

Individual Freedom *And* The Common Good

Both are essential in the fight against COVID-19 for our recovery and our future.

BARRY JOHNSON

ON THE ONE HAND, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has expressed frustration over competing with every other state and with the federal government for ventilators, tests and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). In response to federal disorganization over resources, he has requested a centralized, nationally coordinated effort. Cuomo has a point. On the other hand, when pressed for national coordination, President Trump says he does not want to become a “socialist country.” He decentralized by delegating many decisions to the states, including reopening the economy, so they can respond to local realities. One size does not fit all. Trump also has a point.

Governor Cuomo *And* President Trump are each expressing a point of view shared by many supporters. The things expressed above, though important, are driven by a powerful value pair that is emotionally loaded. Each powerful value is attached to an equally powerful fear of losing that value. One value is for the Common Good, with centralized coordination as a means of support. The fear attached to the Common Good is that decentralization will lead to a disorganized government in which the Common Good is lost. A second value is for Individual Freedom, with decentralization as a means of support. The fear attached to Individual Freedom is that centralization will lead to big government in which Individual Freedom will be lost.

The tension over these strongly held values has historically led to polarization between the groups holding those competing values. COVID-19 is shining a bright light on this tension today. Fighting over who is right did not serve us well before COVID-19. It is not serving us well in addressing COVID-19. And, it will not serve us well after COVID-19. What feeds the polarization is the assumption that we must choose between Individual Freedom “*Or*” the Common Good. When we divide these two powerful values with “*Or*” we allow COVID-19 to kill many more friends and family members; to deepen its damage to our economy and to slow our recovery. We also undermine our potential to thrive long after the virus is gone.

We Can Move From Polarized To Optimized.

These two powerful values are both essential and they need each other. They are an interdependent pair called a polarity for which “*And*-thinking” is required. We need to maximize the benefits of decentralizing to protect Individual Freedom *And*¹ maximize the benefits

¹ I use an italic *And* only when connecting two poles of an interdependent pair and an italic *Or* as a mistaken connection between two poles of an interdependent pair.

of centralizing for the Common Good. We can and must do both. Effectively combining these two powerful values will reduce our deaths, minimize the damage to our economy, accelerate our recovery, and improve our potential to thrive long after the virus is gone.

Four things that will help:

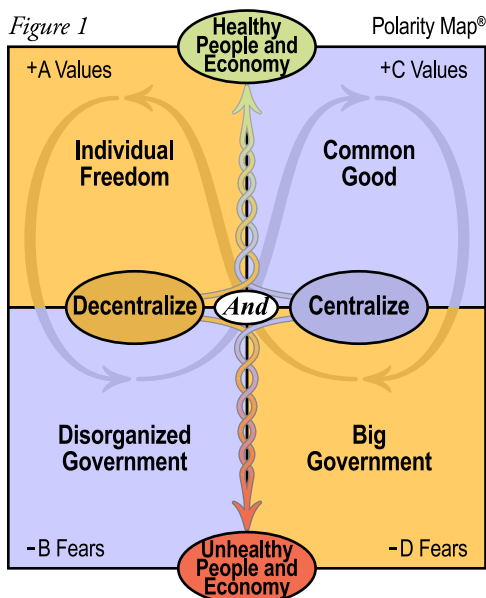
1. Recognize the bigger picture – put both points of view on a Polarity Map
2. Appreciate the power and wisdom within each point of view (2a and 2b)
3. Understand how power works with polarities
4. Use a dual strategy to maximize the gifts of each point of view and minimize its liabilities.

1. Recognize the Bigger Picture - Put Both Points of View on a Polarity Map^{®2}

Figure 1 is a picture of a Polarity Map. The two points of view are represented in the diagonal quadrants. President Trump’s point of view (gold) has a strong value for Individual Freedom (+A) tied to an equally strong fear of losing that value to Big Government (-D). In support of that point of view it is helpful to Decentralize (Left Pole).

Governor Cuomo’s point of view (blue) has a strong value for the Common Good (+C) tied to an equally strong fear of losing that value to Disorganized Government (-B). In support of that point of view it is helpful to Centralize (Right Pole).

We must leverage the tension between these two points of view to achieve the goal at the top of the map (green): Healthy People and Economy. The infinity loop represents the perpetual movement of energy through the system over time. The loop going high into each upside represents the intent to maximize the benefits of both Individual Freedom *And* the Common Good. The infinity loop going only slightly into each downside represents the intent to minimize the limits of Disorganized Government or Big Government.



² Polarity Map[®] is a registered trademark of Barry Johnson and Polarity Partnerships, LLC. Commercial use encouraged with permission.

