

A new approach to political time in Canada

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Introduction

If the year is not yet 2640, then the pipe organ at St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany is scheduled to be somewhere between the beginning and end of a musical composition by John Cage. The performance of Cage's "*Organ²/ASLSP*" began on 5 September 2000 with a seventeen month rest. Its first notes were heard in 2003 (BBC News 2003). (Prior to 6:00pm local time on 5 February of that year, the only sound the concert produced was that of the organ's bellows being inflated.) The most recent chord change – the piece's fifth – occurred in February of 2009. The next is scheduled for 5 July 2010.¹

The second half of the title of Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP* is an acronym: it stands for "as slow as possible." Because the composer neglected to provide temporal instructions beyond those suggested by the title, previous performances of *Organ²/ASLSP* have fluctuated in length. A typical performance lasts between twenty and seventy minutes. By contrast, the St. Burchardi performance is scheduled to go on for 639 years – roughly the life of a pipe organ. The official website of the performance provides a sense of the show's pace: "Since some notes will not be needed for decades, pipes need only be added when donations suffice" (Deutsche Welle 2008).

The St. Burchardi performance is bold to the point of absurdity. It strains normal conceptions of what is physically possible (do constantly playing pipes last centuries? will there even still be humans to change the sandbags hanging from the pedals of the organ six hundred years from now?), to say nothing of how it challenges our aesthetic sensibilities. However, the performance in Germany has gained international attention not simply because it is a grand feat, but because it is a grand feat of slowness in an age dominated by speed. It is an exception to the norm, its cardinal virtue being its roguishness. A 639-year concert is unique not only in quantitative terms (that is, because it lasts more hours than most shows), but in its qualitative nature (that is, its odd devotion to slowness). The logic behind Cage's composition is remarkable because it runs contrary to "the logic of social acceleration [which] is decisive for the structural and cultural evolution of contemporary society" (Rosa 2009, 108).

The pace of life is speeding up. The trend makes for good reason to interpret Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP* as resistance to what reporter and essayist James Gleick (1999) has dubbed, "the acceleration of just about everything." The St. Burchardi Church performance reminds us not to overlook "those strange corresponding phenomena of

¹ For more on this project, see: <http://www.john-cage.halberstadt.de/new/index.php?seite=dasprojekt&l=e>

social deceleration” (Rosa 2003, 5); however, it is speed – more specifically, the complex quickening of technological, cultural, and structural features of life – that dominates contemporary human existence in the industrialized West.

We all notice that events around us seem to take place faster all the time. Our computers process huge sums of information at ever more impressive velocities. What was experienced as being extraordinarily speedy just yesterday (for example, a 66 MHz word processor or an ISDN Internet connection) now seems extraordinarily slow. The shot lengths in movies, advertisements, and even documentaries have increased by a factor of fifty, and the speed with which speeches are delivered in parliament has risen by 50 percent since 1945. Athletes break speed records with frightening regularity. Although the velocities of trains, planes, and cars no longer appear to be increasing by much, traffic planners continue to promise abbreviated travel times. The time that elapses between an earthquake, a disease, or a novel fashion in New Zealand and my being informed about it is getting shorter every year. Speed dating and drive-through funerals remind us that even basic life activities appear to be speeding up: fast food, fast learning, fast love. Neighbors, fashions and lifestyles, jobs and lovers, political convictions, and even religious commitments appear to change at constantly heightened rates. (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009, 1)

This paper discusses ways in which political science in Canada could benefit from the growing literature that examines processes of social acceleration. I argue that new and rich understandings of our political institutions, political cultures, and political histories will result from closer attention to the myriad ways in which political time is speeding up. Political scientists in the US, UK, and Europe have begun to bring into contact questions about politics and questions about social acceleration; however, by contrast, there is a paucity of this kind of research in Canada.

