The Declaration of Independence opens with this statement: “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.” This statement was meant to be a solid and noncontroversial principle of what Americans believed on the eve of rebellion against the British.

So, of course, the meaning of nearly every word has been debated.

Two words have perhaps received the most consideration: “all men.” Who is a “man?” Who is included in this broad claim? At the time, the writers referred primarily to adult white male Christians. But, since the Declaration’s composition, “all men” has been expanded to include members of all races, all genders and all religions. These changes were not easy: The nation fought a civil war. It underwent the struggles of the women’s suffrage movement, the civil rights movements and the more recent debate over gay rights.

Two other words have received almost as much dispute: “equal” and “Rights,” especially combined into a single term “equal rights.”

Equal rights are a lofty principle held up as our highest national goal. All people should be equal. They should have equal liberty, equal protection under the law, equal free speech and equal freedom to worship. These rights seem uncontroversial, but how about equal access to education, voting and civic participation? Equal pay for equal work? Equal access to health care? These are more provocative.

The disputes lie in the shift from principle to practice. It is one thing to have a broad principle; it is another to put it into effect for all citizens. Equal rights are a balance, but achieving balance is difficult.

Humans divide naturally into groups, whether by race, religion, belief, gender, family or any number of other criteria. Putting the principle of equality into practice is a matter of working out how to treat different groups the same.

Much of the USA’s legislative history features debates over how to provide equality to the members of all groups. Indeed, when cultural debates over equal rights become strong, groups aim to create laws favoring them. This is how a group achieves a “win.”

This process takes place in a back-and-forth manner. One group gains rights; then, another group sees itself as lacking rights because of the change in the first group; and it strives to make adjustments in its favor.

The Civil War ended slavery. Then came Reconstruction, when poor whites saw themselves overshadowed by the newly freed blacks; their “equal rights” were eroded by these new citizens. The whites then restricted black access to equality (e.g., voting rights) to preserve whites’ “equal rights.”

This example shows the historical dynamics of moral debate in the USA: It is a struggle for balance among competing groups. The same dynamic appears in the evangelical Christians’ response to gay marriage. They want the right not to act in a manner supportive of gay marriage.

Religions can inspire inequality. True believers of nearly all stripes see their way of life as God-given. To compromise so that nonbelievers have equal rights is not encouraged. Indeed, religions often have divine sanctions against compromise with people of other faiths, even if they belong to the same nation.

If this situation was not complex enough, American businesses have long had moral concerns, and they often get involved in cultural debates over equal rights.

This happens frequently. The NCAA refused to hold tournaments in North Carolina after the state passed its anti-transgender bathroom law; PayPal and Deutsche Bank cancelled expansion plans in the state, robbing it of jobs and investment. Disney and Marvel threatened to remove their movie business from Georgia over its recent “religious freedom” bill. Google and Microsoft filed legal briefs against the Trump administration’s immigrant ban.

Similarly, both Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A worked against the contraception mandate in Obamacare, balking over the inclusion of certain aspects of women’s health care.

Whichever side businesses take, their motives are rarely altruistic; their moral actions sustain their bottom line.

The Declaration of Independence’s seeming straightforward principle of equal rights for all citizens has led to centuries of moral debate over its application. Equality of individuals is seen through the eyes of groups, each group striving to ensure its “equalness.” These groups bring their own ethical standards into the debate, whether the standards come from notions of human equality, divine ordinances or economic success.

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