



Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

The **United States** is a nation that emerged out of **protest**. Drawing on the principles of **natural rights** and **consent of the governed**, voting for change, marching to demand action, and petitioning leaders are ways in which “we the people” fight injustice and inequality. Sometimes, public protests fail, leading some to engage in civil disobedience.

Civil disobedience is a form of public protest that involves taking action against unjust laws. These actions may take several forms although most acts of civil disobedience involve intentionally violating a law in order to demonstrate opposition to unjust policy and demand change.

Nineteenth century writer Henry David Thoreau, a strong advocate of **civil disobedience**, argued that if the law **“...is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law.”** In his **own act** of civil disobedience, Thoreau refused to pay taxes that could support slavery and war, and went to jail for it.



Acts of civil disobedience may involve knowingly breaking an unjust law and facing the consequences (such as arrest and jail time), in order to draw attention to the injustice or to force change. One of the most well-known examples of protest is the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was launched in opposition to segregated bus seating that made it illegal for African Americans to sit in front of Whites on the bus. This boycott began with an act of civil disobedience. **Claudette Colvin**, a 13 year old girl, was arrested for arguing that having to move to the back of a bus violated her constitutional rights and refusing to move.

Later, **Rosa Parks** intentionally refused to surrender her seat on that same bus line to a white person, which helped launch a civil rights movement.



Recently, we have seen acts of civil disobedience that seek to draw attention to systems of injustice and inequality. These acts range from refusing to disperse **protests after curfew** to **blocking traffic**. Civil disobedience is a tool in the workshop of democracy that is the United States. Knowing when to use that tool can make a significant impact in the pursuit of justice.



To Think and To Do: Find examples of recent acts of protest and civil disobedience. How are they similar? How are they different?

Learn MORE about the concept of civil disobedience. Free registration may be required.

- [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#), from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research & Education Institute
- [What if laws are unjust?](#), from the John F. Kennedy Library
- [Civil Disobedience](#), from the Bill of Rights Institute

