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THE MODEL OF INTEREST ALIGNMENT GAPS IN THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PROCESS USING THE SERVQUAL APPROACH

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Abstract. The interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process have been identified in the analysis of scientific literature by various authors, yet these insights are often presented in a fragmented manner, lacking a cohesive, systematic framework. There is also a lack of definitions that clearly describe this phenomenon; therefore, an interpretivist approach can be used to identify these gaps in the scientific literature. The authors of this paper apply a systematic approach while examining this phenomenon, with the main aim of developing a theoretical interest alignment gap model in the democratic political process. For this purpose, the SERVQUAL model of gaps was used and adapted to the political process. This model will allow scholars from different countries to explore the systematic interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process in different contexts.

Keywords: *interest alignment gaps, democratic policy process, SERVQUAL gaps model.*
Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Interesų derinimo spragos, demokratinės politikos procesas, Servqual spragų modelis.*

Introduction

The democratic political process is fundamental to the well-being of democratic societies. It is often seen as a mechanism that serves the public interest by ensuring that citizens' needs are reflected in governance. However, there are challenges to the effectiveness of this governance:

– Public participation. This is essential to democratic governance since it allows citizens to influence decision-making processes and represent the public interest. This participation of citizens is evaluated as a feature of a democratic regime (Agomor 2023). For example, platforms for public participation are being developed, particularly involving non-governmental organisations, although challenges remain in

raising the level of participation and awareness among the public (Mirlina 2019). The effective involvement of external participants in the political process is crucial for the implementation of the public interest, as these actors represent different interests in the public sphere (Lisovska et al. 2023).

- Challenges in defining the public interest. The concept of the "public interest" is often criticized for being ambiguous and difficult to define. It is seen as an obligation for politicians to work for the common good of society, but the concept of the "public interest" is also often seen as an empty concept (Koslowski 2004). When attempting to pinpoint what it means, it is perceived to be the obligation of politicians to work for the common good of society. Political philosophers have largely ignored the question of the public interest, resulting in a lack of conceptual clarity (Boot 2022). In the procedural view of interest alignment in the political process, the public interest agenda is often formulated by institutions in the initial drafting of the legislation. Factors such as lobbying, officials' prejudices, and lack of awareness also affect this process, distorting the public interest. Moreover, the alignment of draft legislation is dominated by the institutions and their managers rather than by external interest groups, which also creates competition between public and institutional, and sometimes private (narrow) interests. The democratization of the political processes and the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders are key to ensuring that the public interest is truly represented.
- Impact on democratic processes. The democratic nature of elections is no longer questioned, but are they indeed democratic? If we look at the ability of candidates to access the arena of political debate, or if we look at contemporary elections in different contexts, can they really be considered democratic? The democratization of candidate selection processes is hypothetical and aims to strengthen political participation and trust in democracy. However, systematic analysis needs to be completed to confirm these effects (Put et al. 2014). Democracy should be seen as a political project rather than a static state that requires continuous engagement and adaptation for the effectiveness of social rights and public policies (Suxberger 2014). Democratic processes, such as fair elections, the representation of interests and their alignment process, and freedom of speech—that is, participatory democracy—are the foundations of public trust in the political system and active participation in public governance.
- The use of information systems (artificial intelligence, big data, robotic process automation, etc.) has been observed as shaping public opinion on social networks. This is an emerging area of research that has significant implications for democratic processes of public opinion formation and can be used as a tool to manipulate public interest. According to the authors, this area of research should receive additional attention.

