The Politics of Quarantine: Reinventing Democracy

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Summary

The COVID19 pandemic has exposed many of the challenges representative democracies face. Principal among these is the growing miscommunication between governments, citizens and the media. As a consequence, citizens are largely left out of the democratic process and often fall victim to policies detrimental to their interests. Since whole populations are confined to their homes, people are unable to protest or practice political contestation in their traditional ways. In the meantime, it is becoming evident that numerous governments across the globe have failed to meaningfully engage and consult their citizens in matters related to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, I argue that many of the governmental responses to this crisis might have caused great losses of life and contributed to generating an economic catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude. Pandemics like COVID-19 can be prevented in the future, but only if changes are made to our democratic process.

Discussion

Community level political engagement structures build a stronger and more universal democracy. Citizens feel more empowered when being involved in decision making processes and are more inclined to be political. With increased political involvement, populations are better represented by their governments, allowing for more supportive forms of policy across all levels.

Recommendations

As a response to the pandemic we need to employ enhanced community-level political organization. This can be done through social media streams and local community involvement. Broadening the political structure in this manner encourages collaboration at the ground-level. Such a move brings with it policies that are more accommodating to everyone in the democratic community. Some examples of these could be open government platforms and the use of citizens assemblies in policy-making.

Background

The onset of the COVID19 pandemic has brought forward a situation previously unseen in our world. In a matter of weeks, nations on nearly every continent entered lockdowns and began to face public health pressures of varying degrees. Isolation, social distancing, and massive economic turmoil became the new normal, and citizens began to relinquish many of their civil liberties in order to face the crisis head-on. As we brace for months of distancing and reduced public life, not only must we adjust to this new reality, but we must work to solve many of the issues that have contributed to this crisis. But how can this be done when physical presence and collaboration are unrealistic? Traditional forms of protest and civic engagement have largely involved public displays and conferences[1].

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[1] Gwanhoo, L. & Young Hoon, K. (2012) An Open Government Maturity Model for social media-based public engagement, *Government Information*

When faced with a global pandemic, alternative forms of engagement must be called to action. What does a quarantine politics look like and how can communities contest in times of Pandemic? How can citizens hold their representatives accountable in times of exception? How can populations contribute to the democratic process while remaining in close proximity to their homes?

The interactions between citizens are the foundations of democracies[2]. When these interactions are reduced, so is progression. Under the new normal, governments excise much more power than the majority of citizens are accustomed to. Mainly, this is done through the increased role of emergency powers and the loss of the legislature as a major democratic process. We are advised to avoid leaving our homes, to minimize physical contact with friends and family and to avoid work if at risk. Many have lost their jobs and now rely on government aid packages and savings to get by. Through daily press briefings, government officials and public health officers disclose selected information to the public, with updates on case rates and fatalities. Often, case locations and projections are kept away from the public and released selectively, preventing a whole picture view of the nation's response. Though a worldwide vaccine effort is underway, it is ununified, as many nations refuse to collaborate and share data. With these filtered communication strategies and solitary scientific efforts, the world is trying to respond in the 'old' way. With less communication and collaboration, great differences occur between countries, paving the way for a multiplicity of challenges to arise. Though this outbreak is a tragedy, to some it is also an opportunity to learn from our mistakes, reset, and emerge as a new world.[3]

My research aims to identify some of the aforementioned problematic ways in which governments have related to their public since the beginning of the pandemic. As a response, this text hopes to crystalize different ways by which the public could become more involved in, and educated on, processes that are increasingly designed to control their lives. Additionally, I wish to highlight - with the help of specific examples taken from past pandemics and governmental restrictions - several ways in which political systems like Canada and the European Union can respond to this pandemic in an appropriate manner. Hopefully, in this way another tragedy of this kind can be averted.

Methodology

This research is supported by several academic publications, as well as multiple news media publications that originated during the first few months of the pandemic. It is important to add these publications, as they often draw from firsthand experiences of individuals in their respective homes. These voices provide us with a multiplicity of viewpoints from different corners of the planet.

