From Subjects to Citizens: Enlightenment Ideals in the Declaration of Independence

Demi Moore

Before the eighteenth century, political systems in Europe were largely grounded in hierarchy and inherited authority. Monarchs ruled by claims of divine right, and subjects were expected to be passive recipients of governance rather than active participants in political life. Power flowed from the top down, justified by tradition, religion, and long-standing social structures. In such systems, political legitimacy rested not on the will of the people but on lineage and divine sanction, leaving little room for dissent or reform. However, the intellectual and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment fundamentally challenged these assumptions. By emphasizing reason, empirical inquiry, and the inherent worth of the individual, Enlightenment thinkers questioned the legitimacy of absolute monarchy and reimagined the relationship between individuals and the state. Over time, these ideas traveled across the Atlantic, profoundly shaping the political imagination of the American colonies and establishing citizenship as the central foundation of political life.

By challenging the monarchy, the Enlightenment offered an alternative vision of politics rooted in rationality and civic responsibility. Thinkers argued that all individuals possess the capacity for reason and therefore should have a role in shaping the systems that govern them. This shift in thinking marked a move away from the notion of subjects, who exist under authority, toward citizens, who participate in the creation and maintenance of authority. Philosophers debated the origins and purposes of government, often concluding that political institutions were not divinely ordained but human creations designed to serve human needs. Thus, "[n]atural rights… became not just the slogans of revolutionary dissent but all the first principles of American citizenship" (Meyer 180). These ideas circulated widely through pamphlets, books, and transatlantic intellectual exchange, influencing colonial leaders who were increasingly frustrated with British rule. By the mid-eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophy had become a powerful lens through which colonists interpreted their political grievances, transforming local disputes into broader questions about rights, authority, and legitimacy.

The Declaration of Independence stands as one of the clearest expressions of Enlightenment political philosophy. Issued in 1776, the document reflects the influence of European thinkers on the Founding generation. Its most famous passage declares that "all men are created equal" and are endowed with "unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2026c). This assertion encapsulates the Enlightenment belief that natural rights are inherent in all individuals by virtue of their humanity, rather than being granted by rulers, thereby rejecting the idea that political authority derives from divine will or hereditary privilege. Instead, the Founders insist that legitimacy begins with the individual, fundamentally altering the basis of political life.

Equally significant is the Declaration's emphasis on consent as the foundation of government, reflecting the Enlightenment theory of the social contract developed by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The social contract describes an implicit agreement in which individuals consent to form a government to secure order, protect rights, and promote the common good, trading certain freedoms for protection and stability. Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, argues that without political authority, life would be a "war of all against all," where existence is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," making strong governance necessary to ensure peace (Hobbes). Locke, in the *Two Treatises of Government*, builds on this framework, arguing that because individuals are "by nature all free, equal, and independent." no one can be governed "without his own consent" (Locke and Shapiro 141). Thus, a social contract is formed when people "join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living." From this voluntary agreement emerges "one body politic," in which legitimate authority rests on the "consent of the governed" and the collective will expressed through political participation (Locke and Shapiro 142). The Declaration of Independence adopts the logic of the social contract by grounding legitimate political authority with the consent of the governed, making citizenship the basis of good governance.

The structure of the Declaration itself further reflects Enlightenment values, particularly its reliance on reason and evidence. After articulating its philosophical principles, the document presents a detailed list of grievances against King George III, describing a "history of repeated injuries and usurpations." These grievances include the denial of representative government, the obstruction of justice, and the imposition of unjust laws (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2026c). Rather than relying solely on emotional appeals, the Declaration constructs a rational case for independence, demonstrating that the colonies' decision to separate is grounded in a systematic pattern of abuse. In doing so, "Americans provided the world with what seemed an example of how rational men, acting with sober deliberation, could perform a monumental task of social engineering, creating a government based on the consent of the governed" (Meyer 171). By appealing to reason and shared standards of justice, the document treats its audience as rational actors capable of evaluating political claims. This approach contrasts sharply with earlier political traditions that relied on loyalty, custom, or divine authority, instead of positioning citizens as critical thinkers who must assess the legitimacy of their government based on its actions and adherence to universal principles.

At the same time, the Declaration reveals significant contradictions between its universal language of liberty and the realities of exclusion and enslavement. Abigail Adams's 1776 letter to John Adams exposes a sharp contradiction at the heart of the American Revolution and the ideals later enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. While the Founders proclaimed liberty and equality as unalienable rights, Adams questioned whether those values were truly consistent in a society that continued to deny freedom to others. She warned that she was "sometimes… ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be equally strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs," directly challenging the moral credibility of a revolutionary movement led by slaveholders. Her critique sharpens further when

she highlights the hypocrisy of a nation fighting against British "tyranny" while failing to apply the same moral logic to its own internal hierarchies of power. Her famous plea to "[r]emember the Ladies" adds a gendered dynamic to her analysis, warning that if women are excluded from the new legal order, they will have "no voice, or Representation" and therefore no obligation to obey its laws (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2026a). Ultimately, Adams's critique reveals that citizenship in the new republic was being defined in narrowly exclusionary terms, exposing how the Declaration's universal language of rights was undermined by a political order that granted participation and representation only to select groups.