The analysis of the academic literature has shown that contemporary research on the evaluation of the democratic political process focuses mainly on the following:

- Frameworks for assessing the quality of the participatory process by identifying aspects of the quality of participation, including representation, independence, influence of interested parties, transparency, and structured decision-making. Additional aspects such as quality of deliberation, reduction of bureaucracy, and cost-effectiveness are also considered important criteria when assessing the state of democracy (Moysan and Ródenas-Rigla 2023).
- Democratic accountability. This involves a three-step process: information delivery, discussions, and results, which are essential for effective policy evaluation. *Ex-ante* and *ex-post* evaluations contribute to accountability by providing information that facilitates discussions and informs decision-makers (Han 2023). However, these mechanisms play only a formal role in some democracies.
- Democratic culture in organizations. The development of a psychometric measure of democratic culture in organizations emphasizes factors such as citizen participation, tolerance, and organizational citizenship. These factors are crucial for fostering a democratic environment in organizations, promoting inclusiveness and participation (Lucas et al. 2021). In a democratic society, political culture may be dependent on political change, and there may be a lack of mechanisms to reduce this dependence.
- A democratic system based on AI. The Levels of Democracy framework assesses the democratic nature of decision-making processes in AI governance. It aims to enhance public participation and trust. This framework can help organizations increase the legitimacy of their decisions and maintain accountability (Ovadya et al. 2024). However, the authors note that there are also threats to democracy associated with the use of AI in democratic systems.

As a phenomenon, the divergence of interests in the democratic political process has been analyzed from a number of angles, with a focus on the influence of organized interest groups, the role of the media, and the dynamics of political support. These studies highlight the complex interaction between public opinion, interest groups, and policy outcomes, and they reveal the mechanisms and challenges involved in matching public needs with policy choices. Such challenges are as follows:

- The influence of organized interest groups: Interest groups, such as lobby groups, play an important role in the alignment of interests to influence policymakers. The alignment of these interests with public opinion can influence policy coherence, particularly when it comes to challenging the status quo. If the public supports change but interest groups do not, policy is less likely to reflect public needs (Rasmussen et al. 2021).
- Media content and policy coherence: Media content analysis has been used to examine the impact of organized interests on policy coherence. In Germany and Denmark, it has been found that the media can amplify the influence of interest groups, especially when public opinion favors a change in the status quo (Rasmussen et al. 2021). In democracy-building, the use of the media can expand gaps in

the dominance of socially privileged groups over the public interest. This highlights the dual role of the media in aggravating and reducing gaps in the alignment of interests in the political process (Nisbet 2008).

– Political support and representation of public interests: Political support is unevenly distributed across policy areas such as education, small businesses, and health. This gap of political attention varies across countries over time, affecting citizens' perceptions of democracy and its institutions (Martini and Quaranta 2020). In addition to the political rhetoric of the pre-electoral candidates, external factors also play a role.

In summary, the interest alignment gap as a phenomenon has been analyzed through the following points of view: the influence of interests, the compatibility between media and politics, political support and public interest representation, and the interaction between interests and policy results. However, other studies determine interest alignment gaps in a fragmented manner. These can only be identified by applying an interpretive approach.

According to the scientific literature and experience of practical participation in the policy process, **the authors formulate a scientific problem**: the interest alignment gaps in the democratic policy process have been determined both by the scientists and practitioners, nonetheless, after analyzing the academic research, and no studies were found that systematically examine this phenomenon. It is also difficult to assess this phenomenon in the scientific literature because there is no specific concept that describes it.

While addressing these research gaps, the following chapters of this paper develop a theoretical model of interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process through the lens of systems theory. To ensure the democratic nature of the political process, the alignment of public interests—the process of interest alignment (and its results) and the alignment of results with the public interest—plays a key role. Thus, **the aim of this study** is to develop a theoretical model of the interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process. This model would provide a framework and guidelines for further empirical research. To achieve this aim, the authors apply approaches of systems theory and the SERVQUAL model.

Theoretical framework

Literature review

1. A systemic approach for identifying the alignment of interest gaps in the democratic policy process

Theories of political process systems and process management can help to understand the political process by applying strategies to reconcile interests in the political process.

This perspective enables a detailed analysis of how different interests are being aligned and balanced within the broader framework of political and social systems. Based on a systematic approach, the dynamic interactions between public and institutional interests and results, and how they are reconciled (policy outcomes) and aligned (process) in the political process, can be better understood.