The primary contribution of a new approach to political time is its ability to generate new questions and provoke new ideas about how dominant conceptions of political legitimacy are constantly reproduced and resisted through relationships among citizens, institutions, and communications media. Notwithstanding the specific ways in which liberal democracy represents itself as the sole legitimate (if not natural) way of doing politics (cf. Hall et al. 1978, 61; Williams 1975, 53), liberal democracy is, like all political systems, a creature of history. Even when political systems appear not to change, they are, of course, not static. On the contrary, political systems are alive; and their vitality is dependent upon motion – movement, exchange, dialogue, labour, action, conflict – the flow of people and ideas. It follows, therefore, that a thorough understanding of our ways of doing politics must examine the temporal rhythms of political life. This is especially true at a moment when scholars from numerous academic disciplines, not to mention people outside the academy, are expressing concern over the feeling that the world is speeding up (ex. Carver 1997; Castells 2000; Chesneaux 2000; Comor 2008; Connolly 2000, 2002; Goodin 1998; Harvey 1989; Hassan and Purser 2007; Giddens 1990; Patterson 1998; Pierson 2004; Rosa 2003, 2009; Schedler and Santiso 1998; Scheuerman 2004, 2009; Virilio 2006; Wajcman 2008; Wolin 1997).

Furthermore, a new approach to political time has the potential to strengthen not only our research, but our teaching. Because one of the central reasons for my interest in political time stems from my experiences teaching “Introduction to Canadian Government” at Ryerson University, it is important to point out the link between research on social acceleration and specific questions of pedagogy. For example, part

of what makes a new approach to political time in Canada necessary is its ability to respond to undergraduate students' characterizations of Canadian politics as "boring", "stuffy", "old fashion", or "out of touch with young people." To be clear: I am not suggesting that the social acceleration literature is but a pedagogical gimmick – a flashy foreign object smuggled into the classroom with the purpose of awakening sleepy students. Rather, I argue that thinking about our central political institutions and practices with the aid of the concept of social acceleration is a potentially powerful way of demonstrating the significance and relevance – yes, even the excitement – of institutions and practices that can easily seem stagnant or old fashioned.

The paper is organized into two sections. The first reviews literature on social acceleration with the purpose of identifying assumptions and debates that ought to be of special interest to students of politics in Canada. The second builds on questions and concepts from the social acceleration literature in order to propose new ways of approaching traditional objects of study in Canadian political science.

I. What is social acceleration?

The Futurist movement of the early twentieth century published its first manifesto in 1909 in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. The document exalted "aggressive motion" and declared that "the magnificence of the world has been enriched by a new beauty, *the beauty of speed*" (Marinetti, italics in original). The Futurists may have been unique in their veneration of the quickening pace of life – a later Futurist work by Marinetti (1991, 103) demanded that "one must persecute, lash, torture all those who sin against speed" – but from at least the latter half of the nineteenth century, there has been a group of critics in the social sciences and beyond that have attempted to identify and explain the significance of a sometimes more and sometimes less ambiguous sense that the pace of life is quickening. Today, more scholars than ever before are grappling with issues of social speed-up. Not all would agree with Henry Adams' claim that "a law of acceleration" has governed social life since ancient times (1999, 407-414); however, despite the unique forms of acceleration that we are experiencing at the start of the twenty-first century, most critics today acknowledge the extent to which the terms of debate were shaped by classic thinkers such as Marx, Simmel, Dewey and Schmitt.

Of these four, Marx's (1976) explanation is perhaps the best known. In short, Marx argues that increases in the speed of technologies and social relations can be traced back to the profit imperative that drives the capitalist economy. In order for individual capitalists to increase their rates of profit (a demand that must be met if capitalists are not to be driven out of business or taken over by increasingly profitable competitors), then they must constantly devise new ways to drive down the cost of production. "Starting from simplified notions of accumulation, Marx gradually explicates the complex dynamics of an interconnected triple accelerator of: increasing accumulation of capital, increasing productive forces of labour, and an increasing composition of capital" (Reuten in Jessop 2009, 141). As a result, we see not only a trend toward the development of increasingly efficient labour processes – faster and faster ways of producing more and more widgets for less and less money – but also the development of faster means of transportation, communication, and market exchange.