The Declaration's contradictions become even more pronounced when examined through the lens of race and bondage. This tension is powerfully illuminated in Benjamin Banneker's 1791 letter to Thomas Jefferson, in which he appeals to the very principles Jefferson helped articulate. Banneker begins by acknowledging the "distinguished, and dignifyed station" of Jefferson while also noting the "almost general prejudice and prepossession… against those of my complexion," emphasizing that Black Americans had "long laboured under the abuse and censure of the world" and were often "considered rather as brutish than human." Drawing directly on Enlightenment ideals, he reminds Jefferson of the Declaration's claim that "all men are created equal," a principle he suggests must extend to enslaved Africans as well. Banneker sharply exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaims liberty while sustaining bondage, asking Jefferson to reconcile his revolutionary opposition to British tyranny with the continued "groaning captivity and cruel oppression" of enslaved people. In doing so, Banneker both affirms the Declaration's ideals and underscores the profound contradiction between its universal claims and the lived reality of racial injustice in the early republic (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2026b).

Nevertheless, these limitations did not diminish the long-term significance of the Declaration's principles. At the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton deliberately echoed the language of the Declaration of Independence in her Declaration of Sentiments, asserting that it is sometimes necessary for a group "to assume… a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied." She famously expanded the founding claim to declare that "all men and women are created equal," insisting that women are equally entitled to "inalienable rights" and that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." Like the Declaration, Stanton supported these claims with a list of grievances, arguing that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman," including the denial of suffrage and legal autonomy. By adopting both the structure and principles of 1776, she reframed women as citizens unjustly excluded from political participation, using Enlightenment ideals of equality and natural rights to demand full inclusion within the political community (U.S. Department of the Interior).

A similar dynamic unfolded in the struggle for racial equality, where abolitionists used Enlightenment ideals to expose the contradictions of a nation founded on liberty. Frederick Douglass, in his 1852 speech, forcefully denounced the hypocrisy of celebrating freedom while maintaining slavery, declaring that "the character and conduct of this nation never looked

blacker… than on this 4th of July!" He framed slavery as a direct violation of the very principles of liberty and justice that the United States claimed to uphold, insisting that the nation was "false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future." Drawing on the Enlightenment emphasis on natural rights, Douglass rejected the need to even argue for the humanity of enslaved people, asserting that "the manhood of the slave is conceded" and that there is no need to prove what is already universally understood. Instead, he exposed the moral contradiction at the heart of American democracy, condemning a system that denied Black Americans the rights it proclaimed as universal. In perhaps his most powerful critique, he described the Fourth of July as "a day that reveals… the gross injustice and cruelty to which [the slave] is the constant victim," calling American liberty a "hollow mockery" (Douglass). Like other reformers, Douglass did not reject the principles of the Declaration of Independence; rather, he demanded their full and consistent application, using Enlightenment ideals as a moral standard to argue for the expansion of citizenship and the realization of genuine political equality.

Ultimately, the importance of the Declaration of Independence lies not only in its role as a founding document but in its redefinition of political agency. By centering citizenship and grounding political legitimacy with the consent of the governed, it decisively breaks with older models of hierarchical rule. Its embrace of Enlightenment ideals—natural rights, equality, reason, and the social contract—establishes a framework in which individuals are both the source and the guardians of political authority. Although its promises were initially limited and imperfectly realized, the principles it articulates have had a lasting and transformative impact in shaping democratic thought and providing a powerful language for demanding justice, equality, and accountability. In this sense, the Declaration is not merely a historical artifact, but an enduring statement of what politics can and should be when grounded in the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

References

Douglass, Frederick. 2026. "What to The Slave Is The 4th of July?" *Teaching American History*, teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-2/.

Hobbes, Thomas. 2026. "Leviation." *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm#link2HCH0014.

Locke, John, and Ian Shapiro. 2023. *Two Treatises of Government: And a Letter Concerning Toleration*. Yale University Press.

Meyer, D. H. "The Uniqueness of the American Enlightenment." *American Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1976, pp. 165–86.

U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 2026. Declaration of Sentiments. www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2026a. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2026b. Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson, 19 August 1791. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0049

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2026c. Declaration of Independence: A Transcription. www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript