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Discipline: Political Science

Title: Citizens' expectations toward representative democracy

Abstract: Most political scientists and commentators would agree that democratic politics is in turmoil. Low levels of citizens' trust in political authorities, waning party membership bases, the decline of conventional forms of political participation (e.g., voting or party linked activities) and heightened support for authoritarian principles of government are signs of growing popular dissatisfaction. But while many analysts would agree on this diagnosis, they find it difficult to pinpoint the immediate causes of such dissatisfaction; let alone identify remedies. Part of this difficulty originates from inconclusive findings on citizens' expectations toward representative democracy. For instance: while some studies suggest that citizens would favour more direct forms of political participation, others indicate that citizens would prefer to leave politics up to experts (technocracy). The lack of conclusive findings is not surprising. First, the majority of studies draws on quantitative surveys that, by necessity, adopt a deductive logic and rely on the mental attributes of individuals for explaining forms of public consciousness, such as trust. Because of their deductive logic, surveys primarily allow for testing the extent to which citizens agree with scholarly conceptions of democracy (i.e., the importance they attribute to core concepts, such as transparency, responsibility, responsiveness, etc.) and are less well equipped to yield innovative insights into the ways in which citizens experience politics and make sense of it. The methodological individualism of surveys, furthermore, fails to tap into and unpack the routinised discursive practices by which individuals make sense of politics. I welcome all research that deploys a qualitative approach (interviews, focus groups and everyday talk) to studying how citizens make sense of politics, what they expect from representative government and what the normative implications thereof are.

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