In Gross' (1985) words, the temporality of capitalism threatens all non-economic rhythms of time, for "capitalism requires the constant unsettling of routine and a rapid turnover of needs, wants, and desires that can be commodified, revamped, and then commodified again" (75). In sum (although in admittedly crude terms), the Marxist perspective is powerful because it makes a compelling argument for understanding acceleration in everyday life (at the level of culture, or the superstructure) as being a product of the insatiable demand for speed in processes of capitalist production (at the level of the economic base). Informed by Marx's understanding of capitalism's need for speed, concepts such as Harvey's *time-space compression* or Giddens' *time-space distancing* "characterize the shrinking time horizons for decision-makers and mark their ability to take advantage of declining transportation and communication costs to spread decisions over a wider and more diverse space" (Mosco 1996, 13).

Simmel's (2004) understanding of social acceleration is also intimately connected to the capitalist economy; but whereas Marx is primarily interested in the mode of production, by contrast, Simmel focuses on the temporal effects of changes in the money supply. At the level of the individual, Simmel argues that access to greater sums of money encourages higher levels of consumption; and as the substantial body of literature on consumer culture points out, this helps to quicken the rate at which individuals replace their collections of commodities and, subsequently, spurs greater demand for commodity production (see Featherstone 1990; Schor 1998; Slater 1997). If, as Giddens (1991, 81) argues, late modernity is best understood as a mass identity crisis in which "we have no choice but to choose" who we are, as no coherent fixed identity is assigned to us at birth, then part of what feeds this crisis is the cyclical process in which consumers search for identities, while producers offer a constantly-expanding slate of identity options.

At the social level, Simmel argues that the geographic concentration of monetary activity serves as a motor for a more varied and therefore *faster* existence:

The tendency of money to converge and accumulate, if not in the hands of individuals then in fixed local centres; to bring together the interests of and thereby individuals themselves; to establish contact between them on a common ground and thus, as determined by the form of value that money represents, to concentrate the most diverse elements in the smallest possible space – in short, this tendency and capacity of money has the psychological effect of enhancing the variety and richness of life, that is of increasing the pace of life. (505)

Certainly Simmel is critical of the deleterious effects of social acceleration – the ways in which shifts in the money economy reinforce Erikson's (2001) "tyranny of the moment" by promoting individualism and heightening social risk. However, as the previous quotation suggests, he is not blind to the ways in which access to money makes it easier to acquire a greater variety of things, and thus to offer the promise of a better life. Alive to multiple dimensions of the issues he addresses, Simmel is a serious student of the contradictions of capitalism and speed. It is out of this tradition that emerges contemporary work on the "ambiguity of speed" – work such as that of William E. Connolly (2000), who argues that "democratic pluralists must embrace the positive potentialities of speed while working to attenuate its most dangerous effects" (598).

By contrast, John Dewey sees hardly anything good about processes of social acceleration. Anticipating Postman's (1985) polemic to follow fifty years later, one of the primary concerns of Dewey's 1927 classic, *The public and its problems*, is what he views as the anti-democratic consequences of developments in communications technologies. Regardless of its precise cause, the proliferation of forms of amusement, argues Dewey, is eroding American democracy. Making matters worse, the numbing of the civic spirit goes on in a cyclical process: "The mania for motion and speed is a symptom of the restless instability of social life, and it operates to intensify the causes from which it springs" (140). The annihilation of distance in the era of the telegraph; the ceaseless movement of people in the age of high-speed trains and automobiles; the endless diversions of the growing entertainment industry – all of this has fouled the grounds necessary for "a public readily to locate and identify itself." Echoes of Dewey's skepticism about the possibility of robust civic engagement can be heard from critics in today's high-speed world who disparage emergent forms of "slacktivism", or thin, web-based modes of political participation (Siegle 2005; Spark 2009). In a similar vein, Virilio argues that "the constant increase in acceleration... is leading to nothing other than 'the liquidation of the world,' to the realization of the one original idea the West has produced: nothingness, the being of nothing, the void" (Breuer 2009, 215-216).

