

MASS PARRHESIA:
Strengthening Democracy by Articulating the Public Will Quantitatively
in a Non-Binding, Open Forum

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

This thesis begins by considering how democracy has been affected by a modern public discourse that is increasingly siloed and polarized, with experts mistrusted and truth relativized. In Chapter 2 I outline the overriding causes of populist upsurges in the West, especially examining the outcomes of Brexit and Trump, and I assess the circumstances as potentially threatening to liberalism. Alongside economic and cultural causes, I argue that a lack of political efficacy is frustrating and has been a contributor to populist sentiments in the West. In Chapter 3 I analyze Foucault's conception of *parrhesia* and argue that we can moderate populist impulses by harnessing the elements of *parrhesia* to improve discourse and enhance political efficacy in Western democracies. I reconcile Foucault's problematization of truth by upholding the value of the wisdom of crowds, when they are properly engaged. In Chapter 4 I describe a democracy platform for *mass parrhesia* that harnesses the elements of *parrhesia* with modern information technology, and I submit that Canada is apt for its introduction. I conclude by addressing potential objections and I advocate for the application of my concrete proposal to mitigate the risk of electing a populist, illiberal government in Canada.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures.....	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication	viii
CHAPTER 1 – The State of Western States.....	1
Introduction.....	1
More Internet Less Trust	5
Today’s Internet Agora(e) and the Siloing of the Public Sphere	9
CHAPTER 2 – Causes and Consequences	17
Economic Causes.....	19
Cultural Causes.....	22
The Problem of Single-Issue Motivators	26
Democratic Decay	30
Eroding Efficacy	35
Ship of State Adrift.....	39
CHAPTER 3 – Parrhesia and the Internet Agora	41
Audience is Power (Friends and Followers).....	47
Crowdsourcing the Truth	48
CHAPTER 4 – A New Approach for Parrhesia.....	54
Why Canada?	55
Mass Parrhesia in Canada	62
The Platform	64
Funding.....	64

Foundation and Governance Framework	65
Voters	66
Issues	68
Votes.....	71
Members of Parliament	72
Existing Projects	73
Argument for Implementation	74
Elements of Mass Parrhesia Applied	76
CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion	80
Objections Addressed	80
Closing.....	92
Works Cited.....	94

List of Figures

Figure 1 – E-petition against Trump making state visit, by parliamentary constituency18

Figure 2 – Voter turnout at federal elections since 1993 (in Canada) 55

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Dedication

To my baby daughter, Sophia, for whom I envision a better world.

CHAPTER 1 – The State of Western States

Introduction

Before Twitter, Facebook or the advent of personally curated news feeds, Michel Foucault defined *parrhesia* and examined the evolution of its meaning from ancient Greece to the 5th century. In his 1983 lectures that were subsequently published in the book *Fearless Speech*, Foucault considered the Greek and biblical conceptions of *parrhesia* and how the truth-teller's role was problematized in those societies. He questioned the nature of truth-telling, its consequences, and its relation to power. Although his analysis considered society, democracy, and the self through the lens of ancient literature, Foucault's modern problematization is prescient for today's Internet Age and it compels us to consider how truth-telling and free-speech generate a conundrum for political self-determination in our own time.

In this work, I shall re-examine Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia* and reflect upon the way we might think about *parrhesia* in the twenty-first century. In particular, the problematization of truth that Foucault described is as relevant as ever in our time of social media and modern mass communication. 'Free', 'frank', and 'fearless' approximate the character of the speech that is envisaged as *parrhesia*, but the technology that supposedly augments these attributes, to give us all greater access to speech, paradoxically, is muddying the truth. Whereas Athenian democracy maintained *parrhesia* in the *agora*, today's *agora* is the Internet. And this modern manifestation lacks many of the checks and balances that lent virtuousness to *parrhesia*, stripping it of much its constructive power and utility. Foucault proposed that frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty served to buttress unrestrained speech—to deter what today we might refer to as alternative facts.

With an overabundance of empty chatter and noise in today's Internet *agora*, one of the core problems with modern Western democracies, I will argue, is the lack of perceived efficacy of our democratic system. In the realm of political science, 'political efficacy' is classically defined as the "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties" (Campbell). When the wishes, demands, and interests of common citizens go unheeded for too long, pressure builds up that may eventually boil over. A frustrated citizenry can imperil us all and is liable to sow the seeds of destabilization, rebellion, and violence. As John F. Kennedy said: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable". If we want fundamental changes without violence, we must build upon and improve our liberal project before it degrades further.

To be clear, all citizens do not actually have to *be* empowered and I will certainly not be advocating for a functional direct democracy, but I will argue that we need to tweak the system for our times so that citizens can—when they are duly inspired—press more directly on issues that they care deeply about, or else populist movements such as Brexit and Trump will continue to spread. Enhanced political efficacy must be achieved through the continued free expression of opinions and beliefs, but we need a new kind of *parrhesia* that will level the playing field for all participants and be constructive in the twenty-first century. Like the Athenians discussed by Foucault, I worry about what is true in political discourse and I will therefore be advocating for the expression of political will that is liberated from vitriolic rhetoric. This way, the will of citizens, quantified and articulated openly, will be constructive and serve to restore a sense of political efficacy. At the same time, the aggregated wisdom of the crowd (of citizens), properly harnessed, will more often shine towards what is likely to be true, as I will discuss.

Some activists and academics on the left make compelling arguments for more radical reformist changes that advocate dismantling social hierarchy to establish horizontalist governance; that is not the thrust of this work. Although I am amenable to some of those views, I will focus here on a practical, iterative approach that builds on the liberal democratic system that already exists in the West. I will confront our democratic conundrum with the presumption that the current world order, while flawed and in need evolution and modernization, is generally on the right track; that it is the least worst system we know of, to borrow from Winston Churchill. I generally agree with contemporary defenders of liberalism, like Karl Popper and John Rawls. I hold the assumption that we have been making gradual progress towards truth and justice under our current system, and that *parrhesiatic* discourse has been a key element of our success thus far.

In Chapter 2 I shall discuss some of the problematic outcomes that have recently emerged in Western democracies, linking them to a critically eroded democratic efficacy, among other factors. Subsequently in Chapter 3 I will look at an idealized Athenian democracy through the lens of Foucault's *Fearless Speech* and consider how *parrhesia* may be harnessed in our Internet age to enhance political efficacy, thus tempering the damaging effects of apathy on one side, and of unrestrained and exasperated political discourse on the other. I will also attempt to practically contend with Foucault's problematization of truth by advocating for a crowdsourced political will that enables us to better grasp towards it. Considering democracy in Canada specifically, in Chapter 4 I will propose a practical evolution of our parliamentary, representative democracy that retains its key features but is supplemented by a *parrhesiatic* discourse that leverages modern information technology. My ultimate objective is to propose a practical approach that uses modern information technology to mitigate the risk of electing a populist, illiberal

government in Canada. In Chapter 5 I will counter many of the objections that are likely to arise from my proposal and conclude with a call to try something new that will disrupt the status quo.

More Internet Less Trust

Times have changed since the era when free citizens would gather at the centre of ancient Athens to receive news and discuss politics in the open-air. So long as one was not a foreigner, a woman, or a slave, Athenian democracy endorsed free expression and open dissent—or *parrhesia*—to sustain and improve it. Over the course of more than two thousand years only the printing press would drastically expand the potential for the exchange of ideas, until our own lifetime. The Internet has leveled the playing field for speech and discourse as would have been unimaginable to the citizens of ancient Athens. Today, roughly 4.2 billion people have some form of access to the Internet (about half the Earth's population) (Internet World Stats). Those who do have open access are disproportionately located in Western democracies—which I will be considering throughout this work. Notwithstanding political limitations imposed on free access in some countries, and outdated hardware/software accessible to some people, never before have so many humans been able to enter the *agora* and take part in the discussion.

In Canada specifically, where I am especially focussing this thesis, an agency of the United Nations pegs the rate of Internet access at 89.8% based on 2016 data (International Telecommunication Union). Along with this statistic, the same organization reports that 86.8% of households have a computer and that there are 66.1 mobile Internet subscribers per 100 inhabitants. While the shortfall in full Internet access is relatively small and narrowing, it is nevertheless concerning as it disproportionately affects disadvantaged populations such as those in remote areas (especially First Peoples) and those who have limited socioeconomic resources (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission). In December 2016 the CRTC ruled that, “Broadband Internet access services are vital to Canada's economic, social, democratic, and cultural fabric. Canadians will increasingly need to have access to broadband

Internet services to participate in the digital economy.” Accordingly, it established a universal service objective whereby, “Canadians, in urban areas as well as in rural and remote areas, have access to voice services and broadband Internet access services, on both fixed and mobile wireless networks” (CRTC).

Coupled with the CRTC report, “the federal government announced it would [invest] up to \$500 million to bring high-speed, broadband Internet access to 300 rural and remote communities by 2021” (Kupfer).

The recognition that Internet is vital and demands universal access, along with a commitment to invest in expanding service in remote communities, indicates that trends towards increasing availability of Internet and adoption by households will continue. This underpins my introductory assertion that the time is right to reimagine the democratic process and to evolve how it is conducted, harnessing modern technology to meet the expectations of Canadians in the twenty-first century.

Along with increasing Internet access, the potential for mass engagement was originally heralded as a windfall for the average citizen and for democracy. Prior to the Internet it was more difficult for laypeople to enter the *agora* to express their ideas and to hear the views of a diversity of interlocutors. Access to an assortment of news and other information sources was finite, as were the means by which they could interact with those sources or with each other. Citizens might dislike or distrust certain presentations but there was a limited menu of ideas for the taking. Deviations from the mainstream had few places to take root, and without a critical mass they had difficulty flourishing.

Today in contrast, fringe ideas can coalesce across space, and some of the wildest theories persist, including by flat-Earthers, birthers, anti-vaxxers, and 9/11 truthers. *The Flat*

Earth Society, for example, hosts a forum at forum.tfes.org, that as of March 2019 boasts “176519 Posts in 8880 Topics by 4651 Members.” The official-sounding *National Vaccine Information Center* found at www.nvic.org, whose mission “is dedicated to the prevention of vaccine injuries and deaths through public education and to defending the informed consent ethic in medicine,” serves as a quasi-official hub that legitimizes the anti-vaccine movement and can mislead otherwise neutral enquiring parents. The “non-profit education organization” *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth* hosts a professional-looking website at www.ae911truth.org which disputes that airplanes could have caused the collapse of the World Trade Center towers and is “dedicated to researching and disseminating scientific information about the complete destruction of all three World Trade Center skyscrapers on September 11, 2001.” These fringe movements can now be accessed and effortlessly engaged with online. Their polished campaigns find appeal and they are evidently sustained by a loyal following.

Where conspiracy theorists used to have few others with whom to commiserate, today they take to cyberspace to meet and find resonance with likeminded people who are otherwise separated in physical space. Personalities like Alex Jones of InfoWars.com is an example of a hub for these sorts of extreme anti-establishment, fringe beliefs. His political influence, however outlandish, nevertheless finds significant appeal, including with the current occupant the White House (Murphy).

It also used to be that people had a greater degree of trust in institutions such as the press or academia, along with relative confidence in their declared apolitical, non-partisan status. A 2016 Gallup News Service poll reflects a substantial and steady decline in the American public’s trust and confidence in the mass media since the 1970s, when about 70% of respondents asserted

a great deal or fair amount of trust in mass media, whereas only 32% of respondents agreed in 2016 (Jones).

The findings of the 2018 annual trust and credibility survey by Edelman Intelligence is summarized as follows:

Gresham's Law, based on the 18th-century observation that debased currency drives out the good, is now evident in the realm of information, with fake news crowding out real news. Leaders are going directly to the people, bashing the media as inaccurate and biased. These forces are taking a toll. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, media has become the least-trusted global institution for the first time, with trust scores of over 50 percent in only six nations, five of which are in the developing world. Putting pressure on trust in media are declining trust in search engines and social media.

People have retreated into self-curated information bubbles, where they read only that with which they agree, as if selecting their playlist for music. Fully half of respondents indicate that they consume mainstream media less than once a week. Nearly six in 10 agree that news organizations are politicized, and nearly one in two agree that they are elitist. Nearly two-thirds agree that the average person cannot distinguish good journalism from falsehoods.

The fourth estate has long been upheld as a critical component of a functioning democracy, and thus, the erosion of its perceived legitimacy is troubling. The study goes on to warn that, "The consequences of a loss of belief in reliable information are volatility, societal polarization and an ebbing of faith in society's governing structures, slowing economic growth and tempting leaders to make short-sighted policy choices" (Edelman Intelligence).

Within the vast Internet *agora*, where trust in institutions has been critically eroded and scepticism abounds, each citizen may cleave to their own sense of what is true, not only in the personally spiritual or religious realm but also regarding profoundly public shared matters. This is injurious to democracy and detrimental to our collective progress since we need universally trusted institutions which apply common standards with which to winnow false claims from true

ones. “Successful democracy requires setting up and protecting independent and non-democratic spaces and institutions—specialised epistemic communities with the authority to investigate truth” (Wells 85). In chapter 2 I will outline some of the other issues that are having a corrosive effect on democracy and yielding worrisome, illiberal outcomes which are aggravated by the problem of truth.

Returning to Foucault’s problematization of truth in political discourse, we can see how the problem is as grave now as ever. I will delve more deeply into *Fearless Speech* in Chapter 3 and go on to argue that we can begin to address Foucault’s problematization by considering research into crowdsourced information as a means to arriving at truth, thus enhancing political efficacy and defusing cynicism. In Chapter 4 I will go on to describe a practical and implementable approach to democratic engagement in Canada that utilizes modern information technology to harmonize democracy with the world in which we live today.

Today’s Internet Agora(e) and the Siloing of the Public Sphere

With the worldwide web now opening the doors of the *agora* to the multitudes, all can potentially have a voice. For Hobbes, the multitudes were unformed and unfocussed, but with the potential to become united in a “Representer” (506). I think that modern information technology can, if employed correctly, be harnessed to enliven a representer for our own time.

Today, the aristotelian powers of persuasion can be in the hands of anyone with an Internet connection and the inspiration to exercise them best. Or worse, powerful or moneyed players can exert a disproportionate influence when it suits their own interests. The effects of *logos* (sound argument), *ethos* (speaker’s credibility), and *pathos* (emotional appeal) persist in today’s *agora*, as they did in ancient Athens, but now sophistry can be spun more easily than

ever. Thus, our public sphere of open discourse can be hijacked using today's modern mass communication tools. This potential hazard must be mitigated so that unified articulations of public will are adequately represented and constructive, substantially more often than they are destructive.

In his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas describes a process leading up to and during the Enlightenment when the emerging bourgeois class increasingly gathered within a 'public sphere'. He puts forth that contemporary notions of public and the private emerged during the eighteenth century in a manner that empowered citizens politically. Analogous to the concept of the Athenian *agora*, Habermas's public sphere is constituted by private citizens, specifically those with private property, education, and spare time. Rooted in family units, common, albeit privileged citizens were informed by the press and met in coffee houses and salons to discuss matters of collective interest. That is to say, private citizens came together to compose a public space. There, through 'rational-critical public debate' emerged our contemporary conceptions of 'public interest', 'public opinion' and ultimately 'public authority'. It emerged informally starting in the 18th century, and ultimately constitutional states enshrined public consensus as the source of their authority, usurping the supremacy of monarchs and other territorial rulers (14-56).

Towards the end of the book, Habermas goes on to coin 'refeudalization' as a phenomenon with regressive tendencies taking place in the mid twentieth century. He describes a re-merger between the public and the private that generate some pre-Enlightenment consequences, and many of his observations remain prescient in our Internet age. In particular he is concerned with the emergence of a consumerist society where corporate interests increasingly shape and influence what had previously been a reason-based debate between private

individuals. In his characterization of the Enlightenment era, the “rational-critical debate of private people in the salons, clubs, and reading societies was not directly subject to the cycle of production and consumption,...it possessed instead a ‘political’ character in the Greek sense of being emancipated from the constraints of survival requirements” (160). The ‘political’ character of this discourse is reflected as virtuous and approximates Foucault’s concept of *parrhesia* that I will discuss in greater details in Chapter 3. In contrast, with refeudalization, commercial interests took prominence and began to coalesce with political interests to muddy the waters of reason-based discourse. He goes on, “As soon as the press developed from a business in pure news reporting to one involving ideologies and viewpoints, however, and the compiling of items of information encountered the competition of literary journalism, a new element—political in the broader sense—was joined to the economic one” (182). Coupled with partisan political movements and mass marketing, Habermas’s model public sphere was showing signs of disintegration when he wrote his 1962 book. As discussed above, the deterioration has persisted to today.

