

## AMERICAN POLITICS

**Chasing Equality: Women's Rights & U.S. Public Policy.**

By Susan Gluck Mezey and Megan A. Sholar. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023. 255p. \$98.00 cloth, \$28.95 paper.  
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In *Chasing Equality: Women's Rights & U.S. Public Policy*, Susan Gluck Mezey and Megan A. Sholar take on a central question in gender politics: To what do we owe the persistence of inequality? In this book, the authors conduct an expert autopsy of some of the most fraught gender issues in US politics, explaining how the complicated web of federalism and three branches of government frequently results in unsatisfactory outcomes for feminists. They note that any gender progress that is won through this political system is frequently followed by backlash. In short, both the problem of gender inequity and the government processes that are called on to mediate it are complicated.

Mezey and Sholar argue that to understand the lack of progress on women's rights in the United States, we must address the complete picture of policy making: we must understand how, in some contexts and on some issues, some institutions are more progressive than others and how that could change in an instant. These partial and inconsistent gains complicate the strategies of feminist activists and facilitate backsliding through what the authors call "the revolving door of rights" (212). They highlight that the quest for gender equality is a fight that is not over and that the political battles won are frequently then waged again, sometimes years, presidential terms, or decades later. In her 2011 book, *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*, Cecilia Ridgeway offers a complementary analysis. She argues that, with so much advocacy, so much technological change, and so much progress along other identity dimensions, the persistence of gender inequality is the result of the reinscribing of patriarchal gender norms in new spaces. Mezey and Sholar demonstrate how public officials respond to pressure for the expansion of equality, calls to preserve the status quo, or even to public backlash, noting how government, in all its forms, frequently facilitates the reinscribing of norms that work to constrain women's potential.

It is not all doom and gloom, however, as the authors point to the progress made and the heroic and strategic actors that made it possible. Fans of Representative Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) and her fight for the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) will appreciate chapter 4's detailing of the twists and turns of the act's progress through a legislative process rife with electoral, economic, and moral concerns. The authors warn, however, that advancement toward gender equality is not permanent

and that gains can become losses at the turn of an election. Fans of the *Mrs. America* TV series will see the impact of the conservative lawyer and "anti-feminist" Phyllis Schlafly in chapter 1. The discussion of Schlafly sets the historical scene for the chapters to come, each of which takes on a particular policy subject: education, employment, family–life balance, family planning, and abortion.

Mezey and Sholar's decision to consider public policy from a multilevel and cross-institutional approach yields a more satisfying explanation than previous piecemeal accounts for what happens when equality does or, more frequently, does not result. Additionally, the decision to include popular media accounts of well-known public battles is a sure way to engage readers, particularly students of public policy. The authors defend their strategy with a clear mission: "We hope our readers will see how these issues affect their own lives and the greater society. By explaining the influence of various institutions on policy outcomes, we also hope to provide a better understanding of how readers can participate in the fight for gender equality" (vii). Indeed, having spent the book arguing that judicial appointments, executive agency personnel, and legislators matter both federally and at the state level in the pursuit of policies that promote gender equality, their conclusion highlights the vital role of elections at all levels. Whom we elect has consequences for who serves in all kinds of capacities throughout our government—and therefore for who makes these important policy decisions.

Despite their obvious political commitments, the authors do a wonderful job of explaining both the intentions and perspectives of those historical advocates of gender equality and their opponents. One example is an in-depth discussion of religious objections to the inclusion of birth control coverage under the Affordable Care Act. The authors include quotes from religious leaders during the negotiations and the compromises offered by the Obama administration. Further, through media accounts, they show divisions within the camps between people who fear the opponents are not asking for enough and those who think the president is giving too much away.

In describing various lower court and Supreme Court decisions, the authors offer digestible feminist legal analysis in the vein of Martha Chamallas, whose 2003 *Introduction to Feminist Legal Theory* remains a classic in its second edition. In particular, Chamallas's first chapter, "Thinking like a Feminist," would be a great pairing with this book. Those who have lamented the lack of an updated women's policy text will be pleased that Mezey and Sholar end their historical deep dive with a conclusion that discusses the most up-to-date status of each policy, thereby bringing us to Biden's administration and the *Dobbs* decision.

Sensitive to an intersectional understanding of the distinctive modes of oppression inflicted on women of various racial and sexual orientations, Mezey and Sholar

demonstrate how advancement for some women may be a step back for others. This uneven progress creates difficulty in organizing across groups of women. These divisions among women's advocates due to historical racial and sexual divides, among other factors, further compound the decentralization of power within a federalist system to yield a reality where gender equity is elusive.

Although the book is rich with real-time accounts of various policy debates, at times these historical records become too repetitive without adding much analysis. More importantly, however, Mezey and Sholar do not offer a strong defense for why they chose these case studies. Historically, feminist scholarship has been criticized for focusing primarily on the challenges faced most frequently or exclusively by white women. As researchers, what we choose to make our main object of analysis suggests what and who is important in these debates. Alternative case studies might have included criminal justice reform, election law, or immigration law, which would have allowed for the consideration of how intersectionality complicates advocacy and leaves the responsibility for policy making within these domains to political elites frequently marginalized by their own racial identity. Although they perhaps focus too much on policies considered important to white

feminists, the authors do take great care in demonstrating how economic injustice, healthcare access (including to both contraception and abortion), and educational inequities are, of course, exacerbated by race. Instructors interested in a clear discussion of the racial divides within successive waves of feminism will find an easily understandable and honest accounting in this book.

This text would be ideal not only for policy courses but also for modern US history courses that reckon with recent battles in gender politics. Courses that focus on either the legislative or judicial branch of government are an obvious fit for this text, and courses on the executive branch may also find a few vignettes particularly relevant. The creation of policy through government regulation is a recurrent theme, allowing *Chasing Equality* to provide a good introduction to the less democratic aspects of executive policy making. The authors take seriously not only the role of specific branches of the federal government and the increasing role of the states in determining US women's autonomy today but they also demonstrate how various instruments of public policy—including administrative rules, legislation, and court precedent—continue to shape women's opportunities for economic, educational, and bodily equality.