

# Balancing Equality and Freedom: An Examination of Declarations of Independence

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## Introduction

The balance between expanding equality without diminishing freedom can be seen by examining how the structure and language of the Declaration of Independence has appeared in the declarations made by minority groups—specifically women and African Americans—throughout history.



## Declaration of Independence (1776)

The Declaration of Independence defined the values of the American Revolution and the nation. The working definition of equality is associated with life, liberty, happiness, and security. **“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.”**

Basic liberties claimed for the colonists included freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom to make decisions responsibly, and freedom to alter the government: **“it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”**

## Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

The Declaration of Sentiments, signed at the first Woman’s Rights Convention, used the language of the Declaration of Independence to redefine equality: **“all men and women are created equal.”**

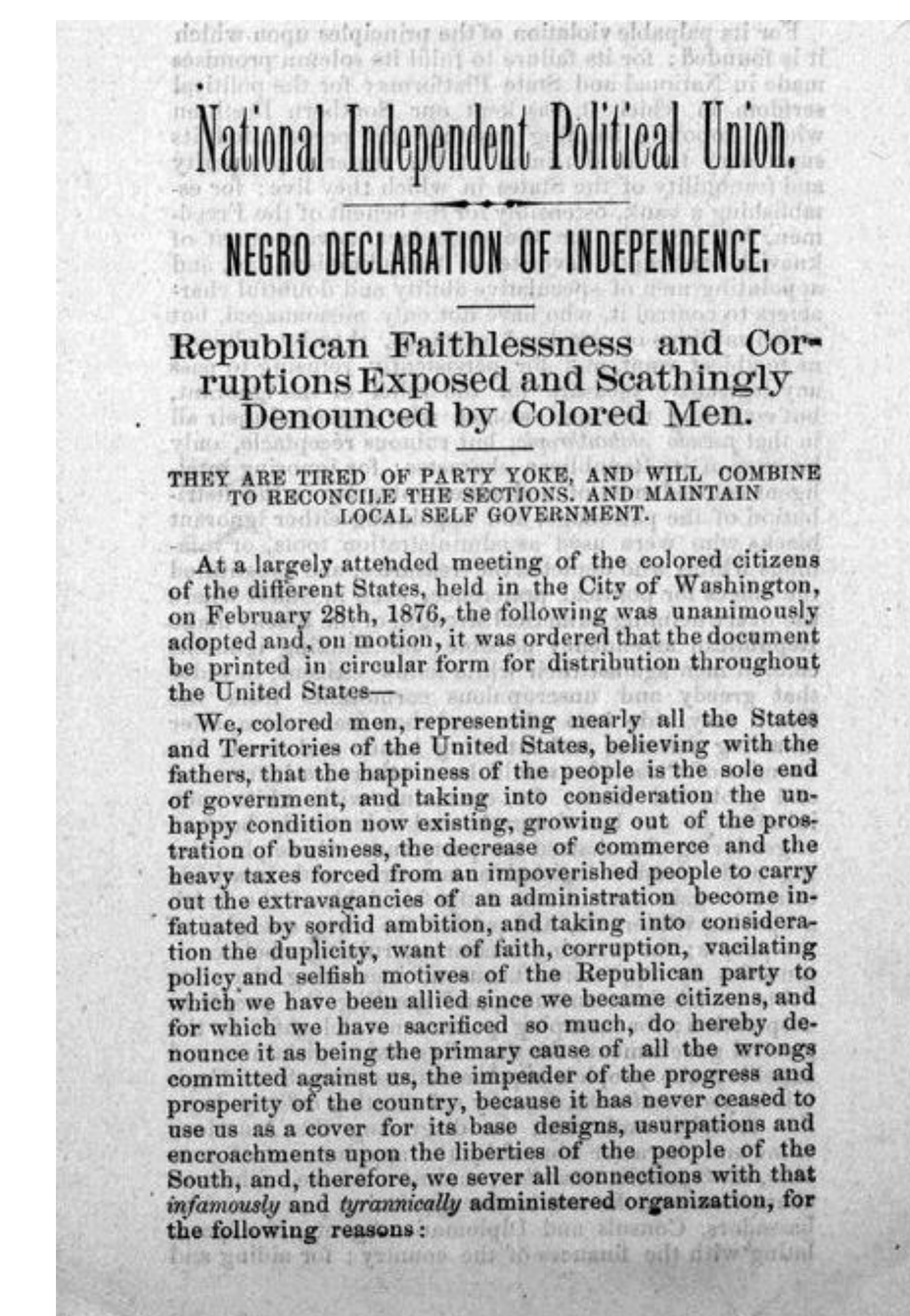
The document boldly demanded more freedom for women, specifically **“her inalienable right to the elective franchise.”**



Rather than claiming the right to “alter or abolish” unjust government, the Declaration of Sentiments states that **“it is the right of those who suffer from [destructive government] to refuse allegiance to it.”** The male majority, whose freedom would be threatened by greater liberty for women, forced women to compromise their own equality.

## Negro Declaration of Independence (1876)

The Negro Declaration of Independence redefined equality to include unity among men by encouraging African Americans **“to organize to the end that their ballots may subserve the peace of the country, the fraternization of all the people, and the prosperity and unification of all the sections of our undivisible Republic.”**



Freedom of thought, expression, and responsible decision making were claimed with the separation from the Republican Party: **“we propose to stand by principles, and will support only those men who will do the most for us.”**

White Americans prevented equality and sacrificed unity with African Americans to preserve their freedom.

## Significance

Minority groups—specifically women in the Declaration of Sentiments and African Americans in the Negro Declaration of Independence—used the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to claim American history as their own, redefine equality in more inclusive terms, demand greater freedom for themselves, and fight against compromises made in an attempt to balance equality and liberty within the nation.