

# **Democratic Responses to the Rise in Contentious Politics**

**Yashar Tasouji**

**Abstract:**

Starting with the 2011 Arab Spring, through to present-day cases across the world such as in Hong Kong and the United States, there has clearly been a rise in protest and political contention globally in the past decade. With a focus on democracies of the West, this paper aims to (1) contextualize why and how the rise in contentious politics has come about and (2) explore democratic tools that are available to governments. To contextualize Western democratic political contention, this work follows the historical process of disenchantment with the democratic process through the rise of neoliberalism and post-politics, which has led to what some might call anti-elite, anti-establishment, or populist movements. On the other hand, social media and technological tools have augmented political polarization and the proliferation of misinformation and fake news. These forces have also contributed to a degradation of confidence in experts and, as a result, a lack of rational and fact-based policy, notable in the present-day through the lack of climate change action and incoherent COVID-19 responses. The paper responds to these circumstances through three potential institutional democratic solutions: (1) a technocratic 'Professional Committee,' to recommend rational and fact-based policy, (2) a 'People's Jury' and organized 'Political Briefings' to provide public scrutiny of policy decisions and facilitate transparent communication, and (3) a 'Political Media Platform' to respond to the degradation of information gatekeepers and the digital information age. These solutions are formulated with the objective of strengthening 'rule by the people,' reorganizing 'rule by the experts,' and revamping information distribution, verification, and political communication in the digital age. In an era characterized by increasingly interconnected global communities, impending irreversible climate change, COVID-19, and increasing economic inequality, the

ways in which we make decisions and co-exist with one another are vital to our survival more than ever before.

## INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that protest politics is on the rise. Starting with the 2011 Arab Spring, through to present day cases across the world such as in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>, the United States<sup>2</sup>, and Thailand<sup>3</sup>, among other contemporary cases, it is clear that there has been a rise in protest globally in the last ten years<sup>4</sup>. Particularly in the West, contentious politics has taken on an anti-establishment, populist, anti-elite tone, beginning with the anti-corruption Occupy movement (spurred by economic inequality, particularly revealed after the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent bailing-out of mega-corporations), leading to the election of President Donald Trump in the United States<sup>5</sup> and climaxing with the January 6 Capitol Hill riot.<sup>6</sup>

The central question I wish to explore is: what democratic solutions are available to the West in response to the recent surge in protest politics, namely anti-elite, populist movements? To give some context to this question, we must ask ourselves: what are the driving forces of the increase in protest and contentious politics today? Throughout this paper I combine two spheres of literature to answer the latter, contextual question: (1) post-politics and neoliberal rationality,

---

<sup>1</sup>Preeti Jha, "Hong Kong protests: The flashpoints in a year of anger," *BBC News*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53942295>.

<sup>2</sup>Ray Sanchez, "Black Lives Matter protests across American continue nearly 2 months after George Floyd's death," *CNN*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/23/us/black-lives-matter-protests-continue/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Author unavailable; analysis by Jonathan Head of BBC News, "Thai protests: Tens of thousands gather again in mass defiance of government," *BBC News*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54548988>.

<sup>4</sup>Howard Ramos and Kathleen Rodgers, *The Promise of Social Movement Societies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), p. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup>Kirk Hawkins, Levente Littvay, *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 1-3.

<sup>6</sup>Ted Barrett, Manu Raju, Peter Nickeas, "US Capitol secured, 4 dead after rioters stormed the halls of Congress to block Biden's win," *CNN*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/06/politics/us-capitol-lockdown/index.html>.

and (2) political polarization and the forces of social media. Briefly put, post-politics refers to a state of politics whereby agnostic debate and contestation of ideas, assumed vital to a healthy democracy, are non-existent due to a popular acceptance of a ‘consensus in the centre’ of the political spectrum. Neoliberal rationality, on the other hand, is the notion that political questions can be solved using neoliberal logic such as cost effectiveness. This ultimately leads to a political landscape that is ruled by experts (not citizens) and ignorant of traditional democratic principles such as debate and deliberation. These issues are exacerbated by social media and the political polarization that has accompanied it, whereby technological factors such as digital echo chambers (i.e., digital information feedback loops), intensified by cognitive biases such as homophily (i.e., the tendency to gravitate towards those who are like you) make democratic contestation difficult not only through an inability to agree on what information is true (e.g., fake news) but through polarization which occurs beyond the direct control of any democratic agent. I use this context to answer my central question on the sorts of democratic solutions that can be formulated to respond to the recent surge in anti-elite, populist movements. Broadly put, I suggest transparent and participatory institutional frameworks and a state-sponsored political media platform as the best state responses to the rise in protest politics.

