



A DCI Issue Guide

Balancing Unity and Equality: The Case of Citizenship and Immigration

How should immigration policies balance national cohesion with a commitment to the equal dignity of all people?

About the Deliberative Series on American Values

As the United States nears the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the nation's founding, this Deliberative Series on American Values invites participants to reflect on the foundational ideals that have shaped our republic. Approaching this milestone in an era marked by historical amnesia and selective memory, the series aims to foster a more complete understanding of our nation's past and present. Each forum draws from both the Declaration and the Constitution's Preamble to explore a pair of core American values that often complement each other but also have been – and remain – at the heart of deep tensions, particularly during moments of national change. Through dialogue grounded in history, informed by philosophical inquiry, and connected to current policy challenges, this series and this guide is designed to encourage thoughtful deliberation on how best to uphold and balance these enduring commitments in an ever-changing democracy.

Background

Introduction

250 years ago next July, the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and approved by the Second Continental Congress, formally separated the 13 colonies from British rule, placing the nascent country on the path to democracy. Beyond the Declaration's grievances against the Crown or assertions about the nature of government, one line stands out in the collective memory of the American people: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Those thirteen words and the doctrine of equality they promote have proven remarkably durable in American political culture. Referenced by the Seneca Falls Convention in its pleas for women's rights, Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King Jr. in his "I Have a Dream" speech, the foundational commitment to equality

established in the Declaration has guided the country in some of its most pivotal moments. However, equality has never stood alone as the nation's guiding value.

In 1787, as the US transitioned from the aspirational ideals of the Declaration to the practical governing framework of the Constitution, another value emerged as the Founding Fathers' first priority: unity. They open the Constitution's preamble not by echoing Jefferson's emphasis on equality, but by anchoring the preamble in a sense of shared purpose through the words, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union." This emphasis on unity, together with the Declaration's statement about equality, represents the importance of considering both the nation's egalitarian founding principles as well as its need to promote an enduring national identity. From the slavery debate to the New Deal to the failed adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment, the complementarities and conflicts between equality and unity have been a key feature of the American experiment.

This guide aims to provide some basic background information that can help readers better understand these dynamics for themselves. It does not answer how the US (or other countries) should manage the dynamics between unity and equality, but it instead offers historical context, presents a range of diverse perspectives on these values, and creates a foundation for informed and respectful dialogue about the path forward. With this information in hand, you and your fellow deliberators can decide for yourselves what unity and equality should mean to the US in the 21st century.

Understanding Equality and Unity in the American Historical Context

Despite the terms' ubiquity in modern discourse, nuanced definitions of equality and unity are surprisingly elusive. Fully grasping their meaning in political life requires a look at how our understanding of them has evolved over time.

Pathways towards Equality

The Founding Fathers' conception of equality reflected the views of their time, which differ from many contemporary interpretations. Stanford historian Jack Rakove contends that Jefferson did not understand equality through the prism of individual rights, but rather through the belief that the American colonists held the same rights as any other group of people to govern themselves.¹ Other scholars disagree, arguing that Jefferson viewed the Lockean ideal of

¹ ["When Thomas Jefferson penned 'all men are created equal,' he did not mean individual equality, says Stanford scholar."](#) Stanford Report. 2020.

individual natural rights as a central component of equality.² Even when approached from this perspective of personal liberties, women, marginalized racial groups, and those who did not own land did not always feel included in the promise of the Declaration, given their continued exclusion.³ Still, the Declaration was a momentous document at the time that lives on 250 years later for a reason: its bold, universal assertion of equality launched the US as a preeminent global model of liberal democracy and inspired revolutionary movements from 18th century France to post-World War II Vietnam.⁴

Though it could not cure many of the inequalities in pre-revolutionary America, the Declaration continued to serve as a national touchstone upon which people could stake their claims to equality.⁵ Improving upon the Constitution's initial avoidance of the concept of equality, the Reconstruction Amendments (13th–15th) abolished slavery and granted citizenship and voting rights to all racial groups, while the 19th Amendment established women's suffrage, allowing the United States to take steps toward realizing its founding promise. Most pertinent to the constitutional recognition of equality as a fundamental national value, the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause reads, "nor shall any State ... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." In a 1944 high school speech competition, Martin Luther King, Jr. contended that it was with these Reconstruction amendments, not the Declaration, that the American equality-based order truly began.⁶

Unfortunately, it took nearly a century after the Reconstruction amendments for their promise to be acted upon at the national level. Only with the end of segregation sparked by the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the prohibition on discrimination through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the crackdown on discriminatory voter qualification tactics via the Voting Rights Act of 1965, could the US credibly claim to have made its founding principle of equality a reality for all Americans.

