
The Profession

Found Women: Pioneers in Southern Political Science. Hallie Farmer

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Committee on the Status of Women
Southern Political Science Association

With this biography of Hallie Farmer, the Committee on the Status of Women of the Southern Political Science Association introduces a series entitled "Found Women: Pioneers in Southern Political Science." The intent of each biography in the series is to recognize a woman whose contributions to the study of politics and government predate the contemporary women's movement and reflect the history of our profession.

Hallie Farmer's career could only have been pursued by a woman and only in the South. Her goals and contributions were narrowly shaped by her sex, her time, and her place. Although a native of Indiana with a Ph.D. from Wisconsin, Farmer spent her entire career at one small women's college in Alabama. There, she dedicated her energies to the political awakening of Southern white women through her classes, speeches, research, and her own political campaigns and crusades. Her time, the thirties, forties and fifties, was a "dead" period for the American women's movement, between the suffrage amendment and *The Feminine Mystique*. Her place was the most Southern of societies where women and Blacks were legally segregated to their separate spheres.

Dr. Farmer taught history and political science in Montevallo, Alabama at Alabama State College for Women, from 1927 until 1956. She was chair of her



HALLIE FARMER

Courtesy of AAUW Educational Foundation

department from 1927 to 1949 and head of the Social Science Division until her retirement. As one of several women with graduate degrees from midwestern universities recruited by a college president who wanted to make Alabama College "comparable to the best women's colleges in the nation" (Edwards, 1979, p. 18), Farmer tried not only to interest her students in government but urged them to be active in politics. As an administrator and teacher at this small liberal arts school, she was involved in many areas of campus life, from vocational counseling, to extension courses, to sponsorship of Student Government. The Student Union Building at the College, now called the State Uni-

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versity at Montevallo and coed since 1956, bears her name.

As a scholar, Hallie Farmer's subject was Alabama government and politics. In 1942 she became a research associate with the Bureau of Public Administration of the University of Alabama. Her focus is probably best described as "applied politics," for there was always the element of reform in her work. She wrote many articles in Southern journals, such as *South Atlantic Quarterly*, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, and the *Alabama Review* (which she helped found). Her major book, *The Legislative Process in Alabama* (1949) is still cited in the studies of state legislatures (Hedlund, 1984). V. O. Key chose Hallie Farmer to edit the chapter on Alabama for *Southern Politics*. Others who helped Key in this capacity were Henry Alexander, George Buchanan, Manning Dauer, Robert Harris and H. C. Nixon.

As an activist, Hallie Farmer's subject was also Alabama government and politics. Her life was filled with campaigns and crusades. Most of these had two goals: to improve government and to empower women. To her and other feminists of the period, the two goals were one: women should be politically active because their skills as homemakers and mothers would prepare them to provide what Alabama so desperately needed—reform:

Life is no longer as nice and simple in a Democracy as it used to be and the belief that the woman who stays home and raises her children is a good mother is as extinct as the "dodo." Women must be interested in what's going on in the whole world. . . . Theirs also is the responsibility of acting, for it has been the job of women from time immemorial to do a good house-keeping job, by picking up the pieces and making something out of them. Applied in broader terms that means that women must see that the work of Democracy is done in this nation. . . . (quoted in Edwards, p. 35)

They were barred from jury service, and absent from the legislature:

There are too many groups of Alabama's citizens who are unrepresented. The absence of women and the lack of labor representation in the Legislature are the most evident illustrations of this fact. The Legislature is a group of comfortable, mid-

dle class professional men, elected by comfortable middle class professional people to represent them. (Farmer, 1949, p. 311)

Alabama had not ratified the 19th amendment, and while sex was not a classification written into the election law, the state retained all sorts of policies and practices to make sure that only "educated and qualified citizens" (i.e., white men supporting the one-party power structure) actually cast ballots. The poll tax was supposedly intended to disenfranchise blacks, but as Key points out it actually worked to keep more whites from the polls (p. 618). According to Farmer, those disenfranchised whites were mostly women. The tax was \$1.50 per election and was cumulative. Families were likely to pay it for the husband, but not the wife. The costs of voting grew and Farmer insisted that if a poor mother had to choose between "bread and ballots, she would choose bread" (Edwards, p. 36). The tax was due months before each election but voters received no notice. Elected officials often paid the taxes of their supporters. With the poll tax issue, the cause of women's franchise was closely linked to good government and reform.