This research is important because it is the next frontier of political science. The invention of a new medium of communication is a rare phenomenon; the advent of the internet and the rise of social media has upended virtually every facet of our lives, particularly political processes. As noted by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan in 1964, “the medium is the message”<sup>7</sup> - this concept has never been more relevant than it is today, given the invention of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). “The medium is the message” refers to the idea that any ‘medium’ (for McLuhan, any extension of the person - basically any technology) has a profound effect on the particular ‘message’ being conveyed in the first place: “Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or

internet and all the new mediums that were created within it (and are still being created), which are drastically transforming political and social interactions. This warrants a re-analysis of all political and social phenomena.

### **CONTEXT: WHY PROTEST POLITICS?**

There is general consensus within democratic literature of an era of ‘post-politics’ as well as a neoliberalization of the democratic process in the West; these conditions have brought about a disenchantment with democratic process, thus contributing to the era of protest that we see today. Chantal Mouffe in *For a Left Populism* describes post-politics as the idea that there is a “consensus in the centre,” effectively rendering “the adversarial model of politics and the left/right opposition” obsolete. She connects this to “neoliberal globalization,” which reduced political questions “to mere technical issues to be dealt with by experts.”<sup>8</sup> These points are complementary to Wendy Brown’s notion of “de-democratization,” whereby ‘the people’ have lost democratic power. Brown indicates three reasons for this: (1) “major democracies today feature a merging of corporate and state power... evidenced in outsourced and privatized state functions... [and] the growing prevalence of investment bankers and corporate CEOs as ministers and cabinet secretaries,” (2) the transformation of ‘free’ elections to “circuses of marketing and management” whereby “citizens are wooed by sophisticated campaign marketing strategies that place voting on a par with other consumer choices,” and (3) neoliberalism as a political rationality, replacing democratic principles with neoliberal principles such as “cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy,” which ultimately reconfigures the state to be “a business management operation.”<sup>9</sup> These points suggest that ‘the people’ have been

---

message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs.” (p. 8)

<sup>8</sup>Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), p. 4-5.

<sup>9</sup>Wendy Brown, “We are all Democrats Now,” *Theory & Event* volume 13, issue 2 (December 2009): p. 2.

replaced by ‘the experts.’ Simply put, since democratic principles of choice and popular involvement are no longer significant in the face of neoliberal rationality (resulting in the discarding of adversarial democratic models), it is ‘the experts’ who are assumed to be most apt at finding the ‘objectively correct’ or ‘politically correct’ solution to each policy issue, drastically devaluing the role of ‘the people’ in modern democratic systems. Thus, it is logical to contend that the rise in protest is at least partially attributable to the effects of post-politics and the proliferation of neoliberal rationality within governance systems. Critically, these points provide a compelling narrative for the particular proliferation of anti-elite movements in the West.

Second, I consider the role of social media in the rise of protest politics, which has exacerbated political polarization. Political psychological literature points to the polarizing effects of social media through cognitive tendencies such as motivated skepticism,<sup>10</sup> heuristics,<sup>11</sup> and homophily.<sup>12</sup> These tendencies have been heightened by social media through mechanisms

---

<sup>10</sup>Charles S. Taber, Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* volume 50, issue 3 (June 2006): Motivated skepticism refers to a bias towards evidence: scientists and citizens alike “are prone to overly accommodate supportive evidence while dismissing out-of-hand evidence that challenges their prior attitudes.” (p. 755-756). In their study, they find evidence of “disconfirmation bias,” whereby participants “counter-argue the contrary arguments and uncritically accept supporting arguments,” as well as a “confirmation bias” whereby participants seek out confirmatory evidence. They conclude that these attitudes lead to “attitude polarization,” which “suggests that those on either side of the issues should become more attitudinally extreme in their positions.” (p. 764-765).

<sup>11</sup> David Moscrop, *Too Dumb for Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 125. Heuristics refers to the “mental shortcuts” that individuals make when reaching conclusions, which is helpful for knowing when to run away from a bear but can undermine political judgements, which usually require a thoughtful process.