For Habermas, the convergence of public and private is a symptom of manipulation by entrenched powers, be they political or economic. He proposes that these interest groups present themselves to citizens to influence their will in a way that is nefarious and disempowering, as by monarchs and lords in the feudal system of the Middle Ages. One way to make sense of the fracturing that Habermas describes is through the siloing of the public sphere. Unlike the notion of the idealized *agora* where citizens came together to discuss and debate in one place with one set of norms, today with the Internet we see the emergence of a multiplicity of *agorae*, each with their own ideologically-motivated prophets and preachers who recite to their followers what they

want to hear. Thus, a unified public sphere ceases to function constructively. Citizens may engage within the *agora* which suits them best to reinforce their own conception of the good.

More than ever, the information that feeds voters is polarized and polarizing, with each one immersed in their own self-affirming echo chamber of a social media feed, as borne out by a 2017 British study (Krasodonski-Jones). Its author argues that, “The existence of echo chambers and the idea that we are increasingly seeing things that we agree with, things that we like, things that we might buy, challenges some of the fundamental principles democracy thrives on” (Cheshire). Most dangerously, those educational and journalistic institutions that Wells upholds as necessary for democracy are vilified within certain *agorae* for trying to subvert their conception of truth. The sway of *pathos* overcomes inconvenient truths and *ethos* seems apparent when so many others are ‘following’, ‘liking’, and ‘re-tweeting’. *Logos* is being overrun within some *agorae*. What results is a profound political antagonism between ideological factions.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe describes two forms of political antagonism:

Antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space – and what I call ‘agonism’, which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between ‘adversaries’, adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as ‘friendly enemies’, that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way (13).

I am proposing here that there is a scarcity of the agonism we would hope for—that we need—for a productive democracy. Ideological factions can now flourish and amass a following in their own space and the vitriolic antagonism we see prominently in politics today is the type between enemies. I would say that the opposing sides do not inhabit the same public sphere; they

each reside in their own *agora*. The Internet was supposed to level the playing field and foster engagement, but paradoxically it is profoundly dividing us.

A recent article in *The Economist* summarizes the problem with social media specifically. One of its supposed advantages is its decentralized nature, connecting people together and aggregating opinions:

Not long ago social media held out the promise of a more enlightened politics, as accurate information and effortless communication helped good people drive out corruption, bigotry and lies. Yet Facebook acknowledged that before and after last year's American election, between January 2015 and August this year, 146m users may have seen Russian misinformation on its platform. Google's YouTube admitted to 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter to 36,746 accounts. Far from bringing enlightenment, social media have been spreading poison (The Economist "Do social media threaten democracy?").

Drawing on the work of British political scientist Bernard Crick, the article goes on to argue that, "by spreading untruth and outrage, corroding voters' judgment and aggravating partisanship, social media erode the conditions for the horse-trading that Crick thought fosters liberty." The dissemination of lies causes a breakdown in the potential for compromise and mutual understanding, which is anathema to a liberal democracy.

Destructive antagonism is frustrating, confusing to electors, and it may be a driver of general political disengagement. Most disconcerting is the fact that it represents an existential danger to the very democracy that it infects. When parties strongly polarize in opposition to one another, those with power at any given time can work to tilt the rules in their own favour to further degrade democratic institutions, causing what is referred to as "democratic backsliding", as outlined in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*:

If democratic backsliding were to occur in the United States, it would not take the form of a coup d'état; there would be no declaration of martial law or imposition of single-

party rule. Rather, the experience of most contemporary autocracies suggests that it would take place through a series of little-noticed, incremental steps, most of which are legal and many of which appear innocuous. Taken together, however, they would tilt the playing field in favor of the ruling party. (Mickey, Levitsky and Way)

This is being played out with partisan gerrymandering in the United States, where state legislatures with a majority are able to redraw the lines of federal congressional districts so as to favour their party at the national level. Packing the opponent's supporters into fewer districts leads to fewer seats for that party, even if the overall number of votes may be similarly well-matched across parties. This is democratic backsliding in action and, in addition to its very concrete effects, it erodes trust in the legitimacy of the democratic process. The legality of this tactic is being challenged, such as in Wisconsin's *Gill v. Whitford*, which made it to the U.S. Supreme Court but was dismissed on a technicality (Prokop). Nevertheless, the issue will sooner or later be considered by the highest court, although even that pillar of liberal democracy is polarized and packed with partisan influence.

Polarization has been worsening in the United States over the last 20 years, as summarized in a 2014 Pew Research study which found that, "Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines—and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive—than at any point in the last two decades. These trends manifest themselves in myriad ways, both in politics and in everyday life." For example, "The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%." Furthermore, "Partisan animosity has increased substantially over the same period. In each party, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled." As of 2014, 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans see the opposing party as a "threat to the nation's well-being." This goes well beyond the 16% of Democrats 17% of

Republicans who held a “very unfavourable” view of the opposing party in 1994. The study goes on to note that:

‘Ideological silos’ are now common on both the left and right. People with down-the-line ideological positions—especially conservatives—are more likely than others to say that most of their close friends share their political views. Liberals and conservatives disagree over where they want to live, the kind of people they want to live around and even whom they would welcome into their families... Yet many of those in the center remain on the edges of the political playing field, relatively distant and disengaged, while the most ideologically oriented and politically rancorous Americans make their voices heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process... On measure after measure—whether primary voting, writing letters to officials, volunteering for or donating to a campaign—the most politically polarized are more actively involved in politics, amplifying the voices that are the least willing to see the parties meet each other halfway (Pew Research “Political Polarization”).

This study shows that there is an increasing divide between the left and the right in the United States, and a trend away from a sense of having a shared space, or as Habermas would argue, we see breakdown of the public sphere. The political landscape is being skewed by the most extreme views of the minorities at each end of the political spectrum, represented by the most vociferous political participants. This tendency runs counter to political progress which demands cooperation, compromise, and concessions by both sides. When neither side will yield any ground, the resulting stalemate is unproductive, and worse it erodes confidence in the very political system which is supposed to be the means by which to achieve progress. I contend that this frustration—which is manifested partly as a lack of political efficacy—poses an existential risk to liberal democracy if it is not appeased. Tribalistic gridlock is palpable in the American political system today in particular, but Canada is not immune.

In Chapter 4 I will argue for a means by which to amplify the views of those relatively disengaged citizens in the political centre to mitigate our risk here in Canada. Evidence suggests

that centrists too have lost faith in democratic principles and institutions, and they may even favour authoritarian leaders who will actually get things done (Adler). This foreshadows an undoing of democracy, and so we must restore its legitimacy for moderates. It is well known in psychology that negative emotions, such as frustration and resentment, are apt to emerge when a subject's expectations have been repeatedly quashed or do not match their reality. Maslow describes a political radical as one who is "bitter, disappointed, or frustrated" (298), and likely "[doubts] the realness of honesty, of kindness, of generosity, of affection" (x). He furthermore argues that these negative emotions can be found in those who "have been subjected to a long line of disappointments" (143). As we have seen with recent questionable outcomes in many Western democracies, this phenomenon may be manifesting itself at the macro-societal level when promises have gone unfulfilled for too long. By empowering and harnessing the voices of moderate voters who have tended to be less engaged, we can revive their sense of political efficacy and build a more productive democracy. I will argue that mass *parrhesia* can foster more inclusive political engagement across the entire political spectrum, and via modern information technology it is more likely to incorporate truth into political will.

Ultimately, our hopes for what the Internet was supposed to herald, granting us each access to the *agora* and a place in the public sphere, are discordant with the lived experience of most citizens. The disconnect between what we expected and the democratic opportunities we actually have is unsustainable in societies that boast being democratic. A practical remedy is required for the twenty-first century, and it is achievable in Canada.

CHAPTER 2 – Causes and Consequences

In the previous section I summarized some of the troubling effects of the Internet *agora*. Chiefly, there has been an erosion of trust in institutions which has contributed to the siloing of public discourse into echo chambers. This leads to polarized antagonism which, coupled with outmoded political processes, feeds a decline in political efficacy. These phenomena were manifested during 2016, in the outcome of the referendum regarding the British exit from the European Union (Brexit) and in the United States election of President Trump. Both of these outcomes reflect a discernible trend towards populism and a rejection of the status quo political structure.

Both results were a defeat for the liberal elite which had dominated politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Nationalism triumphed over globalism in a bad year for international bodies. Warnings by the IMF and OECD against Brexit were ignored as voters seemed to [convey] that we “have had enough of experts”. The EU was shaken by the decision by its second largest economy to leave. The future of NATO and international trade deals were called into question by Trump’s victory (Grice).

In the case of Brexit, of the 72.2% of eligible voters who cast a ballot, 51.9% voted to withdraw from the EU, verses 48.1% who preferred to remain (The Electoral Commission). This close outcome evidences the polarization in Britain regarding the country’s conception of what is good and important for that society. On one hand, diversity is upheld as an economic driver and an imperative to global unity, and on the other, migrants are coming to sap the country’s wealth and to dilute its traditional identity.

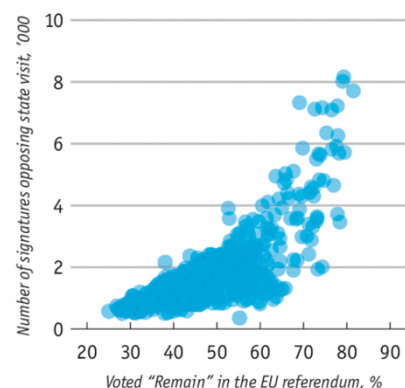
The 2016 US presidential election yielded the lowest voter turnout in 20 years, with 55.4% of eligible voters casting a ballot. 46.4% of those voters favoured Trump with 48.5% opting for Clinton (CNN), but Trump won due to Electoral College rules and the composition of

state delegates. The domains of polarization in the US include healthcare, the environment, immigration, welfare, taxation, criminal justice, education, public safety regulations, and so on.

Although Brexit and Trump were each endorsed by their own distinct populations of electors, an interesting study exposed a correlation regarding the respective views held. Ahead of a planned state visit to the UK by President Trump in early 2017, an e-petition was circulated demanding the following: “Donald Trump should be allowed to enter the UK in his capacity as head of the US Government, but he should not be invited to make an official State Visit because it would cause embarrassment to Her Majesty the Queen” (UK Government and Parliament). The

FIGURE 1:

E-petition against the American president, Donald Trump, making a state visit
By parliamentary constituency, January 30th 2017



Sources: House of Commons; *The Economist*

1.8 million signatories of the petition—who opposed Trump’s visit—were more likely to have been supporters of the *Remain* side, as depicted by the graph (The Economist “What Brexit and Donald Trump have in common”). While this is an imperfect measure of the specific views held by each set of electors, it does reflect a noteworthy correlation that exposes a largely urban/rural divide.

Effectively, the Brexit and Trump phenomena are related at least insofar as they are espoused by a similar demographic. The BBC highlighted some other key similarities, finding that older, less educated, white voters favoured Brexit and Trump (Curtice). By extension, there is an apparent connection between the underlying motivations that led to these outcomes. In this section I shall describe the likely sentiments behind these populist impulses.

In discussing populism, I draw on Laclau’s work where he describes it as an inextricable component of politics. But populist manifestations are dangerous insofar as a “section within the

community will present itself as the expression and representation of the community as a whole” (45), positioned as authentic in opposition to an established other which is perceived as corrupt or corrupting (elites, immigrants). Populism emerges when society is dichotomized across a frontier (often class) and when there is a chain of related, unfulfilled political demands (39). This is related to an erosion of political efficacy, as I described above. While Laclau posits that this can be an emancipatory force for change of the status quo, Brexit and Trump also represent outcomes that are in stark opposition to liberalizing trends. Populism, while inherently democratic, is often illiberal.

We must be mindful not to over-simplify the underlying causes for this rejection of post-nationalist and globalizing liberal trends, but two over-arching themes tend to prevail as key motivators: the economic and the cultural.

Economic Causes

From an economic perspective, it is often argued that income inequality and a struggling working class have fomented a political backlash against the longstanding liberal order. A piece in *Foreign Affairs* asserts, “Since the early 1980s, the effects of a neoliberal economic agenda have eroded the social contract that had previously ensured crucial political support for the order. Many middle- and working-class voters in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere have come to believe—with a good deal of justification—that the system is rigged.” The article goes on:

The Brexit and Trump phenomena reflect a breakdown in the social contract at the core of liberal democracy: those who do well in a market-based society promise to make sure that those disadvantaged by market forces do not fall too far behind. But fall behind they have. Between 1974 and 2015, the real median household income for Americans without high school diplomas fell by almost 20 percent. And even those with high school diplomas, but without any college education, saw their real median household income

plummet by 24 percent. On the other hand, those with college degrees saw their incomes and wealth expand (Colgan and Keohane).

Jonathan Schlefer, a senior researcher at the Harvard Business School, contends that the promises of market forces to lift all boats, what he refers to as the *parable of the market*, has been unacceptable for most citizens. With all its simplistic, common-sense principles, it has been “dangerously alluring” but:

It demands policies that strive for a utopian future—a future we can never approach because it lacks any reality—and meanwhile delivers disaster. Economies are so complex that we do not know much about them, but we know at least one thing. From the late-nineteenth to the late-twentieth centuries, the best economic minds tried to make the market parable work and failed by their own criteria. It does not work. Without quite knowing why, populists on left and right, sometimes reactionary, sometimes quixotic, demand that society step in to create a fairer economy (Schlefer).

The 2014 English release of economist Thomas Piketty’s bestselling book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, highlighted the underlying systemic issues that inevitably generate income inequality. He argued that the rate of return on capital, which is paid out to the owners of the means of production, is greater than the rate of overall economic growth, which is enjoyed by workers in the general public. His central thesis is that this divergence leads to a further concentration of wealth in the hands of the already-wealthy owners of capital. The book goes on to caution that social and economic instability will result if this effect is not counteracted by means of policy intervention.

In essence, the liberal free-market policies that have been a cornerstone of modern Western democracies have generally yielded increasing income inequality, with wealth concentrating disproportionately in the hands of the elites. This was corroborated in a 2015 IMF study which found that “Widening income inequality is the defining challenge of our time. In

advanced economies, the gap between the rich and poor is at its highest level in decades” (Dabla-Norris, Kochhar and Suphaphiphat 4). Specifically, “Measures of inequality based on Gini coefficients of gross and net incomes have increased substantially since 1990 in most of the developed world” (10). The report summarizes the reason for concern about income inequality as follows:

Equality, like fairness, is an important value in most societies. Irrespective of ideology, culture, and religion, people care about inequality. Inequality can be a signal of lack of income mobility and opportunity—a reflection of persistent disadvantage for particular segments of the society. Widening inequality also has significant implications for growth and macroeconomic stability, it can concentrate political and decision making power in the hands of a few, lead to a suboptimal use of human resources, cause investment-reducing political and economic instability, and raise crisis risk (5).

From the calculating perspective of this IMF report, their concerns about political instability and crisis are rooted in “investment-reduction”. I am here in this work, of course, concerned about the ramifications of political instability and crisis more broadly, and for their own sake.

As I have just described above, the fact of increasing economic inequality is well established. It has also been exacerbated by an increasingly globalized economy that moves jobs to where they can be performed at the lowest cost, leaving many unskilled workers in the US and UK (and elsewhere in the West) unemployed. Another *Economist* article outlined this staple principle: “Economic theory predicts that trade, though often good for average incomes, will squeeze the pay of those workers whose skills are relatively abundant overseas.” The data bears out that, “The sharp decline in American manufacturing employment began in 2000, just as Chinese imports took off” and that about one million manufacturing jobs were lost to China through to 2011 (The Economist “Trade, at what price?”).

It is thus reasonable to conclude that the results of Brexit and Trump are, at least in part, manifestations of and popular reactions to this phenomenon. Trump was especially popular in rural areas that have most been affected by job losses and lower economic growth, and where residents are likely to earn less and be less educated (Porter). Likewise, in the UK the strongest apparent demographic factor amongst those who voted to leave was having a lower average level of education (McGill). A study based at the London School of Economics and Political Science concluded that, “Whilst many factors will have contributed to the Brexit vote, there is some sense in the phrase follow the money... The EU referendum has brought deep divisions in Britain to the surface—it appears economic inequality and its accompanying despondent effects on democracy were some of those” (Dorling, Stuart and Stubbs).

While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions of causation based on the correlations cited above, there is compelling evidence that economic factors, especially income inequality, may have contributed to Brexit and Trump. That is to say, those who have less economic power were at least partially motivated to cast a vote of dissatisfaction against the established economic system. This reinforces my prior assertion that public frustration, rooted in a lack of political efficacy, can cause a surge in populist sentiment and lead to unexpected political outcomes that run contrary to the traditional, establishment order.

