

Working the Democracy: The Long Fight for the Ballot from Ida to Stacey

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After a 72-year struggle, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted American women the right to vote in 1920. Coupled with the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended voting rights to African American men, the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment transformed the power and potency of the American electorate.

Yet for those on the periphery—be they people of color, women, the poor, and working class—the quest to exercise civic rights through the ballot box has remained contested to this day. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, white fear of a new electorate of formerly enslaved Black men spurred public officials to implement policies that essentially nullified the Fifteenth Amendment for African Americans in the South. The same was true with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

But the right to vote is more than checking a box on the ballot. In this article, we invite you to reimagine the Nineteenth Amendment beyond women suffrage. Not only did the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment open the doors for some Black women to vote, but it was also a call to political activism. The amendment empowered African American leaders like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and, today, Stacey Abrams to hold the nation accountable on its promise to be a government by the people and for the people. Ida B. Wells-Barnett not only fought for passage of the Nineteenth Amendment but utilized its passing to plant the seed of political activism within the Black female community.

Given the dearth of Black women's voices in the historical memory of the long civil rights struggle, we explore the stories of two African American women who harnessed the discourse of democracy and patriotism to argue for equality and justice. Both women formed coalitions that challenged the patriarchal boundaries limiting who can be elected,

whose interests should be represented, and ultimately what policies will be implemented at the local and national levels.

At a quick glance, childhoods partially spent in Mississippi might be the only common denominator of these two women, as they were born in drastically different times and seemed to fight drastically different battles. Whereas Wells-Barnett is best known for her crusade against lynchings in the South and her work in documenting the racial violence of the 1890s in publications such as *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*,¹ she was also instrumental in paving the way for women suffrage. Upon her forced relocation to the North, she worked tirelessly in the early twentieth century with Chicago's Black community for the enfranchisement of African American women and for the political empowerment of African American men.

Decades later, Stacey Abrams, who was the first Black female major-party U.S. gubernatorial nominee in 2018 when she ran in Georgia, has emerged as a rising star in today's Democratic Party. She is also the first Black woman to deliver a response to the State of the Union address. Stacey is the most recent and perhaps most powerful example of Ida's dedication to expanding Black women's opportunities in the political realm in order to promote an authentic democratic system. A closer look at these two



IDA B. WELLS.

Ida B. Wells, head-and-shoulders portrait, published in *The Afro-American press and its editors*, by I. Garland Penn., 1891

(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

African American leaders and the battles they fought a century apart reveals their shared approach to civic matters. Ida and Stacey both understood the ballot box as more than a vote, extending its power to political enfranchisement and community activism. Being leaders not just through their words but also through their actions, both women deployed the power of defiance in order to challenge the system. In this regard, their commitment to the promises of democracy arches the long fight for the ballot in the United States.

We are again at a critical moment in our society. The country's changing demographic has triggered fears, mostly among white conservatives, about a political, economic, and cultural takeover by immigrants and people of color. Conservative politicians know how to harness this tide of anxiety. They push through legislation (e.g., gerrymandering, voter suppression measures, etc.) that curbs access to the ballot. And in the tradition of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Stacey Abrams has been galvanizing political activism and participation in disenfranchised and underserved communities.

Defiance as Power

Historically, African American women were doubly removed from the public realm, both legally as well as socially. They lacked the independent status equated with being male and white in American society. After Emancipation, they were essentially governed by Black men. Even as the rules of legal coverture, or second-class citizenship, were eroded in the second half of the nineteenth century, the core principle of an indirect citizenship, conferred via the head of household (husband or father) for women remained. The Nineteenth Amendment succeeded in displacing this ideal of citizenship by giving white women and some Black women clear political standing in the public sphere. But suffrage failed to establish equal citizenship. Rather, women remained caught between competing conceptions of political equality and ascriptive difference.



Then-Georgia State Representative Stacey Abrams gives the keynote address at the Barbara Jordan Forum of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, in Austin, Tex., February 21, 2012

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So, while the Nineteenth Amendment diminished the gender distinctiveness of women's citizenship, it still fell short of creating equal opportunities for all citizens.

Ida's Defiance

While Americans celebrate Rosa Parks for her defiance of Jim Crow laws on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, Ida actually openly challenged the system by refusing Jim Crow transportation in Tennessee more than 70 years earlier.² She claimed her seat in the "ladies" coach on a train ride from Memphis to Woodstock in September 1883, experiencing the double bind of being Black and a woman. The train conductor demanded she move to the "colored" coach. Ida recalled, "He said to me that he would treat me like a lady, but that I must go into the other car, and I replied, that if he wished to treat me like a lady, he would leave me alone."³ Her refusal to leave the coach designated for white women triggered an altercation (she bit the conductor's hand when he attempted to forcefully move her), resulted in her dress being torn, and led ultimately to her physical removal from the train at the next stop. She initiated a suit against the Chesapeake Ohio &

Southwestern Railroad Company, which was initially victorious. However, the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the lower court ruling, deciding in favor of the railroad company. It was that train ride in Tennessee that ignited Ida's tireless passion to fight against discrimination and racism.

