

Extended Bio of Janai Nelson

Janai S. Nelson is Associate Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF). As an organizational thought-leader at LDF, Nelson works with the President and Director-Counsel to determine and execute LDF's strategic vision and oversee the operation of its programs, including having served as interim director of LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute. She is also a member of LDF's litigation and policy teams, and was one of the lead counsel in *Veasey v. Abbott* (2018), a federal challenge to Texas's voter ID law. Prior to joining LDF in June 2014, Nelson was Associate Dean for Faculty Scholarship and Associate Director of the Ronald H. Brown Center for Civil Rights and Economic Development at St. John's University School of Law where she was also a full professor of law.

During her eight years at St. John's, Ms. Nelson launched and led an annual student program at the Supreme Court of the United States and assisted in the direction The Ronald H. Brown Prep Program for College Students, an award-winning law school pipeline program, among countless other service activities.

Ms. Nelson is recipient of the 2013 Derrick A. Bell Award from the American Association of Law Schools (AALS) Section on Minority Groups and was recently named one of [Lawyers of Color's 50 Under 50](#) minority professors making an impact in legal education. Her scholarship centers on domestic and comparative election law, race, and democratic theory and she has taught courses in Election Law and Political Participation, Comparative Election Law, Voting Rights, Professional Responsibility, and Constitutional Law. Ms. Nelson's most recent publication, [The Causal Context of Disparate Vote Denial](#), 54 B.C. L. Rev. 579 (2013), examines Section 2 of Voting Rights Act as a disparate impact standard and the racial dimensions of modern vote denial. Her article, [The First Amendment, Equal Protection, and Felon Disfranchisement: A New Viewpoint](#), 64 Fl. L. Rev. 111 (2013), explores the intersection of the First Amendment and the equal protection clause in reconsidering the constitutionality of felon disfranchisement in the United States.

In the year prior to joining St. John's faculty, Ms. Nelson was a Fulbright Scholar at the Legal Resources Center in Accra, Ghana, where she researched

the political disfranchisement of persons with criminal convictions and the advancement of democracy in Ghana. Her research as a Fulbright Scholar is the basis of a publication entitled, [*Fair Measure of the Right to Vote: A Comparative Perspective of Voting Rights Enforcement in a Maturing Democracy*](#), 18 *Cardozo J. Comp. & Int'l* 425 (2010). Prior to receiving the Fulbright award, Ms. Nelson was the Director of LDF's Political Participation Group where she oversaw all voting related litigation and matters, litigated voting rights and redistricting cases, and worked on criminal justice issues on behalf of African Americans and other under-served communities. While at LDF, she argued *en banc* before the Second Circuit and served as lead counsel in *Hayden v. Pataki*, a felon disfranchisement case that challenged New York State laws that deny the right to vote to people who are incarcerated and on parole for a felony conviction. She was also part of the team of civil rights attorneys representing African- and Haitian-American voters in *NAACP v. Hood* (a class action suit that arose out of the 2000 general elections) and one of the counsel representing a death row inmate whose sentence was commuted in 2003 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Banks v. Dretke*.

Ms. Nelson began practicing law as the 1998 recipient of an NAACP LDF/Fried Frank Fellowship. She received a B.A. from New York University and a J.D. from UCLA School of Law where she served as Articles Editor of the UCLA Law Review, Consulting Editor of the National Black Law Journal, and Associate Editor of the UCLA Women's Law Journal. Upon graduating from law school, Ms. Nelson clerked for the Honorable Theodore McMillian on the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit (1997-1998) and the Honorable David H. Coar on the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois (1996-1997). She has been published on issues of domestic and comparative election law, democracy, race, and criminal justice and is a contributor to Thomson Reuters and [Huffington Post](#). Ms. Nelson has also appeared on CNN, [InsideOut](#), [public radio](#) and other media as an election law expert and regularly speaks at conferences and symposia nationwide.