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**FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN AMERICAN PUBLIC  
HEALTH DEBATE AROUND COVID-19**

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katya.sotkina@gmail.com**Abstract**

As a key culture-shaping concept for the USA, the *freedom/liberty* concept is frequently appealed to in debates regarding various political, economic, and social policy decisions. However, since understanding of this important concept always entails radical disagreement, it remains a topic of scholarly interest to see how it is used in various situations and various types of discourses. The study examines how and to what purpose and effect the concept *freedom/liberty* is used and metaphorized in the American public discourse related to vaccination and other restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research has shown that the two primary frames used in the public health debate around COVID-19 are “caring, responsible freedom” that places emphasis on the common good and fiercely individualistic “don’t-tread-on-me freedom,” both of which are deeply rooted in American culture. The content of the two basic frames often drifts so far apart that they are seen as polar opposites and while the debating parties acknowledge the importance of both aspects, their interpretation and implementation differ significantly. The *freedom/liberty* concept is intertwined with another important concept, *responsibility/duty*, with both sides of the COVID-19 public health debate actively employing and reframing them to prove their point. Providing a better understanding of how and why it shapes the public sentiment related to the pandemic measures would help improve the efficiency of public appeals and tactics to persuade hesitant audiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The freedom/liberty concept, as the core culture-shaping concept for the USA, is often at the heart of debates regarding various political, economic, and social policy decisions, public health discourse being no exception. It is organically and historically connected to such key American concepts as “(personal) rights,” “choice,” “autonomy,” and “independence” and their complements. Symbolic imaginings of America as the land of the free and the land of liberty prioritize individual liberties and people’s right to make final decisions about their personal lives and the dispositions of their families, as, from the start, this separated America as an early democracy from other nations where decisions were often made for the people by their monarchs, governments, masters, etc. However, in the USA, despite an uncontested core with which everyone agrees, the concept freedom remains essentially contested and thus is understood differently by different parties and individuals. The contested nature of the concept allows for its prolific metaphorization and diverse usage in various frames – so much so that the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility in various areas, including public health, has been directly connected to framing battles (Dorfman et al., 2005).

The value tension around the freedom/liberty concept can be illustrated by George Lakoff’s idealized models of “nurturant parent” and “strict father” family metaphors which develop the simple uncontested freedom into two versions of the idea (Lakoff, 2006). The “nurturant parent” model, according to Lakoff, stresses equality, empathy, respect, and responsibility, and the parent’s/ government’s authority is supported through a set of reasonable rules and limitations that are clearly communicated and discussed with the rest of the family/nation. This approach shapes “progressive freedom” that values security (which, Lakoff argues, is a prerequisite for freedom, as in Roosevelt’s “freedom from fear” from the 1941 Four Freedoms Speech), opportunity, fairness, community, and compassion. This model sees freedom as a dynamic, extendable value that drove the freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s to advance liberties and civil rights to the previously deprived groups of population.

In the “strict father” model, the head of the family/nation is a strong, authoritarian, inherently moral father figure whose job is to support the family, protect them from the evil that threatens them, teach the children right from wrong, and discipline them when necessary, so that mature children could eventually support and discipline themselves and learn to be their own moral authority – in which case the father is not allowed to meddle anymore. A mature individual is regarded as their own “strict father” and should therefore be free from the government’s interference. This tough love model of freedom values fair competition, free market economy, and discipline that allows one to pursue their self-interest in order to achieve prosperity (Lakoff, 2006). The nurturant parent model prioritizes common wealth and common good by ensuring that everyone has equal freedom of opportunity and supporting those that are weaker, the strict father model emphasizes individual choice as a way of exercising the right to freedom of opportunity to achieve personal success – which leads to the survival of the fittest who deserve prosperity. These two models roughly reflect the “progressive” Democratic (nurturant parent) and “conservative” Republican (strict father) views of freedom.

Although Lakoff’s approach might be criticized for political bias, this is a great example of how a core cultural concept is filled with different, often opposing content by different parties and individuals

belonging to the same culture. As we shall demonstrate later, our research has shown that the two primary frames used in the public health debate around COVID-19 – common good-oriented “caring, responsible freedom” and fiercely individualistic “don’t-tread-on-me freedom” – largely correspond to Lakoff’s “nurturant parent” and “strict father” models.