Ida realized the power of the ballot to achieve social equality. In "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynching," she noted,

The Negro has been given separate and inferior schools, separate railway cars, separate every thing [sic] else because he has no ballot. He therefore cannot protest against such legislation by choosing other law makers, or retiring to private life those who legislate against his interests.⁴

Soon after, in January 1913, she founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first African American suffrage club, with the help of white suffragist colleagues like Belle Squire.

Upon settling in Chicago, Ida travelled across Illinois speaking publicly on civic matters and the fight for women suffrage.⁵ She organized various local Black women's clubs in the city. As new president of the Alpha Suffrage Club, she joined the Illinois Suffragists for a National American Woman Suffrage Association-sponsored parade in Washington, D.C., in March 1913. Forty years after defying Jim Crow on a train in Tennessee, Ida found herself again defying Jim Crow, this time in Washington, D.C. The parade's white leadership feared alienating Southern members by challenging their Jim Crow system, and did not want Black women walking with state delegations. Ida, however, refused to be sent to the back of the parade and boldly marched with the women of Illinois. Ida "defined the battle for African American women by intertwining her state citizenship, her African Americanness, and her femaleness," and asserted "African

American women's place in the fight for the ballot by confronting white women."⁶

Stacey's Defiance

At an early age, Stacey Abrams was shaped by her experiences of racism and sexism. After winning an essay contest in middle school, she had to fight the librarian to receive her award money. The librarian seemed unable to believe that Stacey—a Black girl—was the author of the award-winning essay. In college, when she still aspired to become a physicist, her physics professor doubted Stacey's ability to understand "the complexities of higher math [that] the long-term pursuit of physics required."⁷ Stacey would go on to "always [confront] racism, sexism, ageism and other phobias," as she well understood that opportunities in today's society entail learning "to constantly rebut the soft prejudices held against us."⁸ By the time Stacey became the Democratic leader in Georgia's House of Representatives in 2011, she had identified "stinging rhetoric," "wordsmithing and incisiveness" as her strategies for fighting gender stereotypes and white supremacy.⁹

Stacey's first prominent act of defiance was at a town hall meeting in the aftermath of California's 1992 Rodney King verdict, which sparked violent reactions across the nation, including in Atlanta, where Stacey was a first-year student at Spelman College. She understood that despite Atlanta's Black leadership, white supremacy was at the root of many of Atlanta's problems. Mayor Maynard Jackson denounced Atlanta's violent response to the King verdict, deploying the police across the city and campuses. Stacey publicly challenged the mayor's record of failing to improve the lives of his constituents.¹⁰ The moment catalyzed her battle for political office, which would become about eradicating poverty and racism, while actively engaging and politically activating Georgian communities.

In 2013, Stacey founded the New Georgia Project. Though a century apart, both the Alpha Suffrage Club and the New Georgia Project were nonpartisan

initiatives dedicated to registering and engaging people of color in the civic process, which in Georgia's case encompassed more than 800,000 potential voters. The addition of more than 86,000 voter registration applications provoked panic among Georgia's political players and sparked an increase in acts of sabotage, with half the applications going "missing." Stacey's conviction "to shift the political dynamics of Georgia, and to live [her] parents' teachings about civic responsibility," as well as the New Georgia Project, have been her driving purpose ever since.¹¹

You Cannot Be What You Cannot See: Working the Democracy by Empowering Women

When Illinois granted women restricted voting rights in 1913, enabling their right to vote for president as well as local offices (such as mayor or alderman), Ida worked with the Alpha Suffrage Club to organize meetings, register prospective voters and galvanize political interest in the African American community. She specifically appealed to women to register and vote, with the promise to "help put a colored man in the city council."¹² Although Black women's first attempt to elect a Black councilman in Chicago failed in early 1914, women were energized by the closeness of the race. *The Chicago Defender* championed Black women's "sense of duty to do more," proclaiming that soon "Traitorous leaders [will] be relegated to the background and citizens of strength and character [will] take their places."¹³ A year later, Chicago's Black women were the driving force behind the election of the first Black man to city council, Oscar de Priest, alderman of the Second Ward.