Since the formal enshrinement of equality before the law, a new debate has emerged in American politics over the meaning of equality. Recognizing the continued impact of centuries of discrimination, proponents of policies like affirmative action that advantage historically marginalized groups contend that equality requires going beyond simply requiring that the law treat everyone the same.⁷ Others like Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, who authored

² "[Rights and the Declaration of Independence](#)." Bill of Rights Institute.

³ "[Equality in America: The Expansion of a Concept](#)." North Carolina Law Review. 1965.

⁴ "[The Declaration of Independence in Global Perspective](#)." Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

⁵ "[Thomas Jefferson's Vision of Equality Was Not All-Inclusive. But It Was Transformative](#)." Time Magazine. 2020.

⁶ "[How Martin Luther King Jr. Changed His Mind About America](#)." Time Magazine. 2022.

⁷ "[The case for affirmative action with professor Cara McClellan](#)." Penn Today. 2023.

the Court's opinion prohibiting affirmative action in college admissions, claim that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it," including forms of corrective discrimination.⁸ Such a view reflects a commitment to equal opportunity and identical treatment under the law, while some progressives argue for a focus on equal outcomes to address persistent disparities.⁹

Pathways towards Unity

Just as Jefferson and his contemporaries conceptualized equality very differently from how we might today, the American approach to unity has also evolved over time.

Initially, unity meant forming an entity that could preserve peace. It did not matter that residents of Massachusetts and Georgia had different cultures, practiced different religions, and held different normative views on slavery. It only mattered that, as John Jay put it in *Federalist No. 4*, the union could "put and keep [the nation] in such a situation as, instead of inviting war, will tend to repress and discourage it."¹⁰ After the 1786 Shays' Rebellion exposed the weakness of the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution's predecessor, Americans increasingly saw the need for a stronger framework to preserve the unity of the new republic.¹¹ As a young nation fearing international adversaries and domestic rebellions, the purpose of such unity was primarily to support a national government and military to maintain order and deter threats. In the years to come, however, unity would connect with many broader purposes and issues.

As the issue of slavery divided the country and inspired significant partisan violence, it became clear to some that unity should mean not only a shared system of governance to live under but also a common moral compass. The American system of federalism provides significant room for policy disagreement among states. However, amid the tumult of the country's clashes over slavery, Abraham Lincoln's famous line, "A house divided upon itself cannot stand," suggested that a modicum of shared values that united the country might be necessary for the American experiment to succeed.

Today, unity carries not just a political meaning, but a cultural one, as many Americans strive to share not only a government, but also a national identity.¹² Such identity can come from a sense of shared values, history, culture, and other sources. Regardless of its foundation, this

⁸ [*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*](#), 600 U.S. (2023).

⁹ *How to be an Anti-Racist*. 2019. Ibram Kendi, One World.

¹⁰ "[Federalist No. 4: The Same Subject Continued: Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence](#)." The Independent Journal. John Jay. 1787.

¹¹ "[3.1 Info Brief: Summary of Shays' Rebellion](#)." National Constitution Center.

¹² "[The Evolution of the American Identity](#)." Ipsos. 2021.

solidarity offers a source of comfort, creating a sense of connection with others that becomes especially meaningful during moments of national hardship, like in the days following 9/11.¹³ However, such unity can also be isolating for those who don't feel they fit in with the dominant conception of national identity, despite whatever pluralistic components it encompasses.¹⁴

Historical Interactions Between Unity and Equality

Understanding the concepts of unity and equality and how they interact in the abstract can be difficult. Examining three pivotal moments—debates over slavery, the New Deal, and the failed adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment—when the United States grappled with balancing these fundamental values, can help clarify their meaning and relevance to American society.

