



HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

Declaration of the Rights of Man

(France, 1789)



Portraits of French women adorn the Panthéon in celebration of the International Women’s Day in Paris in 2002. The poster in the center reads, “to the famous women of the grateful fatherland.” ©AP Images

The Declaration of the Rights of Man asserts the authority of democratically passed laws, condemns any government based on absolutism and privilege, and proclaims the inalienable rights of individuals, liberty and political equality. The French National Assembly adopted the declaration on August 26, 1789.

The Marquis de Lafayette wrote the declaration with help from his friend Thomas Jefferson, who was the American envoy to

France. As a general during the American Revolution, Lafayette had been instrumental in defeating the British.

King Louis XVI signed the document on October 5, 1789, under pressure from the people who marched to Versailles. In 1791, the declaration became the preamble to the first constitution of the French Revolution, although the revolution later revoked certain principles and generated two additional declarations of the rights of man (in 1793 and 1795).

With France’s national motto “Liberty, Fraternity, Equality,” a protestor includes “Retirement” on her face during an October 2010 Paris demonstration against parliament’s proposal to raise the retirement age from 60 to 62 to help sustain the pension system. ©AP Images



The Lafayette text, inspired by the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, endured and is the foundation of other important French national documents, including the constitutions of 1852, 1946 and 1958.

Declaration of the Rights of Man – 1789

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social body, shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all. Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

Article 1.

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.

Article 2.

The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

Article 3.

The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.

Article 4.

Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.



Ceramic tiles displaying the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man cover the tunnel walls of Concorde Station on Paris Métro Line 12. Each tile has only a letter — no punctuation or space between words.
©Shutterstock/Carsten Medom Madsen

Article 5.

Law can only prohibit such actions as are hurtful to society. Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be forced to do anything not provided for by law.

Article 6.

Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.

Article 7.

No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases and according to the forms prescribed by law. Any one soliciting, transmitting, executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished. But any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of the law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offense.

Article 8.

The law shall provide for such punishments only as are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one shall suffer punishment except it be legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated before the commission of the offense.

In support of Tunisia's revolution, a French activist in Marseille displays "Hand in Hand to Democracy" as an expression of solidarity at a gathering in southern France on January 15, 2011. A popular rebellion had forced the Tunisian president to flee. ©AP Images



A poster of a voting card beckons a young man with the words "42 million people have it. Do you?" near Montfermeil City Hall on the northern outskirts of Paris. ©AP Images

Article 9.

As all persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty, if arrest shall be deemed indispensable, all harshness not essential to the securing of the prisoner's person shall be severely repressed by law.

Article 10.

No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.

Article 11.

The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

Article 12.

The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for

the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted.

Article 13.

A common contribution is essential for the maintenance of the public forces and for the cost of administration. This should be equitably distributed among all the citizens in proportion to their means.

Article 14.

All the citizens have a right to decide, either personally or by their representatives, as to the necessity of the public contribution; to grant this freely; to know to what uses it is put; and to fix the proportion, the mode of assessment and of collection and the duration of the taxes.

Article 15.

Society has the right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.

Article 16.

A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.

Article 17.

Since property is an inviolable and sacred right, no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it, and then only on condition that the owner shall have been previously and equitably indemnified.



The original oil painting of this familiar Jean-Jacques le Barbier interpretation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man (c. 1793) hangs in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris. ©Corbis

