LEADER GUIDE · CHAPTER 1

Voter Disenfranchisement
& Threats to Democracy

A flexible group-study curriculum designed to work alongside *The 1619 Project* documentary series. Use all the modules, select only those that fit, change the order, and/or add your own activities.

How to use this guide

This is a modular program, not a script. A group can use one module, combine two or three, or run the full program.

Time required: 30–120 minutes.
The exact length depends on which modules and discussion activities you choose.

Facilitator mindset

- The goal is not to teach everything about voting rights in one sitting.
- Notice how voting access is shaped by law, administration, power, geography, race, class, disability, citizenship and other forces.
- Make room for questions and continued learning, without forcing consensus.
- Choose examples that fit your participants and their region.

Four modules

A **ECC Web Resources**
Readings and voting-rights timeline. ~15 min.

B **1619 Project Film or Reading**
Selected Episode 1 segments, or Chapter 1 reading. ~35 min. of film.

C **Discussion, Activities & Role Play**
Three activities, including the 30-role mixer. ~45 min.

D **Community Context Speaker**
Ras Smith video and discussion. ~15 min.

Before participants arrive

☐ Select modules
☐ Test video/audio
☐ Print guides if needed
☐ Confirm video access
☐ Open readings
☐ Print role cards if using C3

A Every Chapter Counts Website Resources

Use these readings before the session or at the beginning. They provide a shared foundation for discussing changes in voting access.

1. **The Voting Rights Act: A Hard-Won Victory**
   everychaptercounts.org/learn/the-voting-rights-act-a-hard-won-victory

2. **Modern Voter Suppression: New Barriers, Old Tactics**
   everychaptercounts.org/learn/modern-voter-suppression-new-barriers-old-tactics

3. **Modern Voter Restrictions: What's New, What's Old, What's Repackaged**
   everychaptercounts.org/learn/modern-voter-restrictions-whats-new-whats-old-whats-repackaged

Interactive voting-rights timeline

Explore turning points from 1789 through 2026, showing expansion, restriction and continuing debate over access to the ballot.

Open the interactive timeline

Facilitation tips

- If time is short, assign one article to each small group and have groups report back.
- Distinguish between a right existing in law and that right being easy to exercise.
- Capture factual questions that merit follow-up; you do not have to settle everything in one discussion.

Discussion questions

1. Which barriers to voting appear in more than one period of history?
2. What changed after major voting-rights victories — and what did not?
3. What question from the readings would you want the group to investigate further?

B The 1619 Project: Film or Reading

Show selected segments from Episode 1, “Democracy,” available on Hulu, for an approximately 35-minute viewing sequence. The group may instead read Chapter 1 of the book, or use both.

Theme. The selected excerpts explore historical and modern efforts to restrict Black voting power and the continuing struggle to expand and defend access to the ballot.

Introduction and Project Thesis (00:00–02:15)

Voting and Disenfranchisement	(08:08–14:25)
Interlude: Perfectors of Democracy	(14:25–15:20)

The Civil Rights Era and the SNCC (31:12–40:11)

The Modern Restrictive Voting Laws	(40:35–49:14)
Interlude: Black Freedom Struggle as Foundational	(49:14–50:27)
Threats to Democracy in Modern Politics	(50:27–56:24)
Hope for the Future of Democracy	(56:24–58:15)

Reading alternative: In addition to, or instead of, watching the documentary excerpts, read Chapter 1, “Democracy,” by Nikole Hannah-Jones in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*.

Facilitation tips

- Pre-load Hulu and test the time-stamp jumps.
- Explain that the viewing is intentionally selective.
- Pause briefly after major sections for reflections.

Links

The 1619 Project on Hulu
1619 Project Educational Materials

Discussion questions

1. What past-to-present connection stood out?
2. Who shapes access to the ballot, and where does that power show up?
3. What challenged, complicated or expanded your understanding of democracy?

Selected film time stamps were created by Pulitzer Center Education staff for instructional use.

C Discussion, Activities & Role Playing Mixer

Use Module C as one 45-minute block or select its activities individually. Participants explore voter qualifications, changes in voting access, and the experiences of people who sought political voice.

1 Who should vote?

Invite participants to list what they think makes someone “qualified” to vote. Then listen to Fannie Lou Hamer describe her experience trying to register. Revisit the list: what was law, assumption, or barrier?

Watch Fannie Lou Hamer’s speech

Additional Fannie Lou Hamer reflections

1. Were you familiar with Fannie Lou Hamer before this group study? If so, did it deepen your understanding of her role in the struggle for voting rights? If not, why might her story have been unfamiliar?
2. How might race and gender have shaped whose contributions are emphasized or overlooked in widely taught histories?

2 How can voting rights be restricted?

After identifying a group whose political participation expanded, ask participants to predict how policymakers or administrators might make voting harder for that group. Compare with examples from the readings and film.