Cultural Causes

From a cultural perspective, there exists an undeniable fear among some segments of the population that immigrants and refugees are diluting the traditional makeup of their society. Within communities whose racial compositions have shifted rapidly over recent decades, some are struggling to understand and retain a sense of what it means to be British or American. Their social imaginary does not include ‘those foreigners’. This is a classic friction between liberalism

and democracy, as described by Mouffe in her book *The Democratic Paradox*, whereby idealized principles of equality and freedom, espoused by elites in particular, may nevertheless be rejected by a majority of citizens. This internal conflict is manifested especially now in a time of economic destabilization, terrorist threat, and refugee migration. Moreover, it feeds the ideological rift and amplifies political antagonism, as we have seen within the discourse around Brexit and Trump.

An in-depth study at Harvard University of the views of Tea Party members during the Obama presidency found that racial and ethnic stereotypes underpinned many policy positions. While ‘teapartiers’ espoused opposition to welfare state ‘handouts’ and deep distrust of ‘tax-and-spend-liberals’, the core concern was that ‘freeloaders’ and ‘underserving’ groups (immigrants and minorities) were benefiting from these policies. The study concluded that, “More broadly, Tea Party concerns exist within the context of anxieties about racial, ethnic, and generational changes in American society” (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin).

Likewise, in the UK a model was conceived by David Goodhart, in his book *The Road to Somewhere*, to explain the backlash to cultural changes that led to Brexit. In it, he categorizes two key groups of people into “values tribes” of Somewheres (those who tend to be conservative, come from and identify strongly with a small or rural community), and Anywheres (those who are socially liberal, often well educated, and metropolitan). Overwhelmingly, Somewheres expressed discomfort with the changing face of their country. Goodhart used survey data to categorize British citizens into the two camps (or as Inbetweeners), and the results of Somewhere/Anywhere overlapped well with those who voted respectively to Leave/Remain in Brexit.

Fareed Zakaria also argues that the issue of immigration specifically was contentious to Brits and Americans who voted for Brexit and Trump. He highlights a correlation between recent populist tendencies in the West with immigration, noting the absence of both populism and immigration in Japan as a counter-example. “Immigration is an explosive issue on which populists are united among themselves and opposed to their elite antagonists”. Conceding that Canada is an exception to this rule, he states that “Trump’s political genius was to realize that many Republican voters were unmoved by the standard party gospel of free trade, low taxes, deregulation, and entitlement reform but would respond well to a different appeal based on cultural fears and nationalist sentiment”. He goes on to note that immigration rates into Europe are historically high and that the percentage of foreign-born Americans has jumped from 5% in 1970 to 14% today. As evidenced by the outcomes of Brexit and Trump, many people are feeling threatened by this changing cultural landscape. “Immigration is the final frontier of globalization. It is the most intrusive and disruptive because as a result of it, people are dealing not with objects or abstractions; instead, they come face-to-face with other human beings, ones who look, sound, and feel different. And this can give rise to fear, racism, and xenophobia” (Zakaria).

While ‘racism’ may seem like a strong word, a study based on Google search data indicates that it may indeed be an appropriate descriptor for this phenomenon. Economist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, and author of *Everybody Lies*, mined Google Trends during the 2016 Republican primaries to try to determine what people were *really* thinking. By relying on Google search data as opposed to conventional polls or surveys, Stephens-Davidowitz was able gain insight into the personal musings and interests of web surfers. When most people still doubted that Trump could win the primaries, let alone the election, trends in Google searches revealed widespread racism among the American electorate. “Searches containing racist epithets and

jokes were spiking across the country during Trump’s primary run, and not merely in the South but in upstate New York, Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio, rural Illinois, West Virginia, and industrial Michigan”. As far back as 2008 during Obama’s run for the White House, Stephens-Davidowitz found that a shocking number of Google searches about Obama contained the n-word or ‘KKK’. He asserts that his methodology revealed that “There was a darkness and hatred that was hidden from traditional sources” (Illing).

This compelling quantitative analysis highlights the disconnect between what people feel they could say publicly, and what they actually believe. It also lends credence to my previous contention that fringe ideas can gain traction by finding resonance online as they could not before. These views, when legitimized within an online echo chamber, can have real-world consequences as we saw for example in August 2017 at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville where white nationalists openly marched with torches chanting, “the Jews will not replace us”, among other chants that would have been otherwise unimaginable in the 2000s. The next day, infamously, a counter-protester was struck and killed by a car driven by a neo-Nazi. Similarly, online ‘incel’ culture has recently spurred violent attacks such as the van attack on Yonge Street in Toronto in April 2018.

Going back to the fall of the Soviet Union may further illuminate a cause for the shift in social cohesion in the West. With the Cold War ‘ideological other’ defeated, a new ‘cultural other’ was fashioned out of the trope of invading Islamic terrorists and immigrants stealing jobs. Previously the objects of the colonial powers, general globalizing trends and increased wealth have given non-Western cultures increasing influence on global affairs. This phenomenon was predicted in the 1993 article and subsequent book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, which argued that “With the end of the Cold War, international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its

centerpiece becomes the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations” (Huntington). Whereas the Soviet ‘other’ necessitated multinational cooperation on the part of liberalized states, it appears as though we might best protect ourselves from the new ‘cultural others’ via protectionist policies.

During the Cold War, “the perceived Soviet threat generated a strong shared sense of attachment not only to Washington’s allies but also to multilateral institutions.” Whereas, the “end of the Cold War generated particular political difficulties for the Republican Party, which had long been a bastion of anticommunism. With the Soviets gone, Washington elites gradually replaced Communists as the Republicans’ bogeymen. Trumpism is the logical extension of that development” (Colgan and Keohane). Protectionism makes more sense when we understand that those who voted for it have had their collective fear actively stoked by the notion of emerging ‘others’ who are coming to change the American Way or worse, to commit violent acts.

From a cultural perspective we see that an erosion of social cohesion, coupled with a discomfort of shifting racial and ethnic compositions within a country, can contribute to political backlash. Essentially, strong views about immigration were not being heeded by the liberal political class and enough voters seized the opportunity to exert their will via Brexit and Trump, to override the status quo.

The Problem of Single-Issue Motivators

A study based at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government assessed the two general theories I describe above to explain the recent rise in overall populism in the West. It dubs them the ‘economic insecurity thesis’ and the ‘cultural backlash thesis’. The study echoes my evaluation, finding “overwhelming evidence of powerful trends toward greater income and wealth inequality in the West, based on the rise of the knowledge economy, technological

automation, and the collapse of manufacturing industry, global flows of labor, goods, peoples, and capital.” While the study concedes that these economic factors cannot be dismissed and did play some role in buoying populist sentiments, it attributes an overall greater weight and more consistent evidence in support of the ‘cultural backlash thesis’, concluding:

The evidence examined in this study suggests that the rise of populist parties reflects, above all, a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies. Long-term processes of generational change during the late twentieth century have catalyzed culture wars, for these changes are particularly alarming to the less educated and older groups in these countries. It is not an either/or story, for the two sets of changes may reinforce each other in part—but the evidence in this study suggests that it would be a mistake to attribute the rise of populism directly to economic inequality alone. Psychological factors seem to play a more important role. Older birth cohorts and less-educated groups support populist parties and leaders that defend traditional cultural values and emphasize nationalistic and xenophobia appeals, rejecting outsiders, and upholding old-fashioned gender roles. Populists support charismatic leaders, reflecting a deep mistrust of the ‘establishment’ and mainstream parties who are led nowadays by educated elites with progressive cultural views on moral issues (Inglehart and Norris).

These progressive liberals and educated elites failed to adequately represent the public will, as was their democratic duty. Conservative pundit Ann Coulter underscores the supremacy of immigration as a winning issue for the Republican Party: “Without immigration as the GOP’s lodestar, every election will be a rerun of the Tea Party from 2010 to 2012, when Republicans lost Senate seat after Senate seat, entirely in unforced errors.” She goes on: “During the campaign, every time Trump came out with a new proposal on immigration, other Republicans would hysterically denounce him – and then he’d soar in the polls” (Coulter). Having ignored the key cultural factor that motivated their electors, traditional establishment authority was overridden by populist movements. As Fareed Zakaria highlights: “countries where mainstream

politicians have failed to heed or address citizens' concerns have seen rising populism driven by political entrepreneurs fanning fear and latent prejudice" (Zakaria).

Although I have focussed primarily on Brexit and Trump in the USA and UK respectively, this phenomenon is endemic in other Western countries as well, as summarized in Foreign Affairs:

the National Front leader Marine Le Pen was a serious contender in France's presidential election; in the run-up to the Dutch parliamentary elections in March, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom was long in the lead; and last year, Norbert Hofer of the far-right Freedom Party came very close to winning Austria's presidency. Anti-immigrant populists have also achieved breakthroughs in countries where they had previously failed to gain traction, notably Germany and Sweden, where the Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats, respectively, have made big electoral gains (Brubaker).

The Italian election outcome of March 2018 is yet another example of this populist surge. The Five Star Movement, which was founded by comedian Beppe Grillo as a protest party in 2009, garnered the largest proportion of any single party with 32% of votes. This party has had particular appeal in the south of Italy where many feel disconnected and disenfranchised by the northern establishment. Notably, the Five Star Movement has garnered some of its support by promoting the notion of a transparent political system with direct, Internet-based consultation and participation. Overall, Five Star, coupled with support for the right-wing coalition comprised of *Lega*, *Forza Italia*, and *Fratelli d'Italia*, nationalist, anti-Europeanist, and anti-establishment parties won two-thirds of all votes cast (Mazzini).

Sasha Polakow-Suransky's recent book, *Go Back to Where You Came From*, investigates the sentiments of citizens in several Western democracies by means of over more than 100 interviews. The book argues that public concern over immigration, coupled with the feeling that liberal elites are dismissing those concerns, is driving this right-wing populism that has the

potential for increasingly violent fallout. He taps into the nostalgia that arouses white voters and is critical of the unreserved support for multiculturalism that has galvanized populists. While remaining supportive of liberal immigration policies, he proposes moderate corrections such as granting due refuge to displaced people, but not necessarily placing refugees on a path to permanent settlement. He furthermore expresses hope that economic issues can also be important political motivators, as Bernie Sanders demonstrated in the Democratic primary leading up to the 2016 election. What resonates clearly to me in the work, without being a principal point of focus for Polakow-Suransky, is the democratic deficit that is making so many voters feel so very frustrated.

As a result, we are witnessing an increasing willingness by Western, liberalized citizens to vote for political parties and leaders who espouse policies regarding immigration that run counter to traditional liberal values. What many voters came to the polls for was to express a desire for less immigration. What they all got was hateful rhetoric and a bundle of less-liberal policies that came packaged with promises to curb immigration. In the United States for example, they got an anti-immigration president, but he came with trade protectionism, disengagement from global environmental goals, and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. As discussed above, what really motivated and animated voters was the immigration, but it all came packaged together.

Problematically, politics is centred around political parties with integrated platforms. The old-fashioned ballot system with one-person-one-vote every few years does not permit certain key issues to be disentangled from the core party ideology. When voters are faced with a complicated set of issues, they are forced to select the bundle that they perceive suits them best at

election time. It is no wonder that many will cleave to the one that resonates most strongly, even when it is based on a single issue. Most recently, immigration has been that issue.

The notable consequences which I have outlined so far are Brexit and Trump, the options that came bundled with anti-immigration policies. We need a way to articulate the overall public will quantitatively with respect to deeply held concerns, and modern technology makes this possible today. In Chapter 4 I will argue for a new way of supplementing traditional voting to allow greater granularity regarding certain issues that may be of particular importance to electors.

Democratic Decay

Thus far I have shown that economic, but especially cultural factors, encapsulate the most tangible explanations for the unanticipated outcomes of Brexit and Trump. These issues have been, and continue to be, discussed extensively by pundits and academics alike. Solutions to socio-economic problems are incredibly complex, as Trump discovered when addressing the debate on healthcare reform: “Nobody knew healthcare could be so complicated” (Liptak). Reasonable people may disagree on the best course to take.

Likewise, regarding cultural issues, traditionalists ought not be dismissed outright as fascists for feeling besieged, as some do, by the influx of immigrants who are literally changing the faces in their communities. Again, reasonable people can disagree about their country’s immigration policy. But when a single issue such as this one dominates the public consciousness, given the current democratic system, other bundled policies also gained traction. This result, seeded largely by one central issue, reflects a problem with our democracy.

In this section I will orient my analysis towards other systemic factors that contributed to such vigorous rebukes of the political establishment, particularly in the UK and US. Different

voters in a diverse society will inevitably disagree on specific issues, but such wholesale rejections as occurred with Brexit, Trump, and elsewhere in Europe, are rooted at least in part by a system that is unsatisfactory for many people.

Elections are a vital instrument available to citizens to articulate their wishes and to hold politicians accountable. Aside from elections, the three other modes of citizen engagement required in a democracy are: political organizations, social organizations, and direct participation. (World Bank Group 225). Because of the limitations associated with collective modes of engagement such as these, each one must be exercised robustly in a healthy democracy so as to complement the others. Traditional elections in representative democracies, during the last few centuries and essentially unchanged since, today are failing to yield the collaborative and constructive liberal outcomes that we, along with thinkers such as Habermas, Rawls, and Popper, would hope for. Results such as Brexit and Trump indicate that there is indeed a problem.

In Chapter 1 I discussed the negative manifestations of social organization in the Internet *agorae*, and problems with the siloing of the public sphere. Modern online social movements have not been an overall force for good in Western democracies, but rather have had a polarizing effect on public opinion. I also discussed how active participation in political organizations is more likely by those most active voters on the far left and far right. With respect to direct participation as political candidates or engaging with elected officials, this is again limited to the most politically inspired and motivated citizens.

In the previous section I argued that single issues, such as immigration most recently, can motivate voters to cast ballots for leaders, parties, or policies that come bundled with that one

issue, regardless of the consequences of the other bundled policies, and even if they run contrary to their own overall interests.

Considering the aforementioned, along with the steady decline of worldwide voter participation rates, we see symptoms of a system in decay. The 2017 World Development Report reflects a reduction in voter turnout over the last 70 years, despite the fact that the overall prevalence of democratic elections has actually increased substantially worldwide. An especially notable drop in electoral participation took place starting in the late 1980s and over the last 30 years the turnout rate in worldwide national legislative elections has dropped from the mid-70% range to the mid-60% range (World Bank Group 228).

The World Bank report, citing various studies, notes that: “The average voter may not have the information required to properly assess government performance and clearly assign blame” based on the current situation (227). Furthermore, “the average citizen has little incentive to study complex political issues, engaging in what public choice theorists call ‘rational ignorance’” (229) whereby citizens may hone in on certain single issues, as I’ve discussed. Each of these factors, taken together, can contribute to outcomes such as Brexit and Trump.

Even more problematic, citizens who are most engaged are often ideologically motivated and may vote for policies that have been empirically proven to be wrong (229). This assertion from the World Bank report is corroborated by 2017 Pew Research study in the USA which found that, “The most deeply partisan and ideological groups [identified in the study], Solid Liberals and Core Conservatives, also are the most likely to vote, to pay attention to politics and to be invested in the outcome of the 2018 congressional elections.” The study also found that these groups are most likely to donate money to political causes and parties, to contact elected officials, and to discuss politics with others. Likewise, it found that “political engagement is

lowest among some of the groups with the most mixed political values.” Quantitatively speaking, 59% of the general public said they “follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time,” compared to 82% among Solid Liberals and 80% among Core Conservatives. This is contrasted by 43% of the most centrist electors who regularly follow government and public affairs (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The most ardent political participants, dangerously those most on the fringes, are the most likely to engage in social movements, political organizations, and direct participation, coalescing around those views. Furthermore, they are then the most likely to actually vote for candidates and outcomes that represent their opinions and ideologies, as materialized via Brexit and Trump. The passion and vitriol at the fringes may be a disincentive for more moderate voters to engage constructively to register their own views and wishes. Those most willing and able to compromise are the least involved in the political process.

Another systemic factor that contributed to these illiberal trends is the perception of citizens across the political spectrum, perhaps especially those in the centre, that they cannot effect any real change. The drop in voter participation described above reflects this. The political process remains the way it has always been and is baked in as a means of checking the power of the political order on a periodic basis. This is a tremendously powerful idea and its origins in Britain during the middle ages were pivotal in ushering in modern conceptions. But this old-fashioned system is coarse and woefully imprecise, and it fails to represent and legitimise the will of electors substantively between elections. And when elections do come around periodically, they are often essentially binary, such as with Brexit and Trump.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were each widely regarded as unfavourable options in the US presidential election of 2016. When a supposedly democratic system yields this sort of

false dichotomy, depriving voters of any palatable choice, it is no surprise that electors feel frustrated. Thus, while immigration with doubtlessly a motivator for many, another contributor to these outcomes was that other voters were not expressing a substantive preference but were rather registering their rejection of the system to which they are beholden. This is reflected in a September 2016 Gallup poll that found that the top rationale for US voters' choice of candidate was opposition to the other candidate (Saad). The electoral process did not furnish desirable options and so electors chose their least undesirable, but this is not fulfilling the promise of a robust democracy.

