



*THE WORLD AS IT COULD BE* HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION PROGRAM  
TEACHING GUIDE ON FURTHERING RACIAL JUSTICE  
BY EXAMINING THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND PARTICIPATE  
IN ONE'S GOVERNMENT

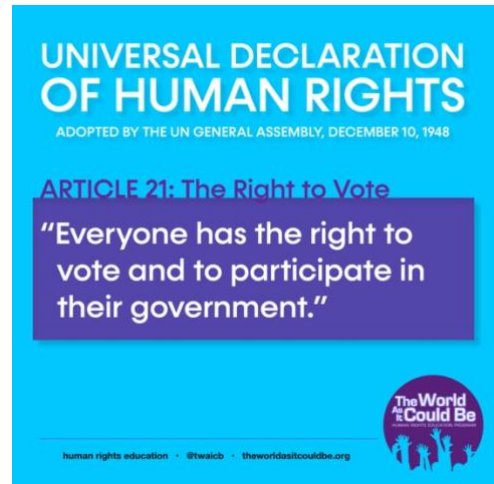
Prepared by Sandy Sohcot, Director of *The World As It Could Be*©, for *The World As It Could Be*©  
Human Rights Education Program, January 2021  
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## Overview and Introduction

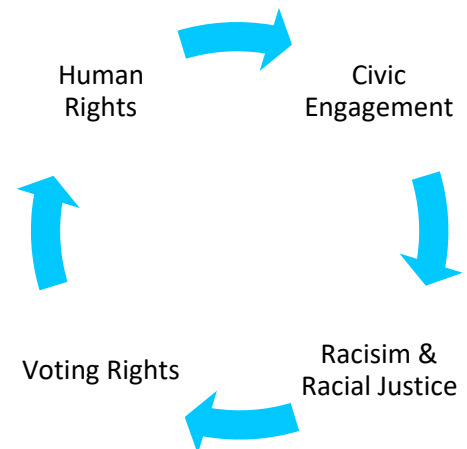
In our work, including our [Curriculum and Resource Guide](#) geared to High School, when the UDHR is supposed to be taught, we bring attention to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) and its continuing relevance to inspire the positive social change that furthers equality, justice and dignity for all people. In September 2020 we developed [this Teaching Guide](#) on the importance of exercising one's right to vote and participate in one's government.

With this Teaching Guide we seek to provide a human rights perspective on the on-going struggle to achieve racial justice across the United States and beyond. We are focusing on the right to vote and participate in one's government as a way to grasp how equal access to this right is fundamental to both understanding the history of racism in the U.S. as well as to insuring this right so as to further racial justice.



## Curriculum Structure

- Background on the Meaning of Human Rights, the UDHR & Human Rights Education
- Relevance of the UDHR to Current Civic Dialogue and Engagement
- Definitions of Racism and Racial Justice
- Our Human Right to Vote and Participate in Our Government and its Connection to Racial Justice
- History of the Right to Vote in the United States and the Constructs of Racism
- How to Speak Up and Take Action to Further Equal Access to Voting Rights and Government Participation as Part of Furthering Racial Justice



## BACKGROUND ON THE MEANING OF HUMAN RIGHTS, THE UDHR & HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

### Definition of Human Rights

Human rights are held by all persons equally, universally, and forever. Human rights are the basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. These rights are inalienable. This means you cannot lose these rights just as you cannot cease to be a human being. Human rights are indivisible. In other words, no right is more important than another. Human rights are interdependent. Each right is connected with other rights.

The UDHR is both inspirational and practical. Human rights principles hold the vision of a free, just, and peaceful world. On a practical level, the UDHR sets minimum standards of how individuals and institutions everywhere should treat people. To promote human rights is to demand that the human dignity of all people is respected. By accepting universal human rights, ones also accept duties to the community to defend human dignity.

Human rights should not be understood as only issues that occur in far-away places. Human rights are present in our everyday lives and in our local community.