Even though at the core of the American COVID-19 debate there also seems to be the issue of framing – whether it’s a liberty issue or a public health issue, – attitudes towards public health and medical decisions, including vaccines and other public safety measures, are understandably rooted in deeply held convictions, moral values, and emotions. In the US, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, appeal to personal choice/freedom (also: freedom of choice) was one of the primary reasons that parents refused vaccines for their children, since mandatory vaccination was perceived as a constraint on personal liberties and parental rights. Research conducted by the scholars of Johns Hopkins University, the University of Maryland, and George Washington University who studied Facebook pages expressing vaccine opposition (October 2009–2019) showed an increase in resorting to the “civil liberty” frame in anti-vaccine argumentation since 2015 (Broniatowski et al., 2020). A research of vaccine hesitance and support in online discourse regarding California law SB277 revealed that vaccine skeptics notably tended to frame their refusal to vaccinate as a “human rights” issue rather than a “civil rights” one (as vaccine advocates did), positioning it as an inalienable and essential kind of freedom as opposed to the liberties granted by the government (DeDominicis et al., 2020). This study also found that vaccine skeptics talked about “America” and “constitutionality” more than about alleged medical consequences of vaccines, whereas vaccine advocates didn’t appear to view this as a political debate.

Vaccination-related writings emphasize the link between American democracy and freedom, prominently featuring concepts of “health freedom” and “medical freedom,” and the language of the ongoing debate heavily relies on precise legal definitions of freedom/liberty, rights, public responsibility/duty, mandatory restrictions and their constitutionality. American legal precedent states that “individual liberty... is not an absolute right in each person to be, in all times and in all circumstances, wholly free from restraint... and every well-ordered society charged with the duty of conserving the safety of its members, the rights of the individual in respect of his liberty may at times, under the pressure of great dangers, be subjected to such restraint, to be enforced by reasonable regulations, as the safety of the general public may demand” (Mariner et al., 2005, p. 583), and here one can observe all the key elements and relationships of the ongoing debate: 1) personal freedom is opposed to and balanced with public responsibility/duty; 2) individual liberty is viewed as freedom from restraint and equaled to personal rights; 3) individual freedom is opposed to and restricted by safety of the general public; 4) by default, individual freedom takes precedence, and only at times, under the pressure of great dangers, public safety outweighs its claims.

Thus, individual freedom seems to be connected to and balanced with public responsibility through public good and, more precisely in this context, public safety. The famous quote by Benjamin Franklin (“Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety” (as cited in *The anti-lockdown movement: a very American protest amid coronavirus pandemic*, 2020)) which has become part of American ideological mythology, also positions liberty and safety as opposites (without qualifying them as public or personal) and emphatically places primacy on the former.

Interestingly, current public health debates also appreciate the necessity of evolution in how personal liberties are understood (e.g., as opposed to 1927, sterilization of people with mental disabilities is now recognized as unacceptable) and insist on continuous re-evaluation of legal precedents in view of more respectful attitudes towards individual freedom. Freedom as choice and a civic right is appealed to on both sides. While pro-vaccine writers see mandatory vaccination as a form of advocacy, protecting children's right to vaccination (an important civic freedom), vaccine skeptics focus on vaccine choice, emphasize parental autonomy (in refusing to vaccinate their children) and present mandatory vaccination as a form of fascism or tyranny (Mariner et al., 2005).

