

# Dictators and Democrats, Unite!

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One doesn't want to like *The Dictator's Handbook*. Its thesis—that all politicians are alike—is noxious, facile, too confidently paraded before the reader. The book argues that politicians have the same goal, to stay in power, and that all of them, whether they are elected democratically or installed extralegally, play by the same set of rules.

Of course this is wrong. Democrats don't seize the reins of power, hold them forever, and misuse government funds to keep their partners happy and the citizenry quiescent. No, they get elected through universal suffrage. Watchdog groups, the judiciary, and the media hold them accountable for political and financial excesses. And constitutions ensure that everyone, including those in power, plays by the rules.

Right?

To be sure, the authors, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, make no attempt to equate, say, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe with Barack Obama. Nor do they present a simplistic explanatory device, such as an arc of power dispersal that places the world's Mugabes at one end and the Obamas at the other. Rather, theirs is a sophisticated argument which holds that every politician subscribes to the same set of rules, knowingly or unknowingly.

The rules are: Keep your winning (or governing) coalition as small as possible. Keep your nominal selectorate (in democracies, the voting public) as large as possible. Control the flow of revenue. Pay your key supporters just enough to keep them loyal. And don't take money out of supporters' pockets to improve the people's lives.

The authors show that these rules easily apply to autocrats. Kim Jong-il keeps his governing coalition small; Lenin introduced "universal adult suffrage in Russia's old rigged election system;"

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari controls the flow of revenue (though he does not quite fit the definition of an autocrat—the book is often too quick to label); Mugabe pays his supporters just enough to ensure their loyalty; and Myanmar's Than Shwe doesn't improve people's lives at his supporters' expense.

But do elected leaders in democratic societies also follow these rules? The authors acknowledge that democratic leaders are "constrained by the laws of the land, which also determine—through election procedures—the size of the coalition" needed to gain power.

But why does the US Congress gerrymander districts? Precisely to keep winning coalitions as small as possible. Why do some political parties favor immigration? To make their nominal selectorates as large as possible. Why do we see so many battles over tax codes? Because politicians want to control sources of revenue. Why do Democrats in the United States spend so much tax money on social programs? Because politicians want to reward the part of their electoral base that they can count on most. And why do Republicans wish the top tax rate were lower, and object so strongly to national health care? Because they don't want to take money from supporters to reward the opposition.

Democratic leaders, the authors argue, just "face different constraints and have to be a little more creative than their autocratic counterparts."

Bueno de Mesquita and Smith—both teach politics at New York University—develop their argument more fully than is reflected here. But even this quick sketch shows why it is important not to reject their analysis a priori. Yes, crucial differences exist between autocrats and democrats. But both kinds of leaders employ similar techniques to gain power and maintain it. *The Dictator's Handbook* is shot through with cynicism, but it is a healthy cynicism—a thought-provoking kind that does not call on us to walk away from politics but rather to remain engaged and vigilant. ■

**The Dictator's Handbook:  
Why Bad Behavior Is Almost  
Always Good Politics**  
by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and  
Alastair Smith. *PublicAffairs*, 2011.