Brazil's October 2018 election yielded yet another example of a right-wing populist ruler. President Jair Bolsonaro leads the world's fifth most populous democracy even though he openly advocated for violence to quell dissent and has proudly expressed sexually disparaging and racist sentiments (Charner). Reacting to the results, American journalist, long-time Brazil resident, and Portuguese-speaker Glenn Greenwald remarked that Bolsonaro had to garner a broad base of support to win with 55% of the vote, and that working-class, regular people voted for him despite his rhetoric "out of desperation and hopelessness, and a belief that the ruling class has become so detached from their concerns." He went on to warn that there is a lesson for Western democracies, that: "When the establishment class fails a huge portion of the population for enough time...[voters] will decide that it is the ruling class that is their enemy and they will run into the arms of anybody who they perceive to be its enemy" (Greenwald). He argues that policies conceived and upheld by elites need to change, or worse political outcomes will lie ahead. In Brazil, like in so many other democracies recently, a frustrated electorate that wanted change felt that its best option was to tear down the status quo establishment.

We stand idly by, pointing fingers and blaming the masses, at our peril.

Eroding Efficacy

Political efficacy, sometimes referred to as ‘popular efficacy’ or ‘democratic efficacy’, can be sub-categorized as either internal or external. Internal efficacy refers to a citizen’s self-confidence to participate competently in the political process, either as an elector or as an elected official. External efficacy refers to the perception of citizens that their government will respond according to their wishes, demands, and interests. These definitions of political efficacy go back as far as the 1950s and are summarized nicely with further citations in a recent article in the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (de Zúñiga, Diehl and & Ardévol-Abreu).

Brexit and Trump each represented an opportunity for citizens to override the status quo and assert their ultimate political power over the establishment. These voters lacked a sense of external political efficacy, doubting that their government would respond according to their wishes, particularly regarding immigration. When given the opportunity to overrule or displace the political elites, understandably many chose to take the fleeting chance. What we see is that the electors’ choices in these cases did not necessarily reflect an affirmation, but rather a repudiation of the apparently inexorable course chosen for us by the elites. My argument here is that Brexit and Trump voters were partly swayed by their lack of political efficacy in a democratic system that does not respond adequately to their wishes.

They did not feel able to influence political change via a more measured approach, and this is a systemic failing. Those economic and cultural drivers I examined above tipped the scales against an establishment that did not take heed of them. Brexit and Trump represented a revolt against the current political order that would not, and arguably still does not, provide meaningful opportunities for change. Glenn Greenwald expressed this concern, as I summarized at the end of

the last section. While this lack of political efficacy is difficult to quantify, scholars such as Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Noam Chomsky, echo this outlook:

Charles Taylor argues that people who lack the power to effect real changes in their own interests will be provoked into action: “for non-elites who have a clear perception of the ways in which their interests are not being served, this efficacy can only take the form of collective action that can secure redress” (Taylor 129). This eroding political efficacy and reduction in political engagement by successive generations is attributed by Taylor to “the development of a more and more elite-controlled democracy, more and more dominated by money, with media that more and more distort public debate” (132). Here, Taylor also alludes to the problem of truth that concerned Foucault, whereby there is a distortion of debate in the public sphere.

In an interview with *New Statesman* in 2016, Michael Sandel asserted that, “There is a widespread frustration with politics, with politicians and with established political parties.... [P]eople feel less and less in control of the forces that govern their lives. And the project of democratic self-government seems to be slipping from our grasp. This accounts for the rise of anti-establishment political movements and parties throughout Europe and in the US” (Sandel). Sandel’s expression of concern regarding self-government demands action.

Noam Chomsky, a long-time critic of neoliberalism, contends that the ultimate failure of these policies has come home to roost via Brexit and Trump. “These programs have improved corporate profit, kept wages stagnant, and highly concentrated wealth and power.” He argues that many average working folks feel left behind, as though government has been unjustly propping up undeserving people, such as immigrants and refugees, at their expense. In the 2017 interview he goes on to lament that EU elections “have almost no implications for policy” and that money in politics has grown so pervasive that “it’s basically one dollar, one vote, and one of the

reactions is just anger at everything” (Chomsky, Palmer and Yarrow). Once again, this leading academic identifies shortcomings with the way democracy is working for ordinary voters as a key contributor to outcomes such as Brexit and Trump.

Marxian economist Richard Wolff, when asked during a radio interview if Trump was “like an [American] version of Brexit”, expresses the sentiment poignantly in following diatribe:

I think that you have a very similar set of circumstances. You have 30 years now of capitalism, basically deciding that it doesn't need or doesn't want the workers that it had and had cultivated for 200 years in Western Europe, North America, and Japan. That it can go now to much cheaper places in China, India, Brazil, and so on. That it can replace workers with machines, computers, robots, what have you, and not to worry about any of the consequences. Keep telling itself that all of this was a wonderful expansion of globalization and one world coming together, and efficiency. And the truth of it was, it was profitable for maybe five percent of the people, and it was a disaster for most of the rest. And [the people] kept thinking it might [come to] pass. They kept believing, or hoping, that what they were being told was true. But when it finally became clear, and this is particularly after the crash of 2008, when it became clear that the economic vision of the future was grim, they began to get angry and bitter, and have their emotions catch up with what the last 30 years really did to them. And so, when they saw the establishment in England telling them why they ought to stay in Europe, their reaction was to say, “whatever it is you leaders are telling us, we're going to do something else; we're going to vote against you.” I don't think the British people care that much in or out of Brexit or Europe, these are secondary issues. This was their first chance to, if you allow me, give their middle finger to the establishment in Great Britain and they weren't going to miss a chance. And frankly, I think an awful lot of Americans feel pretty much the same way. This election gave them, for the first time in many years, a really wonderful opportunity to teach the people who run this society how they feel. For as long as Bernie was in it, you could have Democrats do that. When they shut him down there was only one place left to go to express your anger, and your bitterness, and your sense of betrayal, and that was to vote for Donald Trump. I don't think they support his policies particularly any more than the British people supported being in or out of Europe. That issue faded into the background. They wanted to say they're mad; they want something to

change, and Mrs. Clinton represented same old same old, more of the same thing and therefore they went with the new (Wolff).

I think that this plausibly conveys the thinking of many average voters: “let’s see what happens if I put the ‘x’ here; probably nothing can change anyway.” And here we are. The system must be modernized so that voters have confidence that they can effect change in more moderate increments regarding issues that truly matter to them (even when an outcome might be illiberal, such as regarding immigration).

John Dewey upholds the most basic function of democracy as identifying social woes, summarized succinctly in *The Public and Its Problems*: “the strongest point to be made in behalf of even such rudimentary political forms as democracy has attained, popular voting, majority rule and so on, is that to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which concerns social needs and troubles” (Dewey 207). Brexit and Trump were an expression of these woes, and corrective measures need to be made to democracy itself.

Among the myriad factors which contributed to these outcomes, there are some systemic issues which could be ameliorated to reduce the risk of such results. So far I have outlined the following specific systemic factors that are problematic:

- Polarization of views at the edges of the political spectrum;
- Loss of faith in the system and lack of engagement by more moderate participants;
- Single issues can hijack voter participation; and
- Deficiency of external political efficacy.

A 2006 study out of Cambridge University examined the decline in democratic engagement and found that indeed, “forms of engagement required for a participatory democracy to thrive are in need of attention” (Kahne and Westheimer). In Chapter 4 I will posit how we might update these forms of engagement via disruptive technology.

Ship of State Adrift

Recalling Plato's allegory of the ship of state, he proposed that only philosopher kings are fit to navigate the state, and that the quarrelsome common sailors ought not be chosen to make selfless, judicious decisions. Adapting this within a representative democracy, we have been electing captains to steer our ship in modern Western democracies, but no matter whom we appointed the course has perpetually been steered towards globalization and an economic policy that enriches the elites. There have not been many viable options in our largely binary elections to deviate from this course, until the apparent promises of Brexit and Trump in the UK and US.

Thinking of that large wooden wheel used to steer the ship, it seemed as though no matter what we selected at the ballot box, the helm would not respond; no matter whom we put there, the captain-of-the-term maintained a heading towards status quo globalization. But voters in recent elections have been registering some unconventional choices. As Taylor, Sandel, Chomsky, and others have posited, there is an underlying frustration that is steering our ship into dangerous waters. In an attempt to prove that the helm still works, many are opting for an anti-elitist, anti-establishment choice (Brexit/Trump). As it turns out, the helm does still work, but citizens must be able to make more meaningful course corrections without changing the heading altogether.

The challenge of 'steering' our democracy by proxy is of course supposed to be a feature and not a bug. It is designed to protect our 'ship' from the people's momentary whims and fearful overreactions. It was also the best, most practical implementation available at the time it was conceived. But in a world where material choices appear to be on display everywhere—a mere click or tap away—today's political process is alienating, discordant and woefully unsatisfactory. Its apparent inefficiency compounds our frustration with the current iteration of

representative democracy. This raises the question: how much longer can we feasibly retain this old-fashioned system?

Further aggravating the circumstances, at the height of public concerns about immigration, labour market adjustments, and income inequality, the Trump and the Leave campaigns incited strong emotions, or *pathos*, in their electors. The Brexit campaign implored Brits, “Let’s Take Back Control” while Trump promised to, “Make America Great Again.” These slogans encapsulate the emotional appeal for those who feel they lack control and have lost esteem. At the same time, the Clinton and the Remain campaigns, backed by experts and establishment elites who have failed to deliver the neoliberal panacea for our generation, lacked credibility, or *ethos*, in the eyes of voters. Problematically, the argumentation, or *logos*, transpired in a relativistic fashion, to suit our preconceptions within our own *agora* of likeminded citizens. Therein, the discourse can be divorced from the truth and no one partaking in it perceives their own shroud of ideology.

It is imperative that truth be a guiding star for our ship of state. We may each find differences in the sky, as surely some will see gods while others see galaxies, but we must all be able to identify the same shimmering points by which to navigate together.

In this chapter I described the problem. In the next, in search of a solution, I shall examine Foucault’s *Fearless Speech* and his problematization of truth. In chapter 4 I shall describe a concept that we may apply in practice to alleviate some of these problems.

CHAPTER 3 – Parrhesia and the Internet Agora

Thus far I have described some of the problems with the state of our Western democracies. I especially focussed on the underlying causes for the outcomes of Brexit and Trump as indicators of a system in decay and I considered how the Internet is fostering antagonistic discourse and polarization. In this Chapter I shall employ Foucault's conception of *parrhesia* to elucidate some of the key elements that are missing in our political discourse today. Then in the next Chapter I shall utilize those elements to conceive of a practical solution for us to modernize our democracy in Canada, with a view to mitigating the risk of outcomes such as Brexit or Trump.

Foucault's *parrhesia* is in many ways reminiscent of the type of political rhetoric we hear in the media and from pundits today. The elements of *parrhesia* he proposed include frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. He posits that in ancient times, a person who exercises *parrhesia* "uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (20).

In contrast, we see that today's Internet-based discourses are rife with struggles of persuasion and the encroachment of 'alternative facts'. Death and exile are not instruments available to a modern liberal state but anonymity can be a mask for online bullies who spout death and rape threats, and their lack of accountability for generating danger is exasperating. Formidable criticism is diluted within self-affirming echo chambers, and entrenched self-interests displace moral duty under capitalism. It is no wonder that many citizens are left hopelessly confused and apathetic. Unable to isolate the noise within, the *agora* no longer fosters the *parrhesia* conceived of by Foucault that is so vital to a vibrant democracy.

Foucault goes on to describe the role of *parrhesia* in monarchies, where the king's advisors exercise it on behalf of "the silent majority" (23). In the context of modern representative democracies, we might extend this notion and suppose that members of parliament or senators ought to exercise *parrhesia* to express the will of the people to the head of state and the executive branch. That is in fact precisely what is designed to happen on the floor of parliament in a Westminster system, where members must convey the interests of their constituents, ideally applying *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

J.S. Mill upheld that this sort of arrangement embodies an ideal government, where power ought to be "vested in the entire aggregate of the community; each citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being, at least occasionally, called on to take an actual part in the government" (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* 53). He emphasized that a legislature must be "an organ for popular demands" (106) where all sorts of views and opinions are openly debated, and as such the best ideas will prevail. Mill imagined that the most effective representatives, who best convey the interests of their constituents in pursuit of the common good, would retain democratic support. As I discussed in previous chapters, this idealized process is dysfunctional in the Internet age.

The most fervent voices on the fringes are employing the greatest passion to garner the most attention from the media and from their representatives. At the same time, moderates at the centre are likely to be less engaged (Pew Research Center, 2017). As such, the silent majority is, through their silence, failing to utilize the power of their numbers and missing the potential to inspire constructive *parrhesia*.

In chapter 2 of *Fearless Speech*, Foucault reviews the connotations carried by the word *parrhesia* in Greek literature (27-74). It is consistently reflected therein that those who exercise

parrhesia are free and are therefore not slaves. We also see that a ruler who is able to receive *parrhesia* is one with self-mastery and wisdom (32). But so many of us today, even our rulers, are sheltered by our own ideological presumptions. How can we gain self-mastery and wisdom if we are not subjected to the challenge of legitimized opposition?

Foucault subsequently depicts negative manifestations of *parrhesia*, as exemplified in Euripides' play *Orestes* from 408 B.C., where it is translated as "ignorant outspokenness" (57). This variety of *parrhesia*, specifically named *athuroglossos* or *athurostomia*, is exercised when a speaker passes on an opportunity to remain appropriately silent. This is often accompanied by apparent strength that is essentially loud, bold arrogance that generates an emotional reaction in the audience (65-66). Foucault characterizes this variety of *parrhesia* with a pejorative connotation as being uttered by a speaker who lacks learning or wisdom. "In order for *parrhesia* to have positive political effects, it must now be linked to a good education, to intellectual and moral formation.... For when speakers use *parrhesia* without [wisdom]...the city is led into terrible situations" (66). This ominous assertion rings true in light of the modern consequences discussed in the previous Chapters.

Chapter 2 is concluded under a shadow of doubt regarding the problem of truth:

for the problem is one of recognizing who is capable of speaking the truth within the limits of an institutional system where everyone is equally entitled to give his own opinion. Democracy by itself is not able to determine who has the specific qualities which enable him to speak the truth (and thus should possess the right to tell the truth). And *parrhesia*, as a verbal activity, as pure frankness in speaking, is also not sufficient to disclose truth since negative *parrhesia*, ignorant outspokenness, can also result (73).

This problem of truth, which afflicted Athenian democracy, is as problematic as ever in our Internet age of rampant ignorant outspokenness. In fact, lacking the decisive powers of exile or death, our democracy may be more susceptible than ever to *athuroglossos* or *athurostomia*.

Modern liberalism especially glorifies free speech and upholds its moral imperative as well as its utility. J.S. Mill argued eloquently that “the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race.... If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error” (Mill, *On Liberty* 14). I would not advocate for constricted speech, but Foucault has shown that we face a conundrum when presented with speech that is unhinged from truth and can lead to us into what he described as “terrible situations” (Foucault 66).

I contend that this is aggravated today by ‘post-truth’ that is sustained within our respective Internet *agorae*, cogently defined in an article in *Nature*:

Post-truth refers to blatant lies being routine across society, and it means that politicians can lie without condemnation. This is different from the cliché that all politicians lie and make promises they have no intention of keeping — this still expects honesty to be the default position. In a post-truth world, this expectation no longer holds.

This can explain the current political situation in the United States and elsewhere. Public tolerance of inaccurate and undefended allegations, non sequiturs in response to hard questions and outright denials of facts is shockingly high. Repetition of talking points passes for political discussion, and serious interest in issues and options is treated as the idiosyncrasy of wonks. The lack of public indignation when political figures claim disbelief in response to scientific consensus on climate change is part of this larger pattern. ‘Don’t bother me with facts’ is no longer a punchline. It has become a political stance. It’s worth remembering that it has not always been this way: the exposure of former US president Richard Nixon’s lies was greeted with outrage (Higgins).

‘Whataboutism’ is a related rhetorical tactic that was prevalent in the Trump campaign and is now used in his administration. It is also a favourite tactic of Vladimir Putin, such as when he compared the annexation of Crimea to the US annexation of Texas (Zak). This is employed by a speaker who is asked about a certain questionable issue or action, and instead of answering

he claims an equivalency to actions of opponents to draw attention away from the question being asked. It has been a widespread tactic used by commentators on cable news and at official press conferences by government officials up to President Trump himself. This Washington Post article notes that the Internet allows for a surge whataboutism since in the past it was more difficult to find obscure issues with which to twist arguments to point the finger back at an opponent. Today there is “a huge amount of information immediately available from which cherries of whataboutism can be picked” (Bump).