*As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home...Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."*

### Historical Context of the UDHR

The UDHR grew from a global commitment to prevent future atrocities experienced during World War II. The concept of defending human dignity based on a sense of shared community has its roots in many cultural and religious traditions. Sacred texts such as the Koran and the bible, as well as civic documents, such as the Magna Carta (1215) and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791) provide a foundation for human rights.

At the end of World War II, nations came together to create the United Nations with a charter to promote international peace and prevent conflict. Calls from across the globe voiced their demand for mechanisms beyond international conflict resolution. Strong support for an international framework to protect citizens from abuses by their government and to hold nations accountable for the treatment of those living in their borders culminated in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## Drafting and Adoption of the UDHR

### Human Rights Commission

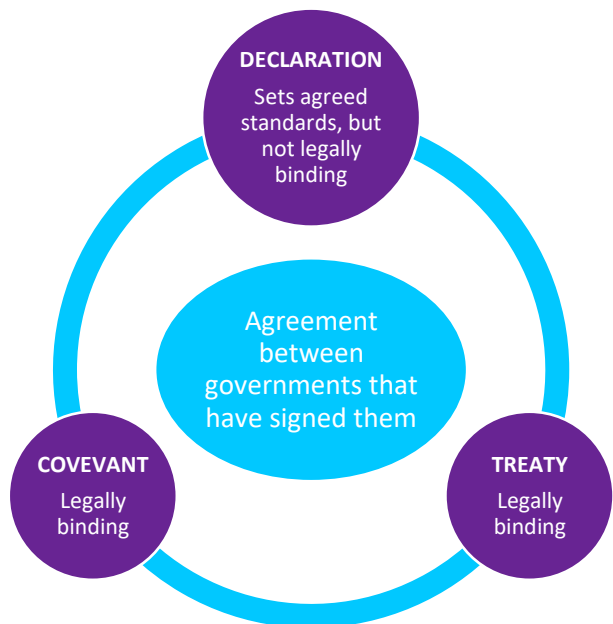
A Human Rights Commission was created with members including human rights experts from around the world. In 1945 over 5,000 participants attended the [conference in San Francisco \(1945\)](#) to address the role of individual rights within the United Nations. The Commission elected Eleanor Roosevelt as their chairperson because of her political stature and personal commitment to social justice. Under the leadership of the “First Lady of the World” the document survived various iterations, attacks and political pressure stemming from the emerging Cold War.



On December 10, 1948, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by forty-eight of the fifty-six members of the United Nations, with eight abstentions. The abstaining members were Byelorussia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Ukraine, The USSR, Yugoslavia, South Africa and Saudi Arabia. The language of the document was designed to not simply suggest or recommend, but to proclaim a universal vision. By creating it as a universal declaration, not a treaty, it was intended not to be legally binding, but morally binding. Over the last 72 years, the influence of the document has been substantial. Its principles have been incorporated by most of the more than 185 nations in the UN. The UDHR has become an international standard for all people and nations.

### Clarification of differences between Declaration and Convention/Covenant/Treaty

Convention, covenant and treaty are synonymous and refer to a legally binding agreement between governments that have signed them. In the United States a treaty may be signed by the President, but must be ratified by the US Senate. A Declaration is a document stating agreed upon standards, but it is not legally binding. While the UDHR is a Declaration, it has led to the ratification of a number of treaties, and, in and of itself, is now considered Customary Law, again, as noted above, as the international standard for all people and nations.

