

Narrator: New restrictive voting laws in states across the country present obstacles to the polls via voter ID laws, voter role purges, and poll closures. The collective impact on American citizens' right to vote follows the centennial celebration of the 19th Amendment and women's suffrage. In this episode of *Intersections: The RIT Podcast*, Nickesia Gordon, associate professor in the School of Communication at RIT, and 2021 criminal justice alumna Trinity McFadden, explore the convergence of race, gender and voting rights with historian Carol Anderson, professor of African American Studies at Emory University.

Nickesia: So, you were the keynote speaker for RIT's "Moving Forward: Suffrage Past, Present, and Future," our spring event where you focused your talk on your book "One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy." Could you tell us a little bit more about why you decided to write this book?

Carol: It was when I was out giving talks on "White Rage," the other book. And I would get to that chapter, "How to Unelect a Black President," which was about the massive backlash against the presidency of Barack Obama, the policy backlash. And one of those key policy backlashes was voter suppression because his candidacy brought out millions of new voters, overwhelmingly African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, young, and the poor. And the response was not to embrace this massive infusion of folks who are committed to democracy and who are voting, but instead to find ways to knock them out. So, these voter suppression laws come in place, and I'm giving these talks on "White Rage," and I get to the voter ID. And invariably I would get the question, "How hard is it to have an ID? Everybody has an ID. I don't understand why this is voter suppression." It told me that the narrative of, "This is a relatively easy middle-class norm that everybody has, and so this isn't suppression," that that marketing campaign had worked really, really well. And then by the time we got to the 2016 election and Black voter turnout had gone down by seven percent because this was the first presidential election in 50 years without the protection of the Voting Rights Act, which the US Supreme Court had gutted in 2013. And so, the language that we got from 2016 was, "Well, you know Black folks just didn't show up." What? And that led me to write "One Person, No Vote," to make clear, to make legible, not only the history of disfranchisement but also its modern-day iterations. To show how voter ID laws work, to show how voter roll purges work, to show how extreme partisan gerrymandering works, how poll closures work. All of this is cast in this race-neutral language that sounds reasonable. And there is nothing reasonable about denying American citizens the right to vote. So, the other component of that was to show the horrific impact of denying American citizens the right to vote. What that means for our policies, what that means for our engagement as a democracy, the way we swag through this world as a democracy when we are systematically identifying American citizens and saying, "There are extra hoops and hurdles you're going to have to jump through, and we're going to ignore all the societal structures that put those hoops and hurdles there that make it harder for you to jump." So, think about the 11-hour lines here in Atlanta to vote. Eleven hours to vote. And to say this to a working-class population, "I want you to stand in line for the entire workday, and so you're not going to get paid." And now we've got this new law that says you cannot provide any water or support for people standing in these long

lines. And it is destructive. It is designed to put these hurdles in front of folks. That's what led to "One Person, No Vote." It was seeing the impact, the destructive impact, that these laws have on voting rights for American citizens and seeing how clever the marketing had been to make this attack seem rational, reasonable, and in fact as a mechanism to improve democracy, to preserve the election integrity.

Trinity: This past election I was really most active. I was able to vote and everything and I was really focused on incarcerated people as well because they're counted in the census but they can't vote. Hearing you speak makes me speechless honestly that this happens in our communities.

Carol: And I love that you're honing in on felony disenfranchisement. You know that there was Amendment 4 in Florida in the 2018 election that was that ballot initiative to bring back the citizenship rights, the voting rights, for those who had a felony conviction. Florida was one of only four states in the nation that had permanent felony disenfranchisement. That Amendment 4 was to deal with a law that Florida passed in 1868. Congress passed the Reconstruction Act of 1867 which said that Black men can vote. The year after that, Florida passes its felony disenfranchisement law that creates a whole slew of laws that basically criminalize Blackness, criminalize Black people. These were laws that only targeted Black folks or were only enforced against Black folks. This is what creates the way that you can disenfranchise without saying, we don't want Black people to vote. You use felonies as the mechanism to stop Black voter participation. In Florida, 40 percent of Black men were not able to vote because of a felony conviction. Over 20 percent of all Black adults could not vote because of a felony conviction. And so, what we saw happening after the passage of Amendment 4, the Republican legislature just opened up its jaws and just clamped down hard and said, you are going to have to pay all of your fines, fees, restitution, court costs, everything to complete your sentence in order to get your voting rights back."

