

BOOK REVIEW

Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 254 pp. \$83.99 (cloth). \$25.99 (paper).

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Representative democracy works. That is the optimistic conclusion readers encounter in the impressive book *Degrees of Democracy* by Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. In what will surely be remembered as a pathbreaking exploration of the connection between public opinion and public policy across countries, years, and issues, the authors show that citizens routinely get what they want from government. Moreover, once members of the public get what they want, they scale back their preferences—as if operating a thermostat—to reflect the new status quo. Few topics are more important, and few authors analyze mountains of data in such a compelling way. All in all, Soroka and Wlezien deliver an upbeat view of government that one could easily miss amid doomsday chatter from political commentators.

The book develops a thermostatic model of citizen-elite interactions in two main parts: public responsiveness and policy representation. The former refers to instances when citizens alter their policy preferences for more or less spending in reaction to government decisions. The latter concerns the extent to which leaders follow public opinion. This is the order in which they are presented in the book. Some readers working from a democratic theory mindset might expect the order of presentation to be the reverse—representation, then responsiveness—but that poses no major obstacles, as the authors consider the dance between both across decades. In many respects, starting points are arbitrary, as Soroka and Wlezien take great care in a succession of time-series models to explain each as a lagged function of the other. Furthermore, if citizens do not notice and react to what leaders do, then leaders have few incentives to follow public opinion.

Soroka and Wlezien argue that a responsive public behaves like a thermostat, adjusting its preferences for more or less of a policy in response to actual policy decisions. The “degrees” part of the title implies an ideal point, like a preferred temperature one would have set. However, just as temperature goals are set in relation to seasonal context, so too are public preferences. The world is changing, not just because of generational turnover in the electorate, but also because of actions on the part of political elites. Many scholars studying

opinion-policy responsiveness focus only on the path from citizens to leaders, but this book places everything in context and does so over long periods of time. Democracy, Soroka and Wlezien argue, has a high degree of efficiency when both responsiveness and representation are operating.

The authors demonstrate this in compelling fashion for the United States, Great Britain, and Canada. They also unpack how these relationships vary across institutional features like the vertical division of power in unitary or federal systems as well as the horizontal division of powers in presidential or parliamentary systems. Soroka and Wlezien argue that vertical divisions of powers make it more difficult for the public to gauge and react to government policy, thus diminishing public responsiveness. Likewise, they maintain that concentrations of power in parliamentary systems make politicians less responsive to changes in public opinion. Added to this, they consider issue salience. Issue salience factors into other prominent studies of democratic responsiveness, but not alongside institutional factors and not as comprehensively. Responsiveness and representation are expected to peak for salient issues in systems with a presidential system and a unitary division of powers.

For Soroka and Wlezien, policy means budgetary data, specifically questions in nationally representative polls that ask about preferences for more, less, or the same amount of spending in various issue categories. This is one limitation of the book, although it feels odd to say that analyses using decades of budgetary data and preferences are “limited” in any way. The point is that budgets are important, but they are not everything. A lot of policy decisions, such as those in the social arenas (e.g., abortion, gay rights, flag burning) or the economic realm (e.g., job training, unionization, worker safety) garner public attention but not in direct relation to the budget. That is, some political battles are more about morals or the proper role of the government in the marketplace. In fact, some foreign-policy decisions are considered in supplemental appropriations outside the normal budget process, and some policies, such as treaties, do not directly concern governmental spending. In other words, this book covers huge portions of what governments do, but the degree to which the arguments generalize to non-budgetary matters is uncertain.

Another issue concerns data availability. Budget preferences are often asked on major national surveys like the General Social Survey or in commercial polls, but not in a consistent fashion across years or countries. What that means is that the set of issues considered in one country might be different than what is analyzed for another country. Like many studies of public opinion, it is only possible to work with what exists, especially because Soroka and Wlezien are going so far back in time. Nonetheless, it is important to consider how many issues on national agenda are not subject to polling. The authors sidestep the issue somewhat by aggregating multiple polls to develop general categories like health, welfare, or defense, but data constraints

seem to have forced them into studying Britain, the United States, and Canada. As survey data become more plentiful in other countries, it will be interesting to see if the main substantive messages hold in other countries or years.

At a more micro-level, there is an assumption throughout the book that people get the signal on policy change and then update their preferences accordingly. However, there is no direct examination of media messages or other ways of documenting these linkages. The analyses are at a high level, but some readers may want more detailed work on particular policies with the intervening mechanisms clearly tested. To be sure, Soroka and Wlezien admit as much when they say, "To the extent policymakers follow the public, how do they learn what people want? As with public responsiveness, we cannot be sure about the mechanisms behind policy representation" (p. 173). They also use clever analyses taken during different points in the year to show that actual spending changes, not just appropriations, drive public responsiveness.

Overall, there is a lot to admire here, far more than is possible to cover in a review. The main message is that representation appears to be stronger in the United States across issues domains than in Britain or Canada. Public responsiveness was not as strong in the United States as it was in Britain on defense and education, and was lower than it was in Canada for health. All of this implies that the institutional differences matter more than the style of government at the federal level. The end result is less system efficiency for the United States than for the U.K., while in Canada it is lower than in both of the other countries. As noted earlier, however, it would be nice to see comparisons like these using more countries.

What the authors do across policy domains within the countries in their study is to jump into the scholarly fray about the degree to which representation varies by income class. Contrary to other scholars, who find that representation follows class lines, Soroka and Wlezien find "no evidence of overrepresentation of high-income preferences" (p. 164). In other words, there is no difference in the representation of low-, middle-, and upper-income citizens. They also consider other areas, such as partisanship, but the overall message is one of responsiveness across the board. As Soroka and Wlezien write, "Based on our analyses, the dynamics of democracy are not the preserve of the attentive few or of a well-heeled elite" (p. 165). Such findings are likely to engender years of academic debate, and it appears as if the proverbial gauntlet has been thrown down.

For all of these reasons and many others, this book is a must-read for students of politics, not only those who focus on American government, but also anyone interested in comparative democratic performance. It incorporates and improves upon an impressive research agenda that has already received acclaim in highly respected political science journals. Public-opinion scholars typically invoke democratic theory as one of the reasons why what they study is important. This book provides some of the much-needed infrastructure and evidence on the degree to which popular government works. With it, scholars

can continue to probe topics like the nature of opinion formation, since preferences prove to be the lifeblood of representative democracy, connecting citizens to leaders and leaders to citizens.

doi:10.1093/poq/nfq049