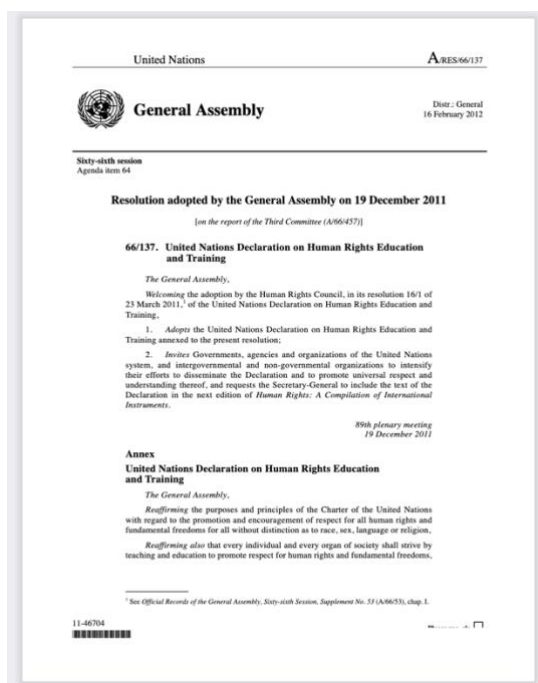


## Relevance of the UDHR to Current Civic Dialogue and Engagement

- Since 1948 the document has served to articulate a promise of all countries to create a world described by its words
- While the document calls for widespread education to make its message known, only 8% of the U.S. population are aware of its existence
- The document provides a framework to see current endeavors, whether civil rights, women's rights, or other such pursuits, share a common goal of achieving fairness, equality and dignity for all.
- Requires individual and local action to realize its words.

## Definition of Human Rights Education

- In proclaiming the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education in December 1994, the General Assembly defined human rights education as ***"a life-long process by which people at all levels of development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect in all societies."*** The Assembly emphasized that the responsibility for human rights education rested with all elements of society--government, nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, and all other sectors of civil society, as well as individuals.
- ***Human rights education and training encompasses:***
  - Education **about** human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
  - Education **through** human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
  - Education **for** human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.
- On December 11, 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training](#) that spells out the importance of Human Rights Education at every level of community, from schools to public safety agencies, based on the principles of the UDHR.



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**Activities to Deepen Learning of the UDHR and Human Rights Concepts:**

- Assign participants to seek out photographs, artwork, poems and songs that reflect ideas and images in connection with human rights
- Work with the participants to create a virtual gallery of the items they have collected; Then, ask participants to describe their gallery item and why they chose their particular contribution
- Distribute the UDHR document, choosing the simplified or long version
- Have participants read the different sections of the document out loud
- Have the participants connect the UDHR Articles with the different gallery exhibit items

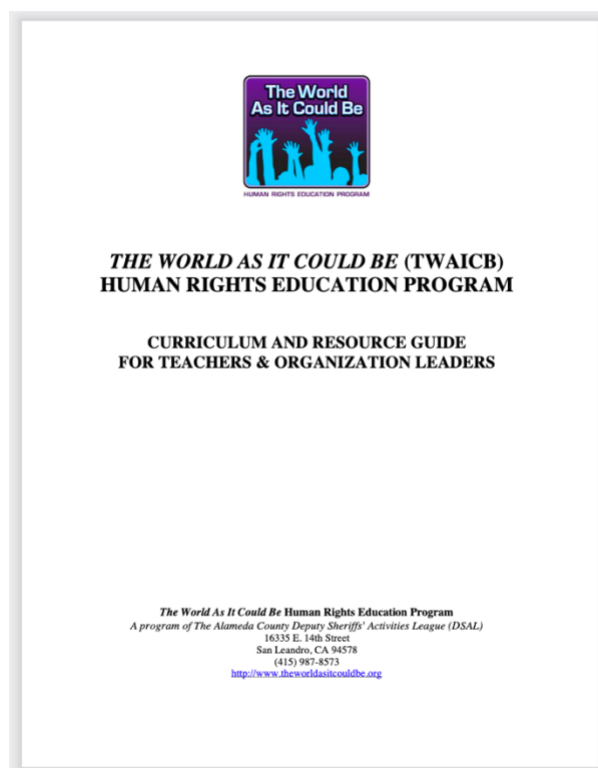
**Discussion Questions to Guide Deeper Reflection and Critical Thinking:**

1. Why was it so necessary to develop the UDHR?
2. Why was including the right to leisure and the enjoyment of arts and culture seen as so important?
3. If you were drafting the UDHR today, what other rights would you want to include, and why?
4. Why is it important for people everywhere to know about the UDHR?
5. How does knowing about the UDHR fit in with knowing about the U.S. Constitution?

