



INSTITUTE FOR POLARITIES OF DEMOCRACY

Defining Democracy **William J. Benet, PhD – November 15, 2021**

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.

My research sought to address the problem that, while democracy has been and still is the rallying cry for those seeking to overcome oppression around the globe, the promise of democracy has never become a reality for all people. In seeking answers to this problem, I also drew on my 40 plus years of political and social activism where, 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.

In formulating my Polarities of Democracy theory, I applied Johnson's (1992, 2020) polarity thinking as my conceptual framework. Johnson says that while there are some problems that can be solved using *either/or* thinking, there are other problems that involve polarities (aka paradox, dilemmas) that require *both/and* thinking because the polarities consist of interdependent poles that create polarity tensions that go on forever. But these tensions can be intentionally leveraged to maximize the positive aspects of each pole and minimize the negative aspects of each pole.

The results of my research support 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 democracy consists of a series of polarities that require *both/and* thinking.

From my research I conclude 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. Thus, 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. 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 (1992, 2020) polarity thinking serving as my conceptual framework, other seminal works underlying the Polarities of Democracy theory include 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, the ten values of the Polarities of Democracy theory are drawn from concepts that span Western, Eastern, African, Indigenous, and feminine literature and wisdom. This suggests that the Polarities of Democracy theory may have universal applicability to all cultures and time periods.

The Polarities of Democracy is now being applied around the world to pursue positive social change by challenging the forces of power and privilege that sustain systemic forms of racial, gender, social, environmental, and economic oppression and violence. For the full scope of my research and application of the theory, please visit *The Polarities of Democracy Collection* (<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/pod/>), the *Institute for Polarities of Democracy* (<https://instituteforpod.org/>), or email me at bill.benet@instituteforpod.org

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