Slavery

Despite the egalitarian rhetoric preached during the revolutionary period, the original Constitution contained no mention of equality. Instead, it featured three provisions upholding the self-evidently unequal practice of slavery: the Three-Fifths Clause (counting slaves as three fifths of a person), the Slave Trade Clause (prohibiting a congressional slave trade ban before 1808), and the Fugitive Slave Clause (requiring runaway slaves to be returned to their enslavers). While many delegates to the Constitutional Convention had either normative or pragmatic reasons for opposing slavery, they nevertheless reluctantly agreed to these terms in the name of national unity.¹⁵

In the initial decades of the young republic, slavery was one of the largest sources of controversy. Every wave of westward expansion saw a related clash over slavery in the new American lands, escalating from debate in the halls of Congress to bloodshed in Kansas.¹⁶ The 1857 Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford* incited Northern uproar by ruling that Black people—whether free or enslaved—were not citizens and thus could not enjoy the privileges of the Constitution.¹⁷ The Election of 1860 punctuated this polarization: while the North voted primarily for antislavery candidate Abraham Lincoln, the South tipped largely for John Breckinridge, who demanded expansion of slavery to the territories.¹⁸ With the South's

¹³ “[What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity after 9/11](#).” Political Psychology. 2004.

¹⁴ “[Who Doesn't Count as an American: An Exclusionary Approach to National Identity](#).” University of Mississippi. 2019.

¹⁵ “[Historical Context: The Constitution and Slavery](#).” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

¹⁶ “[Slavery and other Domestic Challenges of Western Expansion](#).” American Battlefield Trust. 2023.

¹⁷ “The Reaction to the Dred Scott Decision.” Chapman University Historical Review. 2012.

¹⁸ “[United States presidential election of 1860](#).” Britannica. 2025.

subsequent secession over fears Lincoln would abolish slavery, the era of an ever-tenuous unity on slavery in American politics collapsed. The North was driven primarily by a renewed commitment to preserving the Union—and for some, an emerging dedication to basic ideals of equality—while the South sought to protect its autonomy over the issue of slavery.

Even during the Civil War, the Union had to make some sacrifices to its commitment to equality in the name of unity. While the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the Confederate-held territory in 1863, it took until 1865 and the end of the war for Lincoln to require border states—states such as Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri that continued to allow slavery while remaining in the Union—to liberate their slaves.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the Civil War also represents an example of unity and equality aligning. Lincoln wrote in 1862, “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it,” expressing national unity as his #1 priority.²⁰ However, because abolition and equality aligned with Lincoln’s principal goal of unity, the US could make progress on both values simultaneously.

During Reconstruction after the Civil War, the US ushered in an unprecedented level of equality. The ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments made equality the law of the land, invited Black Americans into politics for the first time, and continues to serve as the constitutional mechanism that marginalized groups use to seek relief from unfair practices. The promise of economic equality was embodied by General Sherman’s “40 acres and a mule” policy, providing freed slaves with the means to begin building prosperity after emancipation.²¹ This policy was never implemented, however, as white supremacist violence surged, and new laws stripped Black Americans of the rights Reconstruction had granted, setting the stage for the Jim Crow racial caste system that would endure until the Civil Rights Movement nearly a century later.²² After ten years of military occupation of the Southern states, an interest in unity and equality among the states prevailed over a focus on unity and equality across races.

¹⁹ “[The Border States](#).” National Park Service. 2017.

²⁰ “[Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 2. General Correspondence. 1858-1864: Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, Friday, August 22, 1862 \(Clipping from Aug. 23, 1862 Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, D.C.\)](#)” Library of Congress. 1862.

²¹ “[Juneteenth and the Broken Promise of ‘40 Acres and a Mule.’](#)” National Farmers Union. 2020

²² “[The Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws](#).” National Geographic Society. 2025

The New Deal

Deliberations about the New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's plan to revitalize the American economy in the wake of the Great Depression, also amplified deep tensions in American values. In many ways, the New Deal promoted and undermined both unity and equality in several different respects.

The rosier outlook on the New Deal argues that Roosevelt brought the country together during one of its greatest hours of crisis. In stark contrast to the polarized electorate of today, the New Deal coalition brought together everyone from labor unions to white Southerners to religious and racial minorities in the interest of common economic goals.²³ His administration also contributed to much of the cultural and identity-based unity we know today through its commission of major infrastructure projects (e.g., the Hoover Dam, LaGuardia Airport, and the Blue Ridge Parkway) and thousands of creative works (including over 4000 public murals).²⁴

The New Deal also took steps towards the ideal of equality. Roosevelt granted workers greater bargaining power, safety standards, and a minimum wage, bringing them closer to equality with the business owners who employed them.²⁵ In a 1941 speech, Roosevelt focused on the importance of delivering every American four freedoms: "freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear."²⁶ The most novel of these was freedom from want, which Roosevelt introduced as a fundamental right and sought to realize through Social Security and other welfare initiatives. Much like the "40 Acres and a Mule" policy during Reconstruction, this framed economic standing as an important facet in the equality debate.