**Resources for Learning More About the UDHR and Human Rights Education:**

Pages 24–28 of *The World As It Could Be* [Curriculum and Resource Guide](#)

<https://www.theworldasitcouldbe.org/curriculum-and-resource-guide-2/>



## DEFINITIONS OF RACISM AND RACIAL JUSTICE

We are presenting the following definitions, utilizing the reference [Racial Equity Tools](#):

### Racism

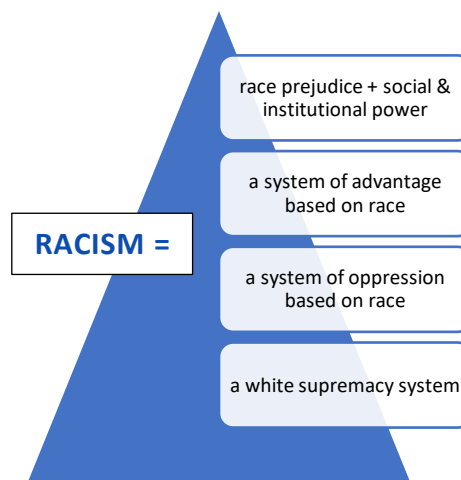
Racism = race prejudice + social and institutional power

Racism = a system of advantage based on race

Racism = a system of oppression based on race

Racism = a white supremacy system

Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.



**SOURCE:** “[What Is Racism?](#)” – Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks) [web workbook](#)

### Racial Justice

1. The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial justice—or racial equity—goes beyond “anti-racism.” It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures.
2. Operationalizing racial justice means reimagining and co-creating a just and liberated world and includes:
  - understanding the history of racism and the system of white supremacy and addressing past harms,
  - working in right relationship and accountability in an ecosystem (an issue, sector, or community ecosystem) for collective change,
  - implementing interventions that use an intersectional analysis and that impact multiple systems,
  - centering Blackness and building community, cultural, economic, and political power of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), and
  - applying the practice of love along with disruption and resistance to the status quo.

### SOURCE:

1. Race Forward, “[Race Reporting Guide](#)” (2015)
2. Maggie Potapchuk, “[Operationalizing Racial Justice in Non-Profit Organizations](#)” (MP Associates, 2020). This definition is based on and expanded from the one described in Rinku Sen and Lori Villarosa, “[Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: A Practical Guide](#)” (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2019)

## OUR HUMAN RIGHT TO VOTE AND PARTICIPATE IN OUR GOVERNMENT AND ITS CONNECTION TO RACIAL JUSTICE

### UDHR Article 21 states the following:

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his/her country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Mortimer Adler, in his book [Six Great Ideas](#), describes the significance of the right to vote in his discussion of the great idea of liberty: (pages 149-154)

*The only liberties to which we can make a claim upon society are the freedom to do as we please within the limits imposed by justice and that variant of circumstantial freedom that is the political liberty enjoyed by enfranchised citizens of a republic...*

*We are under moral obligation to pursue happiness, which means trying to make good human lives for ourselves by seeking whatever, corresponding to our natural needs, is really good for us. We have a right to whatever we need to lead good human lives...*

*Unlike the organized societies of the social insects, which are entirely determined by the instincts of the species, human societies are voluntarily formed and conventionally instituted. They are natural societies only in the sense that man, being gregarious, needs to live in association with other human beings. They are at the same time conventional in the sense that the shape they take – the forms of government, the laws, the institutions, and other arrangements that constitute their organizations – are products of rational and free, not instinctive, determination...*

*A political community is a society that is thus constituted. To say that man is by nature a political as well as a social animal is to say that he is by nature inclined to live in political communities and to participate in political activity – to be a self-governing citizen in a republic...*

***In short, being political by nature means that man by nature needs political liberty – the freedom of an enfranchised citizen – in order to live humanly well. This is the basis of man's entitlement, by natural right, to political liberty...***





***Deprived of political liberty, as slaves are or as are the subjects of a despot no matter how benevolent, human beings cannot fulfill all their natural propensities and lead fully human lives. They are deprived of a real good to which they are by nature entitled. The same is true of those who, living under constitutional governments or in republics, are nevertheless disenfranchised and thus deprived of political liberty.***

### **Discussion Questions to Guide Deeper Reflection and Critical Thinking:**

1. Why is political liberty so important to every human being, as a member of their given society?
2. What types of influences can one have on their society when they are enfranchised/have the right to vote and participate in their government?
3. What can happen to people who do not have access to the right to vote and participate in their government?