## 2. Problem Statement

As a key culture-shaping concept for the USA, the freedom/liberty concept is frequently appealed to in debates regarding various public health issues as well as other political, economic and social spheres. However, since understanding of this important concept always entails radical disagreement, it remains a topic of scholarly interest to see how it is used in various situations and various types of discourses. The aim of the study is to see how and to what purpose and effect the concept freedom/liberty is used and metaphorized in the public discourse related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 3. Research Questions

- How and to what purpose is the concept *freedom/liberty* used and metaphorized in the general public health discourse before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are some of the differences and similarities?
- How and to what purpose is the concept *responsibility/duty* used and metaphorized in the general public health discourse before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are some of the differences and similarities?
- What is the connection (if any) between the concepts *freedom/liberty* and *responsibility/duty* in the context of the general public health discourse before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study was to examine in what contexts, collocations, and meanings the words “freedom”, “liberty”, “responsibility,” and “duty” are used in public health discourse around COVID-19 and how these meanings are constructed and apprehended; what semantic shifts and connotations we can observe in these key words when used by pro- and anti-vaccine authors; what tactics and techniques are employed to achieve the persuasive purpose of the authors; what frames and concepts are activated by using the words “freedom”/“liberty” and “responsibility”/“duty” in the COVID-19 public health debate; and, finally, how American cultural myths, norms, and values related to freedom and responsibility are communicated in these texts. Such analysis would serve to improve understanding of how resistance to vaccination and lockdown measures is intertwined with America's core cultural values and how these values and frames, when activated, influence people's decisions in the public health sphere. The freedom/liberty concept is at the heart of the COVID-19 public health debate, with both sides actively

employing and reframing it to prove their point. Providing a better understanding of how and why it shapes the public sentiment related to the pandemic measures would help improve the efficiency of public appeals and tactics to persuade hesitant audiences.

## **5. Research Methods**

The material for research was obtained from the selection of webpages produced through a filtering process of several stages. The sample of webpages was obtained using a series of Google and Bing searches for the combination of terms “vaccine”/“restrictions”/“covid”/“coronavirus”/ “pandemic” and “freedom”/“liberty”/ “choice”/“responsibility”/“duty”. A similar search was also carried out on YouTube. The pages were later examined to determine their eligibility for this research according to the following criteria: 1) the text had to be American: i.e., written, recorded or filmed by Americans about the USA; 2) the time period was limited to March 2020 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) to present time (July 2021); 3) since the purpose of our research was to focus on public persuasion discourse, we selected only the texts that were a) aimed at and available to mass audiences, and b) reflected the general public sentiment; and c) were reported as highly influential in terms of shaping public opinion. Therefore, social media pages were excluded from the sample. Similarly, we included only the YouTube videos that met the source, time, and relevance criteria (American, mainstream, available to the general public, March 2020 – July 2021), i.e., interviews and news reports by major news channels such as CNN, NBC, Fox News, and others.

The resulting selection comprised 256 publications by government institutions (e.g., articles and guidelines at .gov pages, executive orders by state governors, etc.) and accredited medical organizations and journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine, American Psychological Association, Johns Hopkins University and others; speeches and interviews by American politicians, news reports, editorials, analytical articles, interviews, official commentaries, published by established and accredited mainstream news outlets such as CNN, the New Yorker, Washington Post, the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and others.

We then studied the selected texts using the method of discourse analysis to investigate, explain, and describe the meanings and frames the words “freedom,” “liberty,” “responsibility,” and “duty” were used in, taking into account the linguistic content as well as the cultural and sociolinguistic context.

The fact that most online public platforms and search engines (Google, Bing, YouTube) now have a policy against medical misinformation has led to certain limitations of our research: in mainstream public discourse, vaccine advocates are significantly prevalent. Therefore, in our selection vaccine skeptics were mostly represented in interviews and reports on news channels, comments and speeches by politicians, debates at Congress hearings and as cited in pro-vaccine articles for the sake of refutation. This may be regarded as a distinctive feature of COVID-19-related mainstream public discourse, reflecting the government policy and the generally accepted scientific views on the pandemic. Although outnumbered, COVID-19 skeptics do have a voice in this public health debate, with highest-ranking government officials such as senators Rand Paul, Robert J. Kennedy Jr, state representatives Jim Jordan, Brady Williamson, Rick Becker, Mark Finchem and others openly doubting or opposing the restrictions, vaccine passports or the need for vaccines (Wright, 2021).

