BOOK REVIEW

Policy-making in coalition governments

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Book reviewed:

The Cycle of Coalition. How Parties and Voters Interact Under Coalition Governance

David Fortunato (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021), 225 pp. ISBN: 9781108834803

Coalition governments are central to many modern democracies, and much attention has been paid to their formation process. However, less attention has been paid to the process of coalitional governance and especially to the role voters play in influencing this process. David Fortunato's book provides the first account of the relationship between voters and coalition governments' functioning, illuminating the intricacies of the "cycle of coalition" in which "parties act, voters react, and parties adapt" (p. 5). The book focuses on the role of voters' perception of compromise in coalitional policy-making and how parties' reactions to these perceptions shape policy-making processes. Thus, using comparative data derived from experimental, survey, and text-analysis methods, Fortunato elaborates a novel theoretical framework of coalitional policy-making, providing a fresh take on multi-party coalition governance.

The heart of the book is the theoretical framework. Parties form coalitions, negotiate policies, and pass them through the legislative process. Parties' behaviour during this legislative process shapes how voters perceive parties' policy preferences and competence. These perceptions feed back into the policy-making process, conditioning parties' behaviour (p. 22). Because voters dislike compromise and cooperation between coalition partners in policy-making and are willing to punish parties for it, parties, who naturally want to avoid punishment, have incentives to create conflict with coalition partners during the legislative process (p. 29). Due to coalition-related institutional constraints (i.e. inevitable compromise because no one party can get all that it wants, and collective responsibility bounding parties' ability to voice dissent whenever they want), parties use debates over bills, during the legislative review process, to signal their commitment to protecting voters' interests. Thus, three core assumptions underlie this theoretical framework: (1) voters know about parties' choices in the policy-making process; (2) voters take these choices

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into account when deciding how to vote; and (3) parties want to please voters and consider the perceptions of voters when deciding how to act (pp. 20–21).

The book's empirical analysis uses multiple methodological approaches to provide an extensive, albeit, limited (due to the nature of available data) evaluation of the framework's power in explaining real-world phenomena. Chapter four evaluates voters' base attitudes towards compromise via an experimental study. Chapter five uses survey and electoral data to examine how voters perceive compromise outside the labouratory setting. Chapter six focuses on coalition parties' behaviour during the legislative review process using novel quantitative textual data in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. Chapter seven dives deeper into these behaviours using the UK Conservative-Liberal-Democrats coalition of 2010–2015 as a case-study. Chapter eight zooms out to the macro-level to provide further empirical support of the theory.

Fortunato's book makes a major theoretical contribution to the study of coalition politics, focusing much-needed attention on coalition governance and legislation rather than the typical focus on election periods. The book also significantly contributes to the study of observable party behaviours and the relationship between these behaviours and voters' perceptions of them in parliamentary democracies. While the empirical evidence is mixed, the clarity of writing and attention to detail makes this book accessible and instructive, setting a very interesting research agenda for future scholars of coalition politics, political parties, and voter behaviour.

Specifically, some elements of the theoretical framework merit further discussion and enquiry. In the framework elaborated in early chapters, voters dislike any and all compromise (which assumes, without explicit mention, a zero-sum approach to politics). In later chapters, Fortunato qualifies this as a dislike of "too much compromise," as is evidenced by empirical results in chapter four (pp. 51–56). Furthermore, Fortunato notes that "voters expect coalition policy outcomes to be a weighted average of partner preferences" (p. 42). However, the importance of this qualification is not fully addressed in the core theoretical framework. Relatedly, it is well-established in the scholarship that not all policies are equally important to all parties and voters, which raise the questions: does issue saliency matter and does a compromise over a core issue equal a compromise over a less important issue? While Fortunato mentions compromise over "key issues," the role of issue saliency merits further enquiry.

Finally, Fortunato examines the influence of coalitional experience as a possible mitigating factor to voters' punishment of compromise, and the focus rests on the existence of pre-electoral coalition agreements. However, the examples of the UK Liberal Democrats (throughout the book) and the German Free Democratic Party (FDP) (p. 44) highlight the potential importance of coalitional experience more generally for the severity of voters' punishment. In the UK, where neither parties nor voters had any modern-era experience with coalitional politics, following the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, voters punished the Liberal Democrats so severely, they still struggle to recover electorally. In Germany, where both parties and voters have extensive experience with coalitional politics, the FDP was severely punished in 2013, but the damage was not long-lasting. In 2017, the party regained 80 seats (compared to 93 seats in 2009), and in 2021, it returned to government with 92 seats.

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