Introduction

Special Issue on Democracy

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Democracy is an ancient idea with innumerable modern meanings, applications, justifications, twists, turns and outright denials. Approaching the topic means having to deal with an enormous diversity of opinion. What, if anything, is the definitive meaning of democracy in theory and practice? How can it be encouraged? What are its limits? What are its opportunities? If, as in many cases, we are inheritors of the legacy of the European Enlightenment, what are the prospects for democratic governance in a globalized and increasingly corporatized world? Is the public sector democratic and if so in what ways? If, as well, democracy can be said to define a healthy polity, what is the diagnosis for its continued well-being? If not, what therapies should be considered? What is the prognosis?

However it might be defined, the theme of this special issue is problematic. Democracy could be considered as a topic of general and therefore almost unmanageable interest, or it could be reduced to a single more specific subtopic—perhaps a focus on constitutions and institutions, perhaps an exploration of the management of competing interests in a pluralist setting, or perhaps a series of studies of public opinion and voting behaviour. The list is endless.

Although the original proposal for this issue was to address the topic of “democracy and human rights” in the public sector, it was decided to expand the range of vision and include articles that addressed specific sub-issues. The benefit is to be able raise loosely related issues and to touch on each in a way that allows readers to connect the many dots as it pleases them to do.

So, although there is neither a narrow focus nor an explicit theme other than the importance for creativity, imagination and innovation in making democracy work or work better, this issue tries to perform another and, we hope, equally useful function. It seeks to probe the boundaries of democratic discourse, to address the ways in which democratic governance is practiced and might be improved by innovative strategies to make the public sector more effective, more open and more equitable.

The aim is therefore more to raise questions than to supply answers. Among the articles presented, our contributors consider how non-governmental organizations can improve democratic procedures not only by being robustly democratic in their internal “politics,” but also by pressing administrative structures to be more inclusive in their relations with the public and with various private interests. Thus, for example, Pausch and Robinson explore democracy in the workplace and in trade union settings; Findlay, Carstensen and Langergaard, Benoit and Patsias,
and Nguyen look at issues related to citizen empowerment; specific policy domains are explored by Muzzin and Meaghan, and Greene; Couture deals with innovative electoral reform; and Doughty comments on diverse meanings of democracy as well as the relevance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to current democratic thinking. In the book reviews and review essays, attention is directed to some of the more important efforts at democratic reform and the urgency of citizen participation, as well as to issues raised outside the mainstream experience of Western liberal democracies, ranging from terrorism at one extreme to spiritual growth at the other.

By the end, it is hoped that readers will benefit from having their attention directed to a number of tiles in a necessarily incomplete mosaic. If people are inspired to pursue any of the particular arguments and examples and to explore and discover or to revisit enduring questions of how government and the wider public sector should and could be made normatively better and empirically sustainable, then our ambitions will have been amply fulfilled.

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