



Book review

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Fortunato David (2021) *The Cycle of Coalition: How Parties and Voters Interact Under Coalition Governance*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. £75.00 (hbk); \$80.00 (e-book), xiii + 225pp. ISBN 9781108834803; 9781108883184; 9781108877053.

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To make coalition government work, political parties must make compromises, sometimes painful ones. This book addresses the electoral consequences of coalition compromises and how coalition parties deal with these. It argues that the nature of multi-party government prevents coalition parties from fulfilling *all* their pledges. This makes voters feel that ‘their’ party is giving too much away, which hurts coalition parties electorally. Anticipating voters’ responses, parties use the parliamentary arena to seek conflict with their coalition partners to protect their party brands. This is the cycle of coalition: ‘Parties act, voters react, and parties adapt’ (p. 5).

There is much to like about this book. For one thing, it brings the study of party behaviour and electoral behaviour together in a single framework. Previous literature on coalition governance has predominantly dealt with mechanisms outside and inside parliament that parties use to ‘keep tabs’ on their coalition partners. Fortunato shows that coalition parties use parliament not only to monitor their coalition partners, but also to highlight the differences between themselves and their partners. In examining the little-explored subject of how voters respond to coalition behaviour, the book also sheds new light on electoral accountability, clarity of responsibility and retrospective voting.

The book provides a thorough literature review (Chapter 2) and sophisticated theoretical framework (Chapter 3), which set the stage for the empirical part. It lines up an impressive array of data and methods, mainly quantitative and cross-national, to test the theoretical arguments. Together, the five empirical chapters proceed through all stages of the cycle of coalition. Two chapters focus on voters: Chapter 4 uses a survey experiment of British and Dutch voters to show how voters’ perceptions of parties change

after coalition compromises, and Chapter 5 adduces cross-national panel data to demonstrate how perceived compromises lead to voters punishing parties electorally. The book then turns to parties and shows how – in Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands – parties use legislative amendments to differentiate themselves from their coalition partners (Chapter 6). Still from the party perspective, Chapter 7 reports a case study of the British Cameron–Clegg coalition. The final empirical chapter presents a cross-national analysis of media reports and election results, demonstrating how parliamentary behaviour affects parties’ electoral performance by shaping the media narrative about interparty conflicts through which voters learn about the legislative review process (Chapter 8).

While the overall research design is carefully developed, some choices are less convincing. For example, both legislative amendments *and* parliamentary debates are mentioned as ‘fora in which cabinet parties may demonstrate how they differ from their coalition partners’ (p. 95). However, the cross-national analysis only includes the former. The book reasonably focuses on the legislative review phase rather than on final parliamentary votes: if a coalition party votes against the government, its very survival may be in jeopardy. Amendments are arguably a useful instrument for parties to differentiate themselves, given that such amendments are ‘expressions of dissent with a policy proposal’ (p. 96) and ‘likely to be absorbed by the electorate’ (p. 97). However, as amendments directly change ministers’ proposals, their use should also be expected to be subject to coalition constraints. Therefore, they are probably a more suitable instrument for correcting ministerial drift than for advertising differences with coalition partners. Instead, analyses of parliamentary speeches, but also parliamentary questions, or parliamentary inquiries into scandals could have been considered.

An analysis of parliamentary speeches does admittedly form part of the case study of the Cameron–Clegg coalition, in which the in-depth analysis serves as a further illustration of the book’s argument. The rationale for the choice of a British coalition – a rare phenomenon – is unclear, given that the cross-national analyses focus on countries with long histories of coalition government and parliaments with strong committees. The British experience is contrasted with the findings of the cross-national analysis. However,

for a truly rigorous examination of the impact of coalition experience, a fully comparative analysis – including a country such as Belgium, Denmark, or the Netherlands – might have been even more valuable.

These relatively minor points should not detract from the overall quality of this book. In addition to its important theoretical and empirical contributions, the book is an enjoyable read. Fortunato succeeds in making complex phenomena comprehensible, even for those readers who may be unfamiliar with this topic. The central argument is communicated clearly and illustrated with examples of recent coalition politics. Throughout the book, connections are also drawn with apparently unrelated fields, further enriching the theoretical argument. The public's influence on elite-level decision-making is compared to 'audience costs' in interstate conflicts (p. 196). Sports psychologists' findings that people 'systematically make overly optimistic bets on their preferred team' are used to argue that voters may have unreasonably high expectations of coalition parties (p. 24).

The concluding chapter deserves special mention (Chapter 9). Here, Fortunato succeeds in his aim of 're-contextualizing' the existing literature, leading to a

thought-provoking discussion of the implications of his findings. Coalition conflicts should not necessarily be treated as an indicator of government instability, for instance. They may rather 'imply a healthy cabinet, one that is sufficiently antagonistic outwardly to allow for internally harmonious policy-making negotiation and progress' (p. 189). I found this chapter a rewarding end to a well-written book.

In sum, *The Cycle of Coalition* offers a systematic empirical evaluation of a rich theoretical framework and is a must-read for those interested in coalition politics, party behaviour, parliamentary behaviour and electoral behaviour. The book also offers useful points of departure for future research. For example, the argument could easily be extended to opposition parties, which may cooperate with the government for policy gains, but whose voters may expect a strong antagonistic opposition. The book's publication is also timely. With the increasing fragmentation of the party system and the rise of challenger parties, the occurrence of ideologically heterogeneous coalitions is increasing. This, together with increasing levels of electoral volatility, may fuel the drivers of the cycle of coalition further.