### **HISTORY OF THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE CONSTRUCTS OF RACISM**

When the United States was originally established, coming out of the 1776 Revolutionary War, the only people who could vote were white men who owned property. The following are resources to help outline the history of U. S. Voting rights and the efforts to address the voting inequities and to further racial justice:

#### **U. S. Voting Rights Timeline 1776 -2002:**

<https://a.s.kqed.net/pdf/education/digitalmedia/us-voting-rights-timeline.pdf>

#### **Winning the Vote: A History of Voting Rights by Steven Mintz, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History:**

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/winning-vote-history-voting-rights>

**Stacey Abrams Documentary Film *All In: The Fight for Democracy*** that examines the history of voter suppression in the U.S., along with the efforts to achieve equal access to the right to vote:

<https://www.kpbs.org/news/2020/sep/15/all-documentary-looks-voter-suppression/>

#### **Timeline of U. S. Voter Suppression, as provided by the University of Houston-Clear Lake:**

<https://www.uhclthesignal.com/wordpress/2018/10/25/timeline-history-of-voter-suppression-in-the-united-states/>

**Vital to moving toward racial justice is knowing more about the history of racism that has brought us to this moment in time.** The following *History of the Race Construct* in America, provided by [dRworks](https://www.dismantlingracism.org/history.html), offers a start to this understanding: <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/history.html>

The following book provides another facet of voter rights and the race construct in the U.S., that being mass incarceration: [\*The New Jim Crow\*](#), by Michelle Alexander

### **Discussion Questions to Guide Deeper Reflection and Critical Thinking:**

1. What are the economic, political and social benefits to those who currently hold positions of power to motivate them to denigrate people who are outside of their likeness?

2. How does manipulating access to the right to vote advance the interests of the people holding positions of power?
3. What are the risks to the people holding powerful positions to providing and encouraging equal access to the right to vote?
4. How would you describe the history of racism in the U.S. and the connection of this history to voting rights?
5. What are current examples of how voting rights of people of color are being suppressed?
  - a. What is gerrymandering and how does this political strategy affect voting rights?
  - b. What is the significance of current efforts to insure that people who have completed their prison terms have their right to vote re-instated?
6. How are people who may not directly suffer from voter suppression affected?
  - a. What opportunities are missed when segments of our society are kept from exercising their right to vote and participate in their government?
7. How could addressing voter suppression help further racial justice?

## HOW TO SPEAK UP AND TAKE ACTION TO FURTHER EQUAL ACCESS TO VOTING RIGHTS AND GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION AS PART OF FURTHERING RACIAL JUSTICE

When we learn about what has happened in our history, and what is continuing as efforts to take away the human rights of others, we can often say with some resignation, “What can I, a mere individual, do about this?” Yet, we know that throughout the history of mankind, individuals have taken courageous action to right the wrongs we see. One way of grasping this sense of responsibility to stand up for others being negatively impacted is the [Universe of Obligation](#), developed by Helen Fein, coming out of the atrocities of genocide during World War II.

We can see ourselves as social justice champions, where we seek to do what we can to right a wrong that is keeping others from experiencing equality, dignity and justice, related to all the rights spelled out by the UDHR.

The following are just some of the organizations already working hard to insure equal access to the right to vote and take part in our government, that you can contact for more information about this issue, or to get directly involved:

ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union): <https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights>

American Bar Association, with their list of organizations doing this work:

[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/voting-rights/how-to-help-protect-our-elections-and-get-out-the-vote/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/voting-rights/how-to-help-protect-our-elections-and-get-out-the-vote/)

Brennan Center for Justice on protecting the vote and reforming gerrymandering practices:

<https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote>

<https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/gerrymandering-fair-representation/redistricting/redistricting-reform>