

Let's
Talk
About
It!



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LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Women's Suffrage

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.

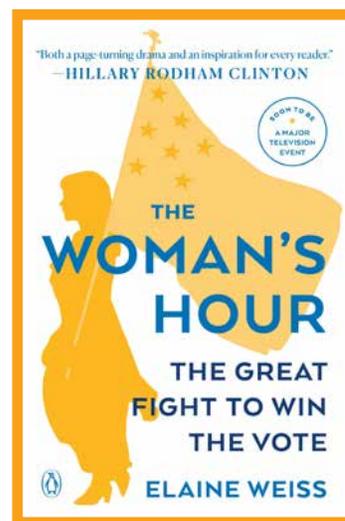
Readings and Discussion Questions

Let's Talk About It: Women's Suffrage 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 *The 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* (2018)

Our first book is nonfiction, but it reads like a political thriller. Will the suffragists secure enough support to secure the final state needed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment? Or will anti-suffragists convince legislators to take a stand against female voters? Journalist Elaine Weiss tells the exciting story about the last-minute debates and describes how suffragists ultimately secured victory. Many suffrage books overlook anti-suffragists, but *The Woman's Hour* highlights how powerful they were and how they fought against votes for women even after the amendment's passage. Currently, Weiss's book is being adapted for television by Steven Spielberg with Hillary Clinton as an executive producer.



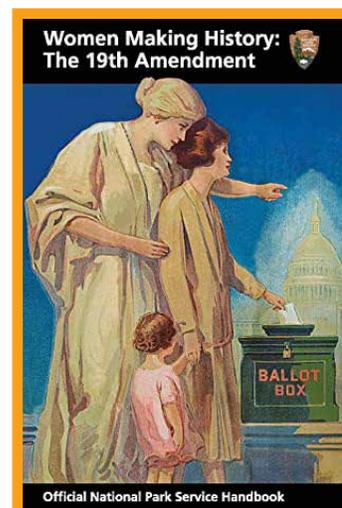
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think anti-suffragists were so powerful? Why did they oppose votes for women?
2. Many stories about the suffrage movement overlook the anti-suffragists. Why do you think they do that? What do you think anti-suffragists add to this story?
3. What kinds of tactics did suffragists use and which ones do you think proved to be the most effective?
4. Which activist—suffragist or anti-suffragist—most interested you and why? Who would you like to find out more about? Your librarians will be able to help you learn more!
5. We already know that Tennessee ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, but Weiss shows us just how close the state's representatives came to rejecting it. How does Weiss create a compelling story?
6. Do you think you'll watch the forthcoming television adaptation of *The Woman's Hour*? What do you hope to see in a screen version of this story?

BOOK 2

Tamara Gaskell, editor, *Women Making History: The 19th Amendment* (2020)

This collection of short essays offers a useful overview of the fight to secure the ballot for women. If you're wondering what happened to set the stage for *The Woman's Hour*, this book will tell you what you need to know! For example, we'll discover how anti-suffragists gained support as well as ways the movement developed differently throughout the United States. We'll look at the social movements that overlapped with women's suffrage, such as those against slavery and alcohol, and we'll consider the ways that we remember the suffrage movement today.



If you're interested in learning more, the online essay series [On Their Shoulders: The Radical Stories of Women's Fight for the Vote](#) (sponsored by the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission) dives even further into these fascinating stories. Some favorite essays from that collection include:

- [“A Noble Endeavor: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Suffrage”](#)
- [“How Native American Women Inspired the Women's Rights Movement”](#)
- [“Mabel Ping-Hua Lee: How Chinese-American Women Helped Shape the Suffrage Movement”](#)
- [“Sister-Wives and Suffragists: Mormonism and the Women's Suffrage Movement”](#)

