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FREEDOM AT 250: UKRAINIAN AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE

The concept of freedom has been an important part of the United States for a long time. For generations, freedom has been portrayed as both a political principle and a promise that anyone could pursue, achieve, and live out. This promise is often captured in the idea of the “American Dream”, which suggests that through hard work and determination, individuals can build better lives for themselves, regardless of their background. For many immigrants, this vision has served as a source of hope, drawing people from around the world to a country that defines itself as a provider of opportunity and freedom. In this sense, the United States has not only come to symbolize freedom, but has also represented the possibility of advancement and the ability to shape and improve one’s own future.

While this depiction is compelling, it has failed to accurately reflect the reality of the U.S. From its earliest history, it is apparent that the United States has struggled to live up to its own idealized concepts of freedom. For example, the same nation that declared that “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence was also founded on systems of slavery and exclusion (National Archives, 1776). Though the history of the United States is one of an independent nation, freedom expanded over time through movements like abolition and civil rights, and even remains a challenge today. For example, although the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s led to major legal changes, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, this did not mean that equal rights were entirely attained. In the present day, these tensions continue within debates over discrimination, accessibility, and representation, and resonate in situations such as restricted voting rights, prison labor, and lack of basic necessities like housing, to name a few (Brennan Center, 2025; ACLU, 2022; Eviction Lab, 2018). These examples suggest that freedom in the United States is not a completed achievement, but an ongoing process- one that requires constant effort to maintain and is vulnerable to setbacks when that effort weakens.

As this history reflects a tension between ideals and realities, is it not solely unique to the United States. There too is a different, if less widely known, story to tell about Ukraine, which offers another perspective on freedom. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union as a result of its dissolution in 1991, Ukraine began building a democratic system, though it came with political instability and public disapproval of the corrupt government. A significant social moment that reflected this disapproval was the Euromaidan, which began in late 2013 as a response to the Ukrainian government’s abandonment of plans to integrate more closely with the European Union.

Initially, the protests began small but quickly became a nationwide movement that demanded political change, accountability, and transparency from the government.

The continuous protests and growing tensions eventually led to the removal of the president, which serves as a mark in Ukrainian politics. (BBC News, 2014). These events, rather than highlighting a stable or firmly established democracy, have instead shown how freedom in Ukraine, much like in the United States, depends on the active involvement and awareness of citizens, especially in times when a political institution fails to represent them.

This contradiction between ideal and reality can be traced back to the founding of the United States. This tension did not end with the Declaration of Independence but rather became embedded in the legal and political structures that followed.

The U.S. Constitution, often seen as the foundation of American democracy, both expanded and limited the meaning of freedom. While it established a system of representative government and protections for certain individual rights, such as freedom of speech, religion, and due process under the law, the Constitution also reflected inequalities of its time, as these rights were not extended to all members of society. For example, the Three Fifths Compromise counted enslaved individuals as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation, which increased political power for slaveholding states without actually granting enslaved people any rights (Britannica). At the same time, voting remained largely restricted to white male property owners, excluding enslaved African Americans, women, and poor white men, while Native Americans were often treated as outside the political community altogether and denied citizenship rights, as they were not broadly recognized as U.S. citizens until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 (National Archives). In practice, American society depended on slavery for its economy, with enslaved individuals legally defined as property rather than citizens. These contradictions of freedom were not abstract but were actually reinforced through law and practice, defining who could fully participate in American society. Laws such as the Naturalization Act of 1790, limiting citizenship to “free white persons,” and the Alien and Sedition Acts, allowing the federal government to limit speech and target immigrants (National Archives), reveal how even core liberties such as the freedom of speech and expression could be limited and restricted (National Archives; EBSCO; Immigration History, 1790).

Importantly, these early limitations did not disappear in later years but instead continued to shape American society in new forms as the nation expanded. This is evident in the decades following the Civil War. For instance, though the abolition of slavery was a major achievement of the U.S., there still existed internal biases and beliefs that prevented people from willingly integrating former slaves into society. Even though the addition of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments attempted to redefine citizenship and political rights, southern society found loopholes to keep African Americans oppressed (Gilder Lehrman Institute). As Reconstruction came to an end, southern states introduced Jim Crow Laws, which enforced racial segregation and restricted Black political participation, while groups forming in society, such as the Ku Klux Klan, used violence to maintain racial hierarchies (Gilder Lehrman Institute). Economic systems like sharecropping further limited freedom by trapping many formerly enslaved individuals in cycles of debt with the disguise of receiving a fair trade of crops in return for their labor, and in turn restricting their independence despite formal legal changes (Gilder Lehrman Institute). Together,

these developments suggest that rather than being removed, the challenges to freedom were simply reshaped.

Throughout these periods, a consistent pattern emerges, which is that the expansion of rights is often followed by new forms of restriction. This pattern reveals that freedom in the United States has developed through an ongoing process of struggle rather than steady progress or final resolution.

While the failures of Reconstruction demonstrated how easily progress could be reversed, they also set the stage for continued efforts to expand and redefine freedom in the United States. In the mid-twentieth century, the Civil Rights Movement marked one of the most significant attempts to challenge the inequalities that had persisted since the nation's founding. Through protests and organization, activists sought to end systems of segregation and secure equal rights under the law. These efforts led to major legislative achievements, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which aimed to eliminate discrimination and expand access to political participation (National Archives; Gilder Lehrman Institute). For a moment, these changes suggested that the United States was moving closer to fulfilling its founding ideals. Yet, much like earlier periods, these gains did not mark a final resolution. Instead, the struggle for civil rights continued in new forms, reflecting the persistence of underlying inequalities.