Whataboutism serves to entrench the views of partisans by fomenting distrust of the other side: If white pride is bad, then what about gay pride? What about the alt-left? (Zak). This deceptive and nefarious variety of *parrhesia*, transmitted via the Internet and cable TV to our personalized *agorae*, has never before had the opportunity to infect us so widely. These post-truth swindles, which serve to animate citizens on the ends of the political spectrum, are understandably frustrating to those in the centre who may feel disempowered.

Of the five elements of *parrhesia* put forth by Foucault, ‘danger’ is the one which is most diluted today. That fear of death or exile that hung over *parrhesiastes*—those who exercised *parrhesia*—in ancient Athens is not applicable in the same way in a modern liberal democracy. Specific public figures, journalists, and social media personalities are undoubtedly exposed to threats and danger, but this sort of danger is not evenly distributed amongst citizens and thus is not the type with which *parrhesia* may thrive given our modern democratic construct. Notably, this sort of modern danger is more likely to be levelled as an emotional reaction by ideological opponents than by allies of truth. On the other hand, the absence of consequences today for twisting the truth or even outright lying is striking and deeply problematic. Comfortably from within our insulated *agorae*, as long as we follow its norms and espouse its ideology, we are

shielded from being challenged by contrary evidence. Condemnation that rains down from opponents outside of our *agora* can instead be a badge of honour, and thus does not carry the requisite *parrhesiatic* danger.

Where Bill Maher of HBO's *Real Time* can be vilified by Fox News' Sean Hannity and his viewers, and vice versa, neither's fame or popularity is threatened by those outside their own environment. In fact, each is rewarded for making more extreme claims, accusations, and characterizations of the opposing side, feeding a vicious cycle of vitriolic antagonism. Not only that, their respective corporate parent companies are incentivized to put forward increasingly salacious viewpoints and accusations about the other side. In this way, productive agonism is impossible.

Corporate sponsors can sometimes be a moderating influence on certain radical views. For example, right-wing commentator Glenn Beck left Fox News in 2011 (MacNicol), and most recently Bill O'Reilly was ousted by April 2017 largely due to a withdrawal of advertising by mainstream corporate sponsors.

Democrats and Republicans might not live in the same places anymore or watch the same shows — but largely, they still buy the same kinds of cars, sign up for the same insurance plans, and participate in the same diet programs. Few big brands cater exclusively to conservatives. So in recent years, corporate America has been put in the uncomfortable position of a go-between, bridging two worlds that feel increasingly isolated from each other (Guo).

However, the Internet can breathe new life into delegitimized *parrhesiastes*. Glenn Beck founded his own right-wing media organization, The Blaze at theblaze.com. And Bill O'Reilly has shifted his efforts to his own *No Spin News* which is available directly from his web site, billoreilly.com. The succession of polarization is thus perpetuated despite the normalizing influence of corporate business interests and their advertisers. Delegitimized *parrhesia* can thus

be crowd-funded directly by fans and adherents who elect for those alternative facts to become legitimate within their *agora*.

Similarly in Canada, right-leaning Sun News Network, which was backed by Québecor Média, shut down in 2015 having failed to be profitable during its four-year venture and unable to find a new owner. However, TheRebel.Media emerged online to replace it, now un beholden to traditional corporate sponsors and funded directly by a loyal following of passionate devotees (Gerson).

With such low barriers to entry via the Internet and social media, the overall corporate influence that once moderated discourse is now insufficient to maintain civility within a shared imaginary. Worse, it can be difficult for citizens even to ascertain what is true.

Audience is Power (Friends and Followers)

The Internet was supposed to level the playing field and equalize our opportunity for expression, but a hierarchy remains. The currency of power is composed of ‘re-tweets’, ‘followers’, and ‘likes’. Ironically, those who are most entertaining and those who inspire the greatest *pathos* gain the most power, whereas the purveyance of truth does little to support the acquisition of power. It is those with power who gain access to a privileged speech which is disseminated most widely. And thus, most of us do not actually enjoy a level playing field for our expression or equal access to that of our neighbours. If a view is not featured online on the front-page or top-chart within our Internet *agora*, it goes mostly unnoticed. There is too much expression and too much information to grant access to all. And so, what is lost within each echo chamber is a proper measure of what each person really thinks; only the loudest, most entertaining, and most powerful *parrhesiastes* get to air their views. There are of course too many of us to each have our own airtime, but the promise of an equal voice goes ultimately

unfulfilled and further feeds our dangerous sense of disenfranchisement. Overwhelmed by the chatter, many citizens let disengagement and apathy reign. Many others become perilously swayed by those most powerful, bold, and arrogant voices.

So, I have identified two key problems with the Internet *agora*. First, that there are many *agorae* in which we can each take sanctuary from ideas we dislike, whose *parrhesiastes* will sustain and feed our entrenched views and shield us from danger. And second, we do not in fact have an equal access to speech within our *agora* of choice, because those with the most fans are heard by more people; if we have no fans we have no voice. The combined result is a cacophony that detaches us from each other and polarizes our beliefs.

Parrhesia, as characterized by Foucault, is vital in a lively and effective democracy and has taken a new form in today's information age. But it is contaminated and is causing damage in its current form, still nascent within a multitude of isolated Internet *agorae*. I contend that diverse manifestations of unfocussed, unverifiable, and biased utterances are untethered from accountability the way that Foucault's virtuous *parrhesia* demands. Rather than leveling the playing field of expression, modern media and communication are muddying the waters of what people believe. There is certainly no going back to pre-Internet discourse, but we now need to leverage these technological tools that got us here to aggregate and focus the expressions of the people to a more digestible form. Most crucially, we must adapt this technology to bring our respective *agorae* together. A productive and constructive debate about the direction of ship of state can only happen when we are all navigating under the same starry sky.

Crowdsourcing the Truth

In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault concludes by defining the *problematization* of truth as having two major aspects:

One side is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true (or concerns itself with our ability to gain access to the truth). And the other side is concerned with the question: What is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them? With that side which is concerned with determining how to ensure that a statement is true we have the roots of the great tradition in Western philosophy which I would like to call the “analytics of truth.” And on the other side, concerned with the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the “critical” tradition in the West (Foucault 170).

The second aspect of truth outlined by Foucault above relates to the importance of truth telling. Why does it matter if people tell and/or hear the truth? My concern in this thesis is not with the virtue of truth telling, and even though deontological motives for truth telling are easily affirmed under the rubric of Kant’s categorical imperative, I am not advocating a rules-based duty to tell the truth. My argument is for the utility of truth telling in the political realm. When lies go unchecked, fear foments antagonism and leads to adverse political outcomes that erode liberal progress.

From a practical perspective the majority need a modicum of shared basic facts in order to coexist and to confront the challenges of our time within a shared public sphere. This requires discourse within a unified *agora*. From a utilitarian perspective, untruth has negative consequences to our ship of state; it can divide us and steer us away from our collective self-interests and can ultimately beget violence. We may even imagine a worst-case scenario that would put an end to our period of long peace. So, truth does matter, and we need to nurture processes that can lead us towards it.

Returning to the first epistemic aspect of Foucault's problematization, what he calls "the analytics of truth": how can we determine what is true today when the menu of purported truths is so vast? This is especially problematic within *agorae* where consensus may seem clear but is siloed from contradictory evidence. The enduring challenge of ascertaining the truth will not be easily overcome, and as I have described previously, the Internet has not fulfilled its promise of aiding us in this undertaking. From behind our own hopes, values, and perceptions, we should be mindful and retain a healthy skepticism. As such, one way we can be sure to elude truth is by disengaging from discourse, from the perspectives of others, and by hiding in an agora that suits our *pathos*. To grasp at the truth, I am convinced by thinkers such as Mill and Dewey, that we need to collaborate more effectively within the very democratic tradition that we seek to uphold. Not only is democracy an ethical ideal, properly tuned to harness discourse and science, it is a legitimate path towards truth.

Long ago Aristotle argued in favour of the wisdom of the multitudes, that many individuals can be better rulers than a virtuous few. In Book III of Politics he mused that "the many, of whom each individual is but an ordinary person, when they meet together may very likely be better than the few good" (Aristotle part XI). Modern research is reviving this conjecture, and I will employ it as an important tool to contend with Foucault's analytics of truth; a tool that is strikingly compatible with the democracy we are trying to fortify.

Democracy is underpinned by the moral notion that self-determination is just, and thus, democratic rule can be auto-legitimizing. The risk of mob rule or a tyranny of the majority is of course a striking counterpoint to this supposed panacea. However, executed properly, with a proper ratio of deliberative, delayed representation, coupled with satisfactory responsiveness to

the preferences of a diverse and informed citizenry, there is evidence to suggest that democracy can lead us towards better outcomes.

This notion is buoyed by the work of Hélène Landemore of Yale University. In various journal articles and in her book, *Democratic Reason* (2017), she argues that “democratic institutions such as inclusive deliberation and majority rule with universal suffrage combine their epistemic properties to turn the lead of individual citizens’ input into the gold of ‘democratic reason’ and give democracy an epistemic edge over any variant of the rule of the few” (Landemore, 2012). She builds on Mill’s defence of representative democracies, as well as the work of contemporary thinkers, to make this point.

The basis for her argument is rooted in the emergence of collective intelligence from the inclusive decision-making of a group with “cognitive diversity”, as demonstrated in the work of Hong and Page. She finds that as long as more participants means more diversity of thought, the fruits of their deliberation are bound to be better (Landemore, 2012). She makes the case that more inclusive and participatory decision-making is not only fairer, but also leads to overall smarter decisions.

She utilizes the Diversity Prediction Theorem which holds that, “the squared error of the collective prediction equals the average squared error minus the predictive diversity” (Page), and she applies this to democratic decision-making. The theorem predicts that when the diversity in a group is large, the error of the crowd is small.

In her 2012 piece, Landemore goes on to summarize some of the positive outcomes from democracy, citing studies that indicate correlations between, democracy and economic development, democracy and peace, and democracy and the avoidance of famine. She positions

these observations as a functional justification which can be placed alongside the usual moral attributes of fairness, justice, equality, freedom, and consent.

She highlights that, “the advantage of the argument from collective intelligence is that it tells you why it is instrumentally good to include more people in the decision-making process rather than demand of you that you just accept it as a matter of fairness, justice or any other value” (Landemore, 2012). This more utilitarian approach should serve as a reason to meaningfully enfranchise more citizens, while at the same time convince skeptics that a robust democracy is valuable for what it will yield.

This vision of collective decision-making, which is also featured at length in the book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, introduces some caveats to the aforementioned model. Based on a robust analysis of incidents and situations where crowds have yielded good decisions, the author finds that four elements are required for a crowd to render judicious results:

“diversity of opinion (each person should have some private information, even if it's just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts), independence (people's opinions are not determined by the opinions of those around them), decentralization (people are able to specialize and draw on local knowledge), and aggregation (some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision)” (Surowiecki 10).

While there would certainly be challenges to meeting the above conditions in full-scale democracy, studies about the potential wisdom to be wrought by collective decision-making furnish us with exciting possibilities that are worth exploring. It is imperative that we consider ways to renew and enhance our project of democracy that can lead us towards a truer approximation of the common good.

We need a practical solution to nudge us ahead in this endeavour. With the technology that is commonplace and familiar to most of us in Canada today, I propose that a modern software platform be developed that will aggregate the wisdom of citizens, and our elected

representatives accountable, reinjecting vital *parrhesatic* danger into public discourse. Although death and exile may not be compatible with liberal twenty-first century values, public liability needs to be elevated. An Internet-based *mass parrhesia* platform leverages the technology at our disposal today to engage citizens in the way we have come to expect. While it will not be a truth generator, properly implemented, *mass parrhesia* will amplify the voices of moderate citizens who now tend to be less engaged. Truth, I have argued, is more likely to emerge out of the wisdom of the whole crowd. Leveraging collective decision-making will point us towards truth, and *mass parrhesia* will simultaneously contribute to improved political efficacy and defuse the pent-up resentment that I have discussed. Furthermore, it has the potential to disentangle single issues from binary partisan politics and bring us together for a lively “agonistic” discussion about how to steer our ship of state.

In Chapter 4 I shall describe the details of my concept for a *mass parrhesia* platform.

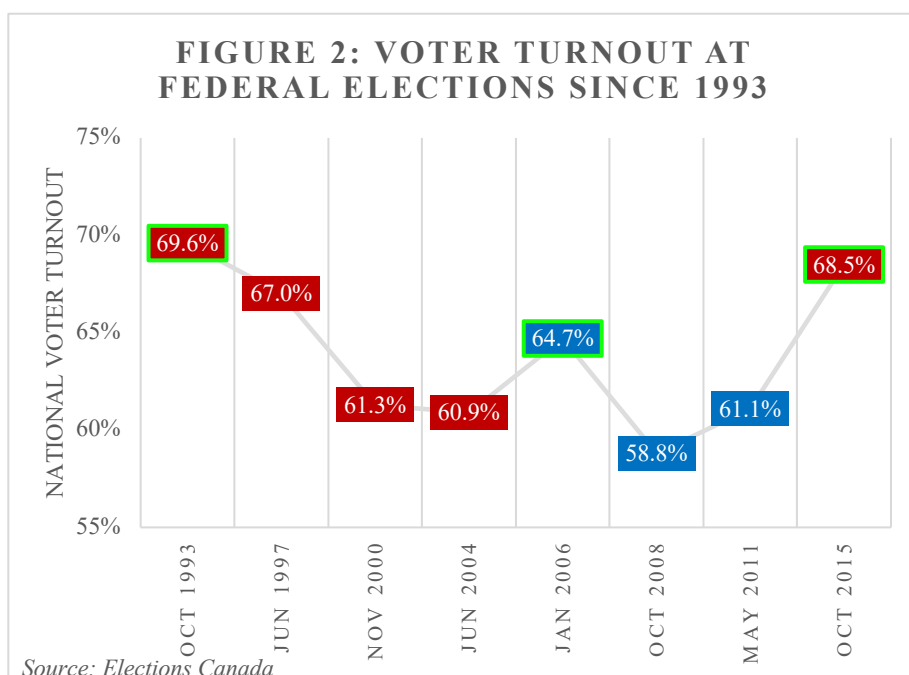
CHAPTER 4 – A New Approach for Parrhesia

Western representative democracies function largely as they have since they were conceived within the last few hundred years. This is true for Canada's parliamentary democracy which is essentially unchanged since it was established in 1867. Our attendance at a polling station every few years is our most directly decisive democratic action and it is discordant with the way we live our lives in the twenty-first century. The Internet grants us access to practically unlimited information and novel ways of interacting with others, enabling the efficient exchange ideas, goods, and services, yet we have the same old voting system.

It is time that our democracy be brought in line with how most of us are now accustomed to living and engaging with our world. Not only that, for the reasons I have laid out in Chapters 1 to 3, it is imperative that we modernize the potential for democratic engagement to newly enfranchise this generation of voters and avert the allure of populism that is budding around the world. Canada is a viable place to implement an evolved, modern democracy platform that can harness those critical elements of *parrhesia* espoused by Foucault: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty.

Why Canada?

Like elsewhere in the West, Canadians are hungry for change. Examining Elections Canada data regarding federal elections since 1993, it is evident that public enthusiasm wanes throughout the term of any given government. Figure 2 indicates Liberal election victories in red and Conservative victories in blue. Years where a transfer of power occurred are outlined in green, and a bump in citizen participation is apparent in 1993, 2006, and 2015 (Elections Canada). This indicates amplified public eagerness for change opportunities.



Furthermore, Canada is indeed a viable place to implement an enhanced platform for democratic engagement because, in contrast to many of its other Western cohorts, Canada is relatively safe from the supposed dangers being stressed abroad that are fomenting populism.

Thus far, the Canadian political system at the national level has been free from any significant populist movements that threaten general civility or democratic cooperation. Furthermore, examining the most recent 2015 platforms of the only two parties that have ever governed, the Liberals and the Conservatives, neither espoused undoing the establishment order or shutting off globalization. On the contrary, both parties tout the importance of trade and both

highlight the positive aspects of immigration. Even the so-called Conservative party espoused that “Canadians take immense pride in the fact we are a nation of immigrants” (Conservative Party of Canada 128). The Liberals echoed that “Canada’s story is the story of immigration” and promised to “make it easier for immigrants to build successful lives in Canada” (Liberal Party of Canada 62). The only other plausibly viable party, the NDP, is to the left of those parties.

