



When you think of the women's voting rights movement in the United States, what do you think of? Perhaps the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and Susan B. Anthony come to mind. You might also know that the Nineteenth Amendment prohibited voter discrimination based on sex. Maybe you have done your own research to learn more, but [a 2017 report by the National Women's History Museum](#) demonstrates just how little students learn about US women's history in schools. Standards differ from state to state, but overall the report reveals that schools require students to learn little about women's contributions to the nation's development.

In *Let's Talk About It: Women's Suffrage*, we'll remedy that. Together, we'll explore the history of the dramatic fight to win women's voting rights. Starting with the nation's founding, a patriarchal legal system prevented women—especially married women—from owning property, signing contracts, and controlling money. Women who were enslaved could not even control their own bodies. However, by the 1830s and 1840s, activists started to fight against these laws and organize antislavery and women's rights movements. These reformers sought to change traditional ideas about who could be a US citizen and which citizens could vote.

Some textbooks and popular histories focus on white female suffragists, but our readings will uncover the story of a far more diverse cast of leading characters. Male politicians supported votes for women, and some men even served as officers in suffrage clubs. We'll learn about late nineteenth-century suffrage groups, like the American Woman Suffrage Association and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, that were far more powerful than Susan B. Anthony's American Equal Rights Association. Women of color founded their own clubs to win the vote and to fight for racial equality, too. These books will challenge the popular myth that the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteed women the vote. Groups like the National Association of Colored Women fought against poll taxes, literacy tests, and citizenship laws for decades after 1920. In fact, debates around voting rights continue today.

Readings and Discussion Questions

starts with *The Woman's Hour*, which shows us just how close anti-suffragists came to defeating the Nineteenth Amendment. Next, we'll explore a collection of essays that provides an overview of the movement's history. These reading selections spotlight the fight for the vote in different regions, the rise of anti-suffragists, and even popular anti-suffrage cartoons. Then we'll find out about the lives of Black leaders like Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells-Barnett in *Vanguard* and *Ida B. the Queen*. Our final book, a fantasy novel called *Once and Future Witches*, tells a fictional story about the association between witches and powerful women that illuminates how we think about the suffrage movement today.

BOOK 1

Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (2015)

Our first book is non-fiction, but it reads like a political thriller. Will the suffragists secure enough support to see their

BOOK 2

Tamara Gaskell, editor, *Women Making History: The 19th Amendment*

BOOK 3

Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* (2020)

Our third book turns to the efforts of Black women in the fight for suffrage. Martha S. Jones' history stretches from the aftermath of the Revolutionary War to the present, introducing us to women leaders who insisted that the phrase "equality for all" be taken literally. Black women's work as preachers, educators, and civic leaders shaped American public culture, and yet they faced opposition from all sides, including from within national women's suffrage organizations, whose leaders worried that their presence would jeopardize support from Southern states. They also faced opposition from within Black churches, where their wisdom and leadership challenged centuries-old prohibitions against women preaching.

These overlapping and intertwined obstacles are best described by the legal term *intersectionality*. Coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, *intersectionality* characterizes a kind of discrimination different than that experienced by Black men or white women, particular to Black women's intersecting racial and gendered identities. These are simultaneous identities that cannot be pulled apart. In documenting Black women's intersectional struggles with racism and sexism, Jones shows us the determination, courage, and political savvy they brought, and continue to bring, to the fight for equal justice.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Vanguard* begins by introducing us to several Black women preachers. Whose life and career most interested or surprised you? Why?
- 2.

BOOK 4

Michelle Duster, *Ida B. the Queen: The Extraordinary Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells* (2021)

In our fourth book we get an in-depth look at one of the women profiled in *Vanguard*, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a journalist, anti-lynching activist, suffragist, and civil rights pioneer. Author Michelle Duster, a great-granddaughter of Wells-Barnett, and a journalist herself, tells the story of how Wells-Barnett, born enslaved in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862, became a celebrated, and in some corners, feared and despised crusader for civil rights. Like the women profiled in *Vanguard*, Wells-Barnett fought both racism and sexism. This is seen most powerfully in her 1884 lawsuit against a railway company for forcibly removing her from a white-only train car, and in her insistence on marching alongside Illinois delegates in a 1913 women's suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., rather than marching at the back with other Black suffragists as the white suffragists organizing the parade had ordered.