In the 1950s, Farmer was a leader in a coalition of women's organizations pledged to make voting easier in Alabama and began a campaign to eliminate the cumulative feature of the poll tax. The *Birmingham News* noted the Farmer phenomenon:

Feminine voices are growing louder and louder in Alabama governmental affairs. Creating much clamor at present is Dr. Hallie Farmer . . . undisputed champion of this state's politically minded women . . . when Dr. Farmer aims her guns on specific legislative reforms, repercussions are usually felt from one end of the state to the other. Working through major women's organizations, she has spearheaded more than one successful legislative crusade. (Edwards, 1979, p. 40)

When the cumulative poll tax was repealed in 1953, the number of women voters increased by 55%.

Hallie Farmer was called a communist on more than one occasion by more than one Alabama leader weary of the "petticoat rebellion." Undaunted, she carried on

other crusades for constitutional revision and prison reform. She actively opposed the Boswell amendment which gave election boards of "good ole boys" the power to deny the vote to persons they judged not to be of "good character."

Farmer's life goal as teacher, scholar and activist was to increase representation and participation, especially of women, in Alabama public life. A scholar of Alabama politics, she led several successful campaigns of her own and many of her students, inspired by her words and example, went on to careers in public administration, social work and teaching. Hallie Farmer's greatest success was that her voice was heard.

About the Author

Dorothy Stetson is professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. She is author of *Women's Rights in France* (1987) and *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England* (1982).

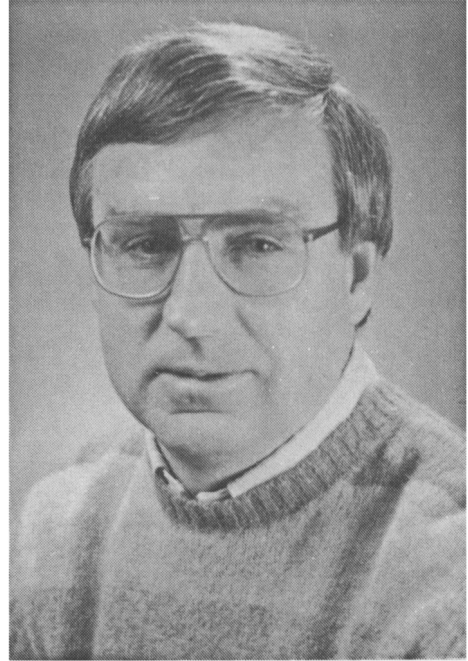
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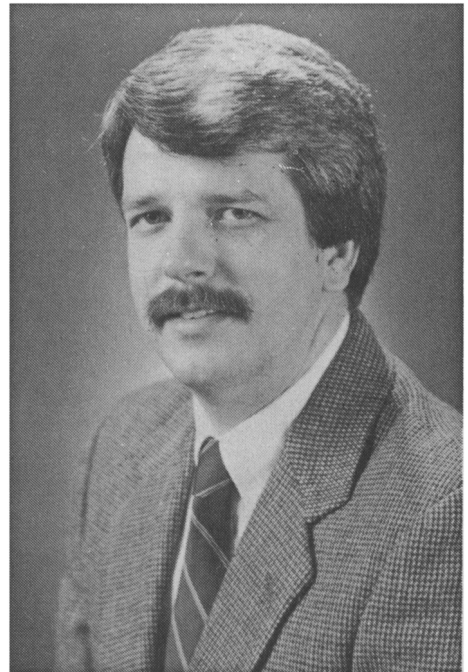
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