While outlets like The Rebel certainly have tried to stoke the fires of political dissent, those ideas have not gained prominence within any political party. In fact, time and time again, candidates at the federal and provincial levels have been rebuked by party leaders and often dismissed for espousing illiberal views. A piece by The Canadian Press in September 2015 listed 20 “candidates, party officials who have made headlines for various gaffes” during the federal election. Among the gaffes are jokes about abortion, Auschwitz, remarks about Muslims and Jews, belief that 9/11 was a conspiracy, and apparent support for a group opposed to the Islamization of Quebec. Invariably, social media exposed some of these improperly vetted candidates and the party leadership took few chances in disposing of concerns.

As a counterexample, the US political system is much more tolerant of questionable candidates such as Roy Moore, or Donald Trump himself. Many other dubious characters that would be untenable here in Canada hold office at all levels in the US.

We have nevertheless seen some far-right-leaning leadership candidates of the Conservative Party of Canada who have garnered public support, most notably close runner-up Maxine Bernier. His views deviated from the official party establishment, such as when he criticized “extreme multiculturalism” as a threat to what has made Canada great (Tang). Having faced widespread rebukes from within the party, in August 2018 Bernier announced that he was starting his own, the People’s Party of Canada. This new party, whose name alludes to its

populist agenda, advocates for curbing immigration and foreign aid, and for a “government [that puts] Canadian people first when they make decisions and policies” (Aiello). A Nanos Research poll from the days following the announcement of the new party found that 17% of Canadians said they were “open to voting for a new conservative party led by Maxime Bernier” (Curry). While 70% of respondents in the same poll indicated that they would not consider voting for Bernier’s party, we can see the potential for a formidable new political force in Canada. It remains to be seen what this will reap in the next election, but the views held by Bernier’s base cannot be discounted. Canadians too, despite our widely hailed national mantra of inclusivity, have concerns about immigration and foreign involvements. As such, I do worry that we are not free or clear from being overtaken by leaders with illiberal leanings. Indeed, we could be one Liberal Party scandal or terrorist attack away from a kind of politics that we have seen in the UK and US.

The recent election of Ontario Premier Doug Ford, often cited as a populist in Canadian media such as Maclean’s, is more clearly an example of a change opportunity that Ontarians grasped. After 15 years of Liberal Party rule that was marred by some missteps by Premier Wynne, voters were ready to try something new. Ford however, with a strong base of support in urban, multicultural Toronto, for the most part steered clear of identity politics and xenophobia. While earning a decisive majority victory with 40.5% of the popular vote (Maher), the sum of electors to the left (33.5% NDP, 19.6% Liberal, and 4.6% Green) are indicative of a bulwark against far-right populism. Ford certainly employed anti-elitist language of common-sense conservatism during his campaign, promising to cut the fat of an inefficient bureaucracy. His message was undeniably populist, and while his campaign was peppered with some worrisome

comments about the media, a dose Canadian civility prevailed (compared to the discourse in the US).

Considering the two overarching motivators behind Brexit and Trump—and brewing elsewhere in Europe as discussed in Chapter 2 (economic and cultural factors)—I argue that Canadians, if given the right pressure-release valve, are less susceptible to being overcome by the fears that may otherwise lead to a dangerous majoritarianism in other places.

First, in the economic space, Canada has an established social safety net with welfare, employment insurance, education, and healthcare access for citizens. Considering its Gini coefficient and per capita GDP, Canada is around the middle of the pack amongst Western countries (Central Intelligence Agency). Inequality and poverty are undeniable issues in Canada of course, but without a critical mass of disaffected citizens, they have not led to widespread civil unrest. I am not downplaying the plight of some First Nations communities without basic access to safe water, or the violence in some racialized urban neighbourhoods, or the millions of working-class Canadians who struggle to put a meal on the table every day. But with a relatively healthy economy and support systems that provide enough for most, resentment and anger have not reached a tipping point. Canada is not special in this regard, but crucially it is not disadvantaged or put at risk by virtue of this.

In the cultural realm, I will argue here that Canada is special. With strong opposition to immigration having been an especially important driving factor behind Brexit and Trump in the UK and US, Canada on the other hand is less susceptible to such fervency in this regard for two main reasons: geography and identity.

Because Canada is geographically isolated from the threat of unbridled migration, this fear is not as relatable here as it is for Europeans. Where migrants can walk or sail relatively

short distances across international boundaries from war-torn and/or impoverished areas of North Africa or the Middle East to Western Europe, access to Canada is physically restricted by oceans. We in Canada have not seen nor had to contend with ‘caravans’ of displaced people arriving right into our territory, whereas Europe continues to cope with a migrant crisis where tens of thousands of asylum-seekers are overflowing migrant camps and tapping resources (Halpern). So too in the US, for decades there has been entry by Mexican and Latin-American migrants for political and economic reasons. This continues today with gang violence displacing many people (Semple).

While Canada had a spike in border-crossings from the US following the election of President Trump, the total number of asylum seekers is small compared to those entering Europe and crossing the US-Mexico border. These border crossings also were clustered mostly along the Quebec border and did not afflict many other communities across the country (BBC News).

Our geographic isolation also grants us the luxury of integrating highly qualified immigrants. The 2016 census revealed that 60.3% of the 1.2 million immigrants admitted between 2011 and 2016 met economic criteria insofar as they had special skills or other economically productive prospects. 26.8% were admitted to join family already in Canada, and 11.6% entered as refugees (Statistics Canada, Immigration and ethnocultural diversity).

In addition to geography, our Canadian identity is a key ingredient to our suitability for expanded democracy. Undeniably, the cliché Canadian identity that I uphold is neither universal nor uniform from sea to sea to sea. Quebec of course comprises a ‘distinct society’, which in October 2018 elected its first right-wing premier in nearly 50 years. Francois Legault promised to curb immigration and to apply a values and language test for newcomers, and he won a resounding majority in *L'Assemblée nationale* (Laframboise). Quebec had been receiving

immigrants at an increasing rate, taking in 17.8% of immigrants between 2011 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, Immigration and ethnocultural diversity) and Quebec maintains a campaign promoting immigration for those who speak French. Once again, this issue appears to have animated voters to seek a new path, and the rest of Canada should take heed.

As with the urban/rural divide that was apparent in the UK and US, Canada shows a similar tendency whereby rural ridings tend to be more conservative, especially in the prairie provinces. While having won a majority in the House of Commons in 2015, the Liberal government only holds about one third of rural seats (Taylor-Vaisey). The more traditional social values of rural and suburban Canadians are also reflected in a 2015 study published in the Canadian Political Science Review (Roy, Perrella and Borden 121). Despite these unsurprising variances across the country, the values of diversity and multiculturalism are strongly engrained in our national identity.

These values were showcased as key to national pride in a 150th anniversary survey conducted by Abacus Data which identified the top 20 items that made Canadians proud. Worth noting: rated number one was “Freedom to live as we see fit”, with 59% saying this made them really proud. Number three was “Open-mindedness towards people who are different”, with 49% identified as really proud. And number nine was “Multiculturalism” with 34% saying this made them really proud. Those aged under 45 boosted their strong pride in Open-mindedness and Multiculturalism by 23 percentage points each (Anderson).

Another study, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), measures “policies to integrate migrants in all EU Member States, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and the USA” (Migration Policy Group). It uses 167 indicators to assess 38 countries across 8 policy areas. The fourth edition, published in 2015,

ranked Canada sixth overall and notably Canada ranked first in terms of anti-discrimination policies. Furthermore, a key finding was that Canadians have “generally most positive attitudes towards immigrants in developed world.” While Canada evidently lags behind in some areas such as with respect to healthcare and political participation for migrants, the MIPEX reflects that Canadians indeed tend to be more open to new people and value multiculturalism.

This is further corroborated by visible minorities themselves who, in a 2013 report by Statistics Canada regarding Canadian identity, reported at a rate of agreement of 71% that they derived “pride in the treatment of all groups in society” (Sinha). This tends to reflect that the majority of visible minorities—many of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants—for the most part feel satisfied with the treatment they themselves receive in Canada.

The 2017 book by pollster Michael Adams, *Could it Happen Here?*, examines the polling data his firm, Environics, has compiled over the years to assess the susceptibility of Canadians to veer towards Trumpism. While accounting for some worrisome anomalies, such as the Quebec mosque shooting, Adams finds that overall Canadians are, and continue to trend towards, more tolerance and compromise vis-à-vis our neighbours to the south. He assesses that, “Canadians and their governments have managed, over a period of decades, to prevent or mitigate the accumulation of corrosive social forces that finally surfaced angrily in the populist politics of the Trump/Brexit era” (Adams 51).

Fareed Zakaria also noted that Canada is an exception regarding public sentiments on immigration, as I cited in Chapter 3.

My intent in this section is to demonstrate that Canada is well positioned to undertake new means of democratic engagement despite the anti-immigrant populist wave that is afflicting many other Western democracies. I acknowledge that new ways to engage the public and gather

their opinions imply risks that public sentiment could carry us in a dangerous direction.

However, failing to properly heed the public will, as we have been doing, is part of the source of frustration that can lead us towards perilous populism. As such, let us keep the supposed promise of self-determination that is enshrined in liberal principles; let us evolve democracy towards the twenty-first century. Canada is the place to do it.

Mass Parrhesia in Canada

In this Part I will consider how we might implement *mass parrhesia* as an IS/IT platform wherein every Canadian voter could lend their voice concerning the issues before Parliament. The concept I lay out below, for simplicity's sake, will consider political decision-making in Canada at the federal level. Theoretically this could also be applied to other levels of governance, from the provincial level, to municipal bodies, and all the way down to corporations and small private organizations, but that will not be addressed here in depth. This information technology platform to harness *mass parrhesia* will henceforth be referred to simply as the platform.

It is important to note here that I must balance my approach: focussing on how this platform will mitigate the problems I laid out in Chapters 1-3, while also delving into some technical IS/IT issues that will shape the platform in a concrete way. The scope of this thesis is primarily philosophical, but I will stray here somewhat to illuminate from a practical perspective how we might improve our democracy in Canada. I will conclude this Chapter by examining how my proposed concept fulfils Foucault's ideals of *parrhesia*.

I envision that we can harness and adapt existing technology to level the playing field of speech and to grant more equitable expression of public will within one unified Internet *agora*. I propose that the political discourse within Canada ought to be coalesced by means of an

interactive web-based/mobile software platform to foster *mass parrhesia*. Key to this must be its role to effectively diminish the influence of extreme views at the fringes while amplifying and aggregating the more moderate views of citizens in the political centre. As discussed previously, those most passionate and vociferous voices have been drowning out and influencing midline views of less fanatical, less engaged (more apathetic) voters. These voters may be inspired by some issue to take action from time to time, but when this arises they have no concrete means by which to express themselves today. I want to give them the means and crowdsource the views of a broader cross-section of Canadian society to counteract more extreme views. Furthermore, the wisdom of this more diverse crowd will more often point towards truth, as put forth by Landemore. A hypothesis which I could not test within the scope of this work, is that even apathetic voters will be inspired to take action to oppose adverse ideas that are gaining prominence, if only they are given accessible, concrete means for action.

Broadly speaking, the platform I propose would track parliamentary proceedings and invite interested citizens to vote on proposed bills which are of importance to them. This would then inform respective MPs of the opinions and beliefs of their constituents and give them a basis on which to vote. To be clear, this would be non-binding guidance and no laws or rule changes to official voting would have to be made. MPs would still need to consider their own conscience, party platform, and the expertise of advisors and committees. MPs would still be free to vote in Parliament as they see fit, and they would have the option of engaging constituents on social media, such as via Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube to explain the reasons for their vote, especially when voting against popular guidance. Come election time each MP would have accumulated a democracy score based on how often they followed the popular guidance. The electoral system as it exists today would not need to change at all with elections happening just

as they already do. This system would overlay the established one and there would be no need to compel elected politicians to participate directly with it; they would be tracked and scored whether they liked it or not. This is the first step to restoring the element of danger to *parrhesia*. Individual citizens too, by registering with this platform and participating would be exposing themselves to elements of danger, as I will describe below.

In the subsequent section I shall illustrate my concept in greater detail by outlining the key elements. I acknowledge that there is plenty of room for debate regarding adjustments and optimizations that could be made regarding certain aspects of the design and implementation. During execution, expertise in the fields of IT security, privacy, blockchain, user interface, and data management would be essential to success. The following is a sketch of the initial concept to illustrate its potential and feasibility.

The Platform

The platform would be composed of the following principle elements:

- *Funding*

Start-up costs for design, development and marketing would be substantial. The best information technology professionals are highly sought and have lucrative opportunities in the profitable technology sector. Preferably, the team would be made up of people who are passionate about civics and about bringing this concept to life. In addition to personnel, other major costs would include server capacity and office space.

For this platform to be true to its values and to be able to suitably deal with the problems outlined in Chapters 1-3, it must be free from any direct or perceived influence from the political or business realms. As such, I would favour initial funding that came from an angel investor, group of wealthy donors, or crowdfunding. There certainly exist hacktivists types, some of

whom are independently wealthy from the explosion in the value of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, who might feel an affinity for this project. Their expertise in blockchain technology would be exceptionally valuable. Any significant initial investors would have to be transparent about their background and motivations.

Over time, sustained funding would be required, ideally crowdsourced from participating voters on an optional basis by those who have the financial means. A relatively small amount from most users would keep things going. A website like Patreon.com employs a fitting membership model with options for ongoing funding support for content creators in the form of monthly micropayments from ‘patrons’. Under CRA guidelines, this platform could potentially meet the requirements of a registered charity by demonstrating “other purposes that benefit the community” and establishing charitable status would be ideal to incentivise larger, tax-deductible donations.

- *Foundation and Governance Framework*

A fitting model for governance of this platform would be the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates Wikipedia. It claims to be “one of the most transparent non-profit organizations in the world” (Wikimedia Foundation), and this would be essential for the platform I am proposing as well.

Wikimedia is a charitable organization whose corporate structure is composed by a Board of Trustees, an Advisory Board, Bylaws, Values, and Policies, notably regarding Access and Privacy. All of their financial information is publicly available, including an annual financial plan and audit reports. I shall refrain from going into further detail here about their organizational and financial structure since everything about the Wikimedia Foundation is available at www.wikimediafoundation.org.

Their stated mission is “to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally.” The general ethos here is very much in line with what my proposed platform pursues, especially “to empower and engage”—but I might go on—“Canadians from coast to coast to coast to express their political opinions constructively so as to inform the Parliament about issues that are most important to us.” With a similar civic ethos, our governance structure should likewise be similar, so Wikimedia would be a good starting point from which to establish the platform’s own framework.

With wikipedia.org ranked fifth on Amazon Alexa’s global list of top 500 most accessed sites (as of 26 Mar 2018), without a doubt this is a model that can work.

- *Voters*

Voters would be the users who register on the platform and interact with it. They would be citizens who are eligible to vote during federal elections. Each voter would be allocated a vote to cast regarding each eligible issue.

To align with voting laws in Canada, voters by definition are at least 18 years of age. I would be amenable to enabling ‘youth voter’ profiles to encourage interaction at an earlier age—perhaps 14—when schools could be involved in actively coaching high school students on the concepts of democracy and on the use of this platform. Asking for personal information of minors however would be problematic, so youth voter profiles would have to be unverified and would therefore not count for legitimate consideration by Members of Parliament. Youth voters could still see the tabulated aggregate results of youth voters and compare that with adult voter results. Youth voter profiles would need to be verified and upgraded to a regular voter profile when the user turns 18, or the youth profile would be deactivated after a certain period of time.

One key to the legitimacy of the platform would be to ensure the accuracy of the registry of regular, adult voters. With this in mind, real names and addresses would be required to determine to which riding each voter belongs. Furthermore, reverification would be required periodically, perhaps every year or only before a federal election about every four years.

Verification, while fallible, could be undertaken by voter applicants snapping a selfie photo of themselves while holding picture identification with their address and a voter registration card. Volunteers could be employed near polling stations or at public libraries to assist those with limited accessibility. If this were required from a within a smartphone app, it would limit the potential for image tampering and could require applicants to embed geolocation to cross-check the riding with the picture identification. Addresses would be further validated against the Canada Post database. Algorithms would be developed to identify possible fraudulent registrations for additional scrutiny and addresses with an anomalous number of applicants would be flagged.

Uber and Airbnb use similar online verification processes for their drivers and hosts without ever meeting them. Those organization nevertheless enable millions of safe trips and accommodation bookings every year within a profitable sharing economy that generates billions of dollars in revenue.

For the sake of privacy and information security, images of faces and identifications could be kept on an encrypted server that is air-gapped away from the Internet so as to be harder to hack into. Once online profiles are deemed to be verified, the proof would become inaccessible except to investigate fraud or potential misuse. The personal information that would need to be retained on the Internet-connected servers would be: email address, full name, birthday, riding (full address not required), last date verified, and voting history (up to a certain

point only, perhaps 5 years). Further analysis would be required to ensure that minimal information was stored while still allowing for a rich and meaningful user experience and information output.