Key findings

Under quarantine, organization and community engagement are a more complicated process. This is further accentuated by differences between different levels of government and different nations, which isolates formed communities and groups that span across borders. Though there are few comparable experiences to this one in modern times, smaller outbreaks of various hemorrhagic fevers remain in certain parts of the world[4]. It is well documented that these

Quarterly, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2012, Pages 492-503

[2] Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism. *American Behavioral Scientist, 57*(7), 920–942

[3] Michael Nagler, "The pandemic is showing that Gandhi's notion of 'practical idealism' is possible," Metta center for Non-Violence, April 21, 2020. https://wagingnonviolence.org/metta/2020/04/the-

pandemic-is-showing-that-gandhis-notion-of-practical-idealism-is-possible/

[4] Gillespie, A.M. *et al* (2016) Social Mobilization and Community Engagement Central to the Ebola Response in West Africa: Lessons for

outbreaks greatly benefit from elevated levels of community engagement over top-down power structures in responses[5]. There are several different communication and organization strategies that have been suggested by UNICEF and the WHO after these outbreaks that are committed to a community engagement framework[6]. When community leaders are trained in a response and management program that is simple and efficient, response times and mobilization during public health emergencies is ten-fold more effective[7]. Ideally, a more educated leader makes for a more educated public. Having a more educated public increases the likelihood of guidelines to be followed and projections to be achieved.

The ability to protest and contest a given political system is integral to democracy. Equally so, a government's ability to deliver news and policy information to the public is one of the most effective ways to unify a community in times of great need[8]. Though the crisis prevents organized public action, protests continue in many nations, albeit in alternative forms. In numerous cases, alternative forms of political engagement have been found to be as effective as traditional ones such as public protest. These alternatives can be found in socially distanced groups or in social media structures. Many recent studies have shown that there are positive correlations between social media usage and political opinion expression[9]. Here in Canada, we can look specifically to the rise in Twitter usage as a

means of protesting for Indigenous rights in the past few years. Indigenous rights movements have used Twitter as a platform for both organization and identity reassertion[10]. These platforms provide organizers with various tools for image sharing, information briefings, live updates and communication, all in a safe manner that does not heavily rely on physical presence. With the help of social media platforms like these, individuals have become more politically engaged. This raises the question of why governments cannot reciprocate by opening meaningful consultation in times of crisis.

With a rise in the use of social media and digital platforms as political organization vehicles during quarantine, governments should work to implement feedback systems that are more heavily based in social media and online settings. Through these streams, community leaders and citizens can be more directly consulted on policies and actions taken by governments at multiple levels. Such a move would allow for a more unified stance regarding specific issues. A proposed system is the open government model, which involves multi-layered consultation efforts between governments and citizens regarding new policy[11]. More directly, the creation of a citizen's assembly would bring increased decision making to citizens[12]. Under this model, citizens are able to make decisions on highly sensitive issues without having to wait for parliaments and elected officials to debate them. Models such as these are valuable for both their reach and transparency[13]. In an

Future Public Health Emergencies *Global Health: Science and Practice*

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid

[8] Gillespie, A.M. *et al* (2016) Social Mobilization and Community Engagement Central to the Ebola Response in West Africa: Lessons for Future Public Health Emergencies *Global Health: Science and Practice*

[9] Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism.

[10] Raynauld, V. *et al* (2018) Canada is #IdleNoMore: exploring dynamics of Indigenous political and civic protest in the Twitterverse, Information, Communication & Society,21:4, 626-642

[11] Gwanhoo, L. & Young Hoon, K. (2012) An Open Government Maturity Model for social media-based public engagement, *Government Information Quarterly,* Volume 29, Issue 4, 2012, Pages 492-503

[12] Carson, L. (2008) "Creating Democratic Surplus through Citizens' Assemblies," Journal of Public Deliberation: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

[13] Gwanhoo, L. & Young Hoon, K. (2012) An Open Government Maturity Model for social media-based public engagement, *Government Information*

immensely stressful time where governmental control over health data and policy action is high, access to transparent data, reasoning and purpose for all policies and decisions would allow for far more collaborative work between different groups[14].

