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Definition: **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable*

A document adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 setting forth basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all are entitled. They include the right to life, liberty, freedom from servitude, fair trial, marriage, ownership of property, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of expression and the rights to vote, work and education.



Image from: [Eleanor Roosevelt broadcasts from New York in... in Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches](#)

Summary Article: **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

From *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a non-binding, international legal instrument that was drafted within the United Nations system immediately after World War II. It was intended to spell out the basic, fundamental rights that all human beings should be entitled to irrespective of political affiliations or personal attributes (e.g., citizenship, language, religion, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.). Like many human rights instruments, the UDHR is comprised of an introductory preamble that expresses general beliefs and values on the subject, followed by numerous articles or clauses that translate these generalities into concrete rights and entitlements. Drafted as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” (Preamble), the historical legacy of the Declaration has been part of a larger debate about the degree to which human rights reflect a Western ideological bias and whether efforts at universal implementation constitute ethnocentrism on the part of Western nations. Nevertheless, since its debut in 1948 the UDHR has become the most prominent and celebrated human rights document in history, and arguably one of the most influential moral documents of the twentieth century.

The aftermath of World War II was a dramatic turning point in the history of human rights. Since the mid-nineteenth century, international instruments had been drafted on a variety of social and humanitarian issues such as the abolition of slavery, political asylum, adequate working conditions, and the humane treatment of prisoners of war. But, the immense destruction and shocking atrocities of World War II provoked a dramatic push to institutionalize human rights protections in the international arena. Article 1 of the United Nations Charter (1945) explicitly stated that “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” was a central goal of this aspiring global organization. Furthermore, Chapters IX and X of the Charter discussed institutional mechanisms for promoting human rights and authorized the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to create commissions and make recommendations for such purposes.

In February 1946, ECOSOC established the UN Commission on Human Rights to draft an International Bill of Human Rights. Chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, this eighteen-member commission began work on a draft bill in January 1947, taking input from UN member nations as well as nongovernmental organizations along the way. By June 1948, plans for a legally binding component in the bill that would address concrete implementation and compliance measures were postponed in favor of a non-binding

declaration of general principles only. In the fall, a draft of the Declaration was submitted to the Social and Humanitarian Committee of the UN General Assembly where it was further scrutinized from September through December. On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly voted on and adopted a final version of the Declaration with a vote of 48 members in favor, 0 against, and 8 in abstention. Widely acknowledged at the time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a notable achievement for the newly formed United Nations. Despite vast geographical and ideological differences among participants from around the world, it was drafted and approved in only two years.

The document itself begins with an introductory preamble that asserts the inherent dignity and equal rights of every individual, and links the promotion of human rights to other UN aspirations such as peace and security, friendly relations between states, democratic freedoms, and respect for the rule of law. The remainder is comprised of 30 concise articles that enumerate a broad range of rights, freedoms, and entitlements. Articles 1 and 2 lay out the Declaration's basic philosophy of universal human equality. Article 1 begins by stating, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," while Article 2 reinforces this idea with explicit statements about non-discrimination. Articles 3 through 21 identify a set of civil and political entitlements that include rights to life, privacy, and free speech, freedoms from torture, slavery, and discrimination, as well as due process under the law. Articles 22 through 27 identify a set of economic, social, and cultural entitlements that include rights to work, leisure, social security, education, and an adequate standard of living. And Articles 28 through 30 address the larger protective framework within which human rights are to be enjoyed, acknowledging the duty of individuals as well as the international community in this regard. One of the interesting features of this particular document is that, unlike other pronouncements of universal, human values, it is entirely secular. After much deliberation in the drafting stage, all references to God or Nature as a source of human rights were left out of the final version. In this sense, the UDHR is historically unique in that fundamental rights are not granted by a higher authority or bestowed from the gods but, rather, they exist by virtue of the fact that everyone is an equally valuable member of the human family.

