UNITED BROTHERS OF LOS ANGELES

CIVIC SCHOOL

An Easy-to-Digest Civic Curriculum for Black Men and Boys

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We don't teach Black men to survive. We equip them to thrive.

How to Use This Curriculum

Civic School is UBLA's plain-English civics course, built for brothers who were handed a ballot with no instruction manual. Six short lessons. Each one carries a single big idea, a plain-English explanation, a real Los Angeles example, one action to take before the next session, and the handful of words worth knowing. No jargon, no lectures, no party line: UBLA is nonpartisan, and this curriculum teaches how power works, never who to hand it to.

Run it anywhere brothers already gather: a barbershop, a church hall, a union local, a living room. One lesson a week, about 30 minutes each, works well. All a facilitator needs is this guide, a sample ballot from lavote.gov, and a phone for looking up registration status. Every lesson ends with a move, because knowledge that never turns into action is just trivia.

LESSON 1

The Map: Who Decides What

The Big Idea. Almost everything that touches your daily life is decided within a few miles of your house, by people whose names are on your ballot.

In Plain English. Government is a stack of layers, and each layer has a job.

- **Federal:** the military, immigration, and national money.
- **State:** driver's licenses, state highways, prisons, and the rules cities play by.
- **County:** the sheriff, the jails, the public hospitals, and the elections themselves.
- **City:** your city council handles police, streets, trash, parks, and zoning, meaning what gets built on your block and what does not.
- **The boards:** the school board, which runs the schools, and special districts like the water board, which controls your water and a real budget with it.

When something goes wrong on your street, one of these layers owns it. The first skill of power is knowing which one.

Real Talk. Look at our own city. Los Angeles is led by a Mayor elected citywide, and its laws and budget are made by a City Council of 15 districts, each holding roughly 260,000 people, more residents than most American cities have in total. One council seat helps decide policing, streets, housing, and how billions in city money get spent. And the city is only one layer: Los Angeles County is governed by just five supervisors for nearly ten million people, so a single supervisor represents about two million residents. Knowing which layer you are talking to is the difference between being heard and being handed off.

> **Your Move.** Before the next lesson, name your reps. Look up your city council district, your county supervisor, and your school board member. Write down their names. Power gets a lot less abstract when it has a name and a district number.

Words to Know. Jurisdiction: the territory and topics one body controls. At-large: elected by the whole city instead of one district. Special district: a focused government, like water or transit, with its own elected board and budget.

REFERENCE PAGE

The Ladder: Every Level, One Page

Keep this page close. Every problem on your block belongs to exactly one rung, and every rung has names on your ballot.

- **Federal: Washington, D.C.**

  Who runs it. The President, the U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives.

  What it decides. The military, immigration, national money, and the federal courts.

  On your ballot. President (4-year term), U.S. Senator (6 years), U.S. Representative (2 years).

- **State: Sacramento**

  Who runs it. The Governor, the State Senate, and the State Assembly.

  What it decides. Driver's licenses, state highways, prisons, state taxes, and the rules cities play by.

  On your ballot. Governor (4-year term), State Senator (4 years), Assemblymember (2 years).

- **County: Los Angeles County**

  Who runs it. The Board of Supervisors, five members for nearly ten million people. One supervisor represents about two million residents.

  What it decides. The sheriff, the jails, the public hospitals, social services, and the elections themselves.

On your ballot. Your County Supervisor (4-year term). In Los Angeles County, one rung up from the city and the most powerful local office most people never think about.

- **City: Your City Hall**

Who runs it. The Mayor, elected citywide, and the City Council. In Los Angeles, 15 council districts of roughly 260,000 people each.

What it decides. Police, streets, trash, parks, and zoning: what gets built on your block and what does not, plus the city budget.

On your ballot. Mayor (4-year term) and your City Councilmember (4 years).

- **School Board and Special Districts: The Hidden Rung**

Who runs it. Elected boards most voters have never heard of.

What it decides. The school board runs your public schools. Special districts run one service each, like the water board, which controls your water and a real budget with it. Transit, parks, and water all live on this rung.

On your ballot. School board members and district directors, often at the very bottom of the ballot, where the fewest votes get cast and a small number of voters decides.

The rule of the ladder. Before you complain, climb. Name the rung that owns the problem, then name the person. That is exactly what the District Locator at ks-operations.net does for your address: it hands you every rung and every name, in order.

LESSON 2

Your Ballot, Decoded

The Big Idea. A ballot is not a test. It is a hiring sheet and a checkbook, and every line on it is yours to fill or leave to strangers.

