15 July 2025

The Enduring Power of Dissent in Modern Democracy

In a society of free peoples, the freedom for the individual to challenge, attack, and ridicule the prevailing group opinion is our oldest and most precious heritage. Those in power need that kind of heavy armor, as Justice William O. Douglas explained in *A Living Bill of Rights* (1961): “They cannot lightly be called to account” (p. 49). That quote serves as a useful wake-up call that the makers of law and exercisers of power are not usually happy to have others looking over their shoulders. Dissent isn’t merely tolerated—it’s essential, and it’s what we’re supposed to do: intervening on one another’s behalf to provoke social change and to protect the very ideals we’ve decided to rest in democracy.

The freedom to dissent has been a force for transformative good in America, from the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement. The leaders of the United States were radicals when they declared their independence from the British crown and re-conceptualized government—not one hinging on the will of a king, but on the will of the people. This heritage of revolt formed an example for posterity. In the 1960s, civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Fannie Lou Hamer fought systemic injustice through nonviolent protests, sit-ins, and strategic litigation. While their resistance met violence and state terror, it resulted in the enactment of historic laws such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Branch, 1988). None of these reforms were possible without protest and resistance.

This right was enshrined by the refusal of Justice Douglas for the Court to be able to

become offended by what he and others formally requested—it would not be said that the First Amendment does not apply in the case now before the Court. Writing in *Points of Rebellion* (1970), Justice Douglas also spoke of the sanctity of this right: "The First Amendment looks beyond and over what we call belief to its expression. (His views, his conscience, his opinion, his sentiments are his own, and not those of the federal government)" (p. 15). That wall protects not just speech but the very act of thinking freely. The capacity to express unpopular or inconvenient truths is necessary for democratic health. Without it, society does not become more stable; it becomes paralyzed by fear and open to authoritarian power.

Today, dissent is more important than it has ever been. Think of whistleblowers like Edward Snowden, who revealed the NSA's illegal surveillance programs. His revelations sparked international debate about privacy, oversight, and civil liberties (Snowden, 2019). Similarly, environmental activist Greta Thunberg's school strikes and forceful speeches at world summits have galvanized millions of other youth around the globe to call for more action to address environmental issues (Thunberg, 2019). These are not mere anecdotes; they illustrate how individual voices—however difficult they may be—can upend the power structure, amplify the voices that are drowned out, and mobilize the public around the world.

Of course, there is no dissent without risk. Speaking truth to power carries great personal costs—from arrests to professional retaliation to social ostracization. But the courage to defy is unmistakable, and the signal is clear. It's not just rejecting injustice; it's imagining and working for something better. The Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged from the deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of the police, started as a social media hashtag and eventually grew to become a rallying cry for racial justice around the world. It has

changed national conversations, affected police reform, and influenced election results (Taylor,

2016). In that same vein, the #MeToo movement gave voice to survivors of sexual harassment and assault, holding powerful people to account and changing workplace norms. These actions show us that opposition is not, in fact, chaos—it is patriotism in progress.

And resistance isn't always about mass protest. Journalists, teachers, researchers, and artists are also dissenters—by providing different interpretations, shining a light on corruption, and challenging the dominant narrative. In these forms, dissent serves as a cultural correction. It helps to make the long-term moral and intellectual evolution of society possible through literature, learning, the arts, and community organization. What's more, being a responsible citizen involves more than simply acquiescing to the status quo; it means taking a stand against injustice and the promotion of bad policy. This is all the more necessary during periods of political polarization or disinformation. As Douglas cautioned, those in power might invoke problems such as "national security" or "public order" as excuses to suppress dissent. And when they do, democracy is on the line. Safeguarding dissent ensures that more than the voices of institutional power play a role in policy and public opinion.

Youth-led dissent is also key. From the youth-led protests against the Vietnam War to the March for Our Lives movement now taking on gun violence, young people have shown time and again that they can remake national priorities. Their lack of institutional power often makes their voices all the more shrill—and all the more urgent. As students, we are not just the grandchildren of history; we are the architects of its future. Thus, educational institutions should be safe havens for open debate, not echo chambers of orthodoxy.

Finally, dissent is not only about human dignity—it is about democratic participation. It allows people to fight oppression, confront wrong, and lay a claim on their government. "The First Amendment builds a sanctuary about the beliefs of the citizen," Douglas wrote. "It is his

notions, his conscience, his convictions that are his own business and not the Government's" (Douglas, 1970, p. 12). When we shelter dissenters, we preserve the principle that in a democratic society, it is the people—not simply the powerful—who are the ultimate custodians of justice. Dissent is not disorder; it is the lifeblood of democracy. It reminds us that freedom is not static—it must be used, defended, and handed on. It is by safeguarding the right to dissent that we guarantee the right to reform, to make progress, and to be truly free.

References

Branch, T. (1988). *Parting the waters: America in the King years 1954–63*. Simon & Schuster.

Douglas, W. O. (1961). *A living bill of rights*. Doubleday.

Douglas, W. O. (1970). *Points of rebellion*. Vintage Books.

Snowden, E. (2019). *Permanent record*. Metropolitan Books.

Taylor, K.-Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Haymarket Books.

Thunberg, G. (2019). *No one is too small to make a difference*. Penguin Books.