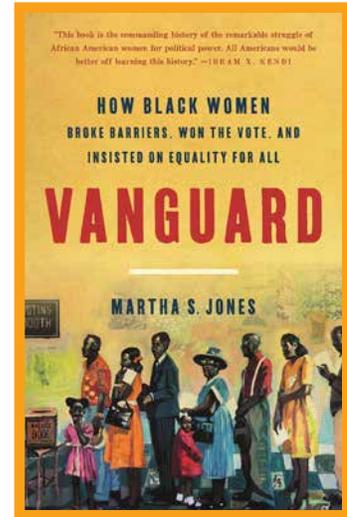
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the suffrage movement expose the successes and limitations of the nation's founding documents (such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution)?
2. How did the women's voting rights movement develop in your region? How was it different from the movement in other areas? Have you heard of this history or any of the historical figures before?
3. Which essay is most interesting to you? Why?
4. The writings reveal that the Nineteenth Amendment did not guarantee women the vote. They also uncover the stories of women's voting rights activism long after 1920. Does this information change how you think of the amendment's importance? How should we commemorate this legislation today?
5. This beautifully illustrated book features numerous photographs, posters, cartoons, and other suffrage images. Which ones did you most find the most interesting?
6. If you could add a few lines to a high school history textbook based on what you learned, what would they be?
7. Judith Wellman's *Commemorating Suffrage* points out women's voting rights historic sites across the nation. Have you ever visited a site focused on women's history? Does your area have any monuments for important local women? Which sites and monuments have you been to, and which ones do you hope to visit?

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.

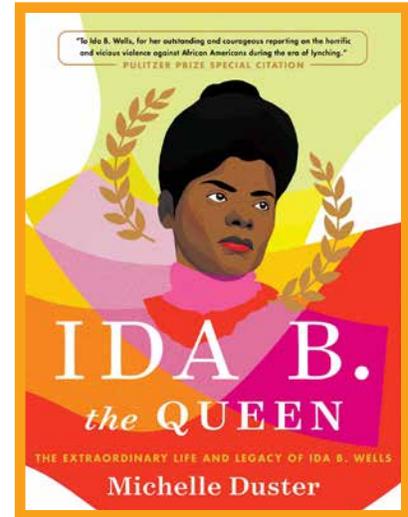
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Vanguard* begins by introducing us to several Black women preachers. Whose life and career most interested or surprised you? Why?
2. What was the role of Black churches in facilitating the rise of civil rights activism?
3. What conflicts did women preachers face in Black churches, and how did they respond to them?
4. What are some of the reasons Black women voters were seen as a larger political threat than white women?
5. What role did Black newspapers like *The Crisis* and *The Chicago Defender* play in the suffrage movement?
6. How did historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) factor into the fight for suffrage?
7. *Vanguard* shows that the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment did not mean the end of Black women's activism for civil rights. What obstacles to Black voters did activists like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells have to fight once the vote was ostensibly granted?

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.

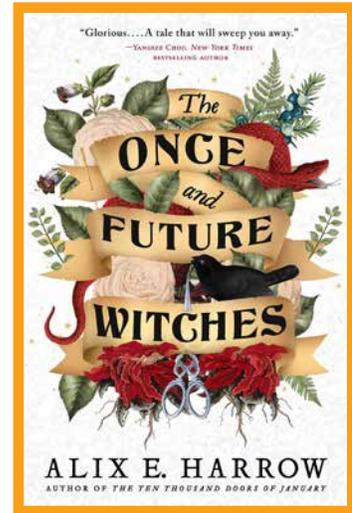
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Duster begins her book at a moment in Ida B. Wells' life when her civil rights activism draws the attention of the FBI, who describe her as "one of the most dangerous negro agitators," and results in her being denied a passport to attend an International Peace Conference in Paris. How does beginning the book in this way set up Duster's exploration of Wells' life?
2. How has being the great-granddaughter of Ida B. Wells influenced Duster?
3. How does Wells' treatment during the 1913 suffrage parade draw attention to racism within the larger suffrage movement? What experiences and perspectives does she bring to the movement?
4. Suffrage is one of many facets of Wells' work as an activist. She also fought a legal battle against segregated train cars seventy-five years before Rosa Parks famously challenged segregated seating on public buses. What happened in Wells' battle, and how did it set the stage for future anti-segregation activism?
5. Wells was also an anti-lynching activist, after three of her friends were murdered by a white mob in Tennessee. How did Wells' work as a journalist and newspaper editor help her draw attention to this atrocity?
6. Duster illustrates her biography of Wells using archival materials—pages from Wells' personal diaries, newspaper clippings, and legal documents. Which did you find most interesting? Did any surprise you?