Efforts to draft a legally binding companion to the UDHR, covering more specific provisions of implementation and compliance, continued apace after 1948. When the General Assembly adopted the Declaration it also passed a resolution calling for the UN Commission on Human Rights to continue its previous work on a companion instrument of this type. The ensuing debates within the UN were complicated by the onset of the Cold War and highlighted different ideological approaches regarding the implementation of economic, social, and cultural rights versus civil and political ones. In general, the Soviet bloc praised the inclusion of economic, social, and cultural rights but resisted the implementation of civil and political ones that were at odds with their highly centralized, communist regimes. Western nations, on the other hand, viewed civil and political rights as more essential and saw no need to impose economic, social, and cultural entitlements, since they would flow naturally from free democratic and capitalist systems. As a result, in February 1952 the General Assembly directed the Commission on Human Rights to prepare two draft instruments instead of one – an International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and an International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The Commission completed its work on the draft covenants in 1954 but, after further deliberation, the General Assembly did not adopt final versions until December 1966. Roughly ten more years would pass before each covenant received enough support from the international community to enter into force. The ICESCR passed this threshold, equal to 35 formal state ratifications, on January 3, 1976. The ICCPR passed the same threshold on March 23, 1976. While they operate as three distinct instruments

of international law, the two Covenants and the UDHR represent the core of the UN's International Bill of Human Rights. Today, a majority of UN member states have ratified both the ICESCR and the ICCPR but debates about the relative importance of particular human rights linger on. Recent campaigns have tried to promote both rights categories as unitary and indivisible. For example, in commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the UDHR in 1998, the UN adopted the slogan "All Human Rights for All" to reinforce the idea that human rights of all types (civil, political, economic, social, cultural, etc.) should be understood and implemented as an integrated whole.

In addition to this debate, some have questioned the legitimacy of the UDHR altogether, claiming that the values reflected in it derive mainly from Western culture and therefore cannot be truly universal. If this is the case then worldwide efforts to implement human rights (based on UDHR principles) and garner compliance from non-Western societies could be seen as a form of cultural imperialism. In 1947, before the Declaration was even completed, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a forewarning to the UN Commission on Human Rights. This formal statement was concerned not only about the problem of ethnocentrism (holding Western values as superior to those of other societies) but that of cultural relativism as well. Ultimately, the AAA argued that fundamental values are relative to the culture from which they derive and that, since there is no objective standard of cultural validity, the effort to construct a "universal" declaration was fruitless. Since then, debates over the universality of human rights and the ethnocentrism of the UDHR are an inescapable element of current intellectual discourse on the subject.

Nevertheless, despite these concerns the moral authority of this document has spread worldwide and can be seen in a number of institutional arenas. Within the UN system, the UDHR continues to be celebrated through formal commemorations. Since 1950, "Human Rights Day" has been observed every December 10 to commemorate the date upon which the Declaration was adopted. More elaborate observances have been organized at ten-year intervals. For example, the twentieth, fiftieth, and sixtieth anniversaries of the UDHR (in 1968, 1998, and 2008, respectively) were marked by commemorative activities taking place throughout the entire year. Most notably, during the UN's Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), a worldwide effort was undertaken to translate the UDHR into as many languages and dialects as possible. As a result, the *Guinness Book of World Records* recognized the UDHR as the "most translated document in history" in 2004. At present, it has undergone 360 different language translations and counting.

Together with the UN Charter (1945), the UDHR has also had a marked influence on the development of international law. Since World War II, scores of similarly structured human rights instruments have been adopted on a wide array of issues that expand upon the content of the Declaration's original 30 articles. Likewise, statements of human rights and fundamental freedoms can be found in many post-war national constitutions. And, in the nongovernmental arena, there is little doubt that the UDHR has inspired the formation of countless civil society organizations that have drawn upon its moral authority to mobilize their activities at both the local and global levels. Today, this document is also used as a curricular tool in a variety of human rights education programs, such as UNESCO's Associated Schools Project. Thus, while the historical legacy of the UDHR has not been void of controversy, it has also become a powerful political and ideological instrument with worldwide appeal.

SEE ALSO: Human Rights; United Nations.

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