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Book Reviews

The Paradox of Gender Equality: How American Women's Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice. By Kristin A. Goss. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012. 240 pp. $70.00 hardcover, $35.00 paper, $35.00 eBook.

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Kristin Goss has produced a magnificent analysis of the history of women's organizations and, via their activity, the creation of and change in women's "civic place." Her substantial achievement sheds a bright new light not only on women's political history and the changing institutionalization of women's place as civic actors, but also on the vexed, paradoxical ebb and flow of "political woman" and "feminist." She defines the elegant notion of "civic place" thus: "Civic place encompasses the civic identity on which groups draw to construct their interests and justify their political authority, the modes of collective action that groups deploy to press those interests, and the policy niche that groups legitimately occupy" (10). Goss uses this construct to distill an understanding of more than a century of women's political activity that alters our perception of the stages of American women's political development.

She has created a massive original database of women's organizations' testimony before Congress from 1880 to 2000, a breathtaking job of identifying and coding not only women's groups' appearances, but also the range of issues on which they testified and the general tenor of their testimony. Although this is an obviously rigorous institutional study, Goss uses the architecture of the institutional analysis as a framework for new thinking about civic identity, sameness, and difference. She uses a very broad review of the literature of gender politics, American political history and institutions, and political psychology to craft an imaginative

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but practical context for her findings. She does it all with crisp and vivid writing: the book is dense with information, but it is a wonderful read, and its triangulated methods are explained so well that anyone could build on her research design.

Goss's most important findings are that our usual assumptions of cresting and crashing waves of feminist activity obscure an alternative but telling view of women's engagement: in fact, the postsuffrage era is marked by ascending organizational activity on the part of major women's groups that appeared before Congress to testify on an astonishing range of issues. Goss devotes particular attention to women's testimony on foreign affairs and health care. These two policy domains test her hypotheses about the shift from women's general advocacy to their advocacy for women's issues. The transition she identifies is one of women who are civic advocates, often portrayed — and self-portrayed — as above the regular political fray, to women whose advocacy is largely limited to women's issues, especially the women's issues most closely tied to feminism. "The public severing of maternalism from feminism in the 1960s and maternalism's very public burial," she writes, "ask us to take a closer look at the evolution of women's activism, not just in the realm of war and peace but across the policy spectrum" (106). The political arena and political science itself have been guilty of using the difference of maternalism to wall off political women. Goss does something much more satisfactory: she crafts a nuanced picture of the constant tension between maternalism on the one hand and liberal feminism's difference-sameness quandaries on the other. This picture of tension in identity then frames our understanding of the changing size and shape of women's civic place.

Her analysis convincingly shows that women's movements fundamentally alter not just the composition of women's political organizations, but also the way both women themselves and the political arena view women's activism. Her very clear finding that, as the feminist movement grows, women's organizations — of any kind — are less visible in direct appearance before Congress seems counterintuitive. The women's movement, after all, made the personal political and embraced women's activism. But, in fact, the major women's organizations of the late 19th century and most especially the middle decades of the 20th century were so powerful because they seemed, simply and selflessly, to be representing and advocating for the broadest civic interest. (I recall a male officeholder, in the 1970s, telling me that he simply couldn't stand the League of Women Voters. When I asked him why, he said with

absolute exasperation, "They don't *want* anything. They're only here for the good cause. How can you bargain with someone who doesn't *want* anything?"). When feminist organizations supplanted the broad women's civic organizations of the midcentury and "women's issues" dominated organized women's political activity, then women's organizations could appear to be just another interest. Feminists, of course, argue vigorously to the contrary that women's issues are as broad as all of humanism — but the evidence is clear that feminist groups have not been as visible as advocates for issues that can't be considered "women's issues." Goss praises the real achievements of the women's movement: dismantling the powerful barriers to women's full participation in civic life fundamentally changed women's lives, and for the better. The decline, nonetheless, in "women's collective presence in national legislative debates and a concomitant narrowing of their advocacy efforts" (187) is something she sees as a loss.

Goss wisely seeks explanations for the transformation at structural, organizational, and individual levels. The cogency of her probing of the structural and organizational levels is exceptional, and her proposed solution of "hybrid" organizations that pursue both women's and "non-women's" issues is an intriguing one. If the book has a weakness, though, it is in its exploration of the individual level of women's political engagement. It is sound and thoughtful, but not as sophisticated as are her movement, organizational, and structural explanations. This, however, just opens a new research agenda for us. Goss's work clearly points to the need for analysis that can more explicitly link mass and elite (or organizational) women's politicization. We know too little, still, about how women outside general women's or feminist organizations conceive of their own political identities, and Goss's book makes me wish for a grand new collaboration of theorists, institutional scholars, and political psychologists who might embark on a new agenda of continued inquiry into the size and shape of women's civic place.

Surely, Kristin Goss's *The Paradox of Gender Equality* will take its place in the canon of significant gender politics research, not just for scholars of American politics, but for all those who have thought about gender, difference, sameness, and civic identity.

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