Carl Schmitt's (1988, 2004) work views social acceleration as being inextricably bound up in the institutional mechanisms of the liberal democratic state. In short, Schmitt argues that liberal democracy, contrary to its promise of a politics rooted in widespread, reasoned deliberation, has in fact become an anti-democratic, perpetual lawmaking machine. The liberal democratic state's endless attempts to regulate the increasingly complex relationships that constitute modern social life leads Schmitt to conclude that it is not the careful analysis of legislators, but liberal democracy's "unrestrained technicism" that promotes and requires greater and greater speed in the political sphere.

In theory, representative democracy is deliberative; and, therefore, it is inherently slow (Carver 1997; Chesneaux 2000; Dahl and Tufte 1973; Scheuerman 2004, 2009; Wolin 1997). The purpose of political debate in a liberal pluralist society is not only to produce policy outcomes, but also to legitimize the policymaking process by allowing diverse actors and groups to forward competing views (cf. Skogstad 2003, 956). In practice, however, Schmitt says that parliamentary democracies are governed not by the will of popular representatives, but by comparatively more authoritarian decision-making bodies – namely, political executives and the courts. The problems of modernity are too complex, plentiful, urgent, and potentially devastating to be left to the vicissitudes of robust democratic debate; for

in a high-speed society subject to constant change, the half-life of even the most well conceived legislative norms suffer from dramatic decline, as statutes become ever more outmoded at increasing rates. Forced to regulate our dynamic, fast-moving capitalist economy, for example, relatively slow-moving citizens and their elected representatives may finally manage to agree on some set of legal rules, only to learn that the social and economic preconditions of legislation have dramatically shifted in the meantime. (Scheuerman 2009, 298)

The most comprehensive contemporary explanation of social acceleration is that of the German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa (2003, 2009). Whereas many critics over the

past century have touched upon the quickening pace of social life, Rosa is one of the first to offer a formal theory of social acceleration. Rosa argues that the process can be divided into three dimensions (see 82-87). Examples of *technological acceleration* include advances in systems of global transportation, the immediate access to consumer capital produced by the spread of automatic teller machines (ATM), the instant photofinishing offered by digital cameras, and continual increases in the speed of web-based communication. The *acceleration of social change* refers to the ways in which fundamental social relations in late modernity – occupations, romantic partnerships, areas of residence, to name a few – tend to change far more frequently today than they did in earlier epochs. Furthermore, the fact that humans are now able to do more things, to have more experiences, within shorter time-spans than ever before, is part of what Rosa calls the *acceleration of the pace of life*. More than simply changing jobs, lovers, and houses more often, we are drawn into an increasingly varied range of work and domestic activities. Crucial to Rosa's theory is the argument that although these three dimensions operate on different levels of social life and, therefore, must be distinguished from one another, together they form "a closed, self-propelling process" (89). In other words, technological developments, shifts in social relations, and the experiences and demands for faster ways of living are mutually reinforcing.

What drives these three dimensions of social speed-up? Rosa identifies three motors: the economic motor, the cultural motor, and the structural motor. Following Marx, Rosa acknowledges that "the logic of capitalism connects growth with acceleration in the need to increase production (growth) as well as productivity (which can be defined in terms of time as output per unit time)" (89). However, despite being a crucial part of contemporary processes of social acceleration, the economic motor is not by itself a sufficient explanation. Independent from capital's need for speed, numerous forces in late modern Western culture foster the presumption that the rich life is the one that includes the widest variety of experiences (see Leiss et al. 2005; Twitchell 1999). In a secular age, "the idea of the fulfilled life no longer supposes a 'higher life' waiting for us after death, but rather consists in realizing as many options as possible from the vast possibilities the world has to offer. To taste life in all its heights and depths and in its full complexity becomes a central aspiration of modern man" (Rosa 2009, 90-91). Consider the modern iconic image of the outstretched arm snapping a cell phone camera at anything and everything that moves. Consider the primacy of "multitasking", the surge in interdisciplinary research, or the popularity of reality television shows that promise immediate household, or even whole identity makeovers. Finally, "social change is accelerated by modern society's basic structural principle of functional differentiation" (92). The complex connections among political, economic, artistic, legal, and scientific institutions produce widespread temporal disparity. According to systems theorists such as Nicholas Luhmann, the (hopeless) attempt to bring the rhythms of social life into harmony has the unintended result of accelerating temporal rhythms in general.

