The *Equality – Difference Paradox*: National policies on pluralism

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The *equality–difference paradox* refers to the tension and balance between two contrasting policies and practices. On one hand, it makes space for *domestic multiculturalism*—varieties of cultural values, beliefs, moral worldviews, and practices. On the other hand, there are policies and practices that aim to promote relative equality in the distribution of goods, such as financial income, educational opportunities, and individual rights, across diverse groups within a complex society. Early discussions of the paradox can be found in Jindra (2014), Minow et al. (2008), Shweder (2017), Shweder and Power, (2013), and Power (2018). The paradox carries with it the implication that promoting forms of equality and expanding the social, legal, and ethical scope for cultural diversity are goals that sometimes conflict. It also implies that a central public policy challenge in multicultural societies is to find a sustainable compromise between a commitment to equality and expression of cultural pluralism.

Recognizing and acknowledging the paradox is important because in many countries, the very existence of cultural diversity has created quandaries and dilemmas for policymakers interested in promoting economic equality (Jindra, 2014). Regardless of whether one theorizes ancestral cultural traditions (or collective ways of life or personal habits) in terms of preferences (goals, values, desires, wants, or agency) or the language of constraints (compulsive external forces, systemic or otherwise), lifestyle diversity is bound to have economic consequences in a competitive market-oriented society. In any complex culturally diverse society, there is likely to be diversity across both individuals and groups in the extent to which the pursuit of wealth or economic gain is more highly valued than the maintenance of one's way of life or cultural standard of living.

The high achievement pattern valued by the coastal upper middle class in places like the United States does come at a cost. For example, Pietrantonio et al. (Chapter 4, this volume) document how increasingly unequal income levels leads to the displacement of local communities through gentrification. There is also little reason to just assume the particular sacrifices required for upward economic mobility are going to seem equally appealing to all individuals and groups. Lifestyle diversity includes many aspects of a way of life, such as diversity in kinship structures and family life, the raising of children, time management, consumption patterns, and even the particular types and amounts of work and leisure that are highly valued. It is not hard to locate communities across the United States and other societies where adults do not aim to liberate their children from family, locality, and group history, or press them to acquire those marketable skills that will make them upwardly and outwardly mobile cosmopolitan “capitalist tools” in a global economy. Such variations in lifestyle and cultural history are likely to be correlated to some degree with variations in income.

Because culturally based lifestyle differences often result in group-based differences in income and wealth, public policies aimed at reducing economic inequalities do not typically celebrate variations in cultural lifestyles. Governments concerned with promoting economic equality typically encourage people to adopt ways of life that are economically productive and integrated with their national economies. Often, they favor the assimilation of cultural differences (of the sorts mentioned earlier) to a lifestyle standard valued and preferred by the policy makers, except when they can be incorporated into cultural heritage tourism (itself a part of development plans). Within any complex multicultural society there will be individuals and groups who care somewhat less about economic gain per se than their freedom to maintain and carry forward their way of life. Consequently, they may resist pressures or encouragement to culturally assimilate and pursue upward mobility especially when it requires them to sacrifice some fundamental or valued aspect of their lifestyle.

In this chapter, we use the equality–difference paradox as a framework to both conceptualize and analyze broad policy approaches that attempt to resolve the tension between conflicting tendencies between equality and multiculturalism due to transnational migration. We advocate for a mediating position that takes into account the differences and strengths of different cultures without ranking them overall. We apply the paradox to two examples in Western liberal democracies by examining how the paradox is confronted in Denmark and the United States. We also examine two non-Western cases: forced coercion in a dictatorial regime (China) contrasted with more pluralistic policies in a multicultural democratic case (India). We end by discussing omniculturalism as a policy for dealing with immigration.

Confronting the Equality–Difference Paradox

Many academics are liberal pluralists who cherish the moral ideal of a multicultural society where individuals and groups are free to differ in their lifestyles while at the same time being relatively equal from an economic point of view (Jindra, 2014; Minow et al., 2008; Shweder et al., 2002; Shweder & Power, 2013). The equality-difference paradox suggests there is the tension between these two values, which may be one reason that both multiculturalists and egalitarians in the social sciences have been reluctant to bring the paradox on stage.

