

It's at the heart of antidiscrimination efforts and populist political uprisings.



POLITICS & IDEAS

Equality Is the Core of American Identity

When Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg characterized the U.S. as a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, he placed the idea of equality at the center of our national identity. But that raised questions that remain unsettled today: In which respects are we equal, and what are the practical consequences of our commitment to equality?

Five years before the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln offered his own answers in a speech at Springfield, Ill.: Because all of us are equal in our possession of inalienable rights, no one has the right to prevent anyone else from pursuing happiness, which means—among other things—improving one's material conditions by enjoying the fruits of one's effort. Slavery was wrong because it denied blacks their natural rights and deprived the enslaved of their inalienable right to rise through labor.

While Lincoln focused on equality of rights, many early Americans recognized that equality has other, deeper dimensions. The claim that we are all created equal gestured toward the theological proposition that we are all made in the image of God. This means that we are morally equal, of equal worth. No one—and no government—can rightly act as though some of us are worth more than others. Policies that give the interests of some individuals greater weight than others violate this principle.

The principle of equality has had civic and political implications as well. No divine right justified monarchical rule; neither God nor nature gave anyone the right to rule another. As Thomas Jefferson put it in a letter 10 days before his death, our inalienable rights mean that "the mass of mankind hasn't been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god." This bedrock civic equality is why all legitimate government rests on the consent of the people.

During the Revolutionary era and long afterward, the principle of civic equality was incompletely realized in practice. Most women and free African-Americans couldn't vote, and neither could white men who didn't meet their state's property qualifications. The principle of civic equality exerted constant pressure on these restrictions, and over time they were dismantled. Still, it wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted and enforced—nearly two centuries after our nation's birth—that this principle was fully realized in practice.

Another dimension of equality took a few decades after the Revolution to emerge fully. As the late historian Gordon Wood showed in his book "The Radicalism of the American Revolution" (1991), the principle of equality gradually undermined social hierarchies. In the 1770s, the legitimacy of aristocracy was still widely recognized. Half a century later, it had all but vanished.

In its place emerged an instinctive belief in social equality. Any American could look any other in the eye and say: Even if you happen to have more money or education or power, I'm as good as you are.

Thomas Jefferson took this belief one step further. "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor," he said, and "the former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter." The common sense of ordinary people is on a par (at least) with that of experts and educated elites.

This sense of social equality has dominated America since the 1820s, and it lies at the heart of populist uprisings that have occurred throughout American history. When one group of Americans seems to be claiming superiority, the others resent it and push back. Rural Americans hate being regarded as “hicks” by urban Americans. People with modest levels of education often feel that highly educated Americans look down on them. When experts claim that their views should dominate policy because they know more, the nonexpert majority usually insists, in a Jeffersonian spirit, that it is equally as competent to make the moral judgments that underlie public policy. When people who have accumulated great wealth argue that they are more qualified to lead than those who haven’t, ordinary Americans resist on grounds that rich Americans cannot understand what it means to live from paycheck to paycheck.

Antipathy to social hierarchy can go too far. Trained physicians aren’t infallible, but they are more likely to get diagnoses and prescriptions right than are the medical amateurs whose offerings crowd the internet. Communities considering infrastructure projects would be well advised to consult experienced engineers. And so on.

Still, in a society dominated by the sentiment of social equality, hierarchical claims are always on probation. When generals or economists or public-health experts or veteran politicians make big mistakes, insurgents can always oppose them by appealing to the common sense of ordinary Americans—and by doing so, they will usually win.

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