BOOK 5

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

The final book in this series, a fantasy novel, moves the fight for suffrage to an alternate reality version of 1890s America, where witches are real, and magic and spells are passed from mothers to daughters. But even in this alternate reality, patriarchal values prevail. Witches' powers can only be exercised in secret, from within the safety of homes. Women who publicly use their powers are hunted, imprisoned, and even executed. What happens when the witches of New Salem fight back, using magic to get the civic powers that come with voting? The novel tells the story of the three Eastwood sisters, Beatrix Belladonna, Agnes Amaranth, and James Juniper, who must learn to trust one another again after a painful childhood before they can convince the women of New Salem to work together to secure their political rights.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Harrow use magic as a metaphor for suffrage? Based on what you've learned about the suffrage movement in our other texts, do the parallels she draws between women fighting for the vote and women historically persecuted for witchcraft resonate?
2. How do Harrow's revisioned fairy tales help her tell this story?
3. How does Harrow deal with the unique struggles of Black women for voting rights and representation within the larger suffrage movement?
4. What role do labor rights and labor rights activists play in the novel?
5. Where do you see references to actual events in US labor history? Does the intersection of the suffrage and labor movements reflect their real-life convergences and conflicts?
6. What role does the press play in the novel? How do different newspapers report on the events in New Salem, and how do their headlines and stories move the plot forward?



Overall Discussion Questions

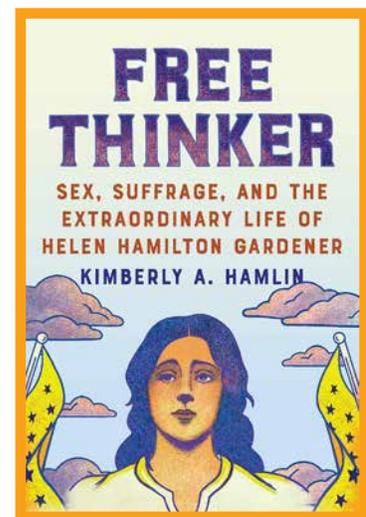
1. What did you learn about the fight for the vote that surprised you the most and why? Does what you learned affect how you think about US history and women's contributions?
2. Which of the historical figures that you read about would you most want to meet and why? Are there any questions you would 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 Suffrage Movement, by Allison K. Lange. 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.

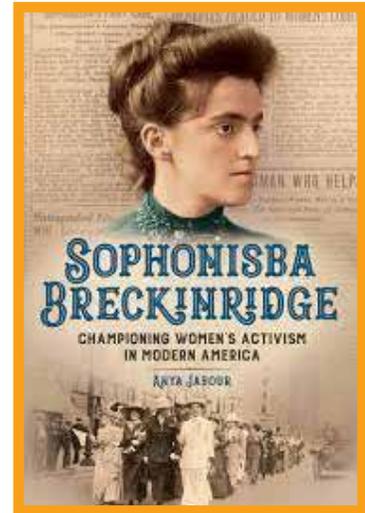


Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement, by Cathleen Cahill. Cahill's collective biography highlights the ways that women of color led the women's voting rights movement. She focuses on three Native American women who fought for gender equality and for Native American 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).

