



# Thoreau's Critique of Democracy in "Civil Disobedience"

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## Framing Question

What criticisms of representative democracy does Thoreau raise in "Civil Disobedience"?

## Understanding

In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau not only calls for resistance to immoral and unjust government actions, he also criticizes the foundations of representative democracy — majority rule, voting, and representation.

## Text

["Civil Disobedience"](#), by Henry David Thoreau, 1849.

## Background

Prompted by his opposition to slavery and the Mexican War (1846–1848), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) wrote "Civil Disobedience" in 1849, but its central question — how should individuals respond to a government that pursues policies they believe to be immoral — still challenges us today.

For Thoreau the goal of any response to unjust policies is to insure that the individual does not, either directly or indirectly, advance them. "What I have to do," he writes, "is to see... that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn." He maintains that there are two ways to avoid lending oneself to the wrong: resistance to the state and separation from it. His refusal to pay his poll tax to protest slavery and the Mexican War was an act of resistance that landed him in jail for a night. Some time before that act, when he was commanded to pay a tax to support a clergyman, he not only resisted by refusing to pay it, he also proclaimed his separation from the state: "Know all men... that I, Henry David Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any... society which I have not joined." At the conclusion of "Civil Disobedience" he even claims that democracy would be improved if the state permitted some citizens



Henry David Thoreau, 1854

to live beyond its reach. (We explore this point in the lesson's second interactive exercise.)

Our chief concern here, however, is not Thoreau's call for resistance but rather his critique of representative democracy. He bases his analysis on two fundamental assertions. First, he maintains that the individual is the source of all moral authority. "The only obligation which I have a right to assume," he says, "is to do at any time what I think right." Second, he contends that it is not enough simply to perceive the right. "How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely?" he asks. He demands "action from principle." The "perception of right" must be accompanied by "the performance of right."

We might respond by saying that, in a democratic society, citizens "perform" the right by deciding where they stand on issues and voting according to their principles. Thoreau would disagree: "Even voting *for the right*," he insists, "is *doing* nothing for it." [His italics.] As we shall see in our analysis of excerpts from "Civil Disobedience," his critique of voting goes hand-in-hand with his objections to majority rule and representation. Taken together, they strike, as one critic has written, "at the very core principles of democracy."<sup>1</sup>

1. Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "Thoreau's Critique of Government," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2009), p. 76.

## Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. For what audience was it intended?
3. For what purpose was it written?
4. When was it written?
5. What was going on at the time of its writing that might have influenced its composition?

## Text Analysis

### Paragraph 4

*Focusing on the tension between the individual conscience and majority rule, this paragraph lies at the heart of Thoreau's critique of representative democracy.*

[1] After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. [2] But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. [3] Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? [4] Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? [5] Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. [6] It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. [7] The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. [8] It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience. [9] Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. [10] A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and

### Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. [11] They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. [12] Now, what are they? [13] Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?

### Activity: Thoreau's Criticism of Representative Democracy



Review the central points of the textual analysis.

According to Thoreau, what is the basis of majority rule?

According to Thoreau, how do governments decide questions of right and wrong?

In Thoreau's view what should determine right and wrong?

Why does Thoreau object to governing through legislators?

In his view what sort of questions can legitimately be decided by majority rule?

The decisions of government are expressed as laws. According to Thoreau, how should individuals relate to the law and why?

What two dangers does Thoreau see in paying the law “undue respect”?

Based on your reading of this paragraph, why does Thoreau assert that “a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice”?

### Paragraph 11

*Majority rule depends, of course, on voting. So what if the right, as dictated by your conscience, appears on a ballot; you vote for it, and it wins. Does that sequence bestow moral legitimacy on government? In the paragraph Thoreau says no.*

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon [a dice game], with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.

### Activity: Thoreau, the Many, and the Few



Write a contrast paragraph and draw an inference.



Henry David Thoreau, 1856

How is voting like betting?

What does Thoreau mean when he says that “the character of the voters is not staked” in voting?

On what grounds does Thoreau believe the majority will make its decision?

According to Thoreau, when is the majority likely to vote for morality and justice?

## Glossary

**conscientious:** morally aware; governed by moral conscience

**whit:** small amount

**palpitation:** beat, throb

**unscrupulous:** unprincipled, dishonest

**gaming:** gambling

**tinge:** shading; the quality of being slightly marked or influenced by something

**staked:** bet

**prevail:** win, triumph

**expediency:** practicality, used here with the connotation of ignoring morality

**feebly:** weakly

**indifferent:** uninterested in

**hasten:** quicken

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