<sup>12</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 9. Homophily refers to the tendency of individuals “to seek people who are like themselves or who agree with them,” which has been intensified by the revolutionizing of communication through the internet era which allows for homophily to blossom within digital communities across time and space.

such as digital echo chambers,<sup>13</sup> including micro-targeting and filter bubbles,<sup>14</sup> and the proliferation of fake news.<sup>15</sup> Focusing on fake news, the literature supports the notion that credible news organizations, so-called ‘gatekeepers,’ have lost support and influence.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of social media and fake news are not novel, as the power of propaganda is well-known throughout history, particularly through its use in World War I and II.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the introduction of new communication mediums and technology (the most common example being writing and the printing press, but applicable to radio and now the internet and social media) is known to uproot and transform the fundamentals of communication.<sup>18</sup>

Although some theorists would argue that polarization is in fact healthy for a democracy (i.e., it leads to more debate and exposure to different perspectives), I make the assertion that extreme polarization (e.g., modern US politics), is in fact a major driving force of the increase in

---

<sup>13</sup> John Brummette, Marcia DiStaso, Michail Vafeiadis, and Marcus Messner, “Read All About It: The Politicization of ‘Fake News’ on Twitter,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* volume 95, issue 2 (May 2018): p. 502-503. A digital echo chamber refers to the lack of exposure to conflicting views on digital mediums due to homophily, exacerbated by advanced technological tools such as search engines and algorithms meant to give users content they would be most interested in, which ultimately “impedes the notions of pluralism and the marketplace of ideas.”

<sup>14</sup> Moscrop, *Too Dumb for Democracy*, p. 155. ‘Micro-targeting’ refers to ads that are focused on “specific subsets of individuals,” while ‘filter bubbles’ refer to “an isolated information space that occurs when online algorithms show you only what they think you want to see.”

<sup>15</sup> Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, Messner, “Read All About It: The Politicization of ‘Fake News’,” p. 501. “...‘fake news’ stories received more engagement from Facebook users than the news stories of credible news organizations.”

<sup>16</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, p. 266-267. “... nobody was watching what spread; traditional gatekeepers, now dependent on [social media] platforms to spread their own stories, were critically weakened. The internet made it easy for anyone to quickly set up a webpage, and Facebook’s user interface made it hard to tell the legitimate news outlets such as the New York Times or Fox News apart from fake ones such as the ‘Denver Guardian’ [...] Mass media had already been losing credibility both due to its own missteps and failures, but also due to a sustained attack against its normative function as gatekeepers for facts.”

<sup>17</sup> Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, Messner, “Read All About It: The Politicization of ‘Fake News’,” p. 498. “The connection between ‘fake news’ and politics has been evident throughout history especially with the use of political propaganda by the British and the Americans in World War I, as well as by the Nazis and the Communists in World War II...”

<sup>18</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, p. 7. “... digital technologies are not the first technologies that have affected how we interact over space and time and have shaped our sense of community, identity, and the public sphere... Writing, for example, is among the earliest technologies that changed the relationship between our worlds and the passage of time.” The same principles can be applied to radio technology, which coincided with the use of propaganda in World War I and II.

protest and conflict in Western society. The result is a rise of anti-establishment sentiment which has manifested in the form of far-right and far-left extremist groups such as Antifa and Proud Boys, as well as alt-right, neo-Nazi/neo-Fascist, or white supremacist ideologies. Furthermore, polarization has contributed to political gridlock on key policy areas such as climate change and, in the case of the United States, federal COVID-19 response. Although debate is valuable to a healthy democracy, inflexible policy stances based on political resentment are detrimental to a democratic system, especially when rational and fact-based policy action is required (e.g., the climate crisis, COVID-19).

It is important to indicate a fundamental theoretical assumption of mine here: that it is most desirable to have a moderate political climate. The basis of this assumption goes to perhaps the most central question of all of political science: can human conflict be ‘solved’? My assumption contends that it is in our best interests to get as close as possible to ‘solving’ human conflict, i.e., to minimize conflict in the hopes of achieving a political society which can work together to achieve great things. However, as discussed above, supporters of radical democracy may contend that the current era of protest is healthy for society and democracy, as it proves that there is a healthy marketplace of ideas and ‘the people’ are fighting to have their voices heard. They may also argue that a moderate society which avoids conflict is unable to adapt to changing times and needs, or that the lack of exposure to different ideas or perspectives is a weakness. Although these arguments are fair, and I will not provide a detailed rebuttal here, I contend that adversarial or radical democratic philosophy ignores the realities of human cognitive behaviour discussed earlier and does not lead to satisfactory political outcomes in all cases; competition is healthy, but only in moderation. Strong political outcomes are difficult to achieve in a polarized



political system wrought with conflict. Thus, a moderate level of conflict which is aimed at reaching *consensus* is most desirable.