In recent years, debates over voting rights have once again highlighted the fragility of democratic participation. Research from the Brennan Center for Justice found that dozens of restrictive voting laws were enacted across multiple states in 2025, including measures that limited early voting, imposed stricter identification requirements, and reduced access to mail-in ballots. These policies, while often justified as efforts to protect election integrity, have been criticized for disproportionately affecting marginalized communities and limiting access to the political process, though the percentage of fraud by voters is rare. (Brennan Center, 2026, Brennan Center, 2017). In this sense, the right to vote, often considered a fundamental element of democracy and freedom, remains challenged rather than secure.

At the same time, other areas of American society reveal similar tensions. The continued use of prison labor, for example, raises questions about the limits of freedom within the legal system. Although the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, it included an exception allowing involuntary labor as punishment for a crime (ACLU, 2022). As a result, many incarcerated individuals are required to work under conditions that lack basic labor protections. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, a significant portion of incarcerated people (approximately two-thirds) perform labor, often receiving minimal or no pay while facing consequences for refusing to work (ACLU, 2022). Likewise, issues such as housing insecurity and eviction further demonstrate how access to basic stability can influence an individual's ability to participate fully in society. Studies from Eviction Lab have shown that eviction can reduce voter turnout, suggesting that economic conditions play a direct role in shaping democratic participation (Eviction Lab, 2023).

These examples suggest that freedom is not only defined by legal rights, but also by the conditions that make those rights meaningful. This idea is reflected in the work of Paulo Freire, who argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that liberation requires both awareness and action. Freire

emphasizes that individuals must recognize systems of inequality and actively work to challenge them, rather than passively accepting existing conditions (Freire, 1970).

When applied to the United States, this perspective helps explain why moments of progress, such as the Civil Rights Movement, require continued engagement to be sustained. Without ongoing participation and accountability, earlier gains can weaken over time. In this way, the persistence of modern challenges, from voting access to economic inequality, reflects not a failure of freedom, but its ongoing and unfinished nature. In fact, when viewed from a broader perspective, it becomes clear that the challenges of maintaining freedom extend beyond any single nation, as seen in more recent efforts to establish and defend democratic systems in countries such as Ukraine.

While the United States demonstrates how struggles over freedom can unfold over centuries, Ukraine presents a more recent and immediate example of how liberty must be actively established and defended. Following the Dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared independence and began the complex process of building a democratic state. The demand for independence was strongly supported by the population, as the national referendum that was held in December 1991 revealed more than 90 percent of voters supported independence, signaling a widespread desire for a democratic state. (CSCE, 1991). However, much like earlier periods in American history, this initial expansion did not resolve deeper challenges. Instead, Ukraine in the following years faced political instability, corruption, and tensions over its national direction, demonstrating that independence alone does not guarantee a stable or fully developed democratic system.

These challenges became particularly visible during the Euromaidan, which began in November 2013 after the Ukrainian government decided to postpone an agreement that would have strengthened ties with the European Union. What initially began as student-led demonstrations in Kyiv's Maidan Square quickly expanded into mass protests involving hundreds of thousands of participants across the country.

As government responses became increasingly forceful, the protests escalated, resulting in violent clashes and the deaths of over 100 demonstrators (BBC News, 2014). By early 2014, the movement had led to the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich, marking a major shift in Ukraine's political trajectory (BBC News, 2014).

At the same time, these developments did not mark a final resolution of Ukraine's democratic struggles. Instead, they revealed the need for continued public engagement, reform, and national stability, which remained central to Ukraine's development in the years that followed. In this way, Ukraine's experience reflects a pattern similar to the one seen in the United States, where moments of expansion such as independence or political reform, are often followed by new challenges that test the strength of democratic establishments. Together, these examples suggest that freedom is not secured through a single event, but must be continually maintained through active participation and support.

When considered together, the experiences of the United States and Ukraine suggest that freedom is not a fixed or permanent condition, but an ongoing process shaped by both progress and resistance. In the United States, the expansion of rights, from the abolition of slavery to the

Civil Rights Movement, has often been followed by new forms of limitation, illustrating that liberty must be continuously protected rather than assumed.

Similarly, Ukraine's path since independence, from the 1991 referendum to the Euromaidan, reveals how democratic systems depend on active participation and become vulnerable to instability once that participation weakens or gets abandoned. In both cases, moments of progress have required effort to be preserved, while setbacks have exposed the fragility of political and social rights.

Ultimately, these histories challenge the idea that freedom can ever be fully achieved. Instead, they suggest that liberty depends on the continued presence of certain conditions, including civic awareness and engagement, courage, and access to the social and economic resources that make participation possible. Without these foundations, even established democracies can experience limitations on rights, while newer systems struggle to maintain stability. Viewed in this way, freedom is not something that a nation simply possesses, but something that must be continually enacted and redefined by its people. This perspective not only reframes the history of the United States and Ukraine, but also raises broader questions about how democratic societies can sustain liberty in the future.

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