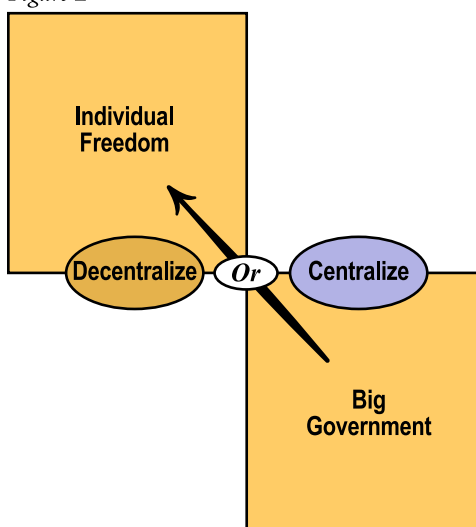
2a. The Power and Wisdom in Preserving Individual Freedom

We value individual freedom and we decentralize and deregulate to support it. There are many values we, as a country, associate with **Individual Freedom**: "...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,"³ entrepreneurship, individual expression/creativity/initiative, "Give me liberty or give me death."⁴ "All for one...". Many have died for the values of Individual Freedom. There is a deep desire within our culture to hold on to them and we should.

The stronger we value Individual Freedom, the stronger our fear of losing it to "Big Government". There are many negative labels or fears that get associated with **Big Government**: "Socialism", "China", excessive centralized control, over-regulation, loss of freedom, "Welfare State" and "The Swamp" - to name a few.

The emotional power within these values and fears is difficult to overstate. *Figure 2* highlights this point of view, with "Or" connecting the values and fears. When this point of view becomes the only point of view, the "Or" increases the power and certainty of a clear choice, "Am I going to choose Individual Freedom *Or* Big Government?" The answer is obvious: just follow the arrow.

Figure 2



At some level, we all value Individual Freedom and resist efforts to limit that Freedom. We don't like to be told, "Stay at home," or "Stop all non-essential work." Individual Freedom is valued by both Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, this point of view is generally held most tightly by Republicans. This is one of the gifts Republicans bring to our country. We need Individual Freedom and to limit Big Government.

There is wisdom in this point of view including its values and fears. It shows up in President Trump and most Republican Governors being hesitant to impose stay-at-home orders even when it is recommended by medical experts. It shows up in their taking the lead on opening things up as soon as possible. It also shows up in the energy behind the many protests at state capitals by citizens demanding an end to stay-at-home regulations. This point of view is historical in its origins, powerful in its conviction and essential to preserve. *And*, it needs an equally valuable point of view to keep this gift from becoming a liability.

³ US Declaration of Independence, 1776

⁴ Patrick Henry, 1775

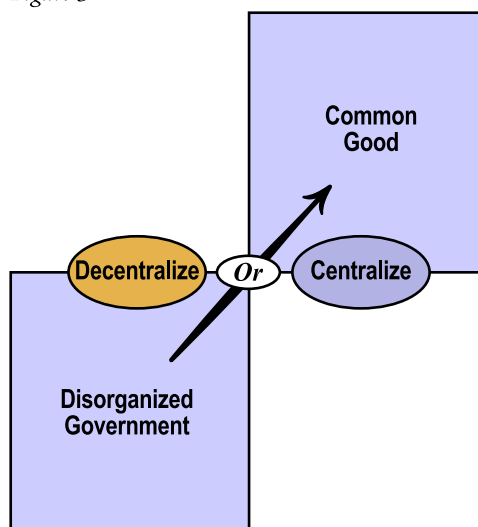
2b. The Power and Wisdom in Pursuing the Common Good

We value the Common Good. This requires Centralized coordination for the benefit of everyone. There are many values we, as a country, associate with the **Common Good**: we are all "...created equal,"⁵ we are all in this together as a community, we must attend to the well-being of the marginalized as well as the dominant culture, no one left behind, the team is more than the sum of individual members, "United we stand," "...One for all." Many have died for the values of the Common Good. There is a deep desire in our culture to hold on to them and we should.

The stronger the value for the Common Good, the stronger the fear of its loss: Freedom without Equality leads to gross inequality including the creation and neglect of marginalized groups. Decentralization without Centralized coordination leads to polarization, selfishness, fighting over basic needs, redundancy and **Disorganized Government**.

The emotional power within these values and fears is difficult to overstate. *Figure 3* highlights this point of view, with "Or" connecting the values and fears. When this point of view becomes the only point of view, the "Or" increases the power and certainty of a clear choice, "Am I going to choose the Common Good *Or* Disorganized Government?" The answer is obvious: just follow the arrow.