So far we have established the following: ‘the people’ have lost power due to the forces of post-politics and neoliberal rationality, compounded by the effects of social media which have aggravated political polarization while simultaneously breaking-down so-called ‘gatekeepers’ of facts and information (mass media), thus contributing to the rise of protest. This provides an explanation to our contextual question of ‘why is there a rise in protest politics today?’ The question we must now turn to is, what democratic solutions can states of the West implement in response? For this inquiry, I offer two solutions. Solution 1 attempts to take ‘the best of both worlds’ by retaining the rationality of ‘rule by the experts’ while facilitating public spaces and avenues for protest, participation, and democratic contention. Solution 2, on the other hand, attempts to bring politics into the digital realm by revamping the verification and distribution of information.

### **SOLUTION 1: RULE BY THE EXPERTS + RULE BY THE PEOPLE**

Solution 1 suggests institutional frameworks to enhance models of ‘rule by the experts’ on the one hand, and ‘rule by the people’ on the other. The ‘**Professional Committee**’ (PC) is proposed in response to the former, while the ‘**People’s Jury**’ (PJ) and ‘**Political Briefings**’ (PBs) is proposed for the latter. The Professional Committee attempts to improve the current ‘rule by the experts’ model of the West to make it more transparent, affording more accountability for political leaders and experts while enhancing the voice of experts as opposed to political leaders. The disadvantage of this approach is its preservation of some aspects of post-politics and neoliberal rationality: the PC does not directly return power to ‘the people,’ but rather attempts to improve the current role of experts in democratic decision making. That being

said, the PC is still more ‘people friendly’ as it takes power from political leaders and gives it to meritocratically chosen professionals. On the other hand, the People’s Jury and Political Briefings attempt to facilitate public communication while acting as a tool of democratic and popular oversight on politicians and the PC. The advantage of this approach is the creation of an *institutionalized* voice for ‘the people’ beyond voting.

### ***The Professional Committee: Reforming ‘Rule by the Experts’***

Currently, in the West, it is ‘rule by whomever gets voted in’ with the hopes that they follow the advice of, or appoint, adequate experts. This leaves too much discretion to elected political leaders while failing to provide a satisfactory directive role to experts and rational, fact-based policy. The handling of COVID-19 by President Donald Trump<sup>19 20</sup>, or the failure of governments to respond to the climate crisis, are striking red flags to the inadequacy of the current model.

The **Professional Committee (PC)** responds to this degradation of rational, fact-based policy, whereby a committee of qualified experts, divided into policy areas (environment, economy, health, etc.) and chosen meritocratically, are given the task of setting the agenda for each policy area via the submission of policy proposals to political leaders, who are expected to follow the proposals or publicly explain why not during a Political Briefing. The PC should suggest multiple policy approaches which spell out the pros and cons of each approach, with the

---

<sup>19</sup>Cameron Peters, “A detailed timeline of all the ways Trump failed to respond to the coronavirus,” *Vox*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21242003/trump-failed-coronavirus-response>. President Trump consistently went against or failed to endorse the advice of qualified health experts and spread misinformation about the virus (going as far as calling it a hoax), among a multitude of other failures.

<sup>20</sup>Aamer Madhani, Zeke Miller, “Trump plays down virus as he steps up pitch for second term,” *AP News*, October 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-donald-trump-fort-myers-media-florida-0a05d69faf3228057c7c95d188065a2d>. President Trump spread misinformation about the virus, went against the advice of leading infectious disease experts, and shunned the practice of mask-wearing while incorrectly citing a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study to suggest that mask wearing does not mitigate the spread of the virus. Dr. Anthony Fauci, a top infectious disease expert in the US, contradicted Trump when he noted that the country is not in fact ‘rounding the corner’ of the virus, based on data.

final decision being made by elected politicians. The PC will also go hand-in-hand with another solution I will suggest later, the Political Media Platform, to ensure transparency and facilitate a degree of digital participation from the public. If political leaders ignore PC proposals, the feature of transparency during Political Briefings and within the Political Media Platform will broadcast this to the public and hold the leader accountable for their choice to go against expert advice.

