

BOOK REVIEW

Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940

By Margaret Chowning. Princeton University Press, 2023. 376 pp.
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Chowning examines the role of women in Catholic lay associations in Mexico from the late colonial era through 1940. The research uses data from Church archives to show that women were the majority of members since the colonial era. She finds evidence of women in leadership positions as early as 1789, and by the 1840s women held leadership positions in most lay associations. The archival data are paired with an analysis of conservative and liberal press coverage of women's political activism. Chowning argues that women's leadership in lay associations encouraged their public engagement to protect Church privilege throughout history, most notably with petitions to overturn the anticlerical Reform Laws of the mid-nineteenth century.

This fascinating book sheds new light on the history of conservative women's political activism and provides an important context for understanding contemporary conservative women activists such as those involved with Pro-Vida (an anti-abortion group founded in Mexico 1978) and Frente Nacional por la Familia (an anti-LGBTQ rights group founded in Mexico in 2016). Conservative women are a key constituency in contemporary culture wars, and it is remarkable how similar today's discourse is to nineteenth-century political conflicts. This book makes four major contributions to research on politics and religion. First, it shows how a gendered framework provides better explanations of important phenomena. Second, the focus on parish level dynamics illuminates the connections between local and national politics and helps to explain regional variations. Third, it provides important historical evidence to support social capital theories of politics. Finally, Chowning shows how liberal reactions to conservative women's activism undermined gender equality.

Chowning's gendered framework explains the puzzling resilience of the Catholic Church through Independence, the Reform era, and the Revolution. Even as men abandoned the Church in large numbers, the work of women continued and accelerated, allowing the Church to maintain its power and privilege in Mexican society. Accounts that ignore women's contributions fail to explain this resilience. The Church embraced women's participation and leadership in the context of its

decline and financial crisis during the Reform and the Revolutionary eras. Women found access to institutional power in the Church at a time when the government excluded women. Women's leadership strengthened the Church and its ties to the community.

Chowning's focus on the parish level, rather than the Church hierarchy, provides important new insights into the regional variation of religious movements. Innovative lay associations were developed by women and local priests and then spread across parishes. Men were especially likely to leave lay organizations in the center-west region because of the severe destruction caused by the Independence Wars, and therefore women played particularly important roles in this part of the country. The work of these Catholic women leaders helps to explain the resurgence of Church power in the center-west that continues today. Historians have noted the rise and fall of Catholic political activism at the national level but have failed to notice the constant engagement of women with parish concerns, which only occasionally bubbles up the national level.

This book provides compelling historical data to explore theories of social capital. Chowning argues that women's participation and leadership of pious associations helped propel women into political activism challenging the state's liberal reforms. The skills women developed organizing church rituals were useful for political organizing. Women's lay organizations most likely helped to draft petitions and actively worked to collect signatures for petitions protesting new laws restricting the privileges of the Catholic Church. This historical evidence supports the social capital hypothesis that dense associational networks have important political consequences.

Chowning's account of how liberal reactions to conservative women's activism undermined gender equality provides important lessons for contemporary politics. The liberal press mocked Catholic women and argued that women should not be involved in politics. Liberals claimed that the women were not sophisticated enough to understand their own interests and were manipulated by priests. As a result of these misogynistic arguments, liberal women were also excluded from public debate and did not gain a strong voice until near the end of the Porfirio Díaz regime in the early twentieth century. Contrary to the liberal perspective, Chowning provides compelling evidence that women were often the driving force behind their political activism. Her research helps to dispel the myth that women participate in conservative politics because they are naïve and easily manipulated by men. Women benefitted from lay associations in important ways. Early lay associations organized ritual celebrations and processions but also provided mutual aid in the form of death benefits for widows. Women valued their membership in these organizations, and their decline threatened women's well-being. Lay associations brought women together to promote their interests and were sometimes powerful enough to defy priests. In nineteenth-century Mexico, very few secular organizations included women, so the only option for most women to participate in public life was through Catholic lay associations. The rise of women's leadership of pious associations empowered women politically.

This research approaches conservative women activists with the assumption that they are rational and capable of understanding their own interests. It details ways in which some women may sometimes benefit from patriarchal institutions and

traditions. In the case of nineteenth-century Mexico, Catholic women not only benefitted from the community and meaning that participation in religious organizations brought to their lives but also were able to gain political influence. The Church provided them with opportunities to engage in public life that the government denied them. Contemporary reformers would be well-served by following Chowning's example of taking all women seriously.