Interactive governance: Advancing the paradigm

Jacob Torfing, B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre and Eva Sørensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2019; ISBN: 978-0-199596-75-1; 273 pp; £66.99)

First published in 2012, the reissuing of *Interactive Governance: Advancing the Paradigm* reflects not only the enduring esteem held in academic circles for its authors but also the continued importance of the text's commentaries around interactive governance for policymakers and elected officials. Resulting from the collaboration of Pierre and Peters, and Sørensen and Torfing, this book explains the interactive governance process, whilst acknowledging the increasingly engaged citizenry and failing trust in government that challenge the role of public leadership in Western countries today.

An introductory chapter establishes the authors' position, positing both government and governance as integral to the governing of the modern state. A strong argument is made asserting the importance of understanding governance processes, highlighting the role of such processes in dealing with increasingly complex issues in policy and public service delivery. This chapter sets out the themes and arguments to be presented over the course of twelve chapters, from a review of the literature around governance in the social sciences to the definition of 'metagovernance' and analysis of governance in the context of democratic participation and accountability. The early chapters of this book build to the concept of metagovernance, explored at length in Chapter Seven.

Chapter One examines the various debates around governance in contemporary literature. Three oft-repeated criticisms of governance – that it occurs only marginally, that it is a dated phenomenon and therefore does not require new consideration by researchers, and that it is a regrettable process – are strongly refuted, lending credibility to the authors' arguments for the relevance of studying interactive

governance. The chapter provides a robust definition for 'interactive governance' as a 'complex process through which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact in order to formulate, promote, and achieve common objectives by means of mobilizing, exchanging and deploying a range of ideas, rules and resources'. This definition prompts considerable questions and thereby interesting material for consideration over the course of the book. The authors chart the history of governance and highlight the increased prevalence of governance as an important area of study in a multitude of policy areas, as well as the recent growth of government-led support for governance processes.

Elaborating upon these themes, Chapter Two examines the distinct definitions of 'governance' employed in different social sciences. Arguing against the perception of governance as a stretched concept or empty signifier, the authors examine the varied understandings of governance and use the common features to enhance their definition. International relations appears to be the field with the most to offer to our understanding of governance. In the international arena there is no true source of legitimate authority. In the absence of a legitimate authority, all countries become actors in networks that may be more or less formal, with more or less power for enforcement. Relatively brief consideration of developmental studies, urban politics, economics and legal theory (amongst other fields) raises questions about the capacity of governance mechanisms to emerge of their own accord – without government support. This contributes to the core argument that governance is not a replacement for government – it is a process that requires control by government.

The third chapter contemplates the relationship between power, politics and governance. The contributors highlight the absence of consideration of power and politics in contemporary literature around governance. They argue that governance is a power-ridden process, with power relations and political conflicts impacting both its processes and results. This chapter contributes to the concept of metagovernance through its consideration of attempts to exercise power *over* governance. It identifies some means by which governments may seek to (meta)govern governance processes – opening or closing governance processes, regulating access to governance arenas, constructing agencies, framing interactions, and assessing and revising interactive governance. This chapter's examination of power contributes to the recognition of governance as a powerful tool for change. It also raises questions around the democratisation of governance, which are addressed later in the book.

Chapter Four is a shorter chapter which discusses the need to measure governance processes. Like the development of a definition for governance, creating a measure which reflects the intricacies of the governance process has eluded many academics and practitioners. Agreement on a definition is complicated by the numerous actors and goals engaged in governance processes, and existing indicator systems do not serve well to measure governance successes. In this chapter the authors propose consideration of governance as continuous, and thereby the use of process-tracing and qualitative methodologies to analyse decision-making in governance. Despite raising some valuable criticisms of existing measurements, the chapter does not provide a new measurement (nor does it truly seek to).

The direction of power relations in governance is examined in Chapter Five. Whereas in traditional models government leads top-down, in governance actors work with and against more powerful and less powerful actors. In governance, power relationships operate 'diagonally', or on a 'zig-zag'. In this chapter the authors argue that the interactive governance perspective offers a more comprehensive model by which to interpret policy and politics than those explored in the literature. The key 'take-away' raised here, however, is the recognition that all governance occurs across various levels and dimensions. The contributors highlight the EU as a 'Pandora's Box' of governance, because it demonstrates the many levels and intricate patterns through which decision-making processes occur in governance.