Nickesia: It sounds like this new poll tax that you mentioned in your book.

Carol: Yes! And what makes it even worse is that when the case went up through the courts, the Eleventh Circuit ruled that it was not a poll tax to require them to pay. But, you know, you get to vote if you haven't paid your income tax, you get to vote if you haven't paid your property tax. But here you've got to pay in order to be able to access the ballot box. And the court ruled that the state did not have to tell people how much they owed. So, it is like the worst of the poll tax that you have to pay and the worst of the literacy test where you're asked an unanswerable question and that becomes your access point to the ballot box. So, when you are asked an unanswerable question by the state and that is your access to your voting rights, that's what I mean when I say voter suppression is destroying our democracy. Because what this means for hundreds of thousands of voters in Florida is that they are silenced, it is civic death. As you noted, Trinity, they are counted in the census so that Florida is able to gain congressional representation off of their bodies, but they have no voice in that government. It is like the Three-Fifths Clause where back in the slavery days in the beginning of the constitution, they were able to count three-fifths of each enslaved person as part of the

census to get representation in congress, so that the slave-holding South could balance out its power.

Nickesia: Is this what you mean by in your book, Dr. Anderson, when you say it's the idea of being half slave and half free?

Carol: What I meant by that is that we have a nation where you have some states that are figuring out, how do we expand access to the ballot box for American citizens? How do we do that? You have Oregon with the automatic voter registrations, California with automatic voter registrations. And then California said we're going to do you one better, we're going to pre-register 16 and 17 year olds so that when they become 18 they're registered to vote. You've got these places, these states that are figuring out how we make voting accessible. Then you have these other states that are like, how do we shut this down? How do we shut American citizens down? This is where we are right now, when you're looking at the key legislation on voting rights: HR1 which is now sitting on the senate as S1 and HR4 which is the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. And how in an American democracy where you've got folks waving the flag talking about the greatest democracy on Earth, the greatest nation ever, how voting rights can be so hotly contested tells us so much about how there really is not this belief in a true multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious, vibrant democracy. So that's what I mean by half slave and half free. We've got a nation that is headed off in two separate directions, and it's creating all kinds of problems and turbulence in the system.

Nickesia: How do you see these new voting rights laws or I guess push back against the Voting Rights Act affecting what the 19th Amendment has meant for women and women of color?

Carol: So, you know when the 19th came into being, you had a massive exclusion of Black women. This is why you see Black women at the forefront in the civil rights movement on this battle to vote. This is why you see Fanny Lou Hamer, this is why you see Mrs. Amelia Boynton, this is why you see Ella Baker battling for the right to vote because Black women were shut out and shut down from access to the ballot box. What I see in this new iteration – so for instance, voter ID. With voter ID you've got to have all these documents that prove you are who you are in order to get the license, in order to get the state ID. Well, what happens when you get married? What happens when you get divorced and don't want to be anywhere near that man's name again? And so, women change their names, that is part of one of the norms in this society. That changing of the names creates enormous consequences for women voters as they're coming in with their little scraps of paper trying to prove they are who they are. It has an effect. What also has an effect are the kind of limited hours when you can vote. One of the things that we know deals with the feminization of poverty and what it means when the ballot box is only open for this narrow moment of time. Do you have time to stand in line for five hours, six hours and lose that paycheck for that day? Do you have time to stand in line for eleven hours and lose the paycheck for that day? The impact of that on the kind of decision-making process is real in terms of the effect of the impact that it has on women. This is why folks are mobilized and fighting because it is really clear what's

at stake. Democracy is at stake, your voice in policy making is at stake, the quality of your life is at stake.

Trinity: Before we close, I don't want to close, but what advice would you give to student leaders like myself or to students in my generation?

Carol: Fight. Mobilize, organize, engage. This is about your future. And your age group for the first time in a long time, your age group, you are the largest demographic in America. If your age group votes at the same rate as the Baby Boomers, we have a different America. It's like you've got the power. Never cede your power. You've got it, use it, flex it, flex it for good. You've got that ability. Bring it.

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