



"This book is the commanding history of the remarkable struggle of African American women for political power. All Americans would be better off learning this history." —IBRAM X. KENDI

HOW BLACK WOMEN
BROKE BARRIERS, WON THE VOTE, AND
INSISTED ON EQUALITY FOR ALL
VANGUARD

MARTHA S. JONES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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WHO GETS TO VOTE?

CONVERSATIONS ON VOTING RIGHTS IN AMERICA

Martha S. Jones. *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

1. Martha Jones reveals that her storytelling efforts in *Vanguard* were inspired by the largely unrecorded roles that the women in her own family—Nancy Bell Graves, Susan, and Fannie—played in the struggle for Black women to gain the vote. Are there unknown figures in your family who, like Nancy Bell Graves, Susan and Fannie, made contributions to social change? Have they inspired you to also be an agent of change?

How are hidden histories like those outlined in *Vanguard* transformative to the women, men, and children who are members of oppressed or marginalized groups in society? How are they transformative to those who operate with privilege in society?

2. In *Vanguard*, Jones discusses some of the obstacles that have prevented Black people from voting, such as poll taxes and violence. She observes that, “[W]ithout the vote, Black Americans had to build other routes to political power” (2).

What were these alternative routes to political power and why were they a necessary step in Black Americans’ journey toward equality?

3. Jones observes that, “the Voting Rights Act was paved with Black women’s organizing and courage” (8) but mainstream historical narratives have largely credited Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and his organizing for this victory.

What are some reasons for historical omissions such as this? Do omissions like this impact voter participation? If so, how? Is there a relationship between these sorts of omissions and the types of candidates who seek public office?

4. After the Civil War, there was uncertainty in the general population about what freedom would or should mean for formerly enslaved people (i.e. did the end of slavery confer equality, legal rights, political rights, etc.?).

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In the 156 years since the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment officially ended chattel slavery in this country, has this question been fully settled? Does the lack of consensus about what freedom was, is, and should be impact civic participation? If so, how?

5. Jones discusses how stereotyped imagery has been used to denigrate Black women and depict them as “inadequate imitations of white ladies.” Can you think of past or current examples that use negative imagery to stereotype Black women? What are some of the sources of these negative stereotypes?

Do stereotypes influence who runs for public office? Do they influence how voters cast their ballots or how lawmakers shape laws and policy? If so, how?

6. In Philadelphia, at an 1837 national political convention, Black women were met with violence for their antislavery organizing. Pennsylvania Hall was torched. Post-emancipation Black men who attempted to exercise the right to vote also met with acts of domestic terrorism from paramilitary groups such as the White League and the Knights of the White Camellia.

Is the government better served by exploring the motivation for domestic terrorism or by pursuing remedies for those victimized in the name of progress?

If lawmakers placed greater emphasis on preventing acts of domestic terrorism and holding perpetrators accountable, do you think we’d see any changes in voter participation and civic involvement?

7. Sojourner Truth, born a slave and without any formal training, proved herself to be an incredibly impactful speaker even when she spoke on stages with speakers of greater education and experience.

Have you ever refused to claim your place at the front because of fears that you lacked the credentials or education? Do you think men or women are more likely to underestimate their own self worth? Why? How does Sojourner Truth’s story cause you to confront your fears?

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8. Celia, an enslaved woman who murdered her owner and repeated rapist for attempting to rape her when she was ill, could not present a defense at trial because the law recognized enslaved women as property and not as humans with basic rights. At this time, laws were written by white men. There was no gender, race, or ethnic diversity in government and lawmaking.

How does society benefit from a diverse pool of lawmakers and voters? Can you think of examples from the past or present?

9. Black voter participation was high during the start of the Reconstruction era, but it declined significantly during the Jim Crow era. Why?

Which is more harmful: apathy in the face of injustice or deliberate attempts to oppress individuals or groups? Why?

10. After years of exhausting efforts to secure the Fifteenth Amendment (which prevents Black men from being denied their right to vote) and the Nineteenth Amendment (which grants the right to vote to women), many Black women realized that laws sometimes promised more than they could deliver. Yet, many of them continued using the legal and legislative systems to fight injustices.

Why, in the face of legal disappointments, do you think Black women continued to use official channels to fight injustices? Why, even after many catastrophic disappointments, didn't they embrace President Lincoln's earlier colonization proposal, which would have removed the formerly enslaved population from the country, relocating them to places like Liberia?

11. When Shirley Chisholm ran for president in 1972, she told the American public she was proud to be Black and female, but assured them that she was not a candidate for Black America or for the woman's movement. Instead, she assured them that she was a candidate for the American people.

Why might she have felt that this assurance or disclaimer was needed? Why don't more politicians provide disclaimers like Chisholm's?

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12. Voting rights advocate and former Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams urges Americans not to be bound by what they have seen.

What, in American society, have you not yet seen, but are waiting expectantly for?

13. Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding how multiple forms of inequality can compound themselves in the life of a single individual. It fosters an awareness of the fact that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression, such as class, race, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or religion. In *Vanguard*, Jones observes that some of the trailblazing Black women included in the book lived the theory of intersectionality long before we came to explain Black women's lives by that term.

What does intersectionality mean to you? Did *Vanguard* change your views on intersectionality? If so, how? What other kinds of people, and in what kinds of roles, might benefit from learning more about intersectionality?