

Parliamentary Bookshelf: Reviews

Les surveillants de l'État démocratique : mise en contexte, edited by Jean Crête, Presses de l'Université Laval, Montreal, 216 p.

Les surveillants de l'État démocratique, edited by Jean Crête, provides an analysis of democratic accountability. More specifically, this collective work explores how institutions and mechanisms are needed to: first, ensure that leaders of democratic states do not exploit their powers, and second, identify and prevent abuse. Through empirical studies, the authors demonstrate that while constraints are an essential

element of democracy, they are not without cost. The book contains seven chapters divided into two parts. The first part consists of three chapters that address the auditing of public accounts. The four chapters in the second part revolve around the theme of structural constraints associated with oversight mechanisms. Although the majority of chapters focus on the Canadian context, two take a look beyond our borders.

In the first section, the authors explore the theme of public accountability in Canada and 27 African countries. In Chapter 1, Geneviève Tellier looks at a new oversight mechanism in Canada: the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO). Tellier traces the history and activities of the Office, providing an overview of how accountability works at the federal level. She concludes that although the PBO does fulfill the requirements of the Office, the Officer is nonetheless faced with numerous obstacles, including the degree of independence while performing their duties. Louis Imbeau also highlights the importance of independence in monitoring the State in the second chapter where he analyses the different types of institutional arrangements in 27 African countries. Imbeau argues that being attached to the legislature rather than another control authority promotes budgetary transparency. This transparency is enhanced when the media is independent. In Chapter 3, also comparative in nature, Crête, Diallo, Rasamimanana and Timlet examine what captures the attention of provincial auditors general in all ten Canadian provinces. Based on the comments contained in annual reports from 2000 and 2010, the authors find that the differences between provinces are minimal compared with those found within a single province over time. The information contained in the reports has also become more intelligible to the general public, which facilitates its evaluation by the media and the public. The authors conclude by emphasizing the important role of the auditor general in monitoring the State.

In the second section, dealing with structural constraints, the various authors address the following subjects: training, evaluations, institutional features and the role of citizens in monitoring the



State. In Chapter 4, Biland and Vanneuville turn their attention to France, examining the role of the Council of State in training senior officials. They argue that the Council of State ensures the prevalence of law and legal monitoring in administrative practices through training.

In Chapter 5, Jacob and Slaibi consider whether the purpose of program evaluation is to ensure the accountability and democratization of government activities, or a tool for controlling and monitoring? To address this, the authors trace the evolution and content of federal evaluation policies from their conception to the present day. They then examine how the policies are used within the federal government. Although those being monitored seem to perceive the policy objective relating to monitoring rather than management, the study shows that the evaluation is used for several purposes. The authors conclude, much like Tellier, that the results are not used to their full potential.

Chapter 6 deals with institutional characteristics in the provinces of Ontario and Québec in the areas of health, education and social services. Through a quantitative analysis of spending in these three areas, Tourigny and Bodet demonstrate the inflexibility of institutions and the advantages of the punctuated equilibrium approach to understanding long periods of stability sometimes marked by rapid change. In Chapter 7, Petry returns to a theme discussed in the introductory chapter, the citizen. He looks at how citizens evaluate election promises. His study shows how different evaluation criteria lead to different evaluations, and he observes a gap between public perceptions and expert evaluations. The collection ends with a brief conclusion.

Despite a few minor shortcomings, this book would be very useful for anyone interested in governance and oversight. Its greatest weakness is related in part to its size; adding a few chapters could have provided for better balance. Indeed, the majority of the chapters focus on Canada, with only two chapters looking elsewhere. With the addition of one or two chapters, or even a few comparative studies, the text could have provided a more comprehensive picture of democratic monitoring, which would have greatly improved the links among the various themes. This comment is not meant to question the need for this French-language work, but simply to point out that some additions would have significantly improved its usefulness to students, researchers, and officials.

It is also important to note that some chapters are rooted more in theory than others, such as that of Tourigny and Bodet, and that some studies stand out from the others, particularly those of Tellier, Petry and Crete et al. This book makes a positive contribution to the current literature dealing with governance, accountability and oversight. And as such, it would be a valuable tool for government officials, parliamentarians and others with an interest in this subject area.

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Comparative Federalism and Intergovernmental Agreements: Analyzing Australia, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States, by Jeffrey Parker, Routledge Series in Federal Studies, London and New York, 2014, 266 p.

While federal institutional architectures furnish governments with authority to act autonomously in certain jurisdictions, they simultaneously require them to work together. In other words, federations variously combine self-rule and shared-rule. The scope and patterns of shared-rule in federations varies considerably across time and space. For example, the changing nature of the modern state in the twentieth century encouraged the emergence of a new era of cooperation in many federations. In contrast, the “new federalism” initiative in the United States, “open federalism” in Canada and “dis-entanglement” reforms in Germany and Switzerland represent efforts to restore self-rule and to trim back shared-rule arrangements. Mechanisms of shared-rule, however, not only vary depending on the historical context and the federal system, but can also take quite different forms. An extremely important, yet understudied form of shared-rule is the intergovernmental agreement (IGA), which lies at the heart of this ambitious comparative study by Jeffrey Parker.

