

Preface

We write this preface in May 2025, more than 100 days into a new presidential administration, just ahead of the 250th commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Yet again, the struggle for the nation's identity is at a crossroads. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of voting rights. Much ink will inevitably be spilled on the clash between the current administration's assault on basic constitutional rights, legal norms and civic society, and the rights of We The People. The United States has often struggled on its uneven path to become a more perfect union. We are in the midst of one of those times, as the forces of reaction threaten basic liberties which have made the country a beacon of democracy. The core achievements of the Second Reconstruction are under attack over 50 years later, especially in the area of voting rights. Also under assault are America's institutions of higher education, the main focus of this book: colleges and universities are in a fight not seen since the McCarthy era to preserve their autonomy and maintain their reputation as bastions of learning, rigorous research, and knowledge production. As this book shows, the United States has also been the home of resistance and reform, what the late Congressman John Lewis called "good trouble." Much of the book focuses on how civic actors in college communities, including students, faculty, and academic administrators, abetted by committed lawyers and advocates, have resisted threats to the right to vote, and in particular the youth vote.

This book was born from an academic project supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Higher Learning Team that was developed in response to a call for academic proposals on the theme of civic engagement and voting. The proposal to Mellon was a continuation of the collaboration of the two editors of this volume, Jonathan Becker, professor of political studies and vice president for academic affairs at Bard College, who is also the founding director of Bard's Center for Civic Engagement, and Yael Bromberg, a 26th Amendment legal scholar, adjunct law professor, and constitutional rights litigator. Becker and Bromberg previously worked together on litigation to establish a polling station on the Bard campus in upstate New York and subsequently, together with good government groups, on legislation that mandated on-campus polling sites on qualifying colleges across New York State. The proposal was informed by a symposium that Bromberg organized at Rutgers Law School on the promise of the 26th Amendment that included legal scholars, election administrators, members of the advocacy community, and university administrators, and which resulted in the first legal volume on the constitutional amendment to be published, by *The Rutgers University Law Review*.

The Mellon proposal envisioned the development of an academic course and teaching materials that focused on three overlapping questions: *What has been the role of college communities in the fight for suffrage? How has the fight for student voting rights been shaped by past voting rights struggles? What are the lessons for organizing, advocacy, and strategic litigation for student voting rights within the broader struggle for American democracy?*

The course, entitled “Student Voting: Power, Politics, and Race in the Fight for American Democracy,” chronicles the histories of the fight for the vote on four college campuses—Bard College, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU), and Tuskegee University—and uses them as a prism through which to explore the history and evolution of voting and American democracy, with particular attention to issues of youth, race, and political power, and the role of various civic actors within college communities.

The ideas in the book emerge from this shared curriculum, co-designed and taught across the four institutions featured in this book, each of which possesses a distinct history related to voting, all of which have overcome tremendous obstacles involving multiple state and federal lawsuits which included students, faculty, and/or administrators acting as litigants, including two U.S. Supreme Court cases that have established precedents related to student voting and gerrymandering.

Three of the partner colleges are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) which offer distinct perspectives on the mission of higher education as they address and deal with the legacy and consequences of America’s original sin of slavery.

Faculty from each of these colleges contributed to the ideas and understanding of the book’s subject matter, and authored the individual case studies found in this book:

- North Carolina A&T State University (Greensboro, North Carolina), with historian Dr. Jelani M. Favors, United Negro College Fund Vice President and Senior Director of the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, and formerly the Henry E. Frye distinguished professor of history at NC A&T, and inaugural director of the Center of Excellence for Social Justice. Dr. Favors’ previous publications include *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership & Activism*, a book which focuses on the prominent role of HBCUs as essential institutions for the African American community, fostering what he calls a “second curriculum” which has shaped the political destiny of the United States.
- Prairie View A&M University (Prairie View, Texas), with endowed professor of political science Dr. Melanye T. Price, the inaugural director of the Ruth J. Simmons Center for Race and Justice. Dr. Price’s research focuses on Black politics

and political psychology. She authored the books *The Race Whisperer: Barack Obama and the Political Uses of Race*, and *Dreaming Blackness: Black Nationalism and African American Political Opinion*. The case study herein for Prairie View A&M was co-authored by PVAMU political scientist Dr. Michael J. Nojeim, whose research focus is on peace and non-violent resistance, and whose publications include the book *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance*. Co-author Dr. Alexander Goodwin is a Prairie View A&M alumnus and assistant professor of political science at Southwestern University whose research focuses on race and ethnic politics.

- Tuskegee University (Tuskegee, Alabama), with Dr. Lisa Bratton, a historian whose primary research focuses on resistance by the enslaved at Historic Brattonsville, the South Carolina plantation on which her ancestors, Green and Malinda Bratton, were enslaved. She also served as a historian for the National Park Service Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and interviewed over 250 of the Tuskegee Airmen.
- Bard College, with political scientist Dr. Simon Gilhooley, who specializes in American politics and political thought. His research addresses issues of constitutionality and authority within the American polity. His book, *The Antebellum Origins of the Modern US Constitution: Slavery and the Spirit of the American Founding*, explores the development of the idea of the Constitution as representative of a historical spirit and the emergence of this idea within the historical context of antebellum slavery. Bard administrator and vice president of civic engagement Erin Cannan authored a separate chapter in this book, focused on the practical work that institutions of higher education can do to support election administration in service of student voting rights.

By exploring these institutions' voting rights legal struggles in chronological order, the book teaches readers about the evolution of the right to vote, and examines the fight to vote from the perspective of college communities, which collectively host approximately 40 % of 18- to 24-year-olds in the nation, and in concentrated populations averaging 6,350 students, and up to 50,000 students. Undergraduate students make up approximately 6.5 % of the voter-eligible population in the United States. These young voters comprise an overlooked and underexamined protected constitutional classification with respect to ballot access pursuant to the 26th Amendment, and their decision to participate, or not to participate, in local, state, or national politics has the power to determine electoral outcomes.

This book captures a vision of what can exist when democracy functions in its fullest forms; the dynamic footwork required to fulfill that vision through a combination of persistent organizing, advocacy, education, and, when necessary, liti-

gation; and a gasp of what may result if we fall short of achieving accountable and reflective representation.