

Public Abstract

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After 1960, national conversation about the proper role of women in American society reached into all facets of social, economic, and political life. Local studies are better able than national surveys to explain why people took the stances they did, so this thesis focuses on the women's movement in one state -- Missouri. While the primary topic is organized feminist activity, it shows also some of the interactions between feminist and antifeminist activity.

Missouri is important for several reasons. First, the state early established an official Commission on the Status of Women. Second, two of the major liberal feminist organizations quickly established chapters in Missouri, allowing comparison with the national-level movement. Third, Missouri's legislature deadlocked on ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, with Senate rejection and House approval, offering a striking example of the warring influences of feminism and antifeminism in the state.

By the end of their first decade, most national feminist groups broadened their goals to include the social liberation of women. At the state level, this process was often less thorough or slower due to internal dissension within women's groups, negative public opinion in the state population, or constraints imposed on women's activism by the state legislature. Faced with strong traditional opinion, Missouri feminists downplayed sexual orientation and regularly attempted to divorce abortion from their ERA lobbying. The ratification failure was caused by the same factors that helped shape Missouri feminist groups. Though Missouri feminism followed the same initial trajectory as national feminism, their paths diverged somewhat due to internal dissension, negative public opinion, or constraints imposed by the state legislature.