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Framing “Freedom”/ “Liberty”**

In COVID-19 vaccination / lockdown / preventive measures debates, freedom continues to loom large retaining its perennial prominence and primacy in the American concept sphere. Just as before the coronavirus pandemic, individual freedom of choice (the right not to get vaccinated) is frequently contrasted with public good and safety (the ethical duty to get vaccinated), as is clearly seen from statements like one made by Senator Rand Paul: “I am kind of pro-vaccine but I am also pro-freedom” (CNN, 2020, 00:12). Protests against mandatory lockdowns, based on protecting freedom are seen as “very American” precisely because of their “patriotic fervor” and appeals to the American Constitution and personal rights seen as foundational protection against the “tyranny” or “arbitrary overreach of the government” (The anti-lockdown movement: a very American protest amid coronavirus pandemic, 2020). In order to increase the power of this specifically American rhetoric, they consistently refer back to precedent texts from the Founding Fathers, adding to the already quoted phrase by Franklin the equally famous statement by Thomas Jefferson (“I prefer dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery” (as cited in The anti-lockdown movement: a very American protest amid coronavirus pandemic, 2020).) which posits freedom as a polar opposite to safety and frames lockdowns as an extreme form of un-freedom verbalizing it as slavery, a word certain to have explosive power in America, given its difficult history of slavery and current Critical Race Theory movement. Vaccination mandates are, in an emotive hyperbole, equated to the Orwellian “Big Brother” telling individuals they “can’t have a cheeseburger for lunch” and “have to eat carrots only and cut their calories”. And, while the public benefit of the mandate is not disputed, its imposition on personal freedom is seen as a bigger threat: “All that would probably be good for me, but I don’t think Big Brother ought to tell me to do it” (Williams, 2021, par. 13–14). Here individual freedom is framed as an absolute value that is threatened by government interference and needs to be protected at all costs. This “don’t-tread-on-me freedom” is seen as the basis of the Idea of America while its opponents who abide by the government rules are shamed as unpatriotic “sheeple”: “My biggest fear right now is how quickly American patriots crumbled and hid in their homes because the government told them that they should” (The anti-lockdown movement: a very American protest amid coronavirus pandemic, 2020); “I’m not doing it because I woke up in a free country,” replied the shopper, who complained that mask-wearers were “sheep” as the attendant took away his trolley” (Authers, 2021, par. 11).

Fascism,” “Hitler,” and “Nazi” are three common insults usually perceived as anti-freedom and have been widely used both in pre-COVID and COVID-related vaccination debates. The COVID pandemic intensified it due to the imposed restrictions. The proposal to introduce vaccine passports caused a massive backlash as they were perceived as a basis for segregation, giving the vaccinated some liberties and depriving the unvaccinated of their basic rights: “Papers Please. Never Again!” one read, with a yellow Star of David in the middle comparing vaccination cards to the Nazi identification of Jews before the Holocaust. “Stop Medical Apartheid,” read another, harking back to the racist segregation laws of 1990s South Africa” (Yau, 2021, par. 10).

Personal freedom is also frequently connected to economic freedom (material wealth and equality of opportunity being two other key American values), which is not surprising given that, historically, in

American political discourse free markets and free trade have been presented as the only economic options that lead to peace and prosperity and framed in moral terms, most notably by linking economic freedom to political freedom, and in economics, the government is seen as an obstacle to the workings of the free market machine (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2019). Even with highly polarized differences between whatever opposing parties happen to be, the belief that free markets and free trade are natural and moral agents that, if applied properly, lead to peace and flourishing and that intervention of the government should be limited because it represents a restriction on these economic freedoms, lies at the core of the foundational American narrative.

