

Universal Declaration of Human Rights not 'universally observed' in US

Gemma Alexander

Tucked between Thanksgiving and Christmas is another celebratory event that deserves attention: Human Rights Day, observed every December 10 to commemorate the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. The Declaration serves as a common standard for the rights all peoples in all nations, and its proclamation marked the first time an international group agreed to a set of fundamental human rights.

The United States chaired the committee that created the Declaration and was among the first nations to adopt the standard. At that time, in the wake of World War II, the United States was seen as the global beacon of freedom. Have we lived up to that reputation?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It's no surprise that the United States had a major role in drafting the 30 articles of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), many of which bear remarkable similarities to our Constitution's [Bill of Rights](#). But some the Declaration's articles, while echoing American sensibilities, are not reflected in U.S. economic reality. For example, Article 26 declares "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" and Article 23 calls for "equal pay for equal work."

State of human rights in the United States

Even a quick read of the Declaration reveals that America has not quite achieved the high standards it set for basic humanity. Moreover, the United States has been reluctant to [ratify](#) many of the subsequent international agreements through which the United Nations seeks to realize the rights promised in the Declaration. The United Nations doesn't produce a scorecard, but the UN's most recent [reports and concluding observations](#) on the United States highlight concerns over the rights of indigenous peoples; arbitrary detention; human trafficking, especially of women and children; the right to peaceful assembly; torture; and racial discrimination.

The nonprofit Advocates for Human Rights identifies [nine areas](#) in which the United

States falls short:

- Poverty
- [Discrimination](#)
- [Violence against women](#)
- The U.S. justice system
- Voter disenfranchisement
- [Immigration](#)
- Civil and political liberties
- Education
- [Healthcare](#)

There's work to do, but those who think we've got it good in the United States are not completely wrong. The 2016 "Freedom in the World" [assessment](#) of political rights and civil liberties gave the United States the top ranking, matched by only 46 of the 195 countries evaluated.

So if you missed taking some time on December 10, perhaps we Americans should all take a minute to reflect on our achievements and shortcomings on meeting the goals of basic human rights. After all, this is the season of "peace on earth and goodwill toward men."