Issue networks are unlikely to self-organise organically – without the support of government. Therefore, it may be necessary for administrators or political leadership to institutionalise initial efforts toward the creation of governance networks. Such is the central thesis of Chapter Six, which focuses on the institutionalisation of governance. In this chapter the authors posit that government support is required to foster first governance proceedings, which may then self-perpetuate if the initial experience is a success. This chapter cautions repeatedly against the over-institutionalisation of governance, asserting that while stability benefits governance, rigidity or excessive stability may hamper efforts. Whilst acknowledging that interactive governance may reduce state power, the emphasis is here placed on the capacity that the state retains vis-à-vis governance networks in a hierarchy of power.

That capacity is examined in detail in Chapter Seven, which reflects on metagovernance and its objectives, means and implications. At the

outset of the chapter, the concept is defined as the deliberate attempt to facilitate and manage the largely self-regulating processes of interactive governance, without recourse to statist styles of government. Indeed, while the authors maintain that elected governments must lend direction to interactive governance processes, they argue against the use of command or the undermining of self-regulation. Metagovernance – and the arguments around it – is discussed at length, as the authors argue that interactive governance does not reduce the role of government but rather is complementary to government power. Discussion of the challenges to and limits of metagovernance contributes to later examination of democratisation and accountability in interactive governance.

Chapter Eight considers the impact of interactive governance on the roles played by social and political actors, including citizens and private actors. As there is no 'before and after' between government and governance, old and new roles for actors – and expectations for those roles – coexist. The 'new' role of the citizen in interactive governance is perhaps the most altered; in interactive governance the citizen becomes a co-producer of governance. This chapter emphasises that this role change lends the citizen both power and responsibility over policy and public service delivery. However, the willingness of citizens to accept such responsibility is unclear.

Returning to the theme of measurement, the ninth chapter is concerned with assessing the impact of interactive governance – and especially network-type governance. It is maintained throughout that interactive governance is not inherently effective or ineffective. Rather, in this chapter the authors identify criteria against which to measure the impact of governance, capturing the specific expectations around network governance in the literature. The chapter serves metagovernors well by identifying means by which they may improve the efficiency of network governance. The criteria for measuring impact remain 'loose', and empirical assessment of impact remains a critical challenge to researchers and practitioners.

Chapter Ten focuses on the democratic quality of interactive governance and argues that the processes involved are neither inherently democratic nor undemocratic. The chapter reviews the many arguments offered in the literature, from the supposition that interactive governance undermines political equality to its empowering of disenfranchised populations. In drawing on part of Sørensen and Torfing's earlier work, the chapter moves to identify how a metagovernor may influence the course of decision-making in

the interactive governance process. However, it is also noted that a politician may choose not to assert his or her role as metagovernor in a given policy area. Citizens may also decline to participate in interactive governance, and the under-representation of some population groups in governance processes ought to be considered critically in light of the literature around participatory government and representation.

Differentiating between transparency in process and in outcomes, Chapter Eleven argues that a lack of transparency is not always a fundamentally negative thing in governing. Indeed, the authors consider the lines between secrecy and efficiency, and the advantages and risks that may derive from governing in the most transparent manner. As a 'messy', and often less institutionalised, governing mechanism, interactive governance may afford actors better opportunities to evade acting transparently than those afforded by traditional government. The authors advocate for a distinction to be made between secrecy for the protection of an autocratic government and secrecy to promote efficiency or democracy. However, without transparency one process may catalyse the other. The final chapter surmises the arguments made in the book and elaborates the research agenda that awaits development.

The text does not advise the aspiring metagovernor on how to engage those citizens who do not trust the traditional institutions or power of the state. Such citizens are engaged in protests and protest-voting and may refuse to engage with interactive governance processes initiated or led by government as metagovernor. While failing trust in government and traditional institutions is manifest across Western countries – not least in the US where anti-statist discourse has become increasingly extensive – the occupation of the metagovernor role by government may be rejected, and thereby hamper the power of interactive governance. The contributors reflect upon such developments in the foreword to the 2019 edition, and also discuss governance in light of the rise of populism. To defend governance against populism, they suggest emphasising democratic cooperation and promoting governance as a way to 'influence our life quality'.

The reissuing of this book likely reflects the status of its contributors, but the relevance of its message is of increasing importance as the extension of interactive governance continues across all levels of government and into various policy areas. Any actor, private or public, who seeks to become engaged in the interactive governance process will find a relative degree of optimism

in *Interactive Governance.* The narrative presented is confident about the power of interactive governance to effect change, yet realistic about its limited potential in 'failed states'. Indeed, *Interactive Governance* may best serve elected politicians who seek to maintain the traditional power and leadership of traditional government in their new capacity as metagovernor.

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