On the one hand, as Shweder (2017) has noted, multiculturalists—those who value cultural diversity and lifestyle differences—do not like to acknowledge that income equality is more easily achieved when there is less pronounced cultural diversity (e.g., in occupational aspirations, valued skills, time allocation, sex role differentiation, ethics and obligations related to work, family, religion, and leisure). This might be done by forcing the assimilation of cultural minority groups into mainstream cultural norms or reducing cultural diversity by restricting immigration or by other means.

Egalitarians also hesitate to acknowledge that greater lifestyle diversity often means more economic inequality. They often blame inequalities solely on “structural” reasons and assume that everyone wants to be upwardly mobile. They ignore the fact that many groups are oriented toward other norms, such as family, faith, or autonomy, rather than career success.

Egalitarians are quick to disparage any such suggestion as “culture of poverty” thinking, which it is not. The culture of poverty literature suggests sustained poverty helped create a cultural system of values, beliefs, and practices that would perpetuate over generations even if the societal and structural conditions from which the culture initially arose was eroded or changed (see Lewis, 1966; Small et al., 2010).

But the equality-difference paradox is not a story about first denying a cultural group the opportunity to become rich and then claiming they want to be poor. It is about cultural groups who are committed to their way of life and are unwilling to sacrifice it to become upwardly economically mobile. For example, Shweder (2017) described life in the poorest community in the United States (as measured by official measures of household income), the Jewish Satmar Hasidic village of Kiryas Joel in New York State. Men and women in that village dedicate enormous amounts of their time to what economists might call “leisure time activities”—religious study for the men, family-building and childrearing for the women. They value their way of life and have found ways to sustain it despite having a low earned household income. Instead, they receive subsidies from the State of New York and the U.S. government through various redistributive mechanisms (tax breaks, food stamps, public support of a maternal health clinic and a school for disabled children). Intended or not, like it or not, such welfare programs in this instance may actually enable this type of manifestation of multiculturalism in the United States. Many other groups follow various alternative paths, including "downshifters" (who leave good careers for lower paying and less stressful living), greens or "crunchy conservatives" (ecologically oriented rather than income-oriented), "leisure career" devotees (prefer free time over work), and various nomadic groups (both traditional and modern) that prefer mobility and living day to day rather than accumulation and settlement (Day et al., 1999; Jindra, forthcoming).

The equality-difference paradox thus raises difficult questions for multiculturalists and egalitarians alike. For example, would one rather be economically equal but culturally uniform or culturally diverse but economically stratified? The more we try to make all groups economically wealthy, the more we may erode those institutions, such as the "freedom of parents to control the education of their children, that keep us culturally diverse" (Shweder, 2017, p. 297). It calls on us to address the question: What is best way to strike a balance of values in a real world where economic equality and cultural diversity do not typically go hand in hand?

The claim of the equality-difference paradox that policies promoting economic equality and policies supportive of cultural differences are in tension is likely to be controversial. One reason cultural homogeneity may be more favorable to egalitarian economic policies, such as income redistribution, is because social trust tends to be higher and there is less chance for xenophobic reactions in groups where members feel that are alike, in lifestyle, history, beliefs, values, and ethnicity (Putnam, 2007; Ziller, 2015).

It is striking that the paradox is more visible in wealthier countries. When countries are relatively poor, cultural homogeneity may have less effect because there is relatively little extra to redistribute and the elites keep the riches for themselves (Derviş & Qureshi, 2016). It is when countries are rich that they have the scope to redistribute a resource. That potential to redistribute excess resources may then be realized or not realized depending on their sense (or lack of it) of fellow feeling, of being “birds of a feather” or part of the same solidarity.

In Europe, for example, immigration has put pressure on traditionally strong social welfare systems. The Scandinavian welfare states, still the envy of many, are dependent on a particular history and culture that cannot be replicated easily. In the 19th century, pietistic movements spread across the region that encouraged a reflexive focus on one’s motivations and practices of daily life, such as work, family, and community life. This also prompted widespread education and the formation of associations, undergirded by beliefs in the “priesthood of all believers” that created strong egalitarianism, conformity, and high social trust. This “modernization from below” (Skirbekk, 2011) stimulated later 20th-century movements like unions and the development of the social welfare state, which was a gradual takeover of the welfare practices of the state Lutheran church (Sørensen & Stråth, 1997).