The foregoing is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the literature on social acceleration, but an introduction to a handful of central concerns and analytical tools in debates about shifts in the patterns of time. The following section addresses the question of how these kinds of debates could help to reinvigorate the study of politics in Canada.

II. Social acceleration and political science in Canada

Parliament is Canada's supreme political institution (cf. Docherty 2005; Smith 2003, 2007.) It houses the democratically elected representatives of the people. It is the only place in which laws are both debated and created. Symbolically speaking, parliament is the heart of the nation-state; and for reasons both symbolic and functional, its proceedings are followed closely by mainstream news outlets. Certainly in an era of strict party discipline parliament serves more as a means of holding the cabinet responsible for its actions than it does as a policy-generator; however, this does not diminish the significance of the institution. Moreover, when parliament is viewed as a whole – that is, when its partisan struggles (both among and within parties), committee work, fora for extra-parliamentary interaction, mediated presence, and so on, are taken into account – it becomes clear that the institution is much more complex than a rubberstamp for executive decisions. Democracy is a way of doing politics based upon dialogue, and Parliament is the political talk-shop par excellence.

Parliament is also central to the marking of political time. Consider the temporal rhythms of the parliamentary calendar. Each legislative session begins with the ceremonial Opening of Parliament – a ritual that looks back upon Canada's British heritage at the same time as it looks forward to a new legislative agenda. Legislative authority is bestowed upon a collection of legislative days. The legislative day runs on a strict schedule, with specific amounts of time set aside for petitions, introduction of bills, statements from members, oral questions, private members' business, debate, and so on. At the call to vote, the division bells ring for two, five, ten, or more minutes. By design, each parliamentary session includes a handful of "Opposition Days" – periods of time in which opposition parties take control of the legislative agenda – and timetabling of government business is a matter of the greatest importance. In the words of CES Franks (1987, 128), "timetabling is not just a technical issue of tinkering with procedural rules. It is a vital question of the relationships between the wielder of political powers and the subjects, between government and governed; it sets the terms and conditions by which the people's representatives in the House of Commons debate, examine, and approve or reject proposals for the use of power and authority."

Notwithstanding the myriad ways in which parliament organizes time and, in turn, is shaped by the organization of time, there are no models in political science in Canada for studying parliament as a political timepiece. To be sure, students of parliament often discuss the allocation and use of time in the House and Senate, and time is at least tangentially related to a host of other well-researched topics. However, in the first instance, parliamentary studies in Canada tend to be more interested in, for example, the representational function of MPs, the exercise of party discipline, the balance of power among MPs and the executive, the relationship between the House and the Senate, and other matters more expressly functional than cultural or symbolic (cf. Docherty 2005; White 1997). According to Jonathan Malloy (2002, 1), the prevailing concern among students of parliament for issues relating to the exercise of responsible government "has influenced and shaped the study of legislatures away from positive research in favour of normative defenses of existing practices and past traditions." Developing new research that focuses on the temporal aspects of Parliament would go

some distance toward answering Malloy's call "to move away from the defensive and categorical modes of the responsible government approach, toward greater engagement with alternative conceptions of representation and democratic accountability" (17).

Specifically, a temporal approach to legislatures would open the possibility of examining parliamentary time in light of key debates in the social acceleration literature. For example, a temporal approach to legislatures might begin by examining empirical shifts in the timelines of parliamentary debate, and then move to a broader level of abstraction with the purpose of inquiring about the context in which such shifts have occurred. It is widely understood that legislatures spend less time than ever debating individual policies (Docherty 2005; Franks 1987; Smith 2007). Whereas the rhythms of legislative debate once tended to follow the ebb and flow of different party interests – that is, debates would last until all members wishing to speak had done so – the convention of all-party negotiation has given way to government's strict control over House time. Describing the situation in Ontario, White (1997) notes that "time limits have been placed on MPPs' speeches in most circumstances, and governments of all political stripes have increasingly come to rely on time-allocation mechanisms to limit debate on important or controversial measures" (84). The timing of legislative debate, therefore, has become organized less and less around the unique qualities of individual policy debates, and more and more by the uniform desire of the government to control parliamentary proceedings in order to pass legislation. The government views debate as an obstacle to the implementation of its policy agenda, and chooses institutional efficiency over democratic exchange. An image of Schmitt's "motorized legislator" springs to mind.