The passing of the Nineteenth Amendment inspired Ida to build a structure that would support and advance African American voting rights. She founded additional civic-minded and politically engaging organizations such as the Third Ward Women's Political Club,

which trained Black women specifically to run for political office. Running under the motto "For Women, of Women, By Women," Ida united community development with political activism and democratic aspirations.¹⁴ She then led the way and ran as an Independent for the Illinois State Senate in 1930. Though she came in fourth, losing to incumbent and Black career politician Adelbert Roberts, she demonstrated that political power for women was within reach.¹⁵ Despite not winning her political race, Ida signaled that having Black women in positions of power was a possibility. Or, in the words of civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman, "You can't be what you can't see."

Stacey Abrams, in the twenty-first century, continued to register more and more voters through the New Georgia Project. She pursued her political aspirations to be governor of Georgia (even though the United States has never had an African American woman governor), because "You can't be what you can't see." After winning the Democratic primary nomination for governor in May 2018, Stacey galvanized local and national support across racial, class and gendered lines. She accumulated a number of high-profile endorsements, including one from Oprah Winfrey and former President Barack Obama.¹⁶

In a disputed November 2018 race, in which she ran against then Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp who supervised his own election system, Stacey gave a non-concession concession speech challenging the system that allowed Kemp to both oversee and run in the same election as well as engineer a voter suppression scheme. In the speech, she appealed to supporters to recognize that elections are not about the individuals running, but about what citizens are seeking. Stacey has gone on to found new nonprofit initiatives such as Fair Fight Georgia and Fair Count, which demand accountability and integrity in Georgia's elections and assurance that every person is counted in the Census, respectively.

Lesson Idea

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™

Compelling Question	How can the lack of power push individuals to seek change?	
Standards and Practices	D2.Civ.5.9-12; D2.Civ.10.9-12; D2.His.3.9-12; D2.His.12.9-12	
Staging the Question	This activity highlights the Life Road Maps strategy. At the conclusion of the lesson, students will draw a map of Ida and Stacey's lives that highlights the important events and decisions that shaped their identities. To begin, write the compelling question on the board. Ask students to think about the question for a minute. Have students turn to a neighbor and share responses. Inform students that today they will examine two African American women who were born without power or privilege but who sought to change their lives and the lives of others by working the democracy.	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
How did the lack of power influence the core beliefs of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Stacey Abrams?	How did Ida B. Wells and Stacey Abrams use power to work the democracy for the greater good?	Challenging power takes courage and sometimes results in ostracism. Can you think of times where Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Stacey Abrams felt alone?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source A (Ida) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source B (Stacey) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Small group: Based on primary source analysis, respond to supporting question 1.</p> <p>Timeline: Create two timelines that represent significant events and choices in Ida and Stacey's lives.</p> <p>Journal Entry 1: Have students construct a journal entry for Ida and a journal entry for Stacey focusing on how the lack of power influenced their core beliefs.</p>	<p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source C (Ida) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source D (Stacey) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Small group: Based on primary source analysis, respond to supporting question 2.</p> <p>Timeline: Update both timelines in light of new information gathered.</p> <p>Journal Entry 2: Have students construct a journal entry for Ida and a journal entry for Stacey focusing on how both women used their power (or lack thereof) to work the democracy for the greater good.</p>	<p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source E (Ida) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Primary source analysis: Analyze Primary Source F (Stacey) using primary source analysis sheet.</p> <p>Small group: Based on primary source analysis, respond to supporting question 3.</p> <p>Timeline: Update both timelines in light of new information gathered.</p> <p>Journal Entry 3: Have students construct a journal entry for Ida and a journal entry for Stacey focusing on how both women felt alone as they worked the democracy for the greater good.</p>
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: A Legal Brief for Ida B. Wells' Lawsuit: https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/ida-b-wells-and-anti-lynching-activism/sources/1113</p> <p>Source B: Chapter 1 from <i>Minority Leader</i> (pp.1-25), particularly sections "I Know You Are, But What Am I" and "What's Love Got to Do With It" (pp. 7-15), available online at: http://subwayreads.org/book/minority-leader/</p>	<p>Source C: Coverage of the March of 1913 (<i>Chicago Tribune</i>, March 5, 1913, p. 5, available on newspapers.com; www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/the-march-of-1913/); and the 100th anniversary of the March, commemorated in the <i>Washington Post</i>: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/03/03/despite-the-tremendous-risk-african-american-women-marched-for-suffrage-too/</p> <p>Source D: Chapter 1 from <i>Minority Leader</i> (pp.1-25), particularly the section "I Don't Want What I Haven't Got (And Other Lies)" (pp. 15-25), http://subwayreads.org/book/minority-leader/</p>	<p>Source E: The March of 1913 (www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/the-march-of-1913/) and the 100th anniversary of the March, commemorated in the <i>Washington Post</i>: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/03/03/despite-the-tremendous-risk-african-american-women-marched-for-suffrage-too/</p> <p>Source F: Chapter 8 from <i>Minority Leader</i> (pp.175-195), particularly the section "First Things First," (pp. 179-186)</p>
Summative Performance Task	Argument	<p>Explain to students that they will be drawing a "map" of someone's life. Before students draw their maps, have them brainstorm things people might encounter when they take a trip or journey. Items on this list might include stop signs, speed bumps, traffic lights, dead ends, detours, highways, tolls, and rest stops. Give students the opportunity to discuss what these items might represent when applied to the metaphor of "life as journey." For example, a dead end might represent a decision that did not yield the desired result. A green light might represent getting approval to move ahead.</p> <p>In small groups, have students construct "life road maps" for Ida and Stacey. Provide students with a large piece of bulletin board paper or chart paper. Remind students that this journey should represent important decisions and events that shaped Ida and Stacey's lives. Encourage students to add details to their maps, including facts that may have influenced decisions, such as historical events, important relationships, goals, beliefs, and aspects of human behavior (fear, prejudice, etc.).</p> <p>Have students share their work as a gallery walk. As students review the work of their classmates, ask them to pay attention to similarities and differences among the maps. As students partake in the gallery walk, have them reflect on the following questions:</p> <p>What factors influence the choices people make? What factors help people move forward and make progress? What factors set people back?</p>
Taking Informed Action	As a culminating activity, ask students to reflect on the following question: How can you use power to work democracy for the greater good?	