Recommendation

These findings recognize a key resolution to take forward for the duration of this pandemic: the employment of community-based political organization and involvement in policy making. This can be implemented through community education and social media initiatives. Social media represents a valuable, untapped tool that can be used increasingly in public consultation and information during the crisis. Harnessing social media as a medium for the citizenry to have a democratic say is important. Such involvement will improve communication and participation as individuals and nations address the numerous challenges that they face. For example, political organization and protest in refugee camps is a complicated issue. Political action and organization from within refugee camps is largely based on solidarity movements and demands for human rights to be followed[15]. Recognizing the importance of such actions gives governments an idea of what issues matter most to refugees who are confined to the limbo of the camp. Such activity allows governments to be better informed when preparing policies affecting refugees[16].

Quarterly

[14] Ibid

[15] Ataç, I. *et al* (2016) Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins, Citizenship Studies, 20:5, 527-544

[16] Holzer, E. (2013), Law in a Refugee Camp. Law & Soc'y Rev, 47: 837-872

Though individuals in camps engage in protests and displays of insubordination, they are limited to the resources available to them within their particular camp. Such action, therefore, often lacks collaboration and coordination between different refugee camps making refugee struggles seem like random unconnected acts. Notwithstanding, I argue that should camps be given access to social media platforms and networked collaboration between camps be facilitated, universal refugee demands would be better represented. Governments and civil rights groups would be better able to help refugees access programs and services that are of the highest priority. Most importantly, the voices of refugees would be more often heard. Within communities and across government the implementation of a more horizontal decision-making process, coupled with increased transparency and accountability, will improve our decision-making systems and help communities be better prepared for future pandemics.

Reflection

Though the world has faced many tragedies and continues to do so, global pandemics differ greatly. These wars have an unseen enemy, and they continue to threaten the very pillars of our societies. Perhaps humans can embrace the current conjuncture as an opportunity to change the way in which we engage with each other and the living earth. Despite the troubling times that we face, there remain amazing instances of global aid, transnational unity and support. The resilience of the human race can be seen in action nearly every day, and it must be harnessed to move forward when this pandemic comes to an end[17]. To some, this quarantine

[17] Baker, P. C. (2020). 'We can't go back to normal': how will coronavirus change the world? the Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/how-will-the-world-emerge-from-the-

represents a forced opportunity to improve our structures. As Gandhi practiced his 'practical idealism', wherein he capitalized on his times in jail to self-improve, we have the opportunity to do so as well[18]. There is no going back to normal. With a more united and organized world that embraces multiplicity humanity might begin anew.

Interesting questions raised by this research

Our studies of the role of social media in protest and civic engagement have raised several questions. Principal among these is the potential for the declaration of social media usage as a human right. Though there are public television and radio programs, social and digital media are largely controlled by private, for-profit service providers. With the ever-increasing role of social media and digital platforms as tools in the democratic process, governments should consider guaranteed, universal access to certain levels of media technology.

The idea of social media as a human right raises potential questions regarding government censorship and information rights. The possibility of social media platforms and online spaces that are controlled by citizens and free of government constraints opens the potential for new forms of political organization previously unseen.

Key References

1. Carson, L. (2008) "Creating Democratic Surplus through Citizens' Assemblies," Journal of Public Deliberation: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

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[18] Michael Nagler, "The pandemic is showing that Gandhi's notion of 'practical idealism' is possible," Metta center for Non-Violence, April 21, 2020. https://wagingnonviolence.org/metta/2020/04/the-pandemic-is-showing-that-gandhis-notion-of-practical-idealism-is-possible/

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COVIDA

The COVIDA collective aims to provide a fresh, transformative perspective on global politics. Founded in Victoria BC, we are a dynamic and collaborative group of engaged civic citizens and academics with various backgrounds ranging from biology to law. We advise global policy with the goal of promoting sustainability, democracy, and equality.