However, the New Deal was not without criticisms regarding its impact on national unity. By bringing a redistributive agenda to the forefront of political discourse, the New Deal stoked class-based animosity.²⁷ The New Deal also incited controversy for its remarkable expansion of federal power, which continues to reverberate today.²⁸ Most concerning of all, Roosevelt's brief and failed onslaught on the Supreme Court's legitimacy amid an effort to pack the Court threatened Americans' unified belief in their three branches of government.²⁹

²³ "[Franklin D. Roosevelt: The American Franchise](#)." Miller Center of Public Affairs.

²⁴ "[The New Deal Put Huge Numbers of Unemployed Artists to Work](#)." Jacobin Magazine. 2021; [Post Office Murals](#)." University of Central Arkansas; [9 New Deal Infrastructure Projects That Changed America](#). History.com. 2025.

²⁵ "[Labor and the New Deal](#)." Labor Archives of Washington.

²⁶ "[FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech](#)." Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

²⁷ "[The Second New Deal and the Redefining of Liberalism, 1935–1938](#)." MacMillan USA.

²⁸ "[FDR's Presidency: 6 Controversies](#)." History Channel. 2023.

²⁹ "[How FDR lost his brief war on the Supreme Court](#)." National Constitution Center. 2024.

The New Deal also was disparaged on the basis of equality. Roosevelt largely excluded Black Americans from the progress of the era and avoided civil rights advocacy and anti-lynching legislation in order to keep southern Democrats in the New Deal coalition.³⁰ Moreover, many of the publicly funded jobs Roosevelt created, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, were reserved exclusively for men.³¹ Emphasizing the importance of equality of opportunity, some conservatives also bashed Roosevelt's welfare agenda as unequal by arguing it gave special benefits to certain groups while excluding others, such as farmers initially left out of Social Security.³²

The Equal Rights Amendment

Approved by Congress in 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) reads, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Despite marking a major stride toward gender equality, the amendment ultimately fell short of ratification by the required 38 states. In this case, appeals to national unity and cultural consensus overpowered the push for legal equality.

Initially drawing a bipartisan near-consensus level of support in Congress, the ERA derived great popularity from its promise of equality. Feminist advocates like Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman framed it as the "next logical step" after suffrage amid persistent legal gaps in women's rights.³³ Today, gender-based discrimination continues to be subject to a lower degree of judicial scrutiny than classes like race, religion, and national origin that are explicitly protected in the Constitution.³⁴ The ERA would have made gender equality a core constitutional principle.

However, eventually, the perceived threat the ERA presented to national unity predicated its demise. The ERA created a "war among women," as legal scholar Joan C. Williams put it, that polarized women concerned principally with preserving traditional women's values and privileges against those seeking a more expansive form of equality.³⁵ It fed prevalent fears that the amendment would undermine our current national unity and stoked divisions on issues like same-sex bathrooms, single-gender educational institutions, and female child custody

³⁰ "[Equal Rights and the New Deal](#)." Lumen Learning US History.

³¹ "[Who Were the Men of the CCC?](#)" National Parks Service. 2021

³² "[Running Against Social Security](#)." Daily Kos. 2012.

³³ "[The Equal Rights Amendment Explained](#)." Brennan Center for Justice. 2020.

³⁴ "[Intermediate Scrutiny](#)." Legal Information Institute.

³⁵ "[Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It](#)." Oxford University Press. 1999.

preferences.³⁶ In the end, a deference to the existing social order as a means of preserving unity won out over a commitment to formal gender equality enshrined in the Constitution.

Immigration: Tensions between Unity & Equality in the 21st Century

Before the 2024 election, 72% of American voters rated immigration as “extremely important” or “very important” to their choice that November.³⁷ In many ways, their concerns about immigration reflected a deeper struggle to navigate the tension between unity and equality that this issue brings into focus. As conflict over immigration has heated up over the changes in immigration policy that Donald Trump has enacted since taking office, it is important to trace this flashpoint for political strife back to America’s founding values.