Considering the historical proliferation and omnipresence of IGAs in almost every federation, the lack of comparative research on this issue is astonishing indeed. As Parker highlights in the introduction to his book, IGAs are manifold and can serve different purposes. IGAs lay the groundwork for the introduction of new policy programs in areas such as health care or education, they establish a framework for the management or regulation of natural resources or create new institutions like the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). In

essence, Parker's comparative study seeks to shed more light on this crucial feature of federal politics by posing two questions: First, how do federations differ in the way they make use of IGAs and, second, what explains these differences?

The study compares the scope and patterns of IGA formation in six federations: Australia, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States. Parker justifies the rationale behind the selection of cases

with the institutional diversity that is represented by each federation. As this sample represents federations that contrast in important respects such as size, location, level of economic development or age, it spans a broad range of federal systems. Moreover, it also promises to produce insights that are, to a certain degree, generalizable.

Drawing on institutional theory, Parker introduces a set of seven variables that he expects to be crucial to understand why some federations produce more IGAs than others. These variables are assumed to have different effects. While most of them are conducive to IGA formation, others counteract or mitigate those effects. For example, if a federation displays a high degree of overlapping competencies, governments are more likely to create IGA in order to cope with resulting interdependencies. However, if there exists a large number of subnational governments, it is more difficult to reach an agreement and IGA formation might be inhibited. For each of his six case studies, Parker thoroughly scrutinizes the effect of each variable separately and "in concert," (how they interact within each federation).

The comparative study of the six federations yields several noteworthy insights. As for the productivity, it is interesting to see that there obviously exist profound differences in how individual federations deploy IGAs as a means of shared-rule. Australia, Canada and Germany have generated a significantly higher number of IGAs than Switzerland and the United States. South Africa is the only federation that has not yet created a single IGA, but it is also by far the youngest federation within the sample. The similarities among Australia, Canada and Germany are remarkable as those three federations differ in many other respects: Australia is usually considered as exemplifying a highly centralized federation, while Canada counts as perhaps the most decentralized one. In addition, unlike Australia and Germany, Canada is a multi-national federation. Finally, Germany sets itself apart from both Australia and Canada as it features a high degree of institutional entanglement and joint-decision-making.



As counterintuitive as these findings might be at first glance, they appear as less surprising after a closer look. First, the differences in IGA productivity among the federations are, to some extent, a consequence of deliberate conceptual and methodological decisions. With good reason, Parker focuses only on what he calls national agreements; this means IGAs that involve virtually all governments. He sets the bar very high, thereby excluding, however, bi- or multi-lateral IGAs among a smaller number of units, as long as they are not part of a larger single federal effort to coordinate one policy area (p. 8-9). Although this certainly is a wise decision to keep a complex comparative study manageable, the picture of IGA productivity might look differently had all types of IGAs been included.

Second, as the comparative investigation reveals, his set of institutional variables is well chosen in order to explain variation. Hardly surprising, he finds that the seven variables do not carry an equal weight. For example, the existence of lasting forums for intergovernmental relations turns out to be a very successful variable as it correlates with high IGA productivity in almost all cases, whereas the degree of constitutional overlap – according to Parker’s analysis – was one of the least successful variables. Also, the large number of subnational units in the United States (50) and Switzerland (26) makes it more difficult to forge an IGA than in federations such as Canada or Australia.

One can certainly pick at several aspects of Jeffrey Parker’s study. In particular, some decisions concerning the conceptual framework appear a bit flawed. For example, the degree of constitutional overlap variable is somewhat misconstrued, which becomes evident when Parker suggests that Germany

has a high degree of overlap. This is misleading, because the functional allocation of competencies in Germany (federal legislation, Lander implementation) is different from real overlap in dual federations like Australia or Canada. Likewise, the way Parker uses the welfare state as an indicator for interdependence and, hence, a variable that promotes IGA productivity, tends to be superficial. Finally, it would have been good to elaborate on the question of periodical shifts of IGA productivity within individual federations, an important aspect that Parker does not address in his study.

While some criticism is warranted, however, the study’s limitations are comparatively small and do not diminish its overall contribution to comparative federalism research. Parker very carefully explains and justifies almost every step in the formation of the concept, always demonstrating a keen awareness of each decision’s possible implications. Considering the scope and qualitative nature of the study, Parker does a remarkable job, as this type of comparative research requires a considerable level of engagement with each individual country. Throughout the study, he is very anxious to remain consistent with his framework, which – and this is the flipside in terms of style – makes this book at the same time a somewhat mechanistic read that also suffers from some redundancies. Again, however, it is important to highlight that these are rather minor quibbles in an otherwise excellent study which, for various reasons, addresses an important research gap in comparative federalism.

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