Under this construct, users would admittedly be exposing themselves to some level danger. They would knowingly be sharing private information that could theoretically be exploited for nefarious purposes. Although measures would be taken to minimize risks, and no data would ever be shared wittingly, users would be made to understand that with legitimized expression in a democracy there comes some inherent risks. The organization would need to be trusted as non-partisan, not for profit, and transparent, as discussed above.

In addition to the potential for leaked personal data, voting history is also sensitive information. Likewise, users are accountable for their views if they are to be heard in the Internet *agora*. Notably, as facial recognition technology becomes reliable, this kind of danger will even manifest itself in regular, old-fashioned protest marches, so citizens of modern democracies must learn to accept the risk of exposing themselves with their views to the possibility of tracking. These prospective dangers are elements of the *parrhesia* espoused by Foucault as requirements for a robust democracy.

- *Issues*

Issues are policy questions to be voted upon by voters.

Further consideration would need to be taken to determine the limit of issues open for deliberation on the platform, but as a basic starting point I would propose that only prospective bills that are before the House of Commons be considered. Once a bill is introduced and begins to follow the process of various readings and committees, voters would have the opportunity to convey their opinions, if they wish to, directly to their respective Member of Parliament. This

would be tabulated by riding as a guide for respective MPs to assess the general views of their constituents.

Each issue would be summarized in text form with a corresponding short video for consumption by voters prior to casting a vote. In my conception there would be a limit of three minutes for a video explaining the purpose and advantages of the bill and another three-minute video conveying objections, and/or suggestions for improvement, presumably by the opposition. This could be followed by one-minute response by proponent side and a one-minute conclusion by the opponent. A rubric would be developed as a guide for proponents and opponents to convey basic information like costs, stakeholders, and risks. The idea is that in about ten minutes an interested voter could gain a basic understanding about a proposed law—outside of any information silo—and express their support or opposition via this platform. Issues-related material in ridings with some minimum threshold of francophone or anglophone constituents would need to be represented bilingually. The platform interface would also be bilingual, and other languages may be considered in the future.

Videos would ideally be produced by an MP who favours the legislation, and another MP who opposes it. During initial rollout, before MPs have necessarily bought into using the platform, members of the development team would have to undertake production of the corresponding videos, perhaps in partnership with the political science department of a Canadian university. The potential for bias here would render this an interim approach only. Furthermore, the time and effort of foundation staff should be spent primarily on the structure of the platform and not on its content. Here too, exact constructs are subject to discussion, reconsideration, and change.

Importantly, MPs who presented certain legislation to the public would become accountable for it more directly; both for its success or its failure. Likewise, those who opposed legislation would have to appeal directly to the public and would have an opportunity to gain notoriety in their appeals for changes to, or rejections of bills. These opportunities for direct interaction with voters would rightfully elevate the visibility of the MPs who are accountable to us.

Voters would not be able to introduce new issues directly into the platform since it would be limited only to bills before Parliament, at least when the platform is first launched. However, the platform would enhance the potential for private members' bills—which would be up for a vote on the platform—to gain extra traction if there was popular support behind them. Voters would be newly empowered to demand that certain issues duly follow the parliamentary process, and when issues died at the closure of a parliamentary session, MPs could gain insight into how important they were to encourage reintroduction in the next session. This would weaken the grip of party politics, as advocated by several of the parliamentarians who contributed to the recent collection of essays in *Turning Parliament Inside Out*. In this book, NDP MP Kennedy Stewart specifically laments the overarching power of leadership, at the expense of backbench representatives, and he advocates for greater cooperation across party lines (Chong, Sims and Stewart 121).

Each issue would be tagged to identify one or more areas of focus. For example, 'defence', 'families', 'taxes', etc. Voters could register areas of interest to be alerted via email or push notification when issues arise in their areas of interest so that they would know to log in to the platform to participate. Notifications would also be sent to users regarding issues that generated a lot of activity on the platform or that were yielding close results. This would serve to

inspire greater participation by a wider swath of voters and thereby diminish the effects of the more passionate, active voters.

Although every issue would have plenty of complexities, nuances, and uncertainties all worthy of public debate, this platform would not support discussion functions. Discussion would still take place as it does now in the traditional media, on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, and on websites such as Quora and Reddit (among countless others). But for the platform to fulfil its purpose of bringing together all sides into one *agora*, it would need to exclude the potential for vitriolic, polarizing discourse I have discussed previously. This would be a place for all to come together to register their muted opinions, no matter how ideological or partisan, no matter how many friends or followers.

- *Votes*

Regarding each issue, voters would have 4 choices: ‘yay’, ‘nay’, ‘amend’, or ‘abstain’. By default, every voter, regardless of how active they are on the platform, would be designated to abstain on any new issue. By registering on the platform voters are demonstrating a general interest in taking a more active role in politics and they are positioning themselves to express opinions when they have them, as well as the time and inspiration to express them. But they may still abstain most of the time since much of what happens in Parliament is technical, procedural, and mundane. When an issue of interest arises, voters would log in to register a ‘yay’, ‘nay’, or to suggest that amendments are required. They could also log in, learn about the issue, and still decide to retain their abstention.

It would be encouraged to abstain regarding issues where voters have doubt or indifference. Abstention is an important component of the platform that would reduce unnecessary and counterproductive views of uninterested voters. The old cliché trope to “get out

and vote” would become a vestige of a time when it was important to seize the only chance to register a political opinion on election day. But it really is senseless to have voters casting ballots about specific issues with respect to which they are uninterested and/or uninformed. This conforms to a certain extent with the sort of epistocratic notions advocated by political philosopher Jason Brennan. While his proposal for a strong epistocracy is not tenable given the democratic expectations I have discussed, his notion that ignorant voters ought to abstain is sound (Brennan 24). The power of the platform lies in empowering voters, when it is relevant for them. Otherwise, the technical, procedural, mundane business should rightfully be left to the professionals.

A trustworthy and verifiable vote tally would be vital to the legitimacy of this platform. As such, a public ledger of all votes would be exhibited transparently for any voter to be able to audit their own vote at any time and see the overall sum of all other votes. A great many technical challenges would need to be overcome, but blockchain technology is a promising means by which to ensure voting integrity. Just like bitcoins or other cryptocurrencies can be transferred to different users, each vote would work like a token that is allotted to a voter when a new issue is introduced. Instead of transferring these votes to other voters, they would be placed into virtual ballot boxes of either ‘yay’, ‘nay’, or ‘amend’. Technical hurdles would need to be overcome to permit voters to change their votes after they have already been cast, for example if they change their minds or are satisfied with amendments made to a bill.

- *Members of Parliament*

MPs are in fact sitting members of the House of Commons. Each MP would be designated to their respective riding within the platform and their voting record in parliament would be compared to the guidance provided by voters in their riding. Their concurrence or

participation with the platform would be irrelevant; their official voting would be tracked regardless.

Each MP would be sent an email explaining how the system will work with an official invitation to join. If they chose to enrol they would have a special user profile to enable access to details about the voting preferences of their constituents and they would be able to post videos about issues. All voters would be made aware of their respective MPs enrolment status, so they would be directly accountable for non-participation at election time.

Existing Projects

What I am proposing is not completely novel. The idea of leveraging the capabilities of the Internet to compile data or aggregate political will is a compelling proposition, and many websites already exist that are making some efforts towards what I described above. The Internet is a powerful platform with kinetic effects in the real world to meet people, shop, and coordinate activism; why not to exert legitimized political will?

OurCommons.ca is hosted by the Government of Canada to provide transparency regarding parliamentary proceedings. It provides information regarding current and past business of the House of Commons, as well as of committees and of individual members.

OpenParliament.ca promises to “keep tabs on Parliament” and delivers a summary of tweets, news stories, and voting records of MPs. It also provides a summary of proceedings related to specific issues of interest with some rudimentary search capabilities.

Democracia en Red, whose name translates from Spanish as ‘Net Democracy’ or ‘Online Democracy’, is based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is behind two synchronized initiatives in Argentine politics: DemocracyOS and *El Partido de la Red* (The Net Party). The former has been dubbed as an “operating system of a more open and participatory government” at the

municipal level (Scaturro). The latter is a political party founded by this same group, whose sole political platform is to fulfil the will of the people in accordance with DemocracyOS. This party was inspired by similar ‘pirate parties’ that have seen some success in Scandinavia and Germany. In general, these kinds of parties all demand direct democracy, transparent government, and open data.

Democracy Earth is a not-for-profit foundation is a spin-off of *Democracia en Red* and is behind the development of a new software called Sovereign: “an open source and decentralized democratic governance protocol for any kind of organization” (Democracy Earth Foundation). Their movement is based on a notion with which I agree, that: “We are 21st century citizens interacting with 19th century institutions based on 15th century information technology.”

Democracy.com is based in the United States with a vision of connecting citizens to civic engagement opportunities. It promises the largest database of local and national events for political actions such as rallies, petitions, and marches. It connects people to volunteer or donate in favour of causes that matter to them in places they can have an impact.

There are countless other examples online, but a successful platform would need a sharp focus and a compelling interface that can garner wide adoption. Each of the aforementioned websites offer some noteworthy elements that have inspired the platform that I propose, but none of them goes far enough or are properly conceived with Canada in mind, although it is possible that Sovereign could be tailored accordingly in the future.

Argument for Implementation

To succeed and attain maximum participation from the majority of Canadians who have access to the Internet, my proposed platform for *mass parrhesia* would be as intuitive and as easy to use as Uber, would employ blockchain technology for security and transparency, must be

crowd-funded and non-partisan like Wikipedia, immersive and featuring informational videos like YouTube. It could also incorporate addictive user interface elements to inspire interest, encourage participation, and keep voters coming back for more, as many other apps and websites do today.

Most importantly, no action by politicians would be required for the development or implementation of this conceptual *mass parrhesia* platform. Recently, the Liberal government broke its promise to enact democratic reform. Unsurprisingly, they determined that the status quo first-past-the-post (FPP) system was advantageous to them, so they ended the initiative to change it. Similarly, BC failed to adopt a single-transferable-vote (STV) system three times, with citizens rejecting the referendum question in 2005, 2009, and 2018. While our current FPP system has its drawbacks, STV bringing its own set of shortcomings and the prospect of change is evidently unnerving for many. Furthermore, neither STV nor any other variant voting system for a representative parliamentary democracy that has been proposed for Canada address the issues I have raised in this work. The proposed *mass parrhesia* platform would be a disruptive force that emanates from outside the established system to overlay it and enable a new approach for more granular engagement in the twenty-first century.

As ambitious as it may seem, *mass parrhesia* requires only technical expertise and non-profit funding. What I have laid out above is a concept that remains rife for valid objections and critiques. But as I have argued, given its nature and consequences, siloed modern online discourse has proven to be a destructive force within the web of Internet *agorae*. Of course, we cannot turn back the clock or return to the glorified ancient Athenian *agora*. I also doubt that citizens will ever find enduring political accord on most issues; that is the nature of our democracy, as described eloquently by Mouffe:

What is specific and valuable about modern liberal democracy is that, when properly understood, it creates a space in which this confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final. However, such an ‘agonistic’ democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of ‘the people’. To imagine that pluralist democracy could ever be perfectly instantiated is to transform it into a self-refuting ideal (Mouffe 15).

What *mass parrhesia* can do is unravel acrimonious partisanship while sustaining the disagreement that defines democracy. We must make the best use of the tools we have at our disposal today to bring political adversaries into the same common symbolic space, as advocated by Mouffe.

Essentially, a user-friendly web/mobile interface that leverages new and emerging information technology would crowdsource opinions, expose them transparently to fellow citizens, and gauge the effectiveness of elected representatives in order to: collapse the binary nature of elections, break down divisive political identities, enhance political efficacy and alleviate the public’s sense of powerlessness and alienation.

Elements of Mass Parrhesia Applied

One of my objectives has been to apply Foucault’s ideals of *parrhesia* as a model from which to enliven democracy in Canada. Reconsidering the platform I have described above, I shall demonstrate how it satisfies these elements in a contemporary context. Recalling his summary definition: a person who exercises *parrhesia* “[1] uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, [2] truth instead of falsehood or silence, [3] the risk of death instead of life and security, [4] criticism instead of flattery, and [5] moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (Foucault 20). The platform I described incorporates these principles as follows:

1. First, the platform enhances opportunities for free democratic expression by enabling citizens to choose with frankness. We would register our will without any accompanying persuasion, conveying support or opposition to prospective laws before Parliament: ‘yay’, ‘nay’, ‘amend’, or ‘abstain’. As Foucault expresses, “the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion...by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the *parrhesiastes* uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find... [T]he *parrhesiastes* acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes” (Foucault 12). Hypothetically, *mass parrhesia* would inspire engagement especially when an opposing view is showcased to be prevailing.
2. The ‘mass’ modifier of *mass parrhesia* seeks to find truth by sourcing the wisdom of the crowd. Truth is a fundamental tenet of liberalism and it has proven to lead us towards constructive societal advancement. While it is perpetually elusive and impossible to assure, crowdsourcing is a promising avenue that is consistent with democratic ideals, as argued by Landemore and others. To draw directly from Foucault, this mass or crowd of *parrhesiastes* “say what is true because [they] *know* that it *is* true; and [they] *know* that it is true because it is really true. The *parrhesiastes* [are] not only sincere and say what is [their] opinion, but [their] opinion is also the truth. [They] say what [they] know to be true” (Foucault 14). For the ancient Greeks, *parrhesia* is only *parrhesia* when it is also true, and virtuous *parrhesiastes* did not conceive of the self-doubt and skepticism that is at the forefront of our thinking today. In practice, applied *mass parrhesia* would point to the truth by

harnessing the wisdom of the crowd. Insofar as we are accountable for the outcomes of our choices on the platform, untruth brings an inherent punitive element. This, in theory, will steer us well more often than not.

3. While death is not consistent with modern values, the danger to which this alludes is still essential. Death is of course the ultimate danger, but Foucault does not demand that death be the only relevant danger to a *parrhesiaste* and he gives a more quotidian example of confronting a friend who is doing something wrong. He goes on to assert that *parrhesia* “demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger” (Foucault 16). The proposed platform fosters danger in the realm of cyberspace. The risks associated with sharing personal information with any website are present when registering for and using the *mass parrhesia* platform. Personal information or voting history could theoretically be hacked or leaked. Citizens must opt to participate actively in spite of this danger. Likewise, MPs will be exposed to increased accountability and the very present danger of being ousted from office if they do not uphold the will of constituents. As such, the platform duly exposes our elected representatives to a more direct danger which today is conspicuously absent.
4. The criticism that Foucault describes requires that the *parrhesiaste* be of lower status than their interlocutor. He provides the examples of a philosopher criticizing a sovereign or speaking before the Athenian assembly which has authority over them (Foucault 18). It is, in essence, speaking truth to power. Under *mass parrhesia*, the aggregated will of citizens would inform political leaders and criticize their vision and plan with a weight and credibility that is not possible today.

5. With respect to duty, the *parrhesiaste* makes an active choice to express themselves rather than to stay silent. Although they are not forced to speak, they feel a sense of duty to do so to help the city and guide the sovereign (Foucault 19). With *mass parrhesia*, this is fundamental. Citizens could be partaking in countless other entertaining activities today, but they must choose to spend their time and mental energy to participate on the platform. Some may do so often, and some may do so rarely, but when they do, they will do so out of a sense of duty to express what is good, true, and just.

CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion

The notion that the masses ought to have a direct say in political decision-making is a contestable claim which is generally considered to be on shaky philosophical ground going back all the way to Plato. There is however a moral case to be made for democratic self-determination, as is enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in most Western constitutions. Most importantly, citizens have a common expectation that their wishes be adequately articulated politically. The ideology of self-determination is deeply entrenched, and I have argued that we as a society need to do better to translate those wishes into political reality more often, and with more precision than can be done via traditional periodic elections. The issue I have raised is not primarily moral, but functional. If we fail to do this, populist resentment can boil over, as we are seeing across many Western democracies.

My proposed solution raises some valid questions and before closing I will address some possible objections.

Objections Addressed

- *Hackers could steal personal information*

As with any Internet-based platform, hacking is an omnipresent risk. No database, website or app-based interface that is connected to the Internet is impervious to a targeted attack by talented computer hackers. The technical aspects, from an IT/IS perspective, go well beyond the scope of this work, but here I will nevertheless address the general hacking-related objections that may arise.

There are two overarching risks present with this system in particular. First is the risk that voting records or personal information, such as name, contact info, or other personal identifiers may be gathered nefariously. The other risk, that voting results could be falsified to convey

results that do not reflect the actual outcome of votes cast, will be addressed in the next subsection.

