

The Polarities of Democracy from Conception to Execution

By William J. Benet, PhD

ABSTRACT

People around the globe have embraced democracy to bring about positive social change to address our environmental, economic, and militaristic challenges. Yet, there is no agreement on a definition of democracy that can guide social change efforts. The polarities of democracy presents a unifying theory of democracy to guide healthy, sustainable, and just social change efforts. The theory consists of 10 values, organized as five polarity pairs: freedom and authority, justice and due process, diversity and equality, human rights and communal obligations, and participation and representation. In this definition of democracy, each value (pole) has positive and negative aspects, and the objective is to successfully leverage the polarities so as to maximize the positive aspects and minimize the negative aspects.

The Polarities of Democracy from Conception to Execution

Introduction

The Polarities of Democracy theory was developed through my original doctoral research (2001-2006) conducted at the University of Toronto (Benet, 2006), updates and revisions arising from my post-doctoral research (2006-2013) carried out through the University of Toronto (Benet, 2012, 2013), and ongoing subsequent research (2013-present) carried out through the University of Toronto, Walden University, and the Institute for Polarities of Democracy in Washington, DC.

I was exploring the problem of why, while democracy has been and still is the rallying cry for those seeking to overcome oppression, the promise of democracy has never become a reality for all people. In addition to my research. I also was drawing on my 40 plus years of political and social activism in which, while achieving many individual victories, I was unable to find solutions to overcome systemic and structural racism, patriarchy, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression. The Polarities of Democracy theory emerged from my research as a unifying theory that might be used to make the promise of democracy a reality for everyone.

In constructing my Polarities of Democracy theory, I applied Dr. Barry Johnson's Polarity Thinking (1992, 2020) as my conceptual framework. Johnson says that while there are some problems that can be solved using *either/or* thinking, there are others that involve polarities (aka paradox, dilemma) that require *both/and* thinking because they consist of interdependent poles. These interdependent poles create polarity tensions that go on forever. But the tensions can be intentionally leveraged to maximize the positive aspects of each pole and minimize the downside limitations or negative aspects. This helps leaders, teams, organizations, and communities attain and sustain their preferred future with a *more than the sum of the parts* synergistic effect.

My research supports the finding that democracy should be an either/or solution to the problem of oppression in both the workplace and in society. It should provide a system of governance that (a) overcomes oppression (our deepest fear), (b) achieves human emancipation (our highest aspiration), and (c) advances healthy, sustainable, and just organizations and communities. But the

challenge in achieving and sustaining democracy as an either/or solution to oppression is that it also requires both/and thinking.

So, my research concludes that democracy requires ten values, each of which is essential, but none of which are sufficient by themselves. Rather, these ten critical values exist as five polarity pairs. To realize the promise of democracy, both/and thinking is needed to effectively leverage these five pairs to maximize the positive aspects of each pole and minimize the negative aspects of each pole. Thus, the Polarities of Democracy's ten values arranged as the five pairs are:

- Freedom and Authority
- Justice and Due-Process
- Diversity and Equality
- Human Rights and Communal Obligations
- Participation and Representation

Further, each of the Polarities of Democracy pairs are interrelated with the other pairs, creating a *multarity* (a system of two or more interdependent polarity pairs). To seek greater democratization, we must effectively leverage each pair of values by maximizing the positive aspects and minimizing the negative aspects of each pole. Because the pairs are interdependent, failure to successfully leverage any one pair of values negatively impacts the other pairs.

In addition to Johnson's Polarity Management serving as my conceptual framework, there are three other foundational works underlying the Polarities of Democracy theory: Robert Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton's *Managerial Grid* (1964, 1985), R. Freeman Butts' *Decalogue of Civic Values* (1980), and Budd Hall's *Participatory Research* (1975).

Finally, my research draws from concepts that span Western, Eastern, African, and Indigenous literature and wisdom. This suggests that the principles of democracy may have universal applicability to all cultures and time periods. This may allow us to pursue positive social change by overcoming the forces of power and privilege that sustain systemic forms of racial, gender, social, environmental, and economic oppression and violence.

Application of the Theory

The Polarities of Democracy theory is now being used by doctoral students and graduates around the world to make the promise of democracy a reality for all people. Current and completed studies explore achieving positive social change that overcomes oppression in (among others) the US, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Niger, Liberia, Bangladesh, and Haiti. Walden University has served as the primary location for those doctoral students and graduates using the Polarities of Democracy as their theoretical framework.

The post-doctoral application of social change projects is carried out through the Institute for Polarities of Democracy, a 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Washington, DC. The Institute was created in 2017 to equip a cadre of post-doctoral scholar/practitioners with the tools and skills to apply the theory to real world social problems on a global basis.