The diagnosis of the political process should be an essential function of democratic systems, it is a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary democratic theory and democratic systems. The application of models of system theory to the analysis of the political process has its own history—the expectation that quantitative analysis and innovative methods would answer the problematic questions of the political process remains unfulfilled. Systems theory has been applied using a variety of qualitative methodologies. This theory is fundamentally different from various institutionalist approaches that dominate in theory and policy-making practice (Stewart and Ayres 2001).

The authors believe that the application of a systemic approach could diagnose interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process, and once the extent of the problem has been identified, other models and methods based on the theory of systems could be applied to diagnose the alignment of interests in the political process. In accordance with these findings, the gaps identifying the alignment of interests, firstly as a result of policy and the political process, would be identified. The alignment of interests is an intermediate result of successful policy implementation.

Deming formulated the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle in 1982, which is the key concept in quality management and continuous improvement. The cycle is widely used to improve productivity and efficiency in various organizational processes. The Deming cycle is not a one-size-fits-all solution applicable in all contexts, but it has proven to be effective in many areas, especially in Western cultures and stable environments. The main aspects of the Deming cycle, its applications, and limitations are discussed below.

Planning (Plan): This stage includes setting the goal, creating the plan, defining success metrics, and activating the plan. The establishment of clear goals and processes is essential to achieve the desired results (Kemenade 2014).

Implementation (Do): This phase involves implementing the plan on a small scale to test its effectiveness. It is crucial to execute the plan while collecting data for further analysis. For instance, in a manufacturing context, this might involve trial runs or pilot projects (La Verde et al., 2019).

Evaluation (Check) During the Check phase, the outcomes of the Do phase are monitored and evaluated against the expected results. This involves rigorous data analysis to verify the success of the plan and identify any discrepancies or areas for improvement (La Verde et al., 2019).

Adjustment of actions (Act): Based on the analysis, this stage involves the adjustment of actions to improve the process. If the plan is successful, it is standardized and implemented on a larger scale. If not, the cycle is repeated according to a revised plan (Kemenade 2014).

In summary, the Deming cycle is used for identifying the alignment of interest gaps,

juxtaposed with the stages of the political process as elements of a process designed to ensure the quality of its results.

2. Research of the political process: analysis of policy stages models

The idea that the political process can be perceived as a series of decision-making stages was first put forward by Lasswell. He also formulated the functions of the decision-making process: 1) planning, 2) development and maintenance of alternatives, 3) adoption of general rules, 4) description of rule-governed behavior, 5) final descriptions of behavior, 6) evaluation of policy, and 7) implementation of policy (Lasswell 1956). It was P. A. Sabatier (1993) who formulated the "supporting coalitions" model consisting of three stages, which are divided into further sub-steps, to analyze the policy process: a) agenda-setting, b) formulation, and c) implementation. The importance of stages model is also confirmed by other scholars (Howlett and Giest 2012).

The stages model has been widely used, modified, and integrated into the analysis of the political process. Scholars have also devoted time to synthesizing the step models of past researchers and, after discussion, concluded to use the term "policy cycle," incorporating five classic phases of the process presented, but refined by Lasswell, mapped to problem-solving stages (Fischer and Miller 2017).

