

# A History of Protest

Our country was founded on the twin platforms of dissent and protest. Dissent is thinking or feeling differently about something, and protest is taking action based on dissent. It's easy to dismiss protests as the undertakings of zealots and kooks, but the history of the U.S. is largely one of protest: the Boston Tea Party, the Revolutionary War, and the Declaration of Independence, all the way to the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and are quintessential examples of protest and the reasons why we have the freedoms we do.

"What does this have to do with me?" you might ask. "I've never protested anything in my life." This isn't true, at least if you've ever voted. Voting is the most powerful way you can make your voice heard, and it is often done as a form of protest. Don't believe it? How often have you said, or heard someone else say, I'm voting for candidate X not because I like him or her, but because I like the other candidate even less?" Not only is there nothing wrong with using your vote this way, but it would be wrong if you were truly bothered by what a candidate represented and did nothing about it.

## A Code of Ethics for Protesting

Yes, we have a responsibility to speak up when we are upset by what's going on in the world, but there are better and worse ways to do it, from both ethical and practical perspectives. The goal of any protest is a moral one: to make things better [BusinessWeek.com, 1/18/07]. However, this concern must be balanced against the ethical obligations **to do no harm** [BusinessWeek.com, 1/11/07], **respect others** [BusinessWeek.com, 1/31/07], and **be fair** [BusinessWeek.com, 2/15/07]. With these concerns in mind, I propose the following code of ethics for those on either side of the forthcoming rallies and protests concerning the passage of Proposition 8:

**1. Obey the law**, or be willing to accept the consequences. Civil disobedience has an important role in democracy, but those who break the law, even in the name of a higher moral good, may have to pay a significant personal price. Rosa Parks rightly protested the Jim Crow laws of the segregated South but was arrested, went to jail, and received death threats. Those who take issue with any aspect of either convention should keep the law in mind at all times and recognize that the failure to do so may lead to civil or criminal penalties, or both.

**2. Be tolerant.** It is great to be passionate about your point of view. It's also great to recognize that others may not share it or even be passionately opposed to it. Yes, let others know what you think and feel, but remember Newton's third law of motion: "For every action, there is an equal, but opposite, reaction." Tolerance is a necessary condition for respectful protest. We should embrace diversity, not wish it away.

**3. Be respectful.** It increases the chances that you'll get you what you want.

Respectful protest doesn't guarantee that you'll achieve the result you're hoping for, but disrespectful protest almost certainly means you won't. This is where ethics meets practicality: By honoring the ethical principle of respect for others, you increase the likelihood that your voice will be heard rather than ignored.

**4. Accept that fairness is a bedrock of democracy.** Winston Churchill noted that "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried," and fairness is one of the distinguishing characteristics of democracy. To be fair is to give to others their due, and in the context of protesting, this means that everyone deserves to be heard.

**5. Spend your money.** The best way to pay this debt is the old-fashioned way: with lots of your own cash. If No on 8 is your position, go shopping at businesses that support our side of the protests. You can bet that the "Yes" folks will be supporting the businesses on their side of the issue. Support the many grassroots groups that are taking out issues to the streets, the Capitol, the churches, the people (like [www.EqualityActionNOW.org](http://www.EqualityActionNOW.org))

**7. Above all, take the high road.** Whether you're going to protest or to discuss the cause of Equal Rights for all, you will encounter insults, nastiness, and other forms of hostility, and it will be easy to give in to the temptation to respond in kind. **DON'T.** You are there to advance your cause, and the best way to do this is to keep ethics front and center in all that you do. Besides, cameras will be everywhere, and the whole world will be watching. How do you want others to see you?

These have been edited from a business week article for people showing up at rallies and protests since the passing of Proposition 8.

Learn more at <http://www.EqualityActionNOW.org> for more info contact [info@EqualityActionNOW.org](mailto:info@EqualityActionNOW.org)