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Gap Analysis: Participatory Democracy, Public Expectations and Community Assemblies in Sheffield

Matthew Flinders & Katharine Dommett

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Abstract

This article offers an argument of almost primitive simplicity: politics tends to promise too much and deliver too little. In order to substantiate this argument this article presents the results of the first attempt to analyse an experiment with participatory democracy through the lens of 'gap analysis'. This approach focuses attention on the creation, management and fulfilment of public expectations vis-à-vis products, services or experiences. In a historical period in which the fiscal and social resources of democratic politics are severely limited the argument and empirical research set out in this article offer valuable insights for scholars and practitioners of politics and public policy. Central amongst these is the suggestion that responding to unprecedented levels of anti-political sentiment is likely to demand that politicians pay more attention

to the management of public expectations (i.e. demand) and less on how to maximise political outputs in terms of public services (i.e. supply).

Key Words:

Public expectations

participatory democracy

community assemblies

gap analysis

political engagement

Notes

1. This article focuses upon politically invoked expectation gaps but the impetus for such schisms can emerge from elsewhere. Such causes are not, however, the focus of this article.
2. Whilst other forms of participation can be identified (Fung 2003), deliberative and participatory democracy represent the dominant wings of the literature. This focus is therefore deemed most illustrative, but this does not prevent the future expansion of this framework in line with other conceptions of participation.
3. This approach could also be adapted to focus on more instrumental concerns such as expectations of service delivery in local government but we feel it provides an innovative technique for the analysis of democratic initiatives.
4. It is important to assert that whilst developed with one initiative in mind this approach has far broader application and can be tailored to study other initiatives, be they participative or deliberative in nature.
5. This figure relates purely to the assembly meetings which offered, as noted, limited participatory opportunities. Other points for engagement were available.

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