Why Was There so Much Resistance to the Principle of Equality From 1789 to 1861?

The words “all men (and women) are created equal,” were just words for the majority of people living in America in the first half of the 19th Century. Without the right to vote from the U. S. Congress, this majority, made up of Women and African-Americans, was denied representation and equality. These words inspired and sustained more Americans to remain committed to the principle of equality over this time period. Women make up about half of the U.S. population. If the four million slaves in the South are included, you have the majority of people living in the U.S. in 1860.¹ Both of these groups invoked the Declaration of Independence and its idea that all men are created equal and are due certain inalienable rights in arguing for equal rights.² Two significant events in the future, the emancipation of slaves in 1863 and Women winning the right to vote in 1920, demonstrate that more Americans were committed to the principle of equality than not. This paper will focus on why these two groups that represented the majority of people living in the United States were committed to equality but were unable to achieve it during this time period.

The answer to the question of why there was such a powerful minority opposed to greater equality during the first half of the 19th Century can be found in the makeup of Congress. Women and slaves could not vote because Congress and the state legislatures were dominated by well off, white and protestant men at this time. One of the best examples of this opposition was John Calhoun, a pro-slavery U.S. Senator from South Carolina that served from 1811 to 1850. He served as Vice President of the U.S. for not only a democrat but also a republican president making him one of the most powerful Senators.³ Calhoun argued in a speech on whether slavery should be legal in Oregon that all men [and women] are not created equal.⁴ He used the
analogy of an infant and how one is incapable of freedom when he is born and is not capable of freedom until he has acquired sufficient intelligence and experience. Until then infants and children are to be taken care of by their parents. Calhoun felt that white males were superior to some races, such as African-Americans and Women. He felt that it was their “fatherly” duty as white men to take care of their slaves and their wives and daughters but that the laws of the land should be decided by the smarter and wiser “parents” or white males. Calhoun concluded, in his Oregon speech, “The attempt to carry into practice this the most dangerous of all political error [all men are created equal], and to bestow on all, without regard to their fitness either to acquire or maintain liberty, … has done more to retard the cause of liberty and civilization…” In other words, the children would be running the house, which was insanity to Senator Calhoun.

It is hard to believe now but at the time it was argued that Women and African-Americans had the intelligence of young children and would distort the political process. Women and African-Americans were not afforded the same educational opportunities as white men which is why they did not appear as intelligent as white men. Escaped slave and famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglass argued, “It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write.” 5 The top American universities during the first half of the 19th Century were all male meaning that Women did not have the same access to or the ability to debate the top constitutional scholars of the day. From the Woman’s Rights Convention of 1848, one of the among many discriminatory practices declared included, “He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.” 6

Further insights in to why there was this resistance to greater equality can be gained by looking at the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which was passed by Congress in 1854. Congress had to
make a decision concerning the legality of slavery in the new territories. Robert Hunter was a pro-slavery Senator from Virginia who argued for passage of the act. Congress decided to let the voters in Kansas and Nebraska decide on a district by district basis. Hunter introduced an interesting take on the question of slavery and globalization. The country was rapidly expanding at the time with the annexation of Texas and the settling of the Kansas and Nebraska Territories. Hunter argued, “It is plain that in the course of this progress, ours must rule all inferior races.”

With this rationalization, Hunter not only attempted to justify slavery but also the recent war with Mexico that resulted in the annexation of Texas and other important territories. Hunter’s logic was that because America defeated Mexico and that Southern slave holding states were prosperous and peaceful demonstrates the superiority of the United States. If this was not what nature intended then America would not have won the war with Mexico or be able to hold slaves. Senator Calhoun also supported this logic in a speech on the dangers of granting citizenship to the recently conquered Mexicans when he said, “None but a people advanced to a high state of moral and intellectual excellence are capable in a civilized condition, of forming and maintaining free governments…”

This idea of American superiority and the need to expand America’s influence and territories resonated with many in Congress. Jefferson Davis was a pro-slavery U.S. Senator from Mississippi who was also the Secretary of War and Military affairs under President Pierce and he would eventually lead the confederacy. Davis shared Hunter’s view that America was a superior society on par with those in Europe and that it needed to expand its territories and influence with a stronger military. While Secretary of War and Military Affairs, Davis saw the Army grow by four additional regiments and thirty more steam vessels for the Navy. It is ironic that the better equipped Army and superior Navy that Davis helped create would lead to the
defeat of his confederate troops in the upcoming civil war and end slavery. The powerful U. S. Senators from the South, such as, Calhoun, Hunter and Davis, would be replaced by representatives from the North that were not as discriminatory towards Women and African-Americans.

The key to countering this resistance to greater equality in Congress was for women and African-Americans to gain voting rights. This was going to be a great challenge because wealthy, white men were in power and they were wary of losing it. The Woman’s Rights Convention had the right idea when they declared that they would employ agents, petition the state and national legislatures and enlists the pulpit and press as the kinds of activism they would use to secure voting rights for women. Using the pulpit and the press was also important in trying to change attitudes about slavery. Even more important was for African Americans like Benjamin Banneker to abolish the myth that African Americans were not intelligent enough to be responsible American citizens. For example, Thomas Jefferson’s response to Banneker where he said, “Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colors of men.”

To counter the resistance to greater equality Women and African-Americans needed to have a keen understanding of the American Political Landscape. In Cohen’s account of the increasing presence of commercializing sporting culture in campaign politics, he puts forth the idea that an informed citizenry is key in transitioning from an elitist republic to a populist democracy. Cohen pointed to the popularity on gambling on horse racing and how it paralleled electoral politics. First to gamble in a horse race or vote in an election you needed to know the rules of the game or the laws of the land. You needed to know the candidates or the horses to pick the winner. Participating in such contests involved coming together with other interested
observers to debate the merits of the candidates. Women could gain credibility by showing that they had the ability to breed and race winning horses or a great African-American boxer could show that African-Americans could compete with and were equal to whites.

In conclusion, there were more people in America committed to the principle of equality in the first half of the 19th Century but there was a strong resistance to greater equality from elite, white men that were in power. The key to more Americans achieving equality was a grass roots appeal by women, immigrants and free blacks to demonstrate that they were intelligent, responsible citizens that would no longer tolerate being denied their unalienable rights to vote for those representatives that would decide their fates. They had invested their blood, sweat and tears into America just as much as any white male citizen and they had just as much to lose if America was not prosperous. This would be an uphill battle that unfortunately would not be achieved for Women until 1920. Even though, the fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave male African-Americans the right to vote in 1869, they would not achieve voting equality until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The most important lesson learned here is that there will always be people like Senator Calhoun that do not believe that all people are equally deserving of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and if you are not a well informed active participant in the U.S. political process you risk losing those rights and freedoms.

1 Lecture Notes, November 6, 2012
2 Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, July 1848 and American Anti-Slavery Society, Declaration of Sentiments, December 1833
3 Konstantin Dierks, Reading Guide for Week 13
4 John Calhoun, Speech on Oregon, June 1848
5 Frederick Douglass, speech sponsored by the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, July 1852
6 Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, July 1848
7 Robert Hunter quoted in Page 2 of Karp Essay
8 John Calhoun, Speech on Mexico, January 1848
9 Karp, Arsenal of Empire, July 2012
10 Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, NY, July 1848
11 Garnet, National Negro Convention, August 1843
12 Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker, August 1791