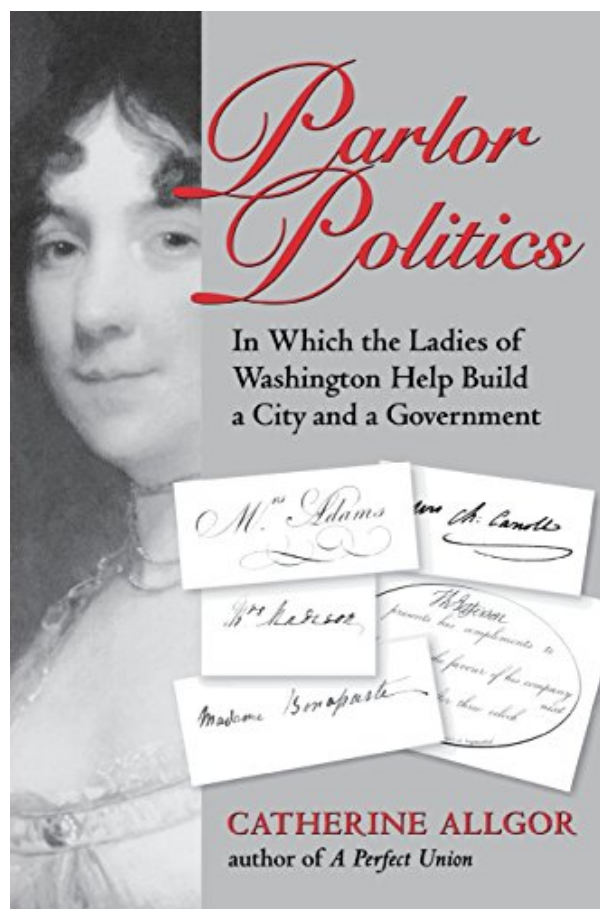
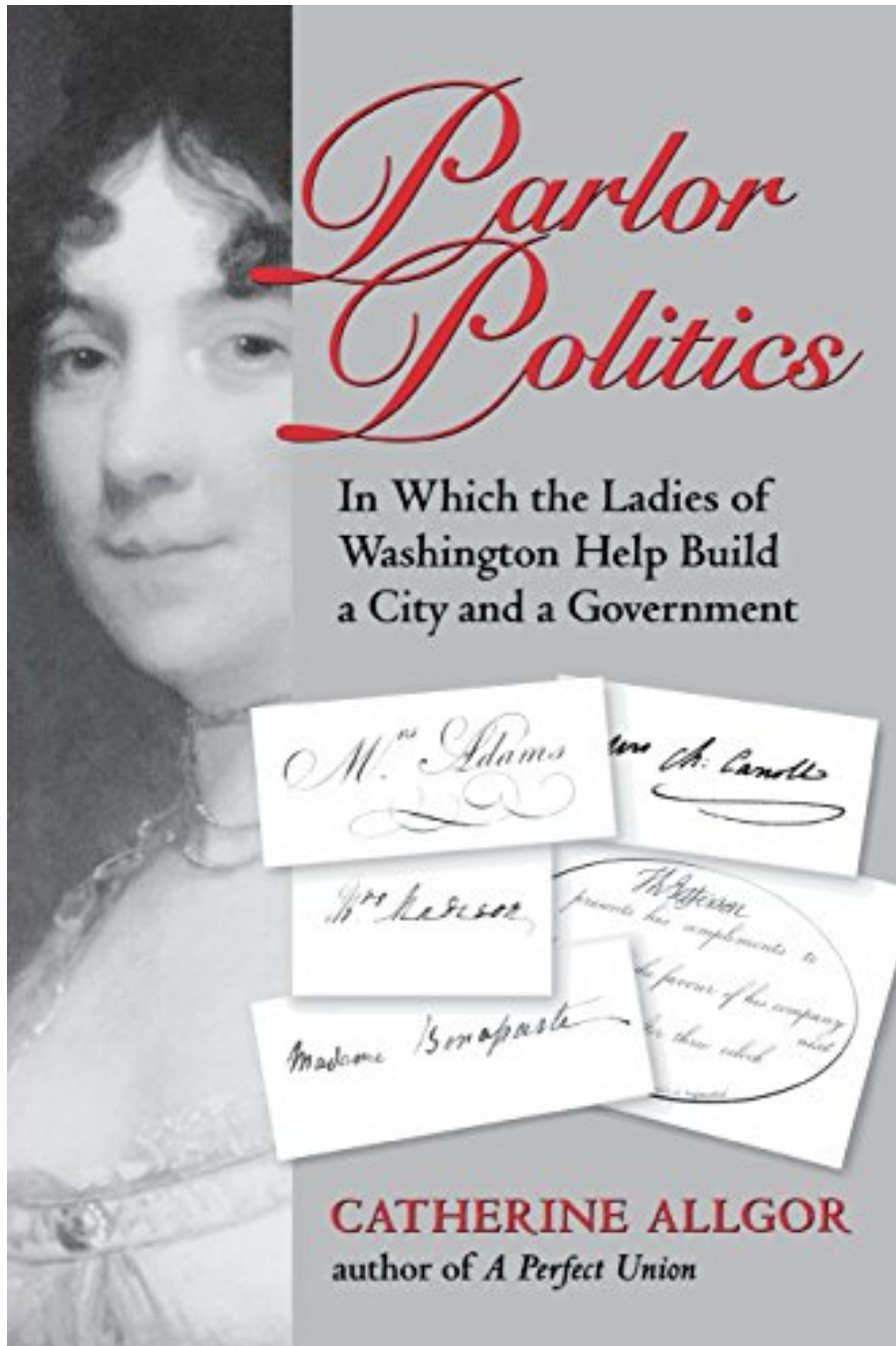