In Canada, it is not new to point out the fact that the amount of time allotted for legislative debate is shrinking. The trend tends to be interpreted as further evidence of the growing power of the executive, and the diminishing relevance of Canadian legislatures. What is new, however, is to argue that temporal trends such as this one need to be analyzed in a theoretical context that extends beyond concern for the maintenance and authority of parliament. To clarify, my suggestion is that the acceleration of legislative debate ought to be discussed in relation to a deeper concern for protecting the necessarily slow pace of what Wolin (1997) calls "political time" against attack from the powerful "temporalities of economy and popular culture [which] are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence." The rationalization of deliberation through the acceleration of House debate should sound alarm bells; for, as Chesneaux (2000, 410-411) warns, "there is no such thing as 'instant democracy'." On the contrary,

in a democratic society, speed does not enjoy the unchallenged position it occupies in the sphere of economics and applied economics. Democracy depends basically on maturation, as a relation to time which provides the 'sovereign people' with a better chance to express itself and to shape its own future. [...] Politics deals with humans living in society; they cannot be replaced by machines and money.

Strict time allocation and the use of closure in the House are troubling because of what they suggest about the impotence and irrelevance of Canada's supreme

democratic institutions. However, they also raise questions about Canadian democracy that stretch beyond the legislative precinct. For example, we might ask: apart from the obvious desire of governments to pass legislation (a desire that is hardly new), what are driving forces behind the acceleration of House debate? What is it about the political culture of today that permits, if not encourages, the apparent rush to get bills through parliament? Are we to assume that this moment in history is so much more complex, more sophisticated, more interesting, more demanding than any previous moment (a conceit common to virtually all moments past) that a faster legislative engine is not only to be expected, but is unavoidable? In what ways can the phenomenon be understood as a result of Rosa's economic, cultural, and structural motors of social acceleration? What is the role of communication technologies in the process? Is it possible to identify other trends in the sphere of democratic debate that are experiencing a similar kind of acceleration? We know that the length of quotations from politicians in television news is shrinking (Basin 2007; Hallin 1992); but what about the length of op-eds and editorials, for instance, over the same historical period? What about leaders' debates? Schudson (1992) compares today's ninety-minute leader's debates to the day-long rhetorical contests that were the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, but what about the evolution of time in leaders' debates in Canada? Is it possible to detect a similar pattern?

Of course, bearing in mind the work of Connolly (2000) and others who note the benefits of more efficient democratic processes and the role of new technologies therein (ex. Barber 1998/1999, esp. 582-584), there is also the matter of interpreting empirical findings. In other words, if democratic debate is indeed speeding up, is this necessarily a bad thing? Furthermore, we need to ask whether there are examples of democratic *deceleration* – the slowing of different kinds of debate, perhaps – cabinet meetings, or constituency town-halls, parliamentary committees – or the lengthening of the policy development process in general – that challenge the assumption that the shrinking of legislative debate is representative of broader trends.

Questions such as these push us further and further away from the issue of parliamentary speed-up; but at the same time, they draw us further into larger questions about whether the pace of politics is quickening in a more general sense. Putting to one side, therefore, questions about the temporal aspects of legislatures, it is logical to focus on an example of a different set of relationships within the Canadian regime that will also be understood in new and productive ways when viewed through the lens of social acceleration: namely, relationships among citizens, and between citizens and elections. A temporal approach to these sorts of relationships would do well to begin by focusing on one of the following three areas:

1. Time and citizen communication

Research under this heading would explore the relationship between time and the ability of citizens to communicate with one another. The breadth of the focus would allow for vastly different approaches; however, a common thread would run through questions about the temporal conditions under which citizens come to know themselves and others as citizens, and how these ways of knowing serve to position citizens as particular types of actors in Canadian democracy. For example, a longitudinal study of

the capacity for movement among citizens – say, examining the evolving means of transportation and travel patterns between 1763 and the present – has the potential to shed light upon not only issues surrounding the acceleration of political life, but also the democratic consequences of what we can safely assume has been the proliferation and popularization of faster means of travel. How has the meaning of citizenship changed in relation to the development of the steam-engine, automobile, mass commercial airlines, and mass public transit?