First, with respect to leaks of information, I want to return to the principle of *parrhesia* relating to danger. It may indeed be unsettling to the average citizen that there could be risk of personal exposure and explaining the principles of *parrhesia* to them is admittedly untenable. I would express the following to skeptical participants:

We will do our very best to safeguard all personal information, including voting records. There were other times and there are other places, unfamiliar to most of us in Canada today, when the very act of attending to the casting of a ballot was a physically risky proposition. New times bring new risks and we call on all active citizens who care about the direction of our country to perform their civic duty, even though total information protection cannot be absolutely guaranteed. I would remind them that their identity is linked only to an email address and riding, and that all data that was collected for verification purposes, such as images of identity documents, are stored offline on an air-gapped server. The organization that is responsible for storing the data will always remain crowd-funded and accountable to average Canadians. The source of all monies and the affiliations of all those directly involved with the organization are declared with total transparency. Furthermore, the organization will never accept money or support from any government, corporation, or foreign agent. It is and will always remain, owned and operated by Canadians at large.

Most importantly, what I am arguing in this thesis is that we ought to try something new to enliven democracy and modernize how Canadians interact politically. Participants will decide for themselves how they feel about the security measures and potential risks. Policies and

technology would certainly need to adapt and evolve throughout the roll-out of this platform, but the key rebuttal that will accompany any objection is: we must try.

- *Hackers could generate false voting results*

The revolutionary nature of blockchain technology allows for a new level of security of sums and tallies, via transparency and openness, as could never before be achieved on a closed system where users had to trust a system's administrators. With overall results exhibited publicly at all times on a digital ledger which is kept balanced by a peer-to-peer network of computers, the possibility of data manipulation is remote. If blockchain can be leveraged to safeguard billions of dollars in assets via Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin, and many other notable digital currencies, it can be applied to safeguard vote tallies. The market capitalization of Bitcoin alone has been in the multi-billions since 2014, skyrocketing over \$300 billion in late 2017, and hovering around \$100 billion in January 2019 (BitInfoCharts.com). This open, public ledger makes it practically impossible to meddle directly with overall vote counts.

Another possible issue could be the hacking of individual user accounts so as to hijack the available votes of those users. Safeguards such as two-factor authentication would be in place to mitigate the risk of any large-scale bulk takeovers. Individual, isolated misuse could possibly occur, but this would be on a small scale that would have little effect on overall results. One might imagine, for example, a passionate and politically active university student using their technologically-challenged parents' mobile devices, ID cards, or other credentials, to register and gain access on their behalf. Admittedly, this type of hacking is hard to avoid, but it could only occur on a small scale.

Measures would be in place to detect all kinds of suspicious behaviour in consultation with information security specialists, and the system would be built to detect tampering when it could not be prevented.

A key to this proposal is the non-binding nature of voting outcomes. If any significant interference were ever detected or suspected, it would be openly acknowledged and questionable outcomes could be invalidated from having political weight. Anomalous incidents would be thoroughly investigated and learned from, but even in the worst case the political system would proceed as normal without the supplemental overlay of this platform.

Again, I insist that we must try.

- *Most people will never bother to engage with the platform*

Countless online start-ups try and then fail to gain popular usage and acceptance. The tremendous challenge of crossing the chasm to generalized adoption is well known and outlined in a book by Geoffrey Moore, *Crossing the Chasm* (2014). It lays out the adoption lifecycle via five segments of user adoption: ‘innovators’, ‘early adopters’, ‘early majority’, ‘late majority’, and ‘laggards’. The chasm, as laid out by Moore, exists between the early adopters and the early majority. He contends that if one can overcome that challenge and inspire a small majority to participate early, disruptive technologies are more likely to achieve ultimate success. He lays out several strategies in this book to help make that happen and I agree that it would be essential to utilize these tried and tested marketing techniques. Certainly, a yet-to-be-defined critical mass of citizen participation would be required to legitimize the platform. As previously discussed, ease of use and a sense of satisfaction would be key elements to foster mass appeal.

It is also important to keep in mind that universal adoption is not a realistic goal nor is it necessary. The concept here is to allow people to avail themselves of a new way to express their

political wishes and to hold their MPs more directly accountable. Those who wish to enroll and engage are enthusiastically encouraged to do so. But those who prefer to stay politically disengaged—the laggards who already do not vote, who do not know about politics, and who do not care—are encouraged remain disengaged. But if they were ever motivated by a certain issue this platform will be available to them to register their views. My hypothesis, which could best be tested by implementing this concept, is that engagement by political junkies, policy wonks, activists, and even by trouble-makers, will beget engagement by the majority. When the early majority see what those early adopters are expressing, especially if opposed to their views, they will be inspired to partake.

Yes, attaining necessary engagement will be a challenge, but with the right implementation it can be done, and we must try.

- *Many people do not have access to the necessary technology to engage with the platform*

For Canadians to participate in this system they need at a minimum a smartphone or basic computer with a data connection. A recent report found that “91% of Canadians aged 15 and older used the Internet at least a few times” monthly in 2016. The report also noted that 76% of Canadians owned a smart phone in the same year (Statistics Canada). Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 1, important minorities who tend to already be disadvantaged—such as the poor, those in remote locations, and First Peoples—are more likely to lack the minimum technological requirements to connect to this platform. Their disproportionate exclusion is a valid concern that will require creative solutions and continued advocacy on the part of, and on behalf of, First Peoples. However, this noteworthy objection, which will require mitigation, is not a sufficient reason to derail an otherwise feasible, and necessary evolution for democratic engagement in Canada.

Notably, this system is not government-sponsored nor is it subject to official standards of accessibility that would necessarily be required of a government programme, as those may impede practical implementation. We would nevertheless make every effort to facilitate the use of older hardware on slower Internet connections to grant as much access as possible. Also, the system would need to be accessible via public libraries and community centres for those who do not have a computer or smartphone of their own.

Furthermore, the CRTC has declared the vital importance of Internet access for all and the current government has committed \$500 million to bringing access to 300 rural and remote communities by 2021, as described in Chapter 1. With this ongoing deployment of increasing accessibility, although a relatively small access gap does exist to the Internet, it is ever shrinking. Indeed, the aforementioned Statistics Canada report reflects consistent positive trends in favour of Internet access. As this platform became mainstream, the requirement to expanded access for all would become all the more imperative, and utilization would beget greater access.

Above all, this is a case where we ought not to let some shortcomings derail the entire concept, especially with trends showing the amelioration of the situation flagged by this objection. I am indeed troubled by the fact that disadvantaged groups would be lacking in this realm also. But I believe that this technology would ultimately lead to improving the conditions of disadvantaged communities by giving Canadians at large the opportunity to more directly express the need for positive change.

- *Many people lack the technical capacity to engage with the platform*

In addition to requiring certain technology to access this platform, some technical know-how is also required. Without a basic understanding of how to use a smartphone or computer, individuals would have difficulty using this system. That said, anyone who can send email, use

Facebook, search Google, and hail an Uber, should be able to attain sufficient proficiency with the system if they are suitably motivated to learn. Those who do not would, admittedly, not be very able to engage with this platform.

The largest group in this category would be the elderly. Although many elderly people have become greatly skilled at using computers and the Internet, they remain the age group with the lowest Internet usage (Statistics Canada). However, here again we see strong positive trends from 2013 to 2016, with Internet use rising from 65% to 81% among 65-74 year-olds and from 35% to 50% among those aged 75 and older.

As technology becomes more intuitive while the population ages, this objection will also fade. Ideally, any democratic engagement should be evenly accessible to all people in all groups. But since this is a practical impossibility in our world, what is a reasonable access rate? Are the rates outlined by Statistics Canada insufficient? If so, what would constitute satisfactory accessibility and why?

I believe that sufficient access already exists to modernize democratic engagement and generate interesting and meaningful insights via the platform I have laid out. In the next subsection, I will discuss the concern at the root of uneven access for some disadvantaged groups.

- *A biased political will would emerge due to the disengagement of certain groups*

While it is indisputable that those with more privilege, who have access to modern technology and are well educated, would have disproportionately greater access to this platform, that is not sufficient reason to oppose its implementation.

First of all, this would be nothing new. The political system already has this glitch. Affluent and educated citizens are already more likely to vote and be otherwise politically active. They are also more able to make political contributions that affect the outcomes of elections. The

question is not, “does this platform provide equitable access for all?” The question is in fact, “does this platform offer new political opportunities for more people so as to improve the system we already have (even for those who cannot directly access the platform)?” The core of my thesis is of course to argue that very point.

Those who raise this objection can be reminded that the technology behind the platform would in fact be able to reveal biases that would then be taken into consideration before any real action were ever taken at the parliamentary level. For example, let’s take the case of proposed changes to the Canada Pension Plan that would be most immediately relevant to older Canadians. Voter preferences reflected via the platform could be broken down by age to reveal what those most proximately affected by legislation think about it. Likewise, proposed changes to the Indian Act could be considered while especially taking into account the views of First Peoples who have chosen to share their demographic information on the platform. In this way, even though First Peoples would represent a small fraction of all participants in that vote, and even though their participation rate as a group would likely be lower than that of middle-class urban Canadians, politicians would be able to weight their views proportionately to how much legislation would affect a given cohort.

Furthermore, the votes and views of stakeholders and passionate activists could inspire other Canadians to reconsider their views, and this platform would grant a means by which to register shifting opinions. We can imagine an example where the overall results of an initial vote have a majority of Canadians favouring some well-meaning legislation that would cause hardship to low-income residential tenants. Roused by the majority opinion, activists for the poor would be animated to explain the harm caused by the proposed law and prompt the public to

reconsider. Likewise, activists could spotlight problematic legislation and bring issues to the fore with the hope of garnering public support with force that is not possible to leverage today.

Since results of any votes are non-binding, MPs would be able to justify their subsequent parliamentary vote based on whatever factors can be explained to their constituents. We can see here that this platform could actually be used to raise the prominence of minority views in a way that would not otherwise happen at the ballot box.

This concept supposes that voters are more likely to express their views regarding issues that matter to them and affect them. Other than political junkies, many Canadians would likely abstain from most votes that did not affect them much. They would be spurred on to participate for issues they are passionate about, and regarding contentious issues where they fear that opposition efforts are gaining a foothold.

Another important factor to keep in mind regarding this objection is that many Canadians who care about what is right and good will not necessarily be voting only in their own interest when it will plainly affect others negatively. When issues are presented on the platform during those 3-minute video clips, opponents and proponents will be distilling what is at stake to make Canadians understand how legislative changes are purported to affect all Canadians. As such, while some bias is inevitable, many voters can be convinced to vote against their own immediate interests for the greater good. This should not be so surprising since already healthy people subsidize the sick, non-drivers pay for roads, and non-parents pay for schools.

Lastly, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects all Canadians and a judiciary is entrusted to ensure those rights by defending everyone—even minority groups—from the implementation of overtly unjust policies. Bias already pervades the political system and the

platform I propose would not extinguish it, but it does have the potential to make things better by shining a light on some of those biases.

The platform I envision represents an opportunity to enfranchise Canadians in a new way. It is not a perfectly equitable, truth-assuring democracy engine, but it is a more inspiring and immersive way for Canadians to express their political will in a granular and quantifiable way, and we should try it.

- *Regarding some issues, a considerable majority will sometimes favour harmful choices*

Democracy carries with it the inherent risk of majoritarian folly. This is one of its gravest flaws, yet the idea that average citizens can self-determine is also its great strength. The notion that the political authority gains legitimacy from the consent of the governed, as articulated by John Locke, is absolutely fundamental to common modern conceptions and expectations. It is enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 21) and in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (sec. 3), as well as many other constitutional and founding documents. As such, this objection is inherently valid with respect to the system we already have. The concept of the platform I am proposing recognizes this prevailing and irrevocable feature of modern democracy and harnesses the good with bad, while aiming to mitigate the risk of the worst outcomes.

As discussed previously, it is important to keep in mind that this platform is non-binding and thus members of parliament would still retain the ultimate say in how to vote regarding any legislation before them. Their transparent and measurable rate of adherence to popular will would nevertheless influence them more intensely, especially when majority opinion is indeed considerable. This is of course how democracy is supposed to work and it is what electors expect

in our time. The ideology surrounding democracy requires that citizens cannot always be protected from themselves, as is already the case.

Brexit and Trump reminded us that majoritarian folly poses an omnipresent risk. The proposed platform would provide pressure relief earlier and permit specific policy choices to be disentangled from overarching political platforms. Thus, if harmful choices were indeed expressed by a considerable majority, it would be better (less harmful) for society to contend with those specific political choices rather than to cope with the after-effects of the basket of harmful choices that would be on offer under the current system, as with Brexit and Trump. Essentially, if harm resulted from an adverse choice, its effects would be limited in scope when applied to fewer policy areas.

For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, evidence suggests that aversion to immigration was the most important motivator for those who voted for Brexit and Trump. If voters had had the opportunity to exert their will regarding immigration more directly, a more balanced, centrist political approach could have prevailed which took into account the deeply held beliefs of many citizens, even if they were contrary to ‘elite expertise’. With greater regard for specific hot-button issues, the political class could avoid the democratic overreaction of their constituents. By making adjustments to immigration policy, even against the establishment consensus, Britain could have stayed in the EU and the US could have elected a less divisive president. Thus, the proposed platform would mitigate the risk of worse political choices.

- *How would this platform ameliorate the problem of echo chamber agorae on the Internet?*

The platform would only indirectly address this issue. It would provide a common space for all voters, but importantly it would enable more centrist voters to articulating their will quantitatively, in a non-binding, open forum. Those who tend to be less engaged, less involved, and more apathetic are more likely to have centrist views (Pew Research Center, 2017) (World Bank Group), and evidence suggests that they are also disillusioned with democracy and may increasingly favour authoritarian leaders who will actually get things done (Adler). There is very little that these citizens can do constructively with the minimal effort that they are willing/able to exert. Aside from engaging in arguments online, which we have seen can exacerbate the problem of echo chambers, most of us are left with little that can be done from the comfort of our homes (which is all many of us would be willing to do).

We have seen that the masses can be roused under the right circumstances. The subsequently criticized viral video *Kony 2012* raised five million dollars in 2 days and garnered 120 million views in five days, and it demonstrates the tremendous appetite that people have to do good with minimal effort. Instead of sharing, retweeting or buying a \$30 ‘action kit’ with bracelets and posters (Cauterucci), the proposed platform would enable the masses to register their will simply, with a few clicks or taps, regarding specific issues that matter to them.

The concept hypothesizes that adverse policy guidance that arises from Internet agorae on the fringes would be muffled by *mass parrhesia* that is centrist and informed by the wisdom of crowds. Faced with views and ideas that are objectionable, the masses will be inspired to click their opposition, thus deemphasizing more extreme views. They have no concrete way of doing

this today, and this platform would enable a new way to amplify the will of moderate voters while mitigating the power and influence of those echo chambers on the fringes.

Without any online discussion or debate within the platform, there would be no additional vitriolic pressure generated directly. It would simply provide a means for citizens to express political will in a way that is quantified, thus relieving the pent-up pressure of otherwise empty online arguments that have no constructive political power.

Closing

It is clear that we have a problem with politics and with democracy today, as I have laid out in this paper. I have argued that Brexit and Trump are symptoms of this problem. So, what are we to do about it?

The case I am making here is that we ought to use modern information technology to reinvigorate the foundations of democracy. Namely, *parrhesia* as defined by Michel Foucault, can provide a framework for a revised democratic system that functions constructively for democratic societies in the twenty-first century, particularly in Canada. The *mass parrhesia* platform that I have proposed, on its own, is surely not a panacea. But I have defended it against objections and I argue that its implementation is a compelling option, perhaps amongst other options that can strengthen liberal democracy.

To contend with Foucault's problematization of truth I have argued that properly implemented, we can achieve better outcomes and approach truth by leveraging the wisdom of the crowds. Even if the mob steers us off course in some regards, they are already doing so today to a troubling extent, often in protest. Having considered those two most recent galvanizing public grievances rooted in the economic and in the cultural, we see promised solutions on opposite sides of the political spectrum. As the pendulum swings at the whim of an increasingly

disenchanted electorate, it must not become a wrecking ball taken to liberal progress. If we are to avoid a populist takeover of Canada, we cannot go on like this. If democracy is to be preserved and violence averted, it must evolve for our times.

To remaining naysayers I ask, if not this then what? Having read extensively on this topic, practical, turnkey proposals to remedy our collective problem are scant. Many experts, pundits, and thinkers agree on the problem, but their solutions—if they offer any at all—are vague. Mine, on the other hand, is quite specific.

We can strengthen democracy in the twenty-first century by leveraging the elements of frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty using modern information technology. In this thesis I have made the case for a concrete endeavour that is achievable in Canada today and has the potential to disrupt politics in a constructive way, by articulating the public will quantitatively in a non-binding, open forum.

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