This strong social cohesion, in a relatively homogeneous society, can be weakened by cultural diversity. The regnant equality of Scandinavia has always been accompanied by an emphasis on duty: “do your duty, claim your rights” (Brochmann, 2015, p. 8). Underneath the claim to the generous welfare benefits is an assumption that everyone has contributed to the wider society, at least to the extent able, as part of a “conditional reciprocity” (Trägårdh, 2017, p. 264). Admirers of the Scandinavian welfare states often forget how much more pressure is put on people to work than is common in the more diverse American system, where stronger notions of liberty and individualism make it harder for authorities to tell people what to do. American freedom means an inclination to leave each other alone, at least compared with other places.

Scandinavian societies have two faces. The first is the egalitarian, open face, renowned for its welfare policies that take care of everyone. But the other face represents a strong, sometimes oppressive “penal” pressure for people to conform to common cultural norms, a crucial part of what makes their welfare system work (Barker, 2013). Other places with reasonably well-functioning welfare states, such as Switzerland, also put strong pressure on people to work, and authorities may also ask other family members to support adult individuals before welfare payments kick in (Schröder, 2013, pp. 124–126; Segalman & Marsland, 1989, pp. 65–77). It is useful to examine the contemporary Danish case in more depth because Denmark is now confronting the equality-difference paradox: a clash between the previous relatively culturally homogenous welfare state and recent immigration resulting in multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and “parallel societies.”

The State of Social Welfare and Immigration: The Danish Case

On May 28, 2018, the Danish government made the controversial decision to ratify the introduction of a new “ghetto law.” Starting at age 1 year, “ghetto children” must be separated from their families for at least 25 hours a week for mandatory instruction in

"Danish values," including the traditions of Christmas and Easter and lessons in the Danish language (Larin, 2019). Noncompliance by migrant or refugee parents could result in a stoppage of welfare payments. Denmark's government is introducing a new set of laws to regulate life in 25 low-income and heavily Muslim enclaves, saying that if families there do not willingly assimilate into the country's mainstream, they should be compelled to do so. Other Danish citizens are free to choose whether to enroll children in preschool (which is available up to age 6).

Traditionally, Denmark has been a relatively ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous country (e.g., Jenkins, 2011; but see Olwig, 2011). As such, migration into Denmark is acutely felt. For example, the controversial events surrounding the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005 revealed tensions between mainstream Danish values of free speech and Muslims religious beliefs concerning pictorial representations of the prophet Mohammad.

Muslims currently account for about 6.3% of the population of Denmark, and the number is increasing (Danmarks Statistik, 2020). The Muslim community, visible in Denmark since the 1960s due to labor demand, continues to expand because of increased migration from Muslim countries, resettlement of refugees, family reunions, and conversion. Muslim migrants from heterogeneous ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds including Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and Bosnia face many challenges adapting to the non-Muslim or secular environments in western liberal democracies, including Denmark (see Simonsen, 2020). Some migrants embrace a liberal, cosmopolitan, lifestyle. Other migrants retain strong links with their place of origin and to others in their diasporic communities. Some are repelled by what they perceive to be highly commercial, degrading, or insufficiently protective capitalist societies to which they have entered. They may try and reinforce the cultural and moral norms and ways of being they consider to be far more ethical than the traditions of the majority in Western liberal democracies such as ways of dressing, raising a family, co-sleeping habits between children and parents, and marriage and gender norms. They might resist the values, beliefs, and ethical standards of the host nation (see Shweder et al., 2002). Within Denmark, moderate and far right politicians have questioned the splintering of the traditional welfare state due to immigration and represented cultural pluralism as the creation of "parallel societies." It is feared that some Muslim neighborhoods have become crime-ridden "ghettos" with high unemployment rates and low educational levels among their residents.