Operationalizing this concept further, I suggest that members of the PC are selected based on merit: experience in the field, education, attitude and character, society involvement, citizenship, and a standard of knowledge in other fields such as history and politics can be prerequisites for the position. Perhaps they can be deemed qualified by achieving a grade threshold on a ‘PC exam,’ before moving to later stages of the appointment process (interviews, background checks, etc.)<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, members of the PC are not alone: they are supported by a team of experts in their field who provide advice, information, and oversight to the members. This team of supporting experts may also be meritocratically chosen, or appointed by the chosen PC member. Ultimately, the PC pressures politicians to follow expert advice, while ensuring that experts are given a structural/institutional framework to facilitate the voice and influence required to put forward rational, fact-based policy into the public sphere.

PC-members would need to be chosen by an independent, third-party committee that is somewhat distanced from the government, or else the ‘pro-establishment’ nature of this solution would not be adequately counter-balanced. The Canadian model of Judicial Advisory Committees (JACs), who are responsible for “assessing the qualifications for appointment” of federal judicial applicants, is a potential real-world operationalization of how PC-member

---

<sup>21</sup> See Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: the Confucian Case* (Princeton University Press, 2020) for a more in-depth discussion and operationalization of meritocratic governance systems (p. 70-95).

appointments may occur. JACs, which are regionally based according to province, consist of “seven volunteer members representing the bench, the bar, and the general public,” three of which are ‘general public’ nominees which can be any member of the public regardless of legal training. The committees are appointed by the Government based on predetermined selection criteria. Each JAC submits three names, from which the Governor General makes the judicial appointment.<sup>22</sup> PC-member appointment bodies may follow a similar model of a committee composed of experts in the relevant field as well as members of the general public, except the final responsibility of appointment should remain within the independent appointment body. Additionally, it may be advantageous to have the ‘general public’ portion of the appointment body be elected by citizens to bolster independence from government, while experts of the relevant field are appointed by the Government and/or recommended by applicable existing professional organizations (e.g., doctors or engineers’ unions).

***The People’s Jury and Political Briefings: A Two-Pronged Approach to ‘Rule by the People’***

The PC does not do well in response to post-politics and anti-elitism, as it only slightly transfers power to the people via meritocratically chosen experts. The **People’s Jury (PJ)** and **Political Briefings (PBs)** are meant to counteract this deficiency by giving the tools to hold political leaders and experts accountable while facilitating a degree of public participation. The PJ relies on planned PBs, whereby the PC and political leaders are required to publicly communicate their policy proposals and decisions while being subject to on-the-spot criticism and questioning by the PJ.

A PB would function like a press briefing, except the PC and political leaders would be required by law to participate and they would occur in a regular (e.g., monthly) format. During

---

<sup>22</sup>Canadian Federal Government, “Guide for Candidates,” *Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada*, October 2016, <https://www.fja-cmf.gc.ca/appointments-nominations/guideCandidates-eng.html>.

PBs, the PJ would have time to discuss and respond to policy proposals and decisions. I will not operationalize this concept in detail here, however, I imagine that the PJ would be randomly selected, much like a legal jury, with potentially some experts or ‘moderators’ available to provide information and aid deliberations. The idea is to subject PC members and political leaders to public pressure for their proposals and decisions, raising the standard of accountability. This process also forces government to be transparent about their policy actions and decisions, dispelling the possibility of enacting policy away from the public eye. This also provides a path for holding politicians and their parties publicly accountable for their campaign promises, whereby the lack of which has fueled democratic disenchantment.

Furthermore, PBs can be sites of planned physical protest, with space and coverage set aside for protestors to be heard. A real-world model of this exists in Singapore, whereby a ‘Speaker’s Corner’ was established in Hong Lim Park in 2000: an “outdoor venue where [Singapore] citizens are permitted to give public speeches.” Essentially, the Speaker’s Corner is an institutionalized public space for issue discussion, with its first demonstration occurring in 2008, which led to an increase in events and activities, at times attracting crowds of hundreds or more.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, I have suggested new institutional frameworks meant to combine the rationality of rule by the experts with the accountability and inclusivity of rule by the people: the Professional Committee for the former, and the People’s Jury and Political Briefings for the latter.

