of seemingly largely for fellow academics. If you don't mind reading this style of writing, you will probably enjoy the book. But if that is not your preference or you have difficulty understanding such writing, then perhaps this book is not for you. The excellent part of this having such an academic flare is that the book is very well researched and amply noted with source material. So I will be able to find other sources for original material on this subject. Had the author been less academically inclined, so much rich source material might not have been provided. Thus, I am very grateful for her endeavor. Also, fair warning, it is from a highly feminist perspective. One could write about this topic easily without alienating a reader who is just not into the feminist movement. It is not particularly bothersome to me, but it might be to others--and they should be aware of the perspective from which it is written.

A fascinating account of what happened to colonial women who thought they would be getting better treatment and a greater voice in public affairs with the success of the American Revolution.

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