A pattern of linked practices, some formal (in integration programs and schools), some informal, reinforce the reigning values and orientations of independence (*uafhængighed*), responsibility (*ansvar*) and self-sufficiency (*selvforsørgelse*; Rytter, 2018). Schools carry out intense "civilizing" missions (for all students), teaching them specific Danish practices, such as "balanced" behavior and "inner control" that avoids being too quiet or too headstrong or showy, with just the right amount of independence and cooperation (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). Immigrants find it challenging to adapt to these specific norms. Neighbors do not hesitate to impress specific Danish practices about sociality, food or gardening upon the newcomers, confusing the immigrants in the process, who at times feel under siege (Larsen, 2011).

Other Scandinavian countries, although not quite as severe as Denmark in integration practices, also have rather narrow standards of acceptable behavior. Denmark (Øland et al., 2020), Norway (Whewell, 2018), and other places with "tight" cultures

(Gelfand et al., 2011) such as Switzerland (Wenger, 2019) even took children away from parents for what some would say are inadequate reasons, like being unemployed. Only recently have governments apologized, although child welfare agencies still tend to intervene faster than in the United States for cultural practices, such as children and parents co-sleeping, deemed immoral from the perspective of mainstream sensibilities. Moreover, homeschooling, a common practice of diversity in the United States, is banned in many European countries, where it is viewed as insufficient national socialization and in effect a potential catalyst of diversity or inequality. For instance, in 2010 a court in Memphis, Tennessee, granted asylum to two evangelical Christian parents from Germany who wanted to homeschool their two children congruent with their religious and moral values. They were prevented from doing so in Germany where homeschooling is illegal.

The flip side of these “tight” and specific practices is the high standard of living in the Scandinavian countries, which are the envy of many in the world. This homogeneity creates high levels of trust and efficiency in government and institutions (Mathiasen Stopa & Svendsen, 2020), because most people know the rules and have ideas about work, punctuality, egalitarian treatment, and social relations. Yet it is difficult to have a society with such high socioeconomic indicators under conditions of diversity. Minority groups find their way of life threatened. In the 1950s, young Inuit Greenlanders were taken away from families to be reeducated as Danish citizens. Today, the indigenous Sami in northern Scandinavia, poor by Scandinavian standards and thus seen as a “problem,” are eligible for welfare payments that come with the expectation of mainstream work. This pushes them away from indigenous modes of seasonal work, such as herding or fishing, or from nomadic ways of life (Midré, 2008). The equality-difference paradox cannot be resolved, but in one way or another, it must be lived with.

Cultural Pluralism: The Case of the United States

In contrast to the Danish system, accommodation for multiculturalism occurs in different Western liberal democracies, such as the United States. That is, a way of organizing society so migrant groups—and their diverse cultural beliefs, values, worldviews, morals, and practices—have adequate constitutional, legal, and societal protection. Although this principle has often been violated in the past, the multicultural ethos pervades American ideology. In the United States, integration is more relaxed. There are no official integration requirements besides taking a brief test for citizenship and English-language proficiency. Because of the long history of immigration and cultural diversity, the size of the country that allows for an array of subgroups, and a tradition of mobility and weaker ties to families, there is less emphasis on a particular way of living, except when you are already within a particular subgroup. Individualism is part of the creed, as de Tocqueville (2003) discovered way back in the 1830s. Along with ethnic subcultures are various religious subcultures, from Mormons to evangelicals to Black Muslims, leisure and work subcultures, itinerants, or isolationists. These are not absent in other countries, but they do not have the same numbers or presence as in the United States, where the country is big enough for many to find an enclave. Some of these groups have of course been discriminated against, but since the 1960s, there have been strong, although not always effective, efforts to remedy past wrongs and decrease present and future discrimination. Civil rights for all groups and attention to unique histories and traditions, especially as a land of immigrants, has meant a strong belief in the benefits of diversity, although with a strong recent backlash from populist movements, as evidenced by the polarization over the presidency of Donald Trump (Moghaddam, 2018).

Along with increased attention to civil rights has come a stronger focus on economic equality. Although this impulse popped up occasionally during turn of the 20th-century populism and the 1930s New Deal era, it intensified in contemporary times with the publication of Michael Harrington's (1962) *The Other America*, after which presidents John F. Kennedy and later Lyndon B. Johnson took up the cause of poverty and passed the "Great Society" programs of the 1960s. Since then, inequality has been on the agenda and seems to intensify when economic times are good. With economic booms in the 1980s, 1990s, and during the Obama era, higher income groups have prospered, especially through investments, while blue-collar workers have suffered by comparison. An increased, intense parental "concerted cultivation" of children among the upper middle class has given them strong advantages over others (Lareau, 2011). When people sense relative deprivation, discontent grows, and populism increases, despite higher overall wealth (Obradović et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Power et al., 2020).