Figure 3



At some level, we all value the Common Good and basic equality. We value working in unity with everyone lending a hand. This value generates concern about inequality and Disorganized Government. The Common Good is valued by both Democrats and Republicans. At

the same time, this point of view is generally held most tightly by Democrats. This is one of the gifts Democrats bring to our country. We need equitable treatment and centralized coordination in order to bring together "...one nation, under God, indivisible with Liberty and Justice for all."⁶

There is wisdom in this point of view, including its set of values and fears. It shows up when governors collaborate in sharing ventilators, PPE and medical staff on a rolling, as-needed basis. It shows up when medical staff travel across the country to risk their lives in the hot zones where COVID-19 is most lethal. It shows up when Governors give stay-at-home mandates based on recommendations from medical experts while knowing it will

⁵ US Declaration of Independence, 1776

⁶ US Pledge of Allegiance

be hard on everyone and the economy. It shows up when Governors are hesitant to open things up too fast for fear of giving COVID-19 another foothold. This point of view is historical in its origins, powerful in its conviction and is essential to preserve. *And*, it needs an equally valuable point of view to keep this gift from becoming a liability.

This returns us back to the power and wisdom of protecting Individual Freedom!

Respecting these two points of view is about understanding without blaming or condoning. Each brings a gift and each, without the other, becomes a liability. This brings us to power issues.

3. Understand How Power Works With Polarities

It is easy to see how the natural tension between these two points of view can become a power struggle in which each side sees their value as the solution to a problem. Focusing on Individual Freedom seems to be a “solution” to the many “problems” with Big Government. Conversely, focusing on the Common Good seems to be a “solution” to the many “problems” with Disorganized Government. Though understandable, neither solution alone is sustainable.

When any polarity is misdiagnosed as a problem to solve, with one pole perceived as the “solution”, everyone pays three times:

1. We first pay by wasting energy in a power struggle over which pole to choose.
2. We pay a second time when the more powerful “win” because everyone gets the downside of the winners’ preferred pole. If Individual Freedom wins, we all get Disorganized Government. If the Common Good wins, we all get Big Government.
3. We pay a third time when we find ourselves in the downside of both poles. Disorganized Government is vulnerable to getting bigger in response to its Disorganization. Big Government is vulnerable to being increasingly bureaucratic and disorganized. The result undermines both Individual Freedom *And* the Common Good.

4. Use A Dual Strategy to Maximize the Gifts of Each Point Of View and Minimize Its Liabilities.

Since there are two points of view to be respected and empowered in every polarity, the strategy for leveraging the tension within it must be a dual strategy involving advocates for both points of view.

A Polarity Map can help as a wisdom organizer. Advocates for each point of view need to create the content of the polarity map together with each side identifying content for all parts of the map. Together, they all identify the many benefits of preserving Individual Freedom. Together, they all identify the many benefits of caring for the Common Good. This respects the reality that each point of view has benefits and values worth preserving. Advocates for each point of view have a place to stand within the map: the upside of their preferred pole. The process continues as they, together, identify the liabilities of focusing

on the Common Good to the neglect of preserving Individual Freedom. Together, they also identify the liabilities of focusing on Individual Freedom to the neglect of the Common Good. This respects the reality that each point of view has a potential liability worth avoiding. When filling out a polarity map, opposition becomes a resource as each point of view brings both values and fears that help fill out a rich map.

When the map is completed, the group can generate Action Steps to maximize the upsides identified in the two upper quadrants. They can then generate Early Warning signs to let them know early when they are getting into the downsides of either pole.

This fundamental polarity of Decentralizing for Individual Freedom *And* Centralizing for the Common Good applies to our global efforts to fight COVID-19 as well. We need centralized coordination internationally for the global common good *And* we need decentralized efforts that support each country in responding to its unique needs.

Whether we are addressing COVID-19 at the local, state, national or international level, making the false choice between Individual Freedom “*Or*” the Common Good leaves us with the worst of both worlds – a pandemic and an economic recession. Misdiagnosing this “both/*And*” polarity as an “either/*Or*” problem gives the advantage to COVID-19. Recognizing it as the polarity of Individual Freedom *And* the Common Good will give us more than a fighting chance.

In Conclusion

The powerful value pair of Individual Freedom *And* the Common Good, when recognized as a polarity, is a great resource not just in fighting COVID-19. What we learn from leveraging this polarity with COVID-19 will serve us well in addressing Health *And* Economy issues when the pandemic is far behind us.

Polarization over chronic issues is often based on a polarity which is misdiagnosed as a problem to solve. The issue remains chronic not because we lack problem-solving skills but because we fail to recognize underlying polarities, which are inherently unavoidable and unsolvable. With such issues, a polarity lens is essential.

Resources

Polarity Partnerships has developed a variety of resources available at our online Resource Portal. Two new books on Polarity Thinking will be available this Spring. To access the Polarity Resources and the books, go to www.polarityresources.com/now.

BARRY JOHNSON is the author of *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma, Volume One - Foundations*. HRD Press, 2020
www.polaritypartnerships.com