American history has witnessed a range of historical approaches to immigration that have incorporated the values of equality and unity in different ways. The first century of the United States was characterized by relatively few limitations on immigration.³⁸ However, after the Civil War, amid growing economic anxieties and cultural tensions, the federal government began to impose stricter controls on who could enter and remain in the country, from a ban on Chinese migrants (the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) to numerical quotas based on national origin (as codified in the Immigration Act of 1924, which also banned immigration from Asia altogether).³⁹ These quotas capped annual immigration from any given country to 2% of the number of people from that country already living in the U.S. as of 1890, sharply restricting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe while favoring Northern and Western Europeans.⁴⁰

The next major turning point occurred in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the national origins quota system established in the 1920s. Looking to bring immigration policy more in line with the civil rights ideals of equality and nondiscrimination, the act replaced the national quota system with a preference framework based on family reunification and skills, opening the door to migrants from previously marginalized regions, including Asia and Africa.⁴¹ However, by placing new restrictions on Western Hemisphere migration despite the strong demand for labor in the US and the existing

³⁶ “[Who’s Afraid of the ERA?](#)” Smith College. 2023.

³⁷ “[Economy Most Important Issue to 2024 Presidential Vote.](#)” Gallup. 2024.

³⁸ “[A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present Day.](#)” Cato Institute. 2021

³⁹ “[A Century Later, Restrictive 1924 U.S. Immigration Law Has Reverberations in Immigration Debate.](#)”

Migration Policy Institute. 2024.

⁴⁰ “[The Immigration Act of 1924 \(The Johnson-Reed Act\).](#)” Milestones: 1921–1936. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State.

⁴¹ “[Fifty Years On, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Continues to Reshape the United States.](#)” Migration Policy Institute. 2015.

migration networks in Latin America, the act catalyzed large-scale undocumented migration across the Southern border.⁴²

With immigration across the Southern border increasing significantly in the two decades after the 1965 legislation, President Ronald Reagan addressed the increasingly salient immigration question by signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, a bipartisan compromise offering amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants while strengthening border enforcement and penalizing employers who knowingly hired unauthorized workers.⁴³ Nonetheless, this landmark compromise legislation did not quell the issue for good. Today, the US finds itself in another politically fraught turning point on this issue amid a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment.⁴⁴

The decision of whether to let in immigrants (and how many) is charged with value judgments related to both unity and equality. Perhaps the most radical commitment to equality would be permitting unlimited immigration, thus treating people equally regardless of their nation of birth.⁴⁵ More moderately, philosophy professor Bruce Landesman argues that a liberal democracy should allow immigration, but only to the extent that it preserves equal access to social goods and meaningful political participation for all members, provided that admissions criteria are applied fairly and without discrimination.⁴⁶

Conversely, many concerned principally with national unity contend that this value is threatened by immigration. Some fear that rising immigration compromises national security, a key component for unity, by opening the door to terrorism, drug trafficking, or foreign interference.⁴⁷ Other immigration opponents point out an influx of new customs from abroad will undermine the cultural foundation of American unity.⁴⁸ Likewise, more immigrants may threaten the nation's ability to provide for the general welfare of its current citizens, whether through social services, infrastructure, or economic opportunities.⁴⁹

⁴² [“How Should Historians Remember the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act?”](#) Organization of American Historians.

⁴³ [“United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986: A Critical Perspective.”](#) Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business. 1987.

⁴⁴ [“New data shows many Americans share Donald Trump’s anti-immigration views.”](#) London School of Economics. 2024.

⁴⁵ [“Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders.”](#) The Review of Politics. 1987.

⁴⁶ [“Restricting Immigration Fairly.”](#) AMINTAPHIL: The Philosophical Foundations of Law and Justice. 2016.

⁴⁷ [“Immigration, Crime and Terrorism.”](#) Oxford Handbook of the Politics of International Migration. 2012.

⁴⁸ [“Conceptions of National Identity and Ambivalence towards Immigration.”](#) British Journal of Political Science. 2019.

⁴⁹ [“Cracking Down on Illegal Immigration Would Raise Wages for Lower-Income Americans.”](#) Heritage Foundation. 2025.

