

## On Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience is the deliberate disobeying of a law to advance (promote) a moral principle or change government policy. It may be confined to breaking only particular laws which are considered unjust, or it can include breaking other laws as a way of drawing attention to the perceived injustice — for example, by damaging property, refusing to pay fines or taxes, obstructing entry into a building, or trespassing. Those who practice either kind of civil disobedience are willing to accept the consequences of their actions as a means of furthering their cause.

### Pro

Even in democracies, we only have a chance to have a say in how the country is run every four years or so, and then only indirectly by voting for a political party. This is insufficient for the opinions of the people to be heard properly, and in certain circumstances civil disobedience is a powerful method of making the will of the public count if it is being ignored. Against powerful interest groups who dominate politics through their money and control of the media, civil disobedience is often the only way to get attention for a cause.

Not every just cause can be pursued through the courts. Even in cases where a case can be taken through legal channels, the courts are often controlled by the same political elite as the government, and there is no guarantee of justice.

If a certain law is oppressive it cannot be opposed in principle but obeyed in practice out of concern for legality — it must be broken. Not to do so makes us partners in repression. National laws cannot be the ultimate authority — men and women are required to obey higher laws. It was established in the Nuremberg trials that sometimes international laws must override national ones. Many Christian thinkers (such as Martin Luther King) and other philosophers have argued that the law of God, or “natural law” is most important, and that national laws which are not in agreement with it are unjust and should therefore be resisted. Even under the theory of social contract, the state can be resisted if it becomes oppressive and subsequently breaks its side of the contract.

### Con

In a democracy civil disobedience cannot be justified. National elections take place regularly, and governments are accountable and can be changed. Members of the public who are unhappy can always lobby their representative or protest within the law, for example, by organizing marches, petitions, advertising campaigns, or even running candidates of their own for election. All these provide ways of changing laws and policies without the need for deliberate law-breaking.

Most democracies also allow appeal to the courts against laws which are obviously unjust. If the law can be shown to be in conflict with the country’s constitution or charter of rights, then courts can usually overturn it. People who are unhappy with such a law should take their struggle to the courts, rather than taking to the streets and undermining the rule of law itself.

We must obey the law even if we think it is wrong, or anarchy will result. The widely-held idea of the “social contract” teaches that by living under a state we accept the benefits it brings, and by accepting these benefits we consent to its laws. If individuals placed their own values, whatever they are based upon, over the collective laws of the state, the state would dissolve and none of its benefits would be available to any of us.