COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Interactive Political Leadership: The Role of Politicians in the Age of Governance. By Eva Sørensen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 240p. $80.00 cloth.

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Interactive Political Leadership is an ambitious work that develops new concepts and theoretical arguments for redefining the study of contemporary political leadership in Western democracies. This makes Eva Sørensen's volume a praiseworthy intellectual effort, one that scholars of representative democratic governance should take seriously.

The declared purpose of the book is to present "a theoretical framework for studying how elected leaders have and might adapt to a world where citizens are systematically involved in governing society" (p. 2). The author starts by observing three changes that are affecting the functioning of contemporary Western countries: an increasing emphasis on the active involvement—alongside elected representatives—of citizens and other nonpolitical actors in the policy-making process; trends toward public administration reforms, which indeed aim to enhance citizens' and stakeholders' participation in political decision making; and the emergence of relatively more pronounced antiauthoritarian values within large sectors of society. The operating assumption is that "neither public authorities nor citizens view sovereign political decision-making and hierarchical, bureaucratic rule as sufficient to produce effective and legitimate public governance" (p. 2). Based on this, the analysis then explores how to reshape public leadership in view of these changes, what incentives do elected representatives have to adapt to these changes, and what barriers make the adaptation less likely. The first question is answered through elaboration of the concept of "interactive political leadership"; that is, "a strategic endeavour to govern society effectively and legitimately through the systematic involvement and mobilization of relevant and affected members of the political community" (p. 3).

The author brings together two different yet complementary strands of literature: (meta)governance research and political leadership research. Whereas the former stresses the horizontal facet of contemporary democratic policy making while neglecting the role of elected representatives, the latter is often focused on the vertical facet of politics and on elections as the only way to authorize public policy. The author proposes the concept of interactive political leadership as a conceptual tool to merge insights drawn from both literatures. It is no surprise that this concept constitutes the core of the proposed theoretical framework, which also pays attention to the main factors that condition the exercise of interactive political leadership (e.g., multilevel governance, the role of media, representative institutions) and to the beneficial effects that interactive leadership has on four types of democratic legitimacy: input, throughput, output, and outcome legitimacy. In a nutshell, this framework criticizes the idea that governing is just a matter of delegation and mandate. Rather, it highlights the possibility of new forms of political decision making, based on mutual and continuous influence between elected representatives and the rest of the society.

The volume is structured as follows. After introducing the argument, the literatures on governance and political leadership are reviewed in the second chapter, and chapter 3 defines the core concepts. The subsequent four chapters point out why and in which sense interactive political leadership promotes input, throughput, output, and outcome legitimacy, respectively. Chapters 8–10, in turn, are dedicated to the analysis of the structural conditions that affect the emergence and the performance of effective interactive political leadership. The conclusion presents 20 final propositions.

Overall, the proposed concepts and their theoretical corollaries are more than more descriptions/explanations of how contemporary Western democracies work today. On the one hand, the framework accounts for the fact that elected politicians are pushed by citizens' demands for more horizontal participation to promote interactive and "smart-power"-based (p. 31) political leadership. On the other hand, the book is prescriptive, in that it clarifies the "favourable conditions for politicians to *choose* an interactive political leadership strategy in the age of governance, although this strategy also involves challenges" (p. 159; emphasis added).

It is worth noting that the tension between description and prescription is one of the characteristic features of Sørensen's book. In this regard, the coexistence of value-free goals and advocacy that permeates the discussion might disorient the reader who is not familiar with the topic, and it becomes particularly important to distinguish between the two levels of analysis throughout the volume. This distinction would have been clearer if the work had presented a systematic empirical validation of the book's conjectures. Yet, the various theoretical statements of the volume are supported only by references to secondary literature (e.g., pp. 56–58, 61–65) or by anecdotical evidence, such as the series of examples in chapter 10 about the institutionalization of interactive forms of agenda setting and policy implementation in the Danish context (pp. 143–50).

Moreover, the proposed framework posits that citizens of contemporary Western democracies are positively inclined toward higher levels of interaction with political

leaders. Again, this assumption would be stronger if it were supported by a systematic presentation of cross-country data on citizens' values and attitudes about their own political involvement and willingness to participate (e.g., à la World Values Survey). This data would also be useful to understand whether and to what extent hierarchically oriented elected politicians are in fact out of tune with their citizens or whether they resonate with their preferences. Sørensen does *not* neglect these issues, but she only touches on them in the guise of possible outlooks for future research, without addressing the point in the book (p. 161). Overall, the lack of systematic empirical validation (or falsification) of the main theoretical arguments constitutes a preliminary step toward the "advance[ment of] the political legitimacy of public governance in the face of the growing distrust of politicians" (p. 4).

That said, the author's goals are conceptualizing, categorizing, and theorizing in the context of a need for further empirical research, and thus, one cannot blame the book for not presenting extensive empirically oriented analyses. For example, the 20 propositions included in the concluding chapter can be understood as 20 research hypotheses for future studies.

To sum up, the book is an informed and dense journey into a wealth of literature, which is used to integrate bottom-up and top-down approaches to the study of political leadership in the passage from government to governance. Given the broad scope of the investigation, the core chapters refer to debates that can appear very wide ranging. However, the introduction succeeds in providing an analytical synthesis, which helps the reader navigate the book. Moreover, the conclusion is a clear-cut overview of the book's most important concepts, theoretical propositions, and prescriptions, which greatly clarifies the connections between the single chapters.

Interactive Political Leadership is a volume that, by its nature, raises more questions than it can definitively answer. But this is also its strength, in that this characteristic can be seen as an indicator of a rich source of inspiration for scholars interested in pursuing empirical examinations of the changing conditions and forms of political ruling in contemporary democracies.