WHAT CITIZENS WANT FROM DEMOCRACY: POPULAR ATTITUDES TO EXISTING POLITICAL PROCESSES AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES

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Overview
It is by now a commonplace among academics and policy makers that citizens in many advanced democracies are discontented with the way politics operates in their country. Numerous national and cross-national surveys have shown high – and generally rising – levels of citizen discontent and distrust with political actors and institutions (eg. Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Faced with this evidence, the key task is to account for why citizens are so discontented. Typically, researchers seek to explain discontent by reference to the way citizens evaluate how politics works in their country (eg. Norris, 2011: ch10; Dahlberg et al, 2013). Yet this approach is insufficient. For a start, these evaluations usually relate to quite specific features of a country’s political arrangements: the operation of certain institutions, certain aspects of the way decisions are taken and certain outcomes of those decisions. Yet citizen discontent may extend well beyond the specific factors that are included in researchers’ surveys. Linked to this, but more importantly, existing analyses tend to restrict their focus to citizens’ assessments of current political arrangements; they rarely enquire about the kind of arrangements that citizens would like. Yet today’s popular discontent with politics may partly derive from a sense among citizens that existing political arrangements fail to meet the norms and standards of a desired, or ideal, form of politics. If we are to understand more fully the reasons for citizen discontent, we must therefore pay more attention to the kind of democratic arrangements and processes that citizens would like.

To date, attempts by researchers to explore these democratic desires and preferences have been episodic. The goal of this workshop is to bring together research on this topic, and thus to enable analysts to identify more clearly and systematically both how citizens relate to existing democratic procedures and what kind of demands and aspirations they have for the way politics should be conducted. By bringing together researchers from many countries, the workshop will enable us to explore variations in citizen preferences across different groups of individuals and political contexts, enhancing our understanding of the mechanisms underlying peoples’ preferences.

To locate the focus of the workshop within some sort of analytical framework, we might distinguish between, on the one hand, attempts to identify the meanings that citizens attribute to ‘democracy’ and, on the other hand, attempts to identify the specific shortcomings that citizens perceive in their existing governing arrangements and the specific
institutional reforms they favour. The workshop sits in between these two perspectives. Its focus is narrower than attempts to clarify the meanings associated with democracy, although it may overlap with this issue in that the features that citizens seek from democracy may shape the kind of political arrangements they prefer. Citizens' criticisms of existing institutions and their support for institutional changes are of relevance to the workshop, but its focus is less on these specific questions than on the general types, or qualities, of political decision making that citizens favour. In other words, the workshop seeks to address the broad features that citizens wish to see manifested in their democratic system rather than the specific institutions they favour.

Links to existing research
The large body of research on citizen evaluations of politics and political institutions is dominated by studies of 'output' variables such as trust, satisfaction and confidence (eg. Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Hooghe and Zmerli, 2011), along with analyses of popular attitudes to specific political institutions and their reform (eg. Wenzel et al, 2000; Bowler et al, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2007; Currin-Percival et al, 2010; Curtice and Seyd, 2012). There have been fewer studies that explicitly examine citizen preferences for alternative ways of conducting politics. Among the limited studies to date, the focus has been on attitudes towards different forms of political representation (eg. Carman, 2007; Bengtsson and Wass, 2010, 2011), direct participation in decision making (eg. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Neblo et al, 2010; Webb, 2013) and different models of decision making (Floss, 2008; Bengtsson and Christensen, forthcoming). Some of these studies have contrasted attitudes towards 'representative' processes with attitudes towards 'direct' or 'stealth' (non-partisan/non-confictual) arrangements.

However, there are other aspects of the political process on which citizens may hold normative desires or expectations: for example, the transparency or openness of decision making; the extent to which political elites are accountable for their actions; the degree of elite responsiveness to mass level demands; and the extent to which decision making is subject to partisan influence, along with the role of non-partisan actors in shaping policy outcomes. On each of these features of the political process, citizens may hold preferences that potentially go beyond – and even clash with – the way they perceive politics to actually operate. These preferences and perceptions are likely to have been the subject of empirical measurement through various opinion surveys, qualitative exercises and experimental designs. By bringing these data together, we should be able to develop a clearer picture of how citizens evaluate existing political processes, the kind of processes they wish for and, as a result, the nature of the 'gap' between democratic perceptions and desires.

Likely participants and papers
Participants are likely to be drawn from researchers within political science, particularly those working in the field of public opinion. We are primarily interested in empirical papers that present findings on how citizens relate to existing political arrangements and their preferences for alternative decision making processes. Papers that address cross-national or cross-sectional variations in preferences are particularly welcome. Empirical papers can draw on national or cross-national opinion surveys (the recent ESS 'Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy' module may be a particularly fruitful source of data), but papers drawing on qualitative and experimental research designs are also encouraged. While the
focus of the workshop is on empirical analyses, there is also scope for papers that address relevant conceptual or methodological issues.

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Dr Åsa Bengtsson is professor of Political Science at Mid Sweden University and currently works as Academy Research Fellow at Åbo Akademi University. She is a member of the steering group of the Finnish National Election Studies and chairs a project on public preferences for political processes financed by the Academy of Finland. Her research focuses on public opinion and political behaviour.

Dr Ben Seyd is a lecturer in the School of Politics at the University of Kent. His expertise is in the field of public attitudes towards politics, centred on the concept of political trust. He has experience of designing surveys on political attitudes, and has published articles and book chapters on public reactions to political institutions and institutional reform in the UK.

**References**