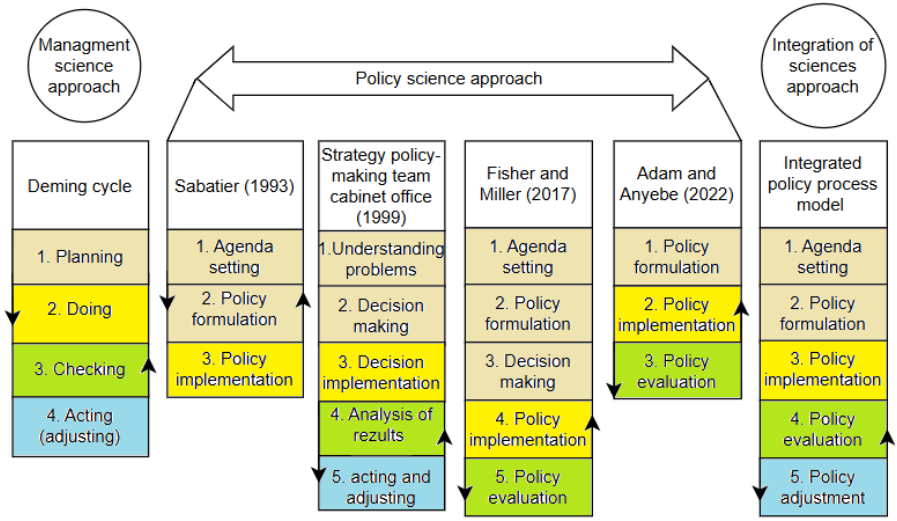
Table 1. The political phases of applied problem-solving and the stages of the policy cycle

Phases of applied problem-solving	**Stages of the policy cycle**
Problem Identification	Agenda Setting
Proposition of Solution	Policy Formulation
Selection of Solution	Decision-Making
Action of Solution	Policy Implementation
Monitoring of Results	Policy Evaluation

Source: compiled according to the Public Policy Analysis Handbook (Fischer and Miller 2017)

After evaluating the stages models of the policy process presented in the scientific literature (Sabatier 1993; Strategy Policy Making Team, Cabinet Office 1999; Fischer and Miller 2017; Anyebe 2022), the authors of this paper compare them with the stages of the Deming cycle as a model ensuring the quality of process. They conclude that policy cycle models lack the action-adjustment stage, which is important for ensuring the quality of results. A synthesis of the stepwise models is presented below:

Figure 1. Synthesizing models of policy process steps: integrating management and political science approaches



Source: compiled by the authors, based on an analysis and synthesis of the models presented in this section (the colors were chosen to reflect the Deming PDCA cycle and its relationship to the steps presented by political science), highlighting how these steps fit into the policy decision-making process. Each color represents a specific phase of PDCA, revealing its links to the theoretical phases of policy analysis and how these phases help to structure the policy process to ensure continuous improvement and efficiency.