In Plain English. Read a California ballot top to bottom and you will find four kinds of choices. Offices: people running for a job, from U.S. Senator down to water board. Measures and propositions: laws and money questions put directly to voters, where a yes or no does the legislating. Bonds: borrowing for buildings and infrastructure, repaid over time with interest, usually needing 55 percent or two-thirds to pass depending on the type. Judges: Superior Court judges run in elections, and state appellate justices face a yes-or-no question on whether they keep their seat. Two California quirks matter. In the primary, the top two finishers advance to November no matter their party. And you may skip any single line: an under-vote on one race never cancels the rest of your ballot.

Real Talk. On a real Los Angeles ballot, a city council district race can sit on the same page as county and statewide contests and a stack of local measures. A measure's one-line summary

can hide a 20-year tax or a major building program. The words after the summary, the fiscal estimate and who supports and opposes it, are where the truth lives.

> **Your Move.** Get a sample ballot early and read it like a menu before you are hungry. Mark your choices at home, at your own pace, and bring your notes to the vote center. Deciding in the booth under time pressure is how marketing beats judgment.

Words to Know. Measure: a law or policy question decided by voters. Bond: government borrowing repaid over time. Under-vote: leaving one contest blank, which is allowed. Top Two: California's primary system, where the two highest finishers advance regardless of party.

LESSON 3

The Money: Budgets, Taxes, and Bonds

The Big Idea. A budget is a values statement with dollar signs. Whoever understands the money understands the city.

In Plain English. Cities run on a few main streams: property taxes, sales taxes, fees, and money passed down from the state and federal governments. Once a year, the council adopts a budget that splits that money among police, fire, streets, parks, libraries, and everything else. That single vote says more about a city's real priorities than any speech. Bonds are the other half of the money story: when voters approve a bond, they are approving a loan the public pays back over decades, so a yes vote is also a decision your children help pay for. None of this requires an accounting degree. The budget for any city is a public document, and the summary pages are written to be read.

Real Talk. When a council says there is no money for the rec center's hours but finds money for a new contract, that is not arithmetic. That is priority. The budget hearing, held in public every year, is where residents can say so on the record before the vote, not after.

> **Your Move.** Find your city's current budget summary online and answer three questions: How much goes to public safety? How much to parks and youth? What is the city's total budget? Bring the answers to the next session. You will know more than most people who speak at the podium.

Words to Know. General fund: the main pot of money a city can spend as it chooses. Fiscal year: the government's budget year, in California cities usually July 1 to June 30. Bond measure: a ballot question asking voters to approve public borrowing.

LESSON 4

The Meeting: Where Decisions Actually Happen

The Big Idea. Elections choose the people. Meetings are where those people choose everything else, and the public is legally invited.

In Plain English. Every council, board, and commission must do its business in the open. California's Brown Act requires posted agendas, usually at least 72 hours before a regular meeting, and a real chance for the public to speak. That chance is called public comment: typically one to three minutes at a microphone, on the record, in front of the decision-makers and the cameras. It is short by design, which is why the winning formula is simple: your name, where you live, the item number, what you want, and one reason. Show up with five neighbors saying the same thing and you are no longer a comment. You are a constituency. Decisions can also be tracked between meetings: agendas, staff reports, and past votes are public records, and any resident can request them.

Real Talk. Council members count. A room with three people in it tells them an issue has no weight; a room with thirty tells them it has a constituency behind it. More than one Los Angeles area decision has turned on who filled the chairs on a Tuesday night.

> **Your Move.** Attend one public meeting before the next lesson, any meeting: city council, school board, or a commission. Stay for one agenda item you care about. You do not have to speak. Seeing the room once removes the mystery forever.

Words to Know. Agenda: the official list of what a body will decide, posted in advance. Public comment: your legal right to address the body on the record. Brown Act: California's open-meetings law. Quorum: the minimum number of members who must be present to take a valid vote.

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The Brown Act: The Law That Keeps the Doors Open

Where it comes from. The Ralph M. Brown Act, passed in 1953 and named for the assemblyman who wrote it, is California's open-meetings law, found at Government Code section 54950 and following. Its opening declaration is the whole philosophy in one line: public bodies exist to serve the people, and the people do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies that serve them. Everything else in the Act is machinery to make that sentence true.

Who it covers. City councils, county boards of supervisors, school boards, special district boards such as water boards, and most boards, commissions, and standing committees those bodies create. If a body spends public money or decides public business, the Brown Act almost certainly applies to it.

Your rights. Five, and they are enforceable. Attend freely: nobody can require you to sign in, register, or give your name as the price of entering the room. See it first: regular meeting agendas must be posted at least 72 hours in advance, in public and online, with a brief description of every item; special meetings require 24 hours. Speak on the record: you are entitled to public comment before or during each item, plus a general period for topics not on the agenda; the body may set reasonable time limits, usually one to three minutes, but it cannot prohibit criticism of itself. Record it: you may audio or video record and broadcast the meeting unless it genuinely disrupts the proceedings. Read what they read: documents distributed to the members about an agenda item are public records, open to your inspection.