With a lot of attention given to both diversity and economic equality, the issue of racial inequality has come to the fore in the United States. In socioeconomic indicators such as income and wealth, Asian Americans have the highest and Native Americans often among the lowest.

The causes of this are much debated, but the contrasting cultural orientations of diverse groups clearly plays a role. Various ethnic groups have done well in forming economic niches, such as Indian motel owners, Korean grocers, or Vietnamese manicurists (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2011; Wilson, 2003). Many have used these family businesses to send children to top colleges and enter highly paid professions. Racism and discrimination have hurt African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. High family instability in some groups contributes to childhood trauma, impedes education, and leaves youth unprepared for higher education or the work world (McEwen & McEwen, 2017). Many Native Americans are torn between traditional modes of subsistence, including urban nomadism (Darnell, 2011) and integrating into mainstream school and work (LaVere, 2000). At high income levels, social pressure to be more humble and egalitarian, as one finds in Scandinavia, is not as strong, so Americans do not hesitate to pay their top managers exorbitantly, further driving up economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014).

At the international level, one of the biggest cultural differences is between countries that have family or clan orientations and more individualistic countries that have broader social relations and connections. The former provides a stronger social cocoon for people, with high support and interdependence, but at the institutional level, they suffer from inefficient, often corrupt patronage-based political systems (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2019). The latter may suffer from more mental health problems and stress from the intense lifestyle, but the impetus on individual accomplishment and mobility creates higher economic production, and the broader-based sociality creates higher trust and more efficient institutions such as governments.

These latter countries are WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Their psychological peculiarity has been highlighted by recent researchers (Henrich, 2020), but the puzzle goes back more famously to Max Weber's work on how the "Protestant Ethic" made some societies more individualistic, achievement-oriented, and conscientious. Henrich highlights earlier pre-Reformation influences from the Catholic Church that also played a role. The Catholic Church banned marriages between relatives, which broadened social relations and alliances, seeded the individualistic trend, and created higher social trust in those regions. Later Protestant pietistic movements greatly intensified these trends, especially in northern Europe, helping create the region's unique standing in many socioeconomic and other indicators (Sørensen & Stråth, 1997).

When people from clan-oriented cultures migrate to Western countries, the probability of economic inequality increases. Culture is not destiny, of course, and many acculturate to new norms in different societies, but culture is also "sticky," and this process is irregular. One sees this contrast even today among the poorer clan-oriented Appalachian peoples of the United States (Woodard, 2011). Latinos have lower college enrollment rates because a strong emphasis on family mean they stick closer to home (Desmond & Turley, 2009). The United States is a country of migrants, with high rates of both diversity and inequality. There are other factors in inequality, of course, but diversity means that attempts to reduce economic inequality will be more challenging, while potentially limiting the diversity of ways of life.

Illiberal Forced Integration in China Versus Multicultural Politics in India

The trade-off between diversity and equality is a balancing act in many countries, but in more authoritarian and dictatorial countries, it is a conscious choice, usually toward a forced equality for most of the population, except for the small, powerful ruling class. This is clearly the case in China where the contrast between the dominant Han Chinese and the country's diverse ethnic minority groups is crucial to understanding these tensions (Gradín, 2015; Joniak-Luthi, 2015).

The Han Chinese have specific family and social structures, a Confucianist ethic, a tradition of rice paddy cultivation, and a history of a strong central government and science

(Talhelm et al., 2014). In contrast, the many nomadic, pastoralist, and non-Han small-scale agriculturalists have daily patterns that allow for more independence. They often strongly resist pressures to assimilate. China's more than 15-year effort to resettle millions of pastoralists (Tibetans, Mongolians, and others) in towns has left many of them aimless and dependent on the government, in ways that echo the plight of the Native Americans when their livelihood was taken away (Jacobs, 2015; Xie, 2015).