Ida B. the Queen is illustrated with archival documents, such as images of letters to Wells-Barnett from Frederick Douglass, excerpts from Wells-Barnett's diaries, and reproductions of some of her famed newspaper columns. Portraits and mini-biographies of other significant Black leaders, timelines, and informative sidebars ground Duster's retelling of the life story of Wells-Barnett within the larger context of the fight for equal justice from the end of slavery to the present. The book also draws a line from Wells-Barnett's work to that of contemporary voting and civil rights advocates like Stacey Abrams.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

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BOOK 5

Alix E. Harrow, *The Once and Future Witches* (2020)

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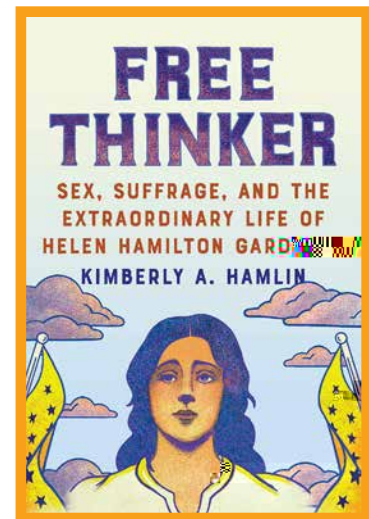
Overall Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn about the fight for the vote that surprised you the most and why? Does what you learned affect how you think about US history and women's contributions?
2. Which of the historical figures that you read about would you most want to meet and why? Are there any questions you would want to ask them?
3. Do the debates about women's voting rights in the past seem familiar to debates about women's rights today?
4. Does the history you learned affect the way you think about the vote and who has access to the ballot today? Will you approach the next election any differently?

Additional Readings

Crusade for Justice: the Autobiography of Ida B. Wells. Wells was working on her autobiography at the time of her death in 1931. Her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster (grandmother to Michelle Duster, author of *Ida B. the Queen*), edited and published it in 1970.

Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener, by Kimberly Hamlin. Helen Hamilton Gardener secured support from leading politicians for women's voting rights, but few know her story. This book examines the life of the woman who was the highest-ranking female federal government official by the time of her death in 1925.



Picturing Political Power: Images in the Women's This book focuses on imagery produced by suffragists and their opponents to demonstrate the ways that these pictures altered popular ideas of womanhood and helped to secure the ballot for women.

Who Was First? The Story of Women of Color by Cathleen Cahill. Cahill's collective biography highlights the ways that women of color led the women's voting rights movement. She focuses on three Native American women who fought for gender equality and for Native American rights: Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin, Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša), and Laura Cornelius Kellogg. Also featured are Black activist Carrie Williams Clifford, Chinese-American suffragist and scholar Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, and Adelina Nina Luna Otero-Warren (of Spanish descent).

Set between the 1850s and 1870s, this historical novel imagines early fights over women's suffrage, birth control, and sexuality. It intertwines the stories of one fictional character, a young Jewish immigrant, and three historical figures, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Victoria Woodhull (a suffragist, free love activist, and spiritualist who was the first woman to run for president of the United States), and Anthony Comstock (founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice and author of censorship laws still active today).

Quinn. This book provides an overview of the women's voting rights movement with numerous wonderful illustrations by over 100 female artists.

Sophonisba Breckinridge: Championing Women's
This book on Sophonisba Breckinridge gives us a fascinating look at the life of one of the women's rights activist who became one of the first American women to earn a PhD in political science. Breckinridge navigated the spotlight and same-sex relationships, and Jabour's book offers an

Supplemental Program Ideas

Below is a list of supplemental program ideas for further engaging your community in discussion about the women's suffrage movement.

1. Work with your local or state historical society to uncover the story of the suffrage movement in your area. Present the information to the community through a lecture program or an exhibit. For example, this [digital exhibit](#)

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