The lines they cannot cross. No off-agenda action: with narrow exceptions, a body may not discuss or decide anything that was not on the posted agenda. No serial meetings: a majority may not deliberate through a daisy chain of calls, texts, emails, or go-betweens outside a public meeting, even if they never share a room. No secret ballots: every vote is public. Closed doors are the exception: closed session is allowed only for specific topics such as personnel matters, pending litigation, real estate negotiations, and labor talks, it must be announced in open session, and certain decisions taken inside must be reported out when the doors reopen.

When they break it. Any resident can send a written cure-and-correct demand, generally within 90 days of the action; the body then has 30 days to undo it, or a court can declare the action void. The district attorney, or any interested person, can sue to stop a pattern of violations. At the extreme, a member who attends a meeting knowing action is being taken to keep information from the public commits a misdemeanor.

Work it. Set an agenda alarm for the bodies on your map. Read the agenda and the staff report before the meeting, not after the vote. Speak the formula: name, where you live, the item number, your ask, one reason. Bring five neighbors saying the same thing. And if a door closes that should be open, write it down with dates and times: that record is exactly what a cure-and-correct letter runs on.

LESSON 5

Beyond Voting: Seats, Service, and the Call That Works

The Big Idea. Voting is the floor, not the ceiling. Between elections, power sits in appointed seats, in paid poll work, and in one well-aimed phone call.

In Plain English. Cities and counties run on boards and commissions: planning, parks, public safety, housing, and dozens more. Members are appointed, often by the same elected officials on your ballot, and seats regularly sit empty for lack of applicants. Serving on one is the fastest

civic education in existence and a real line on a leadership path. Poll workers are the other open door: Los Angeles County hires thousands of residents to run vote centers each election, pays them, trains them, and needs bilingual and neighborhood-rooted workers most. And for daily problems, skip the rant and use the system: in the City of Los Angeles, dial 311 for city services; wherever you live, your council district office exists to move exactly the complaint you have, and district staff track every call.

Real Talk. A brother who serves on a planning commission sees every major development before it is announced. A brother who works the polls knows his precinct's families by name. Neither seat requires winning an election. Both require only applying, and almost nobody applies.

> **Your Move.** Pick one door and knock this week: apply for a board or commission vacancy, sign up as a poll worker at lavote.gov, or make one 311 or district-office call about something on your block that needs fixing. Log what happens. That log is your first record as a constituent who follows through.

Words to Know. Commission: an appointed body that advises or decides in one policy area. Constituent: a resident represented by an official, whether they voted or not. District office: your council member's local staff, whose job is solving residents' problems with city agencies.

LESSON 6

The Playbook: Every Election, On Purpose

The Big Idea. Power is a habit with dates attached. Run the same simple play every cycle and you will out-participate almost everybody.

In Plain English. California makes voting easier than most states if you use the tools. Every registered voter is mailed a ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it in an official drop box, or vote in person at any vote center in the county, many open ten days before Election Day. Registration closes 15 days before the election, and if you miss it, same-day registration at a vote center still gets you a ballot. Track your mailed ballot with the state's Where's My Ballot tool so you know the day it is counted. Then do the part machines cannot: bring people. A personal ask from a trusted brother moves more votes than a mailer ever will, and the research in our own newsletter says Black men are the most persuadable, least contacted voters in the country. That gap is an invitation.

Real Talk. In every California general election the rhythm is the same. Ballots are mailed to every registered voter about a month out. Registration closes 15 days before Election Day, vote centers begin opening 10 days out, and Election Day itself is fixed by federal law: the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Primaries and local elections run on their own

calendars, which is why the habit matters more than any single date: the brother who knows the rhythm never has to scramble. UBLA's target every cycle is simple: every brother in our orbit registered, verified, voted early, and bringing one more with him.

> **Your Move.** Run the play now. Check your registration today, set your early-vote date, sign up for ballot tracking, and write down the one brother you are bringing. Then text him the date. A plan with a name on it is a promise.

Words to Know. Early voting: casting your ballot before Election Day at a vote center. Vote center: a county location where any registered voter in the county can vote in person. Conditional registration: California's same-day option to register and vote at a vote center after the deadline.

A Closing Word

None of this requires permission, money, or a title. It requires only what Black men in Los Angeles have never lacked: presence, discipline, and each other. Civic School's promise is the promise of every UBLA pillar, stated plainly. We don't teach Black men to survive. We equip them to thrive, and a man who understands the map, the ballot, the money, and the meeting is a man no room can decide without.

Prepared by United Brothers of Los Angeles (UBLA) for Civic School, the civic education program of UBLA's Political Power pillar. Nonpartisan: this curriculum teaches how government works and how to act within it. It does not endorse candidates or parties.

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