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When Thomas Jefferson moved his victorious Republican administration into the new capital city in 1801, one of his first acts was to abolish any formal receptions, except on New Year's Day and the Fourth of July. His successful campaign for the presidency had been partially founded on the idea that his Federalist enemies had assumed dangerously aristocratic trappings—a sword for George Washington and a raised dais for Martha when she received people at social occasions—in the first capital cities of New York and Philadelphia. When the ladies of Washington City, determined to have their own salon, arrived en masse at the president's house, Jefferson met them in riding clothes, expressing surprise at their presence. His deep suspicion of any occasion that resembled a European court caused a major problem, however: without the face-to-face relationships and networks of interest created in society, the American experiment in government could not function.

Into this conundrum, writes Catherine Allgor, stepped women like Dolley Madison and Louisa Catherine Adams, women of political families who used the unofficial, social sphere to cement the relationships that politics needed to work. Not only did they create a space in which politics was effectively conducted; their efforts legitimated the new republic and the new capital in the eyes of European nations, whose representatives scoffed at the city's few amenities and desolate setting. Covered by the prescriptions of their gender, Washington women engaged in the dirty business of politics, which allowed their husbands to retain their republican purity.

Constrained by the cultural taboos on "petticoat politicking," women rarely wrote forthrightly about their ambitions and plans, preferring to cast their political work as an extension of virtuous family roles. But by analyzing their correspondence, gossip events, "etiquette wars," and the material culture that surrounded them, Allgor finds that these women acted with conscious political intent. In the days before organized political parties, the social machine built by these early federal women helped to ease the transition from a failed republican experiment to a burgeoning democracy.

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Most helpful customer reviews

20 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

A fascinating view of Washington political and social life

By Joe Brown

In the early 19th century, Washington City was a new political frontier by the time Thomas Jefferson was elected to the President's House. The new political and social elites were both taken aback by Washington's crude facilities and (at first) socially barren lifestyle yet were somewhat anxious to create a new political and social capital. The male politicians who came to Washington City were accompanied by their wives, sisters, and other female relatives and counterparts who saw enormous opportunity for not only social gain but political influence as well. Catherine Allgor's book, *"Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Build a City and Government"*, convincingly portrays women as important movers and shakers in both

Jeffersonian and Jacksonian society. The increasing influence that women were making in social life was beginning to play an important role in politics as well. The republican ideals of womanhood brought increasing responsibility to mothers and wives to train younger generations in civic duties. Women then used this domestic role to effectively make their presence known in the male-dominated milieu of politics. Allgor uses the examples of Dolley Payne Todd Madison, Elizabeth Cortwright Monroe, and Catherine Adams (all First Ladies) to brilliantly point out that women could make or break a person's reputation in Washington. Women were ardent lobbyists; busily preparing and grooming their husbands' careers and making sure that they were introduced to the proper people in Washington. The practice of "calling", for example, on the city's social elite illustrates a complicated network of contacts which was a way of life in the social circles of the nation's capital. While it is easy for upper-class women to busy themselves with politics and social matters (they did have servants to perform most domestic chores) they nevertheless were provided more opportunities for political advancement. Allgor's analyses of the various levees and "drawing rooms" that were held in Washington City illustrate complex social situations in which women played a vital part. Dolley Madison, for example, realized how even the most intricate of details like the color of curtains, for example, could determine if a levee would be successful or not. Allgor's monograph is short yet detailed look at social life in early Washington. So much can be gleaned from this book that can be pertained to modern times (the Jackson scandals, for example). Overall, an interesting behind-the-scenes look at Washington political and social life.

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

well done and worth a read

By Crystal

I was lucky enough to be student of Dr. Allgor's for three years and the book was everything I would expect from her. She is at times funny and serious, and capable of explaining history in academic terms that aren't so esoteric as to be incomprehensible to the non-historian while giving a fresh spin on a well documented time period.

In *Parlor Politics*, Allgor documents the vital role that women played in the creation of a society during (arguably) the most fragile period in our history. One wrong move and the whole democracy concept could've gone out the window. Women were able to step in and do things that men couldn't, and under the guise of furthering their family became real movers and shakers in the early Washington scene. Allgor documents the time of Jefferson through the Jackson presidency and does so with a style that is often missing in academic texts. It is easy to see why this book is quickly becoming an influential work in the history of Washington and the construction of America.

If you enjoy this book, you may want to also read "Good Wives" by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich...more dry, but also interesting.

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Assigned Reading

By Julia

Had to read this as a class assignment. It actually turned out to be pretty interesting, but I think the author could have used 5 words instead of 50 to say the same thing.

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