Perceived Enfranchisement and the Relevance of the Declaration of Independence

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The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

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The Declaration of Independence

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (emphasis added) (Declaration of Independence, 1776)

The preamble of the Declaration of Independence “established the concept of human rights, for the first time in history, as the basis for a republic” (Hitchens 3).
In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln cited the Declaration (not the Constitution) as the document that created “a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”. (emphasis added)

“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom ~ and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” (emphasis added) (Gettysburg Address)
My Project

- Raising the Issue & Creating Discourse
  - Survey
    - 61 responses
  - Newspaper (Targum) Article
Survey Responses

What do you think is meant (in terms of human/citizens rights) by the first sentence of this passage of the Declaration of Independence?

“That all people should have the same opportunity and ability to pursue the life they want”

“I think it means that it’s so completely obvious that everyone deserves life, liberty and happiness; so obvious that it shouldn’t be in the constitution, but it is just in case anyone violates it.”

“I think that it means that all humans regardless of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation were meant to be equal in the eyes of the law. Laws don't work unless they are equally mandated. I think the founders were generous in the definition because they wanted more people to be included under "all men" but the times just weren't progressive enough.”

“The first sentence of the declaration establishes an equal and non-discriminatory playing field for all Americans. It states that there are certain rights that all Americans possess such as freedom and a peaceful life.”
The Presence of Gender-Based Disenfranchisement

Seneca Falls Convention, “Declaration of Sentiments” (1848)

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” (emphasis added)
Equality Concerns

Do you feel that the ideals of equality and human rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence were intended to include you?

- YES: 38 (62.3%)
- NO: 22 (36.07%)
- UNSURE: 1 (1.64%)

If you answered yes to the first question, do you think that the modern United States government is doing a good job of protecting these ideals of equality and human rights for all citizens?

- “No. The government still explicitly excludes groups like gays from the same rights as a heterosexual citizen, and implicitly bars minorities like blacks from the same level of justice with the presence of a racially imbalanced and often racist police and justice system.”
- “No, upper class citizens are more equal than lower class citizens”
- “No, white men are treated far better than anyone else”
- “I think that there are many ways in which the government is doing a good job of protecting these ideals of equality and human rights for all citizens, however there are instances where the government falls short in accomplishing this.”
Equality Concerns Continued

If you answered no to the above, 1) why do you do feel that these ideals were NOT intended to include you? 2) Do you personal think that they should be extended to include you?

“Because even though the words say all people are equal, history lessons show that only white men considered each other equals. Black people and women were considered second class citizens and even today there is still alot of discrimination against minorities.”

“I am a woman and an immigrant in this country. Since the first line of the declaration states "all men" are created equally, it is evident that the forefathers intended the declaration to be application to only when, which was a common ideology of the time period. In addition, as evidence through the various acts during that time and the revolutionary period enacted by the American Government demonstrate, immigrants, especially those of non-Caucasian ancestry were always alienated from politics and only in recent times have these minority group gained any representation in the government and policies. I do think that the declaration should be extended to include me.”
Enfranchisement through the Declaration

- Keeping history relevant
  - Norman Lear Center
    - People For the American Way
  - Dr. Danielle Allen
    - *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration in Defense of Equality*
  - Clarence Thomas
    - Citing the Declaration of Independence in Opinions that he issues
Food for Thought

- What is the Declaration supposed to guarantee?
- What does it mean to YOU?
- What *should* it mean *to/for* YOU?
- Is it serving its purpose?
Bibliography

• Declaration of Independence (US 1776)
• Déclaration des Droits de L'homme et du Citoyen (1973)
• Declaration of Sentiments (Seneca Falls Convention, 1848)
• Lincoln, Abraham. “The Gettysburg Address” (1963)