## **SOLUTION 2: POLITICS ENTERS THE SOCIAL MEDIA ARENA**

---

<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Sim, “Speaker’s Corner,” *Singapore Government Agency Website*, September 2014, [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_515\\_2005-01-25.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_515_2005-01-25.html).

The **‘Political Media Platform’ (PMP)** is the ‘glue’ that brings together Solution 1 suggestions and responds to the contemporary political information sphere. The PMP not only aids in ‘rule by the experts’ and ‘rule by the people’ processes, but responds to the collapse of information ‘gatekeepers’ (mass media outlets) by providing a centralized, reliable source of information while institutionalizing and digitizing political information and policy. In this way, the PMP also responds to the proliferation of fake news by recording political discourse, dispelling anonymity, and subjecting the discourse to legal challenge.

### ***The Political Media Platform: Bringing Politics Into the Internet Age***

The primary function of the PMP is to digitize political discourse. This means (1) digitally documenting and broadcasting the actions of government, providing utmost transparency and accountability, (2) facilitating a medium whereby constituents may communicate with government and each other, effectively fulfilling the role of a ‘suggestion box’ and a political chatroom, and (3) acting as a platform of credible non-partisan information. These three functions respectively respond to (a) the lack of accountability and transparency to experts and leaders, (b) the lack of communication between government and the public, and (c) the collapse of information ‘gatekeepers’ and the proliferation of fake news.

The PMP must be launched as the ‘official’ platform for political discourse. This is why the PMP would likely need to be at least sponsored, if not fully launched, by the state. Party platforms, policy proposals/projects, voting information, election results, as well as Solution 1 suggestions must be published within the program. As a result, discourse published through the PMP must hold legal weight. These are the ways in which the PMP will ensure accountability and transparency in public discourse. Additionally, the PMP can be used to record public personal information such as citizenship, residency, driver’s licenses, etc. These factors remedy

the anonymity inherent within internet discourse, which currently allows for twitter bots and others to spread misinformation<sup>24</sup> or individuals to spread hate while rarely being held accountable. Such public personal information need not be publicly available to all, but should be easily accessible by authorities if legal action or accountability is necessary.

The PMP can also facilitate public participation. Through the use of ‘policy threads,’ users may explore policy proposals and projects by sorting by policy (i.e., environment, economy, etc.) or even jurisdiction (national, provincial, municipal). Users can submit criticism or suggestions through text-messages or likes/dislikes. The PMP could organize which policy threads are most visible based on a balance between how popular a policy thread is and how important the policy area really is; this allows for proportional representation as well as ‘affirmative action’ for uninteresting yet vital policy areas. Furthermore, the PMP could facilitate communication between all parties via comment sections, personal or group messages, and ‘pages’ that can be joined and followed. These participatory elements will, at the very least, provide a ‘feedback loop’ for government to gauge public sentiment on policy issues.

Finally, the PMP will act as an information gatekeeper by publishing fact-based journalism while censoring misinformation. This is the most problematic feature of the PMP, as it is subject to corruption and highly arbitrary. How can we be sure that the reporting is non-partisan, or that the state is not engaging in behind-the-scenes agenda setting, information suppression, or propaganda? Democratic systems of the West often require a *free* press who operates separately from the state. However, the free press of the West has resulted in highly partisan and polarizing journalism, hateful propaganda, willfully ignorant reporting, and

---

<sup>24</sup> David M. J. Lazer et. al., “The science of fake news,” *Science* volume 359, issue 6380 (March 2018): p. 1095. “By liking, sharing, and searching for information, social bots (automated accounts impersonating humans) can magnify the spread of fake news by orders of magnitude.”

influence from special interests. Therefore, while it is true that state-run media can be problematic, a free press also has its disadvantages, especially observable in the case of US mass media. As such, a ‘middle-ground’ approach may be the most beneficial, whereby an institutionalized standard of journalism (perhaps based on fact-checking and access to primary sources) is facilitated, while the independence and freedom of journalism continues to be protected. Perhaps a third-party oversight group can ensure that the process is not gamed, financial considerations can be predetermined (i.e., state grants cannot be redacted, private sponsors are not allowed, ad revenue is banned, etc.), or stories and their authors can be held legally accountable for breaking the rules or operating in ill-fate<sup>25</sup>.