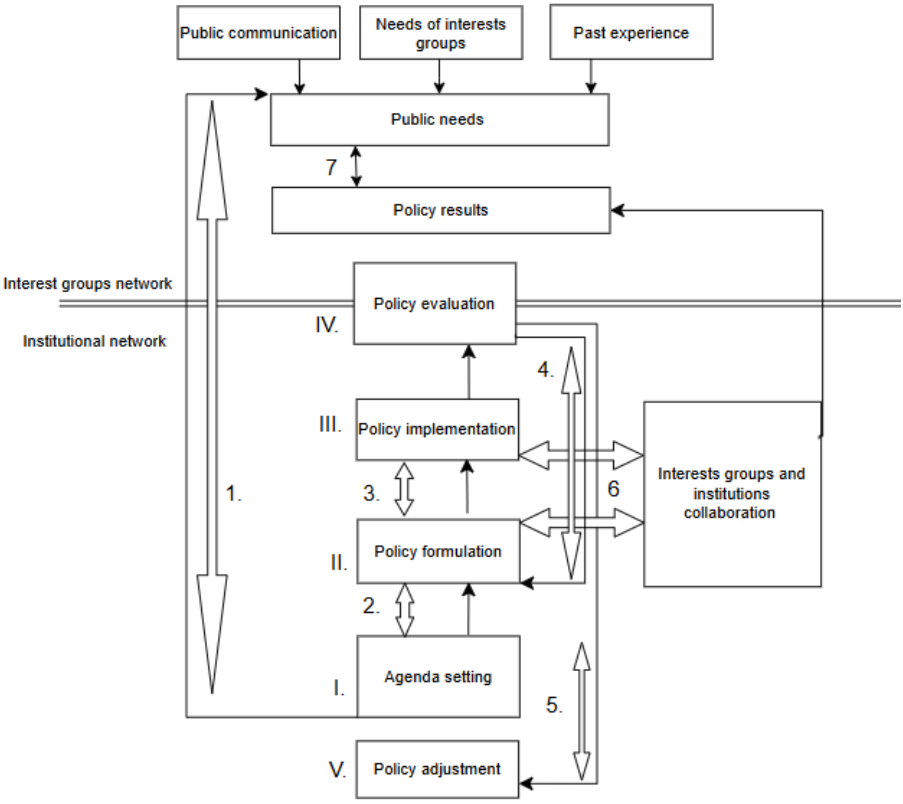
Results

I. A research perspective using the SERVQUAL model

To examine the gaps in the alignment of interests in the democratic political process, we will use the political process steps model adapted by the authors of this paper and the SERVQUAL gaps model. Between these stages of the political process, gaps in the (re) alignment of interests are emerging. As the SERVQUAL model has not been applied to analyze the political process and the quality of its results, in this study, it has been adapted to the subject for the alignment of public interests in the political process to identify gaps in the results of this process. It is formed from two groups of interested parties: public interest groups and institutional networks. In the public interest network, interests are shaped through a) public relations and discourse, b) the needs of interest groups, and c) experience. In the context of generated public interests, regulation is perceived as the outcome of policy. Institutions first exchange knowledge with a network of public interest

groups (knowledge management) and, considering the expectations formed, take the next step of defining the problem and, in some cases, incorporate the issues into the political agenda, where the political process begins. In the second stage, legislation is formulated; in the third stage, it is implemented; in the fourth stage, it is evaluated; and in the fifth stage, actions are adjusted.

Figure 2. The model of interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process



Source: compiled by the authors based on the Politic cycle model and the Parasuman gap model

II. Interpreting interest alignment gaps in the democratic political process:

1. **A gap in the perception of the public needs.** Occurs in defining the problem and putting it on the agenda, examples:
   a. The systematizing of knowledge from the network of interest groups and the definition of the issue creates a gap between the expectations of interest groups and the inclusion of the issue in the political agenda.
   b. Once the public interest has been perceived and defined, it is not on the political agenda for a variety of reasons (objective and subjective).
   c. The public interest is shaped by politicians and bureaucrats with inaccurate disclosure of real public needs.
2. **The policy formulation gap.** Policy formulation creates a gap between the public problem defined in the political agenda and the formulation of its solving solutions.

   The public interest on the political agenda has been misaligned in the formulation of the policy (course) to address it.

3. **Policy implementation gap**. A gap appears between the formulated policy (set course) and the implemented policy (legislation). For example, if the policy is to increase the share of renewable energy in the final consumption balance, sub-legislation is adopted that creates barriers to the development of renewable energy.

   The formulated policy (course) is changed by its implementation (sub-legislation).

4. **The *ex-ante* policy assessment gap.** While providing the policy process with information on potential policy outcomes, the necessary information for the policy formulation stage of the process is not being provided.
5. **The *ex-post* policy evaluation gap.** For example, policy adjustment does not provide the necessary information for the policy adjustment (feedback) phase.
6. **The cooperation gap.** The gap between the formulation of a solution to a problem (course) and its implementation (legislation) is due to an unsystematic process of coordination of interests.
7. **The public needs and policy outcomes gap.** The gap between policy outcomes and public expectations without satisfying the public interest.

The gaps in the alignment of interests in the policy process are outlined above, and a model is provided to help understand at which stages of the policy process they occur. To use the SERVQUAL gap model, an expert interview is conducted to rank these gaps. The authors of this paper propose to use a similar approach, using expert interviews to rank the gaps in a ten-point system and to further investigate possibilities to improve the democratic political process as a practical result, and to make further research in defining the root causes of these gaps as a scientific result.