[“The Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants and Amnesty to the U.S. Taxpayer.”](#) Heritage Foundation. 2013.

This conflict informs not only the debates around whether and how many immigrants should be let into the country, but who to let in. In the name of national unity, the Trump administration has prioritized accepting Afrikaner asylum seekers allegedly fleeing persecution in South Africa, citing that they “could be assimilated easily into our country.”⁵⁰ Similarly, his bans on travel from certain countries—most notably a 2017 executive order targeting seven predominantly Muslim nations and a broader 2025 proclamation targeting a wide array of nations—were justified on national security grounds, emphasizing the need to protect the homeland from foreign threats.⁵¹ Meanwhile, critiques of his immigration policy have been largely rooted in the doctrine of equality, with challengers of Trump’s 2017 travel ban arguing that no religion or nationality should suffer discrimination in the immigration process.⁵²

Once in the country, immigrants attract scrutiny over their potential receipt of public benefits like welfare, government-provided financial or social support to individuals in need, on which the US spends \$1.2 trillion every year.⁵³ In Europe, far-right political parties have magnified this issue by portraying immigrants as freeloaders who exploit generous social systems at the expense of native-born citizens.⁵⁴ For instance, in the US context, upon the arrival of over 175,000 migrants in 2024, New York shelters and other services experienced heavy strains.⁵⁵ In this way, immigrants’ access to expensive public services can be sharply divisive and undermine a sense of unity in a country. On the other hand, advocates of equality before the law promote the idea that individuals who contribute to society, as millions of working immigrants in the US do (one evaluation estimates immigrants’ economic value to the US at \$7 trillion over a decade), should have the same access to public benefits as anyone else, regardless of where they were born.⁵⁶

Immigrants are also subject to an increasingly tense debate in American politics over their entitlement to due process rights. Citing a migrant-driven mass invasion of the US tearing at the fabric of American unity, the Trump administration has denied *habeas corpus* rights and other justice-related rights to immigrants due to the immediate threat it believes they pose to the nation.⁵⁷ However, such a two-tiered approach to justice has attracted staunch criticism, given

⁵⁰ “[First Afrikaners arrive in U.S. under radically redrawn refugee program.](#)” National Public Radio. 2025.

⁵¹ “[Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Restricts the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats.](#)” The White House. 2025.

⁵² [Trump v. Hawaii](#), 585 U.S. 667 (2018).

⁵³ “[Biden’s Budget: A Future That’s Built on Government Dependence.](#)” House Budget Committee. 2023.

⁵⁴ “[Welfare chauvinism: a persistent virus for the welfare state.](#)” University of Amsterdam. 2024.

⁵⁵ “[How NYC is coping with 175,000 migrants from the Southern border.](#)” National Public Radio. 2024.

⁵⁶ “[The Importance of Immigrant Labor to the US Economy.](#)” Center for Migration Studies. 2025

⁵⁷ “[The ‘Invasion’ Invention: The Far Right’s Long Legal Battle to Make Immigrants the Enemy.](#)” ProPublica. 2025

the assumption of the universal extension of due process, with courts generally ruling in favor of the immigrants whose rights were ignored.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, emphases on unity and equality do not perfectly trace along ideological fault lines. Many immigration hawks ground their arguments in the idea that it is profoundly unfair and unequal to privilege those who entered the US illegally while people complying with the legal immigration must sit idly in their home countries.⁵⁹ Others justify limits on immigration due to its harms to American workers, which exacerbate wealth inequality within the US.⁶⁰ Some on the opposite side of the spectrum advocate for more immigration not out of a normative belief regarding equality but rather a recognition that immigration, particularly in the agriculture sector, is integral to economic prosperity, which in turn provides an important basis for national unity.⁶¹ Still others assert that America's commitment to welcoming immigrants – as articulated by the Statue of Liberty's inscription, "Give me your tired, your poor...I lift my lamp beside the golden door," – as a core unifying principle of a nation primarily made up of immigrants.⁶²

The intensity of the immigration debate today may make it seem like an outlier event in American history. However, it ultimately reflects a tension between two of our most important values – unity and equality – that we have struggled with since the nation's founding.