Under this model, current media groups and systems would continue to exist, except they would compete with the PMP, who would be the ‘official’ platform for political information - institutionally setting itself apart from the free press. One way of facilitating this distinction is through the legal weight afforded to political discourse published on the PMP. For example, policy promises made by politicians on non-PMP media platforms would not be subject to legal or popular challenge via the PJ or PB, whereas a political leader’s campaign promises and governance platform, which would be required to be published on the PMP, would be subject to such challenges. At the same time, the continued existence of media organizations ensures that ‘freedom’ of information remains intact, allowing for the publication of stories that may not be approved or required by the PMP. However, free media groups should still be required to meet a standard of verifiable journalism or be subject to financial or legal repercussions. In short,

---

<sup>25</sup> Again, these solutions are not fool-proof: like all human institutions, they are subject to gaming and corruption. Although there is no room for it here, I believe some sort of oversight organization is the best solution to these issues, and is potentially the only way to achieve the ideal balance between authoritarian and democratic political systems.



willfully ignorant reporting, blatant lies, and hate speech should be banned and legally regulated as it significantly degrades public debate and political cooperation.

In order to work, the PMP must have a degree of enforcement. Political leaders and the PC would be required to publish their governance platforms, campaign promises, policy recommendations, etc., on the PMP, while users may be required to achieve a quota of policy engagement per year, for example. Incentives such as tax breaks or rebates can also be used to motivate public participation.

In summary, the PMP digitizes political discourse, thrusting politics into the realm of social media. Transparency and accountability, public-to-government communication and participation, and a revamping of journalism and credible information are the pillars of this solution.

## **COUNTER-ARGUMENTS & DISCUSSION**

Adopting a realist perspective, I concede that a redistribution of economic benefits and a comprehensive welfare state are likely more effective solutions for responding to contentious politics in the West, as opposed to the institutional solutions suggested above. This is not to say that the solutions discussed thus far would not be beneficial given the current state of affairs, but rather that there may be more ‘direct’ remedies. As such, one may argue that a contributing factor for the rise in protest politics or socio-political unrest in the West is a shrinking middle class, which has coincided with a growing gap between the rich and the poor.<sup>26 27</sup> Thus, improving economic conditions (or *perceptions* of economic conditions, perhaps) for ‘the

---

<sup>26</sup> Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 20. “The move from state globalism to individual globalism had brutal outcomes for the developed world; the most obvious was the collapse of middle classes and the rapid growth of social and economic gaps.”

<sup>27</sup> On a related note, perhaps what is important is an *improving* economic state - having needs met is not enough for people to be sated, rather their ‘needs’ are ever growing.

people' (typically the middle class) will likely have a profound effect on reducing contentious politics. I will not engage critically with the notion of economic redistribution; my purpose is to indicate that there is a potential counter-argument here which asserts that the rise of contentious politics can be attributed to deteriorating economic conditions. Thus, improving economic conditions (e.g., establishing a comprehensive welfare state) is a potentially more directly effective solution than what I have suggested. However, this 'welfare state' approach does not adequately address the issue of public participation and social media, which have been addressed by the solutions developed here. While a comprehensive welfare state can help solve many of the problems I have indicated, and should certainly be explored and practically operationalized by future scholars and policymakers, there remains social and institutional benefits of my proposals that cannot be realized by economic solutions alone.

Of course, there are potential drawbacks to each of my proposals. The Professional Committee and Political Media Platform can be critiqued as moves towards *even more* elite rule, which seem counter-intuitive in a context of contentious politics due to domination by the political elite. However, the meritocratic nature of the PC offsets such critiques by retaining the benefits of rational expert rule while encompassing a wider array of individuals into the political process, indicating the democratic affinity of this proposal. Furthermore, Political Briefings and the People's Jury work to counteract the elite nature of the PC by establishing institutional apparatuses to facilitate public contestation and hold political leaders accountable via transparency. On the other hand, while the PMP is vulnerable to authoritarian corruption by the state, the free press of the West has its fair share of poor outcomes (e.g., politically motivated and biased reporting). The PMP seems to be an effective 'happy-medium,' as it attempts to

institutionalize political information and participation while leaving intact the free press as it is today, perhaps with minor regulatory additions.

