

The Unfinished Promise: Democracy Beyond the Glass

Ellie Sileo

Every year, over a million people stand before the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives, reading words practiced and preached for as long as we can remember. The document sits behind glass, carefully guarded, as something that stands uncontested. The room is unbelievably quiet and still. The Declaration still speaks, but we do not know how to respond. As we approach the 250th anniversary of its signing, that silence feels increasingly uneasy. American democracy is not defined by distant theoretical debates anymore, but by daily questions of power, truth, and participation. In an era of such deep political fragmentation and lost trust in institutions, the Declaration's relevance is no longer measured in how often it is admired in the Archives. Its relevance is now measured by whether its claims about equality, rights, and self-government are taken seriously enough to be defended, enforced, and challenged.

The Declaration of Independence remains relevant today because it established a standard to use to judge democracy. Rather than functioning as a legal code, it reads as a public argument grounding political legitimacy in universal principles like natural rights, equality, and the consent of the governed. While doing so, it also invites future generations to measure reality against these claimed principles. Its power lies not only in what it achieved in 1776, but more so in how it continues to function as a framework for accountability. As I have come to understand democracy more as a practice rather than an inheritance, the Declaration has shifted from being a historical artifact to a living reference point that informs my thoughts about civic responsibility, public truth, and the role that we are supposed to play in sustaining democratic life as students and ordinary citizens in our communities. Interacting with the Declaration through both personal experience and current democratic challenges exposes how, at its 250th anniversary, it is not only relevant, but unfinished.

At its core, the Declaration is a claim about moral legitimacy and political authority. Drawing on Enlightenment ideas of natural rights, it declares that all people are born equal and hold inherent rights that no government may rightfully deny. These principles are labeled “self-evident,” because the authors strived to persuade the public that moral truth could stand independently from tradition or power. The Declaration does not merely announce independence; it forms an argument and lays out the conditions under which resistance is justified. By appealing to reason and shared values rather than using force, it adopts an engaged public capable of judgement, which is a foundation for any democratic society. Communicating with the Declaration in this way invites public reasoning about justice, authority, and the limits of government that is more than acceptance of a static historical proclamation.

The Declaration utilizes universal language, but it was written in a nation that denied its promises to many of the people living under it. Enslaved individuals, women, Indigenous communities, and those without property were all excluded from the political community the document imagined. This contradiction is often used as evidence of hypocrisy in the Declaration, but it is also strong evidence of its enduring power. By rooting political legitimacy in universal principles rather than historical precedents, the authors created a standard that exceeded their own intentions. Frederick Douglass later argued that the Declaration's language could be manipulated against the systems of exclusion that defined its founding, insisting that its promises belonged to all Americans, not just its authors (Edwards and Lash). Scholars at the National Constitution Center note that the Declaration's promise of equality gained its power because

later generations implemented its language to push the nation towards greater justice and inclusion (Slauter). The Declaration's failure to live up to its ideals does not negate its relevance, but it explains why the document has remained central to movements for democratic reform throughout American history.

My first encounter with the Declaration was analyzing it as a settled truth, not a contested political argument. In my classrooms, it was presented as the philosophical foundation of a democracy that worked as it promised. Equality was framed as a defining national characteristic and not an ongoing struggle. Rights were described as guarantees and not demands. Over time, however, the gap between this narrative and lived reality became increasingly difficult to ignore and excuse. Political inequality, disillusionment with institutions, and inequitable access to power has complicated the simple truth that I had been taught. The Declaration feels less like a description of American democracy and more like a question posed to it that demands an answer from every generation under its words.

This question became tangible to me when I began working in Lehigh University's student-run newspaper, *The Brown and White*. Journalism transformed democracy from an abstract ideal into a daily practice that is rooted in information, communication, public trust, and accountability. Reporting and editing stories required me to engage directly with institutional power, translate complex ideas into accessible language, and decide which truths deserve attention. I learned that democracy depends not only on formal rights, but on the continuous circulation of accurate information. *The Brown and White* newsroom has taught me that participation in democratic life occurs through the public exchange of truth, argument, and accountability.