Thus, both sides appeal to economic freedom, but while the anti-lockdown opinion defines economic freedom as freedom to produce and provide for our families” and “freedom to open businesses” with equal opportunity for all, essential and non-essential as well as vaccinated or non-vaccinated workers, the pro-safety party seeks to connect economic “recovery,” “re-opening,” and “normalization” with freedom to move. (Moore, 2020, pp. 3-6) Public safety is framed as freedom from danger and freedom to move, consistent with Lakoff’s (2006) statements about freedom in the USA frequently expressed through the metaphors of movement and journey, as well as freedom to enjoy the personal freedoms which were curtailed by masks, lockdowns, etc. Personal liberties (as opposed to public safety) are styled in an ironic paradox as “the right to endanger others,” refusal to vaccinate is reversed and seen not as exercising personal freedom but as “a restraint on freedom” (both personal and public), and mandatory vaccinations, required to attend public events, are compared to such necessary and reasonable safety measures such as gun-control laws, non-smoking mandates, seatbelts, and condoms, the refusal of which measures is now generally accepted as irresponsible and even criminal. This frame places emphasis on responsible “caring freedom” that values empathy and community, where one man’s freedom ends where another’s begins, and encourages people to root for other people’s freedom as well. Here safety is seen not as an opposite to freedom but as a necessary prerequisite for freedom (as in Lakoff’s “nurturant parent” model): “Medical freedom’ isn’t an American value. The Founders promoted vaccines and public health. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin would disapprove of COVID vaccine resistance. They knew health was the foundation for every other freedom” (Servitje et al., 2021, par. 1).

The content of the two basic frames “caring freedom” and “don’t-tread-on-me freedom” often drifts so far apart that they are seen as polar opposites. This is a characteristically American value tension where one side emphasizes public good and the other opposes it with personal freedom, and where both sides acknowledge the importance of both values, but interpret and implement them very differently.

## **6.2. Weaponizing Freedom: COVID-19 as a War**

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, related political speeches and journalistic discourse have been permeated by war metaphors, and, even though at first it was most characteristic of Italy, the USA quickly followed suit, when Donald Trump declared himself “a war-time president” in direct connection with “combating coronavirus” (in itself a conceptual war metaphor) (Oprysko & Luthi, 2020, par. 1). Since President Johnson in 1964, American presidents have used this popular metaphor in public policy, declaring war against poverty, crime, drugs, cancer, inflation, energy consumption, terrorism, and other domestic and international issues, often linking national emergencies to war conditions; thus framing

the COVID-19 pandemic as a war should come as no surprise. This choice to metaphorically present the coronavirus emergency as a war, however, has been deprecated as dangerous, because it might “affect the way people conceptualize the pandemic and react to it. This forces citizens to endorse authoritarianism and limitations to civil liberties” (Panzeri et al., 2021, par. 1) – even though, as current studies show, it’s speakers’ political orientation and specific sources of information rather than war metaphors themselves that influence the acceptance of what these metaphors entail (Panzeri et al., 2021, par. 2).

Framing the COVID-19 pandemic as a war results in two different ways of conceptualizing freedom. On the one hand, in the situation of dire national threat such as war or a nation-scale disaster, executive power is concentrated in the hands of the President as commander-in-chief, there is little time and opportunity for policy deliberation, domestic challenges become matters of national security, sacrifices are called for, and sanctions are imposed. Thus, restrictions of personal liberties (such as lockdown, masks, mandatory vaccination, etc.) are seen as necessary sacrifices for public good: when the enemy is at the gate, a good citizen will think not of personal freedom but of protecting the community which is seen as ethical and moral duty (responsibility) the neglect of which is criminal. COVID-19 is frequently compared to 9/11, a federal financial crisis, bank malfeasance, Hurricane Katrina, or global climate change as an enormous life-threatening crisis, complete with victim statistics and language of danger and death, and in this context freedom as a civil right becomes a secondary value in comparison to the more primary human right to life. Freedom here also figures as responsible choice since by choosing to act quickly and to vaccinate against the coronavirus, one contributes to faster formation of herd immunity (as opposed to, for instance, a purely personal choice to get a tetanus shot which affects only the patient herself) and then leads to the idea that “vaccine is freedom,” since it’s mass vaccination that will give the community those liberties that the pandemic took away.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a war on personal liberties, which are “violated,” “assaulted,” “threatened,” and “attacked,” including American’s First Amendment liberties such as “your right to go to church, your right to assemble, your right to petition your government, freedom of the press, freedom of speech” (Levin, 2021, par. 3), making it seem that a war is waged against the foundational elements of American democracy and America itself, and, as a result, lives are just as much destroyed.