Conclusions

a. The challenges of contemporary democracies are the level of public participation, the democratic nature of the electoral process, and the process of understanding the public interest, meanwhile the main research focuses on assessing the quality of the participatory process, the accountability of democratic processes, the democratic culture in organizations, and the impact of AI. One of the prerequisites for democracy is a democratic process of interest alignment in politics; however, all these areas of research have not been systematically analyzed. Taking this into account, the authors presume that a systematic approach to analyze the gaps of interest alignment in the democratic political process is one of the methods of bridging this scientific gap.
b. By analyzing the stages model as a tool for the analysis of the political process, which was first formulated by Lasswell (1956), and its transformations, and by paralleling it with the stages of Deming's cycle as a condition for the quality of the process, it has been found that the political science in the analysis of the political process lacks the stage of adjustment of actions. After the integration of the approaches of political and management sciences and the development of the adapted model, it would be possible to analyze the process through the prism of its quality.
c. Applying The SERVQUAL approach, the following gaps in the structure of the model of the democratic policy process were identified: gaps in the perception of the public interest, gaps in the formulation of policy, gaps in the implementation of policy, gaps in the *ex-ante* evaluation of policy, gaps in the ex post evaluation of the relevance of the implemented policy results to the public interest, gaps in the cooperation in the formulation and implementation of policy, and a gap in the relevance between public needs and policy results.
d. There are two types of gaps: gaps in the alignment of interests as a process and gaps in the alignment of interests as policy results. There is a lack of terms to describe these two phenomena, both in English and in Lithuanian. To sum up, the implementation of distinction would be a scientific breakthrough for research in this field.

Further scientific research directions

1. The existence of interest alignment gaps has been identified in this paper; they have been classified, and a model of their analysis, based on a systems approach, has been presented. According to systems theory, if gaps of interest alignment exist, the problem should be sought in the interest alignment process. It is, therefore, an additional, related research area. The authors propose to use a phenomenological research approach to participate in the political process of interest alignment and

to document the researcher's experiences. The next stage will be to formulate, from the researcher's experiences, the gaps of interest alignment in the political process and to present them systematically through the cross-sections of the spaces of interest alignment.

2. Public needs (that is, the public interest) and policy formulations are both on the political agenda, but there is a gap between the two, which has a significant impact on public welfare. Feedback in the political process and effective feedback mechanisms could address this democratic challenge. Further research should focus on this phenomenon through the prism of feedback in the political process.
3. AI is a pervasive phenomenon in the information space, and its active use is gaining momentum and beginning to dominate in public discourse. The authors of this article identify it as a particularly pressing issue for modern democracies, affecting elections, public interest, and decision-makers. They also identify a lack of research to monitor this phenomenon and to move toward practical solutions to this problem in the next stages.

Please consider adding a DOI for references 2, 3, 13, and 22.

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INTERESŲ DERINIMO SPRAGŲ MODELIS DEMOKRATINIAME POLITINIAME PROCESE TAIKANT SERVQUAL METODĄ

Anotacija. Analizuojant mokslinę literatūrą, bei su teorinių tyrimų pagalba nustatyta, kad interesų derinimo politiniame procese spragų neišvengta, tačiau šios spragos nebuvo pateiktos sistemingai. Mokslinei problemai spręsti iškeltas šio tyrimo tikslas: sukurti teorinį interesų derinimo spragų demokratiniame politiniame procese modelį. Šio tikslo siekiama moksline literatūros analize, teorinių interesų derinimo politiniame procese spragų nagrinėjimu ir sistemingai organizuotu jų pristatymu, taikant SERVQUAL metodą. Demokratinės politikos proceso spragas identifikuojančio modelio struktūra buvo sukurta SERVQUAL metodu ir identifikuotos tokios spragos: viešojo intereso suvokimo spragos, politikos formavimo spragos, politikos įgyvendinimo spragos, politikos ex ante vertinimo spragos, vykdomos politikos rezultatų atitikties viešajam interesui ex post vertinimo spragos, visuomenės poreikių ir bendradarbiavimo politikos formavimo ir politikos atitikimo spragos.

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