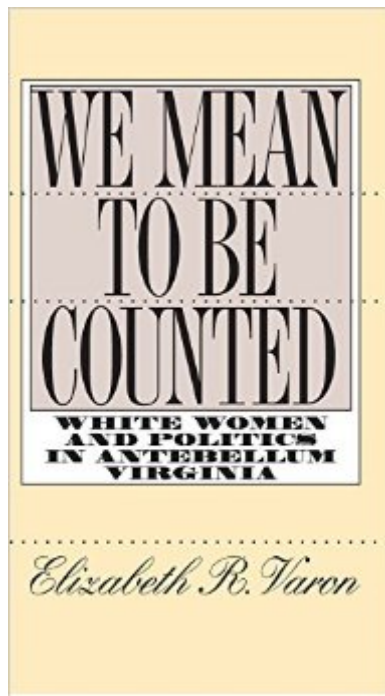


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We Mean To Be Counted: White Women And Politics In Antebellum Virginia (Gender And American Culture)



Synopsis

Over the past two decades, historians have successfully disputed the notion that American women remained wholly outside the realm of politics until the early twentieth century. Still, a consensus has prevailed that, unlike their Northern counterparts, women of the antebellum South were largely excluded from public life. With this book, Elizabeth Varon effectively challenges such historical assumptions. Using a wide array of sources, she demonstrates that throughout the antebellum period, white Southern women of the slaveholding class were important actors in the public drama of politics. Through their voluntary associations, legislative petitions, presence at political meetings and rallies, and published appeals, Virginia's elite white women lent their support to such controversial reform enterprises as the temperance movement and the American Colonization Society, to the electoral campaigns of the Whig and Democratic Parties, to the literary defense of slavery, and to the causes of Unionism and secession. Against the backdrop of increasing sectional tension, Varon argues, these women struggled to fulfill a paradoxical mandate: to act both as partisans who boldly expressed their political views and as mediators who infused public life with the "feminine" virtues of compassion and harmony.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The historical consensus is that white women in the antebellum period were excluded from political participation. Varon argues that elite middle class women were active in political participation, but

they did not attempt to occupy the public sphere of men. Instead, women organized benevolent societies, worked as mediators, petitioned, volunteered, wrote, and attended public meetings. This book is not to show us women were always a cohesive force with a long term goal of suffrage or equality, indeed not because Southern women were generally quite content with the social order. *We Mean to be Counted* merely rejects the premise that women were entirely excluded from politics by showing that, no, there were women involved. Whether 10 or 10,000, women still found a place for themselves and their talents. According to Varon, women were believed by their nature to be disinterested, moral forces of restraint and education for men and children. In occupying a public sphere through political activity, women were fulfilling the duties of their private sphere of motherhood and wifedom. Organizations such as girl schools and colonization societies were seen as perfect for the nature of a woman, and any political knowledge passed on to her through participation in parties such as the Whig party (*Whig Womanhood*) was only so that she could use her intelligence to form a patriotic family. Initially also, Southern women were to act as sectional mediators between the North and South. As time went on, though, and slavery debates heated up, the concept of "Confederate motherhood," with its fervent belief in preserving the south as it was. Varon has written a well rounded perspective on elite white antebellum women and their roles in politics, which she supports convincingly with her source usage.

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