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Especially during a pandemic, how do you suggest we find an appropriate balance between individual freedom and the common good?

The squeak of an Expo pen rang in my years as my teacher paced in front of the class, drawing an old-fashioned scale, like the one I had seen used to represent America's justice system. "How do we find a balance between liberty..." he pointed to one side of the scale, "...and order?" he asked the class. We sat in silence, the question too large for us to know where to start. It was mid-February; we were at the beginning of this semester-long class where we were supposed to gain enough knowledge to become an informed member of American democracy. Yet, his question seemed irrelevant and too great for any one person to make a difference. Little did we know we would soon be facing this question as the state would go into lockdown just over a month later, and we would find that individuals indeed make this decision between the balance of liberty and order.

The fight between individual freedom and the common good is decades old. It was there in the early 20th century when the Spanish Flu spread throughout the nation and there when smallpox ravaged towns across the land (Anthony, 2021). At this time, people would try and oppose mandatory vaccination laws that were common in several states, such as Massachusetts and Wisconsin. Yet, when they entered the court system, the judges ruled against them by establishing the right for the government to enact "health laws of every description to protect the common good" (Bayer, 2007). In this case, it seems that in the case of pandemics or other serious health concerns, the government has the right to overrule all personal freedom in the name of the common good. This power remained virtually unchallenged through the first three-quarters of the century, and it wasn't until the 1970's that HIV/AIDS tipped the balance scale between the

common good and personal freedom in a new direction. As HIV/AIDS swept throughout the country, many legal battles over privacy rights and individual liberties ensued, and more personal liberties were allowed (Bayer, 2009). This leads us to the present moment.

When COVID-19 hit, and lockdowns went up, and later when mask mandates became law, pushback ensued. Soon, videos of people not wearing masks and being told to leave a business popped up all over social media. The fight for personal freedom over the common good became a political debate, with Democrats arguing for more common good policies and Republicans generally arguing for individual freedom. Yet, the questions of how much individual liberty we are willing to give up should not be the determining factor in how we strike a balance between personal freedom and the common good.

Instead, we should be asking: what kinds of information do health officials need to do their jobs? What research actually supports any health mandates being enacted? And are there any other options to get the same information or reach the same goal? In the case of a public health crisis, the best way to balance the scale is through hard evidence and research. If health policies are backed with evidence and research has shown that they have tried alternative methods that allow for more personal freedom to reach the goal of ending the spread of the disease, then people will be more likely to heed government advice (Farr, 2020). Especially if they feel like their concerns about personal freedom are being heard. Suppose laws are mandated by research instead of at-will by the government like in the early 20th century. In that case, people are more likely to feel like their personal freedoms are respected, especially if they are given other options to continue to engage in some of their daily activities.

If we look at the current pandemic and how people reacted to the introduction of the lockdown, we see how the balance between personal freedom and the common good was shifted

over time. At first, most people were willing to lose some of their freedom, such as going to concerts or movies, out of the idea that this would stop the pandemic's spread. Over time though, as the mandates stayed the same and cases continued to rise, people grew frustrated. They were losing their freedom, but it seemed as if it was all for not, as such protests started and unsafe interaction resumed again. Soon a pattern formed, where there would be tough lockdowns and then a release of restrictions. This caused whiplash as people were told not to do one thing and then immediately told it was fine. As such, faith in public health officials dropped (Leonhardt, 2021). Instead of providing relatively safe solutions that were low-moderate in risk, public health officials cautioned everyone to stay on lockdown, which is not realistic for most people. This, in turn, caused more people to engage in dangerous behavior as they were not given alternative suggestions and felt as if their voices were not being heard (Leonhardt, 2021).

Our current day-to-day life shows that the only way to safely balance individual freedom and the common good during a pandemic is to discourage high-risk activities while suggesting and encouraging low-moderate risk activities so that most people feel like their voices are heard. This will also lead to less whiplash, meaning that the public will be more likely to listen to healthcare advisors. Although it is hard to find the right balance between the common good and individual freedoms, we must do our best to empathize with all people while listening to research so that we can move together through such a life-changing event.

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