Sex Wars: A Novel of Gilded Age New York, by Marge Piercy. 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).

She Votes: How U.S. Women Won Suffrage, and What Happened Next, by Bridget 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 Activism in Modern America, by Anya Jabour. 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 important glimpse into her life.



Stories from Suffragette City, edited by M.J. Rose and Fiona Davis, with an introduction by Kristin Hannah. This collection of short stories imagines October 23, 1915, the day of the 20,000-person New York suffrage parade, from twelve different vantage points. Some of the stories feature historical figures, such as millionaire Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, whose support for suffrage was ardent, but often equivocal; Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, a Chinese immigrant who would become the first woman to earn a PhD from Columbia University; and Ida B. Wells, who while not present for the 1915 parade, spends the day back home in Chicago remembering the humiliation of being banned because of her race from the 1913 suffrage march in Washington, DC. Other stories describe fictional characters from a range of classes and life experiences—immigrants, artists, anti-suffragists—as they actively participate in, or accidentally encounter, the march.

Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell, by Alison Parker. This book is the first biography of Terrell, a prominent civil rights and women’s rights activist. Born as an enslaved person and dying soon after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, she lived a long and fascinating life.

Votes for Women: A Portrait of Persistence, by Kate Clarke Lemay. The beautifully illustrated book accompanied an exhibition displayed at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. In addition to the images, the book features several great essays on the movement’s history.

We Demand: The Suffragist Road Trip, by Anne B. Gass is a work of historical fiction, but it tells the true story of Swedish immigrants Ingeborg Kindstedt and Maria Kindberg, middle-aged women and life partners who made a daring cross-country road trip in 1915 to gather and deliver signatures in support of woman suffrage to the president in Washington, D.C. Gass, who herself retraced this monumental road trip, carefully contextualizes suffrage within other socio-political struggles of the twentieth century. The novel does not shy away from exposing conflicts between the two major women’s rights organizations, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, and Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party, nor does it flinch from exploring ageism, racism, and anti-immigrant prejudices in both groups.

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](#) was created by staff from Princeton Public Library and the Historical Society of Princeton in 2020.
- 2. Create a bulletin board or display** that highlights the suffragettes that you did not learn about in school. Include their photo and biography as well as any books or articles about these unsung women of the movement. Use [this article](#) as a starting guide and be sure to include the women highlighted in the books being discussed.
- 3. Screen the feature film *Iron Jawed Angels*** and then use [this comprehensive guide](#) to have staff or a local teacher/scholar lead a discussion about the film.
- 4. Identify a speaker in your region** using [the directory](#) found at the [National Women's History Alliance](#) who can speak at the library about a suffrage or women's rights topic.
- 5. Host an afternoon talk** or “[Equalitea](#)” to discuss women's rights. Have dedicated facilitators and prepared prompts to get the conversations going at each table. During the tea time, serve cookies and tea while attendees engage in conversation about topics connected to women's rights, such as race, anti-suffrage, reproduction, pay equity, or the Equal Rights Amendment.
- 6. Host a nonpartisan voter registration drive** as a way to connect with the history of suffrage while supporting civic engagement in your local community. Voter registration drives also provide an opportunity to develop new partnerships. Reach out to your local [League of Women Voters](#) to help with this project. Oftentimes, local election officials can provide you with blank registration forms and information about relevant public training sessions. It is important to understand the laws for voter registration in your area. Be sure to check the [Fair Elections Center](#) and [Vote411.org](#) websites and discuss logistics with local officials.
- 7. Create a suffrage cookbook with community members** by researching recipes from the time period or those passed down through the generations in their family. Or hold a cooking event featuring recipes from an actual [suffrage cookbook](#). Use this [article](#) on cooking and the suffrage movement as the conversation starter for either of these ideas.
- 8. Hold a concert** of [women's suffrage songs](#) or period music.

Supplemental program ideas provided by *Let's Talk About It: Women's Suffrage* advisors
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