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Conclusion: Win for Democracy

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment did not mean the fight for the ballot was over for African American women. Many scholars claim this fight came to fruition in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, ensuring the civic right to vote for all Americans. Yet, as Georgia's recent gubernatorial race illustrates, the struggle continues. In history books we will read that neither Ida nor Stacey were successful in their political races for office. Ida lost her Illinois Senate race to Adelbert Roberts and Stacey lost the Georgia governorship to Brian Kemp. The problem here is that history is written by and for the winners. Both women challenged and pushed the boundaries of a system rigged against them on a variety of levels. They showed that the power of the ballot encompasses both political activism and participation. Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Stacey Abrams have transformed the narrative and proved that with enough mobilization, traditionally marginalized voters can have a voice in America's democracy. If this is not a "win" showcasing successful and exemplary leadership, then what is?

A Note on the Lesson Idea

The lesson presents an engaging strategy for deepening students' historical knowledge of the long fight for voting rights in the United States and the significant roles played by Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Stacey Abrams. The lesson is meant not only to compare and contrast the two women, but also to allow students to grapple with the reality that the fight for the ballot box continues to this day. 🌍

Notes

1. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York, N.Y.: New York Age Print, 1892), and *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Privately published, 1895).
2. Ida B. Wells-Barnett wasn't the first to challenge discrimination on public transport. Catherine Brown defied riding in the "colored car" on her train ride from Alexandria, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., in 1868. The case ultimately came before the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in her favor in 1873. The federal government's support of Black civil rights, however, was ephemeral, as it repealed

the Civil Rights Act in 1883. Thus, Ida's case was the first one after Blacks had to appeal to state courts for justice. See Evelyn B. Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (1992): 251–274.

3. Greer and Adams. *Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad Company v. Ida B. Wells*. 1885. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <http://cdm15838.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15838coll7/id/283>.
4. Ida B. Wells, *How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings*. NAACP Papers, of United States. Library of Congress. Manuscript Division (Reel 8, Part I: Meetings of the Board of Directors, Records of Annual Conferences, Major Speeches, and Special Reports, Proceedings of the National Negro Conference, May 1910, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.), 1-20, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2561784.
5. The Illinois Suffrage Act, granting women in Illinois limited voting rights, including the right to vote for president and local officers, passed in June 1913. Voting for legislators on the state and federal level, however, was not granted until the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment seven years later. From "100 Most Valuable Documents at the Illinois State Archives," www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/online_exhibits/100_documents/1913-il-suffrage-act.html
6. Wanda A. Hendricks, "Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago," in: *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, Oregon: New Sage Press, 1995), 270.
7. Stacey Abrams, *Minority Leader: How to Lead from the Outside and Make Real Change* (New York: Henry Hold Company, 2018), xviii.
8. Abrams, *Minority Leader*, xx, 75.
9. *Ibid.*, 42-43.
10. *Ibid.*, 15-21.
11. *Ibid.*, 54-55.
12. Alfreda M. Duster (ed.), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 346.
13. "Afro-American Women the Pride of Chicago," *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1914:1, col. 5.
14. Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 217, 239.
15. *Ibid.*, 242.
16. Abrams, *Minority Leader*, 200.

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