A different example of research under this banner: studying changes in the temporality of citizenship motivated by advances in communication technologies. Even if utopian visions of a wired public sphere are wrong, and “the internet has not created the sorts of linkages between individuals and groups that a shared public sphere requires” (Longford and Patten 2010, 196), the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) may still be altering dominant conceptions of civic time. In an insightful anecdote, the American political scientist William E. Scheuerman (2009, 287) admits to feeling guilty for not making more substantial civic contributions, but argues that the state of perpetual busyness in our high-speed world makes succumbing to the temptations of “slacktivism” very difficult to resist:

Rather than volunteering for a presidential campaign, for example, I spend a few minutes writing out a check to the candidate or campaign of my choice. Even better (because it's less time consuming), I go online and provide my credit card number and make a donation transmitted in a matter of nanoseconds. I make up for the fact that my day is already crammed full with time-consuming activities by privileging forms of political activity that can be engaged in rapidly and even instantaneously.

In a world of video on demand, instant messaging, and fluid Facebook profiles, it would hardly be surprising if citizens sought faster ways of doing politics. But more research is required to understand not only the precise means through which this aim is sought, but also concomitant shifts in widely-shared democratic norms. Citizenship involves rights *and* duties; it requires people to be engaged *and* informed (cf. Kymlicka and Norman 1994). What happens to notions of civic duty and levels of political knowledge when “everywhere we turn... contemporary society exhibits an obsession with speed” (Scheuerman 2009, 292)? Nevertheless, at the same time as Scheuerman's situation points toward the dubious democratic effects of an era of online petitions and information overload, it is important not to forget the large body of scholarship that interprets ICTs as ways of deepening ties among citizens and providing social movements with new organizational tools (ex. Levin 2002; Owens and Palmer 2003). The challenge is to build upon the insights of these varying viewpoints and conduct new empirical research with the purpose of formulating more holistic responses to questions about citizenship and time.

2. The pace of elections and the pace of election coverage

This research agenda has a dual focus. On the one hand, it aims to understand changes in the temporal flow of election campaigns irrespective of their mass mediated representation; and on the other hand, it analyzes the temporal effects of the modern mass mediated campaign.

The longest federal election campaign in Canadian history was the 1926 contest that followed the King-Byng affair. It lasted seventy-four days. By contrast, the federal elections of 1997, 2000, and 2004 each ran only thirty-six days, the minimum amount of time required under the *Canada Elections Act*. Are we to conclude that the more recent elections were “faster” than the 1926 campaign simply because they did not last as long? True, the 100-metre dash is *faster* than the marathon; but by this logic, the fifty-five day long campaign of 2006 was slower than numerous elections from decades earlier. Is this a satisfactory conclusion? Recall that regardless of the amount of time between the dropping of the writ and polling day, more than one political scientist has begun talking about an era of “the permanent election campaign” (Ornstein and Mann 2000; Elmer 2008).

We arrive at a fascinating question – one that has yet to be taken up in research on elections in Canada – namely: How does one measure the *speed* of an election campaign? What variables require analysis in order to understand whether election campaigns are accelerating? Fuller exploration of this question will be the task of a different study. However, in hopes of encouraging such a study, I propose the following three questions: (1) Which election campaign is faster: the forty-day campaign with each party making ten major policy announcements, or the fifty-day campaign with each party making one policy announcement per day? (2) Is it more accurate to interpret the shift to leader-centric campaigns as a force of electoral acceleration or deceleration? (3) In what specific ways has speed itself been discussed, represented, and used throughout the history of elections in Canada?