The Institute for Polarities of Democracy Anti-Racism Initiative

The Institute's current primary focus is its Anti-Racism Initiative (Institute for Polarities of Democracy, 2020) being carried out in strategic alliance with the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE). This initiative, developed in response to the murder of George Floyd, uses the Polarities of Democracy theory and Critical Race Theory to promote the 21st Century Policing Report (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015) developed under the Obama administration and intended to transform policing from a warrior mentality to a guardian mentality (Institute for Polarities of Democracy, 2020).

Initiative Timeline

Conceptualization of the Anti-Racism Initiative (Benet & McMillan, 2021) began shortly after the murder of George Floyd. On May 29, 2020, as a senior fellow and coordinator of the Institute for Polarities of Democracy Learning Community, I issued a call to action to respond to the outcry over George Floyd's murder. Dr. Joseph McMillan, a past president of NOBLE and a fellow of the Institute, immediately proposed a joint initiative between the Institute and NOBLE. A conference call was held on June 2, 2020, with McMillan, me, and Chief Cerelyn "CJ" Davis, the then president of NOBLE. President Davis then arranged a conference call on June 7 with the past presidents of NOBLE. McMillan proposed the joint initiative, I described the polarities of democracy approach, and the presidents supported proceeding with the development of a formal agreement.

Following the support of the NOBLE past presidents, Dr. McMillan and I conferred with the Institute for Polarities of Democracy president, Dr. Nicole Hayes, and the managing director, Suzanne Rackl. Together, we developed the overall structure for the Anti-Racism Initiative and requested volunteers for the initiative from the Institute's Learning Community. A formal MOA between the Institute and Noble was signed on November 12, 2020.

Initiative Personnel

Ultimately, a total of 22 practitioners, activists, and academicians took part in conducting Phase One of the Institute/NOBLE Initiative. All of their efforts, including those of the initiative co-chairs, were carried out on a pro bono basis. These volunteers were all affiliated with either NOBLE, the Institute, or Walden University. The overall methodological approach of the Anti-Racism Initiative and the Phase 1 analysis was designed by the initiative co-chairs. The remaining volunteers then conducted their efforts in teams under the guidance and with the participation of the initiative co-chairs. Recruitment of Walden faculty and graduates was coordinated through the Walden University Center for Social Change and the efforts of Dr. Bill Schulz (director of the Center) and Molly Raymond (doctoral candidate and Institute fellow).

Initiative Results

The Phase One findings were presented at the NOBLE Annual Conference on August 2, 2021 (Institute for Polarities of Democracy, 2021). One of the most striking takeaways from the analysis

of The Report is how relevant its recommendations are today. In many if not most instances, its recommendations and action items could be drawn directly from current headlines. For example, in providing guidance for the types of training and education that are needed for reimagining policing, in their report, the President's Taskforce on 21st Century Policing (2015) stated:

The need for understanding, tolerance, and sensitivity to African Americans, Latinos, recent immigrants, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community was discussed at length at the listening session, with witnesses giving examples of unacceptable behavior in law enforcement's dealings with all of these groups. Participants also discussed the need to move towards practices that respect all members of the community equally and away from policing tactics that can unintentionally lead to excessive enforcement against minorities. (p. 52)

Additional Polarities of Democracy Application

Examples of additional specific social change efforts applying the Polarities of Democracy to overcome oppression, promote human emancipation, and advance healthy, sustainable, and just organizations, communities, and nations include:

- Hawaii: An Indigenous Ojibwa's application of the Polarities of Democracy to overcome long-standing oppression and land appropriation of the Kanaka Maoli.
- Haiti: A Native Haitian's application of the Polarities of Democracy to attain higher literacy rates in the rural areas of Haiti such as Pointe l'Abacou.
- Nigeria: A Native Nigerian's application of the Polarities of Democracy to improve the effectiveness of international development initiatives in Northern Nigeria through women's empowerment.
- London: An International Rotarian's application of the Polarities of Democracy to global climate change, international peace and conflict resolution, and anti-racism efforts that address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

A compilation of all of the research completed to date using the Polarities of Democracy has been established by the Walden Center for Social Change. The Polarities of Democracy Collection is housed at the Walden University Library. This collection houses scholarly output of the Walden University community in order to generate, conserve, and transform knowledge to improve human and social conditions. The Polarities of Democracy Collection is located at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/pod/>

The full scope of the social change efforts being pursued by the Institute for Polarities of Democracy can be found at our website: <https://instituteforpod.org/>

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About the Author:

Bill Benet, PhD is an activist, educator, and researcher who developed the Polarities of Democracy theory through his doctoral and post-doctoral research at the University of Toronto. He has over 50 years' experience in politics and social justice activism. He served in the US Army from 1965 to 1968, followed by 28 years in the Monroe County Legislature in Rochester, New York, including five years as Majority Leader.

Dr. Benet currently holds academic appointments as a Dissertation Committee Chair with Walden University's School of Public Policy and Administration, and an Associate Researcher with the

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