Another critique for the PMP comes from an appreciation for the marketplace of ideas<sup>28</sup>: why control or regulate political discourse if our goal is to reinvigorate public debate, should we not allow ideas to be publicly contested (i.e., accepted or discarded by society) in a *laissez-faire* system of discourse? The short answer is that, left to our own devices, forces outside of our direct control such as cognitive biases or digital algorithms significantly degrade the marketplace of ideas on digital mediums. For example, how can a democratic agent be expected to hear each perspective and engage with proponents of different viewpoints when their search algorithms only suggest content which conforms to their current views? Although I agree that a marketplace of ideas is important for a healthy democracy (and the PMP may disturb a ‘raw’ marketplace of ideas), we must seriously consider whether we can apply the same logic to digital mediums. I feel that we must move more towards digital control and regulation, because the current *laissez-faire* arrangements of digital discourse have arguably fallen victim to the forces of social media and cognitive bias.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I have set out in answering two questions: (1) what factors have contributed to a rise in protest and contentious politics and (2) what can states of the West do in response, namely to the rise of anti-elite populist movements? I refer to the concepts of post-politics and neoliberal rationality to illustrate disenchantment with democratic processes, while pointing to impacts of social media and fake news (exacerbated by cognitive tendencies and

---

<sup>28</sup> The ‘marketplace of ideas’ refers to the concept that government should be minimally involved with the regulation of speech and expression, whereby ideas are expected to succeed or fail based on their own merits, through popular contestation. (Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, Messner, “Read All About It: The Politicization of ‘Fake News’,” p. 502.)

digital algorithms) to indicate explanations to the rise in contentious politics. In response, I formulated institutional solutions that attempt to (a) reformat ‘rule by the experts’ via the Professional Committee, (b) reinvigorate ‘rule by the people’ via the People’s Jury and Political Briefings and (c) digitize political discourse and enhance solutions (a) and (b) via the Political Media Platform. This paper acts as an introduction and foundation of the ideas and their merits; I hope future scholars may improve upon these ideas and critique the analysis.

## Bibliography

Author unavailable. Analysis by Head, Jonathan of BBC News. "Thai protests: Tens of thousands gather again in mass defiance of government." *BBC News*. October 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54548988>. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Barrett, Ted, Raju, Manu, Nickeas, Peter. "US Capitol secured, 4 dead after rioters stormed the halls of Congress to block Biden's win." *CNN*. January 7, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/06/politics/us-capitol-lockdown/index.html>. Accessed January 15, 2021.

Brown, Wendy. "We are all Democrats Now." *Theory & Event* volume 13, issue 2. December 2009. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Brummette, John, DiStaso, Marcia, Vafeiadis, Michail, Messner, Marcus. "Read All About It: The Politicization of 'Fake News' on Twitter." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* volume 95, issue 2. May 2018.

Canadian Federal Government. "Guide for Candidates." *Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada*, October 2016. <https://www.fja-cmf.gc.ca/appointments-nominations/guideCandidates-eng.html>.

Hawkins, Kirk, Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Jha, Preeti. "Hong Kong protests: The flashpoints in a year of anger." *BBC News*. August 31, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53942295>. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Lazer, David M. J. et. al. "The science of fake news." *Science* volume 359, issue 6380. March 2018.

Madhani, Aamer, Miller, Zeke. "Trump plays down virus as he steps up pitch for second term." *AP News*, October 17, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-donald-trump-fort-myers-media-florida-0a05d69faf3228057c7c95d188065a2d>.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Moscrop, David. *Too Dumb for Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism*. New York: Verso, 2018.

Peters, Cameron. "A detailed timeline of all the ways Trump failed to respond to the coronavirus." *Vox*. June 8, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21242003/trump-failed-coronavirus-response>. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Ramos, Howard, Rodgers, Kathleen. *The Promise of Social Movement Societies*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015.

Sanchez, Ray. "Black Lives Matter protests across American continue nearly 2 months after George Floyd's death." *CNN*. July 23, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/23/us/black-lives-matter-protests-continue/index.html>. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Sim, Cheryl. "Speaker's Corner." *Singapore Government Agency Website*, September 2014. [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_515\\_2005-01-25.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_515_2005-01-25.html).

Taber, Charles S., Lodge, Milton. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* volume 50, issue 3. June 2006. Accessed October 19, 2020.

Tamir, Yael. *Why Nationalism*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

Tongdong Bai. *Against Political Equality: the Confucian Case*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.