⁵⁸ [From Day One, Trump's Immigration Agenda Has Grown More Extreme.](#) American Civil Liberties Union. 2025

⁵⁹ ["Fence-Climbing Illegal Aliens Cut in Line as Legal Immigrants Wait in Obscurity."](#) National Review. 2018

⁶⁰ ["Yes, Immigration Hurts American Workers."](#) Politico. 2016

⁶¹ ["Immigrant workers help grow the U.S. economy."](#) Economic Policy Institute. 2024

⁶² Berenson, Edward. [The Statue of Liberty: A Transatlantic Story.](#) Yale University Press, 2012.

Expected Outcomes

The purpose of this guide is to deepen our understanding of unity and equality in American history, reflect on the complementarities and conflicts between these foundational values, and consider how they are relevant to contemporary debates about citizenship and immigration. Below are some questions that will help us consider different perspectives as well as reflect on our own thoughts about the topic.

Understanding Unity and Equality

These questions help us think about the values of unity and inequality in both American traditions and our own personal experiences.

1. In the context of America's foundational values, what is a key image for you of national unity? How would you define such unity? What are its key foundations or characteristics?
2. In the context of America's foundational values, what is a key image for you of equality? How would you define such equality? What are its key foundations or characteristics?

Connecting with Other Values

Unity and equality can both be seen as ends in themselves and means to achieve an ultimate goal. For instance, unity helps build social trust and a shared sense of purpose, which are essential for collective problem-solving and civic cooperation. Equality ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate, strengthening both the legitimacy and inclusiveness of our democracy. As such, it is important to identify which of these other values are important to us, so we can consider how they relate to the values of unity and equality. Below are some examples of values and ideas that might resonate with you.

Self-Government	Progress	Individualism
Independence	Justice	Acceptance
Nationalism	Inclusion	Freedom
Privacy	Innovation	Success
Opportunity	Diversity	Social Mobility
Achievement	Wealth	Prosperity

1. Which of these values (or others) matter the most to you?
2. How do you see them connecting with the values of unity and equality, if at all?

Analyzing the History of Unity & Equality in the US

We move now to the nuanced dynamics of unity & equality in American history in the questions below.

1. Throughout its history, how has the United States navigated the tensions between unity and equality?
2. In what contexts have American policymakers' approach to the relationship between unity and equality been admirable? Why?
3. In what contexts have American policymakers' approach to the relationship between unity and equality been regrettable? Why?

Considering the Case of Immigration and Citizenship

We now move forward to the present day to analyze the current debate about immigration as a case study for understanding our founding values of unity and equality and the relationship between them.

1. Should the US aim to be more open or more restrictive in admitting immigrants?
2. What standards should the US use to decide which individuals or groups are allowed to immigrate?
3. Should immigrants enjoy equal access to public benefits such as welfare?
4. Should due process rights extend equally to all people within US borders, regardless of citizenship status? Why or why not?

Identifying Value Priorities in the Immigration Debate (20 min.)

Finally, we will examine both our discussion of unity and equality in history and our analysis of the contemporary immigration issue to understand how our normative perceptions of American values shape our concrete policy viewpoints.

1. How did you incorporate considerations of unity and equality into your immigration policy assessments?
2. How are considerations of unity and equality reflected in American legislators' and the American public's approach to immigration policy?
3. How should we take into account the values of unity and equality when we engage with debates about immigration?
4. Should unity or equality be prioritized above the other in our approach to immigration, or should they be equally balanced?

Reflections

We conclude with some reflective questions about our thinking about this issue and these values.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you in thinking about these questions?
2. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you?
3. Was there anything that was left out that you think should be addressed about this issue? Are there any perspectives missing that you feel would be important to hear?
4. Does anything you have read in this guide or thought about yourself give you hope for the future of conversations about unity and equality?
5. Is there a next step you would like to take related to this topic?

About this Guide

Writers: Casey Scheiner '28 and Graham Bullock

Editor: Graham Bullock

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides: The DCI publishes Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. DCI staff, faculty, and students are the authors of these guides; generative AI is sometimes used to improve the clarity of the writing, identify errors, and provide background information, but all final text is confirmed by the authors. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides: For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While deliberation is itself an important contributor to a healthy democracy, it becomes even more valuable when it leads to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

DCI Issue Guides: Issue Guides are similar to Deliberation Guides but do not include the structured format for group conversations. While they also include a similar list of questions to consider about the topic, they are designed for personal reflection, perhaps in association with a panel or speaker event.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, and email dc@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.