### 6.3. Responsibility/Duty

Seeking to persuade the public of advisability of mass vaccination, pre-COVID writers, well aware of potential legal difficulties in enforcing mandatory vaccination in the USA (where law and liberty are linked organically and positively), stress the essential liberty, so important to Americans, while at the same time positing that *liberty* has its *responsibilities* (Caplan, 2013). They primarily stress the moral and ethical responsibility of protecting those at the highest risk of disease and death, appealing mainly to ethics of rights, ethics of justice, deontological, and consequentialist (utilitarian) ethics. Taking the personal freedom to opt out of vaccination as an American “given,” they ask not whether it is legitimate, American, or patriotic, but whether it is moral/ethical to allow high risk groups to “*bear the burden* of others’ freedom” (Jamrozik et al., 2016, p. 762), thus metaphorizing one person’s freedom into another person’s burden”. Limiting individual liberty to strictly personal physical space (“*Liberty* in regarding vaccination ends at the



start of a vulnerable person's **body**") and prohibiting it from inflicting oppression and death, the conclusion is made that "non-vaccinators are not merely irresponsible, but morally blameworthy for the morbidity and mortality caused by infectious diseases. They can be prevented by vaccination" (Jamrozik et al., 2016, pp. 762–763), since by exercising their individual freedom they endanger others' safety and life. In that, non-vaccinators are likened to drunk drivers who may not have intended or not even directly caused an accident by their actions, but merely failed to prevent it and yet have committed not only an irresponsible act but an indictable offense. Authors acknowledge the national and cultural reluctance to restrict freedom of movement (through self-isolation) and allow respect for the choice not to vaccinate, but argue that it is not the case that the liberty to choose to do something must necessarily be unrestricted or unfettered and further claim that individuals are strictly accountable and liable for any harm their choice caused (Bowen, 2020), strongly linking responsibility to moral, ethical, financial, and legal **liability** – especially since such harm may result in permanent disability and death.

These arguments have carried into the COVID-19 era, and, in striving to persuade the public to get vaccinated, medical ethicists emphasize other-centered ethical approaches (oriented to common good and public duty) as opposed to self-centered approaches to ethics (oriented at individual freedom). "*Both vaccines and masks are a perfect instantiation of the ethics of responsibility. The golden rule, in the case of COVID-19, comes down to a very basic physical act: I get vaccinated – or wear a mask – to protect you, and you do so to protect me*" (Witynski, 2021, par. 7). In addition, pro-vaccine advocates use traditional pro-vaccination discourse and associate anti-COVID vaccination with what is generally perceived to be good for the public, make claims about **legal liability** for those who do not vaccinate, and promote **ethical duty** to preserve public safety, often comparing the common good with non-vaccine-related claims about the public good, including climate change and economic equality (thus appealing to the rhetorical strategy of consistency). Elected officials as people's representatives are strongly encouraged to model choices for public safety because it is the responsible thing for elected officials to do and the refusal to do so sends the wrong message (Cillizza, 2021). An insistence on "getting back American liberties and freedoms" by a specific date is implicitly presented as childish, irresponsible, and wrong: "*Dr. Fauci appropriately attempted to reframe the issue as a public health crisis... and responded like a responsible adult... This [framing the issue as political and not medical] is irresponsible nonsense*" (Chimis, 2021, par. 2–4).

According to psychological reactance theory, restriction of valued behaviors elicits anger and negative cognitions, motivating actions to regain the limited freedom, so resistance in the face of **any** restrictions seems to be a universal response. Studies show that limitations of non-vaccination (i.e., vaccination mandates) have triggered protests and disinclination to show protective behaviors to limit the spread of the coronavirus, while limitations of vaccination (i.e., scarce vaccine supply) have had the opposite effect: intentions to get vaccinated in protest against this specific limitation (Sprengholz et al., 2021). Similarly, even before the COVID-19 crisis, anti-vaccination writers seemed less concerned with, for instance, religious liberties and keener on acquiring vaccine exemptions by any means (Mariner et al., 2005). Even though some may find it expedient to manipulate public response in the context of a health crisis (for instance, through creating artificial vaccine deficits), here, too, it is seen as a better course of action if Americans exercise a sense of personal ownership over their decisions and make **a responsible decision** for public safety out of **free choice** in favor of public duty and common good, rather than either

passively submit to the government-initiated mandates or protest for the sake of protest). Thus, making ethically responsible choices is also presented as an expression of authentic personal freedom which is informed and caring (similar to Lakoff's (2006) nurturant parent).