Better known are China's vast efforts to assimilate the Uighurs by opening hundreds of detention and reeducation camps for at least a million Uighurs and other minorities. This also includes heavy-handed attempts to turn Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other minorities into "an army of workers," whether they like it or not (Buckley & Ramzy, 2019). This kind of repression includes religious restrictions on Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians, and members of other sects who do not submit to government control, fostering resentment and resistance.

The dominance of the Han group in China means that little value is put on diversity, except when folk religions can be used to promote cultural heritage tourism (Cao, 2014). With the government oriented almost entirely to state-directed economic development, China in effect ignores the equality–difference paradox through government policies that simply force forms of societal equality and compliance.

Across other parts of Asia, policies can be very different. India has a democratic, pluralist system. Although this pluralism has come under assault from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party Hindu nationalist party, India still lives the tension between diversity and equality more intensely than authoritarian China, which simply represses it. Ethnic and religious politics, as a result, becomes more passionate and intense. Outside of the caste system, there are 100 million people in the “scheduled tribes,” or Adivasis, a diverse group of hill and forest peoples regarded as “backward” by the country’s dominant ethnic groups. The Adivasis are poorer than the average Indian, tend to focus more on sociality than on work and accumulation, and tend to stay separate from mainstream institutions (Schermerhorn, 1978, p. 71). Some, of course, have assimilated more than others.

Indian state policy has gone back and forth between efforts to assimilate the tribes and efforts to give them more autonomy. Affirmative action policies have been implemented to decrease inequality and bring marginalized groups more power. These policies have also brought resentment and protests from larger, more powerful groups in India, so their status is continually under question. The tribes themselves, like indigenous peoples elsewhere, are torn between maintaining their identity and history, and adopting mainstream practices and lifestyles (Moodie, 2015). The groups feel additional pressure to keep their identities because if they assimilate too much, their special reservations are threatened, similar to the way assimilated Native American tribes in the United States often face difficulty in achieving recognized tribal status.

Concluding Remarks: Immigration and the Equality–Difference Paradox

The equality–difference paradox encapsulates a fundamental tension for contemporary societies. In a splintered social, cultural, and economic world, with increased flows of people immigrating from their home countries, shockwaves occur and attitudes and politics polarize, as we see in Malta (Sammut et al., Chapter 7, this volume). It is thus important to understand how to balance the contrasting liberal impulses for equality on one hand and diversity on the other to minimize social disharmony.

Assimilation and multiculturalism can be espoused as moral ideals by some domestic governments. The democratic Danes, for example, prize equality and aim to melt away cultural diversity through educational, social, linguistic, and housing policies. The dictatorial Chinese force integration by bleaching cultural differences. In contrast, the United States and India are economically unequal but try and create space for cultural pluralism within their borders. Neither national policy is without problems or limitations. Assimilation leads to cultural, linguistic, and religious homogeneity for the sake of greater equality. Multiculturalism highlights and celebrates the heterogeneity of ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic differences. Implicit in it are forms of inequality, including economic inequality. However, a third perspective aims to overcome the limitations of both policies.

The omnicultural imperative (Moghaddam, 2012) offers a path out of the inherent tensions of the paradox of diversity and equality and the contrasting policies of assimilation and multiculturalism. From the policy perspective, omniculturalism proposes we first give priority to human commonalities. These universals are highlighted, shared, and celebrated with a particular focus on using educational institutions to achieve this aim. Group-based differences are then introduced, acknowledged, and comprehended in light of human commonalities during the second phase of omniculturalism. The policy holds promise for organizing globalized and pluralistic societies in a way that promotes social understanding and harmony. This can potentially be achieved by focusing on human commonalities before recognizing the manifestations of these universals might not be uniform across cultural groups.

The trade-offs between equality and difference might better be comprehended in light of an omnicultural perspective. This is because focusing on commonalities, before differences, allows space to recognize and comprehend the paradox between these two competing values. Acknowledging the tension creates an opportunity to critically reflect on the scopes and limits of current national policies aimed at finding culturally and politically suitable ways to organize people in contemporary plural societies. For better or for worse, the equality–difference paradox cannot be overlooked. Soothing the tension between the two competing values is a central national policy issue that can no longer be ignored.

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