3 Who Gets to Vote? Role Playing Mixer

Assign role profiles spanning the colonial era to contemporary elections. Participants compare whose access to political voice was shaped by laws, institutions, economic forces and social pressures.

Role-play facilitation tips

- The first-person summaries are role-play prompts, not direct quotations. Participants need not impersonate anyone.
- For smaller groups, select roles across different periods and types of barriers.
- QR cards open full profiles on a phone; participants can print individual profiles using their device’s print options.
- If time permits, place roles on a shared timeline of expansions and restrictions.

Discussion questions

1. How did the role profiles show voting rights expanding and contracting over time?
2. Which restrictions appear neutral on paper but can affect groups differently in practice?
3. After hearing several perspectives, how would you now answer: “Who should vote?”
4. What reactions did you have to the biographies and portrayals of the people in the role-playing activity?

C3 Role Playing Mixer — Materials

Using the 30 profiles

Each role includes a short role-play summary and expanded context. The website also offers printable QR cards and a handout builder to assemble PDFs from any combination of profiles.

Phone access: You may use a cell phone to open individual profiles and print them using your device's print options.

Open Role Profiles & Handouts

Suggested activity flow

1. Assign one profile to each participant or pair.
2. Allow 3–5 minutes for reading and preparation.
3. Ask participants to exchange what shaped their character's access to voting.
4. Have each participant identify a similarity and a difference between roles.
5. Conclude with a timeline or list of expansions and restrictions.

Profiles included

1. Christia Adair
2. Preston Allen
3. Marsha Appling-Nunez
4. Nathan Bacheldor
5. Ruth Muskrat Bronson
6. Aracely Calderon
7. Floyd Carrier
8. Xitlaali Castellanos
9. Maggie Coleman
10. William T. Combash
11. Thomas Crawford
12. Frederick Douglass
13. Timothy Duffy
14. Oscar J. Dunn
15. Stuart Goldstein
16. Penny Grover
17. Fannie Lou Hamer
18. Larry Harmon
19. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
20. Gladys Harris
21. Joseph Jackson
22. Elzie McGill
23. Denise McQuade
24. Lawrence Aaron Nixon
25. Peter Williams Ray
26. Modesto Rodriguez
27. Lamar Smith
28. Melanie Taylor
29. Bhagat Singh Thind
30. Lee Yok

Portraits are illustrative; first-person summaries are role-play prompts, not quotations.

D Community Context Speaker — Ras Smith

Use Ras Smith's recorded talk to add a lived and civic perspective from Iowa. Participants can compare this specific context with experiences and questions in their own communities.



Ras Smith

Ras Smith is a Waterloo, Iowa, native who served in the Iowa House of Representatives for District 62 from 2017 through 2023. His community and professional work has included youth services, education, engagement, and advocacy.

Iowa Legislature biography

Video: Ras Smith on voting disenfranchisement

Approximately 13 minutes. Play during the session or ask participants to watch in advance.

Watch: https://youtu.be/jYGwZWDgPXk

Facilitation tips

- Introduce this as one perspective; it does not stand in for every Black community or every location.
- Listen for the interaction between personal experience, policy, institutions and place.
- Invite careful comparisons: "What feels familiar?" and "What is different where you live?"

Discussion questions

1. What does Ras Smith's perspective add that the readings and documentary alone do not?
2. Which issues feel specific to place, and which seem recognizable beyond Iowa?
3. What question, resource or next step should the group carry forward?

Closing idea

Voting rights do not move in a straight line. U.S. history includes repeated periods of expansion, restriction, organizing, defense and renewed contest.

Feedback, resources & session close

Participant feedback

Invite participants to respond to four prompts:

1. What part of the program was most helpful?
2. What could be improved?
3. What topic should Every Chapter Counts present next?
4. Other comments.

Use the program-specific feedback form on the curriculum website. Responses go to collectiveecc@gmail.com.

Open curriculum feedback

Further resource

ELCA Election Engagement Toolkit (PDF)

Close without forcing a conclusion

- Invite each participant to name one thing learned and one lingering question.
- Point to the readings and links for continued learning.
- When appropriate, identify a concrete next step for the organization.

Leader checklist

- ☐ Modules selected
- ☐ Time plan set
- ☐ Hulu ready
- ☐ Ras video tested
- ☐ Readings opened
- ☐ Hamer video tested
- ☐ Role cards printed
- ☐ Guides printed
- ☐ Feedback link ready
- ☐ Follow-up identified

Online chapter and videos

Open the Group Study Curriculum
Watch Ras Smith's talk on YouTube

Module C activities are adapted from the Zinn Education Project teaching activity "Teaching About the Struggle for Voting Rights in the United States," by Ursula Wolfe-Rocca. Film time stamps were created by Pulitzer Center Education staff. This guide is a flexible facilitation resource.