Viewing the Declaration through this lens, it begins to resemble an early act of American journalism. It was written for a public audience, organized about grievances, and grounded in an appeal to shared values rather than force. The earliest copies of the Declaration were printed and circulated rapidly across the colonies, spreading like breaking news and reinforcing that the founding itself depended on public communication (Mather). Like effective reporting, the document sought to persuade through evidence and moral reasoning. It trusted readers to recognize injustice once it was clearly articulated to them. The founders did not assume obedience, they assumed judgement. This assumption that the public can evaluate power when given information lies at the heart of both the Declaration and a free press. Being a journalist has made it clear to me that the Declaration's legacy is not only philosophical, but it is practical. Democracy survives and thrives through the public articulation of truth.

Journalism also exposed the risks inherent in democratic participation. Publishing uncomfortable or hidden truths invites criticism, misinterpretation, and, at times, hostile reactions. Decisions about timing, framing, and sourcing carry real consequences, especially in our deeply polarized society. These experiences reinforced that responsibility does not mean disengagement, and that defending accuracy and fairness requires taking a clear stand. The Declaration itself was a risk. It placed its authors in direct opposition to established authority. Both journalism and democratic founding demand the ability and willingness to speak publicly before consensus forms, trusting that truth can withstand resistance.

The Declaration's relevance at 250 is intensified by the challenges American democracy faces today. The spread of misinformation, declining trust in institutions, and intense political polarization have weakened the shared reality that democratic decision-making and conversation depends on. These are not just political problems; they are informational and communal problems. When citizens lose confidence in the truth of what they hear and read in the media and

in conversation, consent of the governed grows fragile. In this context, the Declaration's assumption of an informed public is aspirational and very endangered. Its vision of democracy calls for active cultivation, especially through institutions that prioritize transparency and accountability.

Living in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania has made the stakes of democracy apparent. Northampton County played a pivotal role in determining the outcome of this swing state during the 2024 election. National politics narrowed into the rhythms of our daily life at this time. On Election Day, countless other students and I waited in line for seven hours to vote at South Side's Banana Factory, standing in a line that stretched for blocks with a record voter turnout. This experience was frustrating and tiring, but also very clarifying. As the community section editor and reporter on *The Brown and White*, I am very connected to the people and institutions that make up our local community. This connection has reshaped how I understand democracy as a set of shared values negotiated publicly and imperfectly, rather than as an abstract ideology. Covering local stories has revealed to me how much communities hold in common, even amid political division. We want fairness, dignity, and to have our voices heard. I have learned that democracy does not require unanimity, but it calls for sustained participation during disagreement. The Declaration's emphasis on consent and accountability fades from being a distant theory to feeling more like a daily obligation to the community.

Commemorating the Declaration's 250th anniversary requires more than symbolic reverence. To truly interact with the document is to challenge it. It calls for expanding democratic participation, committing to equality as a lived reality by all, and confronting institutional failure when the government no longer secures the rights it claims to protect. The Declaration does not present democracy as self-sustaining. Democracy depends on citizens who are willing to question authority, demand justification, and stay engaged even in uncertain times.

My experience in journalism has shaped my understanding of my role in this unfinished democratic promise. Civic responsibility is not limited to formal political participation. It also includes the daily work of informing the public and holding power accountable. The skills I have developed through reporting, like critical inquiry, ethical judgement, and clear communication, are democratic skills. These skills reflect the same faith in public reasoning that upholds the role of the Declaration itself. As I carry these values forward in my life and in my community, I am committed to participation and resilience, even when democratic institutions fall short.

It is easy to mistake preservation for fulfillment when standing before the Declaration in the National Archives. The document's survival has never completely guaranteed the survival of the principles that it declares. Two hundred and fifty years later, the Declaration remains relevant not because it is safely archived, but because it is an unfinished promise. The future of the Declaration and American democracy depends on whether citizens are willing to practice its ideals through their actions. The question the Declaration poses has not changed since 1776: will its words remain behind glass, or will we accept the responsibility to bring them to life and fulfill their promise?

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