#### 6.4. Diluting the Discourse

In the pandemic-related oration, *freedom* is sometimes used in strategies that dilute or rarefy the discourse of persuasion that seeks to convince the public in advisability of vaccination. Such strategies include discrediting opponents through amputating some of their positive qualities or, conversely, ascribing to them some negative qualities in order to hint that they are not qualified to make claims on the matter at hand. In a typical example of such rhetoric cited here, this is achieved, for instance, through creating polarization using the “us – them” opposition and verbalizing the negative effects of the actions of groups and individuals who are outside the rhetorical category of “we” (rhetoric of fear) (Nowakowska, 2018), stressing the opponents' negligibility and their flawed understanding of freedom (emphasized by the inverted commas), using capital letters to convey heightened emotion (arguing through sheer volume rather than reason), employing paradox where freedom as “right” and “choice” leads to danger: “*I don't understand the argument by a small minority that their 'personal freedom' includes the right to endanger everyone around them by working while unmasked – by necessity AND unvaccinated – by choice*” (Robb, 2021, par. 10) as well as using the rhetoric of guilt and shame (for instance, implying the guilt for the high death toll). The opposite side uses this tactic, too: “*They call us extremists,*” state Sen. Dallas Heard (R-Roseburg) told the gathering. “*Not because we are extreme, but because we are not willing to go sprinting in whatever direction they are herding us in*” (Yau, 2021, par. 2).

Other discourse-diluting strategies involve disparaging and ridiculing the opponent (i.e., shifting from substantive issues to *ad persona* arguments), implying incompetence (“*Reason and logic are lost on Jordan*”), using evocative language of direct *ad hominem* arguments (“*Told that his time had run out, he screamed, 'I'd like my question answered!' At which point he was told by Representative Maxine Waters, speaking for millions of Americans, to shut the hell up*” (Levin, 2021, par. 5–6)), and inverting foundational American narratives about freedom for shock value. “*There is a primordial American tradition going back to the Founders of being freedom-obsessed, even though we are a country founded on slavery and genocide, being freedom-obsessed to the point that we're always so afraid of the government coming for us that we're blind to other types of threats, whether it's a virus, whether it's bank malfeasance, climate change, what have you*” (Concha, 2020, par. 3). A similar effect is observed when writers give in to general ideologization of issues and appeal to loyalty to certain principles (even such foundational principles as American freedoms and liberties) at the expense of substantive discussion.

Experts note that the ideological gap between the conflicting narratives (protecting individual rights vs. achieving collective good), instead of strengthening the arguments for either side actually lessens their potential to operate persuasively for skeptical readers (Gallagher & Lawrence, 2020).

## 7. Conclusion

Unprecedented restrictions imposed by the government during the COVID 19 pandemic have been a major contributing factor shaping the language of the pro-/ anti-COVID-19 vaccination debate, bringing the freedom argument to a new level. The two aspects of freedom – “caring freedom” and “don’t-tread-on-me freedom” are polarized into different frames that constitute the basis of American public health debate around the COVID-19 pandemic. The first approach stresses common good and a citizen’s responsibility to protect the community by not spreading the virus; whereas the second approach emphasizes personal responsibility of every citizen who should be afforded the diligence of their own decision and suffer the consequences if necessary.

Other frames that are activated through appealing to “freedom” are “war” (employed by both sides), “a public health crisis” (therefore pandemic measures are a necessity and a citizen should act as a reasonable responsible adult – implying that the other side is being irresponsible, childish and irrational) and “a case of individual freedom” (inalienable human right that is threatened by the restrictions and needs to be protected at all costs).

Both sides of the public health debate around COVID-19 use strategies that dilute or rarefy the discourse which often lessens the credibility and persuasive effect of the text.

As a fundamental concept in American culture, “freedom” still outweighs every other value in America; so much so that even public good has to be formulated in terms of freedom. It also remains an essentially contested concept and it is important to keep aware of that in order to enhance understanding between the opponents and reach the skeptical audience.

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