A different way of analyzing the speed of an election campaign would be to consider the ways in which campaigns are brought to life in mainstream media. This approach is grounded in the mountain of research that views journalism as “*the sense-making practice of modernity*” (Hartley 1996, 32, italics in original). In Everett and Fletcher’s (2001) more concrete language, the theoretical perspective is rooted in the understanding that, “for the majority of citizens in mass societies such as Canada, the principal continuing connection to leaders and institutions is provided by the words, sounds, and images circulating in the mass media” (167). On the view that communications media are instrumental to the construction of social reality, what role do mass media play in setting the pace of election campaigns? If the bulk of the citizenry knows electoral contests in terms of how campaigns are rendered meaningful through mainstream news coverage, how does news coverage shape the temporal flow of these crucial moments in Canada’s representative democracy?

A knee-jerk reaction might suggest that the shortening of the news cycle must be a force of electoral acceleration: news’s need for newness means that policy debates and even mini-crises have an expiration date of one day or less. The never-ending mass mediated parade of politicians and pundits that constitutes the modern election campaign can certainly exhaust the tuned-in citizen; but might it not also be interpreted as the semblance of variety that Marcuse describes under the heading of “one dimensional society”? In Baudrillard words, the “inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges” (in Rosa 2009, 106). Looking at election

campaigns through mass media may be more like looking through a kaleidoscope than a pair of binoculars, but recall the blasé attitudes of political journalists in their overview of recent campaigns. Again, Baudrillard: “Events follow one upon another, canceling each other out in a state of indifference.” How might we describe shifts in the tempo of mass mediated election campaigns when comparing and contrasting coverage in the heyday of print, radio, TV, and digital technologies?

3. The temporality of Canadian civics curricula

A third example of prospective research falling under the broad heading of *citizenship and time* would probe the temporal features of high school and undergraduate courses in Canadian politics and government. As Richardson (2005) demonstrates in his study of shifting myths of national identity as expressed in the social studies curricula of postwar Alberta and Ontario, there is much to be learned from cultural approaches to educational material. It would be useful, for example, to map not only the historical sweep of typical high-school and university civics courses, but also the ways in which history itself is conceptualized. Discourse analysis of popular textbooks could help to understand dominant characterizations of history. Is history depicted as the cause of present events? Is it a distant memory, very different from the world today? To what extent are the power relations that underlie any version of history foregrounded in political science texts, and at what points do even self-reflexive types of history begin to adopt the rhetoric of History in the singular sense? A new approach to political time also needs to examine the ways in which actors, institutions, even whole political systems are depicted as static, and which parts of the curriculum emphasize processes of change.

Conclusion

Of course the interests of political scientists are not exhausted by the study of legislatures, citizens, and elections. Indeed, whole subfields of political science, to say nothing of individual topics, have not been discussed in this paper. The paper asks many questions and answers few. It does not provide new empirical evidence to support the assumption that political time is accelerating; nor does it sketch out a detailed plan for future research on the temporal rhythms of politics. What it does do, however, is draw attention to a whole way of thinking about politics in Canada that has been virtually ignored up to this point. My reason for concentrating on legislatures, citizens, and elections has been to demonstrate the potential of the temporal approach in general, not to suggest that this approach is limited in its application.

As the paper suggests, but has yet to make explicit, temporal approaches to the study of politics will be best when undertaken from an interdisciplinary perspective. The compression of parliamentary debate has occurred during a period in which countless other forms of time compression are the norm (cf. Castells 2000; Comor 2008; Giddens 1990; Harvey 1989; Mosco 1996). The former is unlikely to be happening in total isolation from the latter, and interdisciplinary research will help to reveal the connections and, therefore, provide a richer understanding of politics as a part of everyday life. Citizenship, legislatures, and all other subjects of political science research have evolved into being what they are as a result of the confluence of a multitude of factors

extending far beyond the borders of any single academic discipline. If our aim is to more fully understand political things – by answering, for example, new questions about the extent to which they have been influenced by forces of social acceleration – then theoretical and methodological approaches must be flexible enough to meet the demands of the new questions.

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