

# Civil disobedience and thoreau

Government



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“ Civil disobedience” is an intentional and non-violent disobedience of law by an individual who believes that a certain law is unjust and who is willing to accept the penalty for breaking that law to bring about change and public awareness. When Henry David Thoreau wrote “ On The Duty of Civil Disobedience” in 1849, he advocated that democracy in America could only be improved by individual activism and civil disobedience to unjust laws.

Thoreau’s ideas in “ Civil Disobedience” are outdated for contemporary American Society because the more effective solution for unjust laws today is active participation within the political system and not individual civil disobedience. The American political system allows the minority perspective to prevail, and any citizen can change the law through the courts, through Congress, and through the election of new government leaders. Thoreau’s ideas that American democracy is run by an unresponsive and tyrannical majority and that “ A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority” (Thoreau 231) are wrong or outdated in today’s society.

In the American concept of democracy, individuals can, and do, challenge unjust laws through the court system and through the election process. While civil disobedience by individuals has historically been credited for civil rights reform in America, the government institutions were ultimately responsible for the reform of unjust laws and unjust practices. Civil rights reform began in the court system. Ultimately, unjust laws were overturned by the new laws. The Fourteenth Amendment gave all citizens the right to due process and equal protection under the law. Women have the right to vote because of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Thus, Thoreau is incorrect when he states “ Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it” and minimizes the effect that a citizen can have in the election process (Thoreau 226). American’s participation in the Iraq war will end as a result of President Obama’s election. One of President Obama’s significant campaign promises was that he would end the Iraq war begun by President Bush. The demonstrations across from the White House and the marches did not change President Bush’s conviction that military resources should be used in Iraq. Kathy Kelly’s Voices in America which defied economic sanctions against Iraq by taking medicine to Iraq and by being fined \$20, 000 did not cause any change in policy. Ethan and Vima Vesely-Flad’s purposeful payment of 51% their tax monies to the Quakers rather than the federal government to protest the military involvement in Iraq only resulted in the garnishment of Ethan’s wages. All of these civil disobedience efforts failed, and the change that all these protesters wanted occurred because people participated within the political system by voting for President Obama. The Court system legalized abortion rights and protected the rights of women. In contrast, the anti-abortion movement has marched on Washington, D. C. and engaged in civil disobedience for decades without changing those rights. These protestors of the right created by Roe v. Wade who have illegally blocked patients and healthcare providers from access to the abortion clinics have only helped those who favor abortion. The pharmacists who refused to provide birth control because they consider it a form of abortion have only lost their jobs and been subject to public disdain. Supporters of the right to choose and of abortion rights for women have devoted their energies to working within the political process with the results being that abortion remains legal.

The Tea Party also demonstrates how an organized grassroots minority can influence government by organizing and by working within the political system to bring about change. The Tea Party organization began with a handful of citizens who were concerned about government spending and excessive taxation and regulation. The Tea Party created a platform called “The Contract For America” which caused Republicans to create their own “Commitment to America” and their “A Pledge to America.” The Tea Party has been able to influence several elections and is given the credit of having helped Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown be elected.

The Tea Party has been predicted to have a significant impact on the coming November elections. If the Tea Party succeeds in electing state and federal legislators, it will affect government spending. The existence of the Tea Party has already influenced the Republican party, which shows that working within the system is more effective than the civil disobedience urged by Thoreau. Modern day civil disobedience is ineffective and will not result in change as Thoreau suggests. The reasons that civil disobedience is no longer the most effective mechanism for change is because of its nature.

Civil disobedience involves a protest by an individual who breaks a law to change it. Most of those protests are uncoordinated. Individual disobedience without widespread participation or publicity does not create greater awareness of a moral issue. Civil disobedience has worked in the past when the unjust law affects a majority of the citizens and has widespread, albeit silent, support. Certain acts of disobedience like the pharmacist refusing to fill a prescription needed by a woman for whatever reason or like blocking access to a medical clinic do not work and alienate the society.

Thus, Thoreau's ideas of " Civil Disobedience" about civil disobedience have less value today in American Society because the individual is far more likely to bring about change by working within the system as the modern Iraqi war protests, anti-abortion protests, and the Tea Party have shown. Civil disobedience is no longer the most effective agent for an individual to reform the law, and the more effective solution for unjust laws requires active participation in the political process to make the government more responsive to its citizens.