

Varieties of Dictatorship

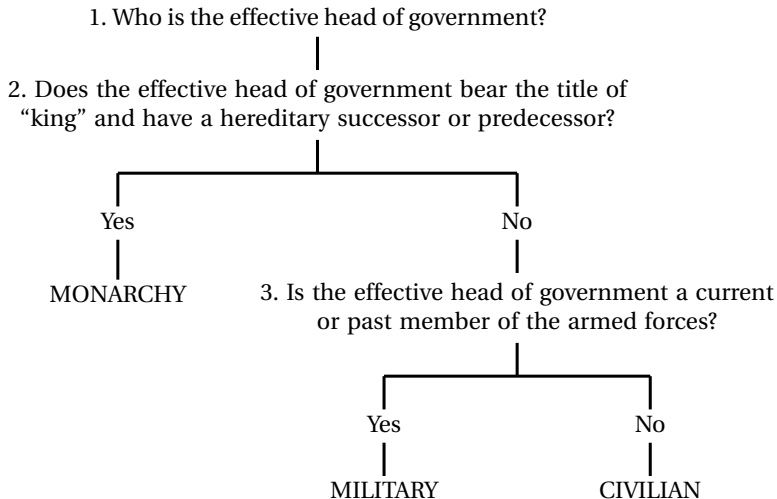
A Typology of Dictatorships

There are many different types of dictatorship.

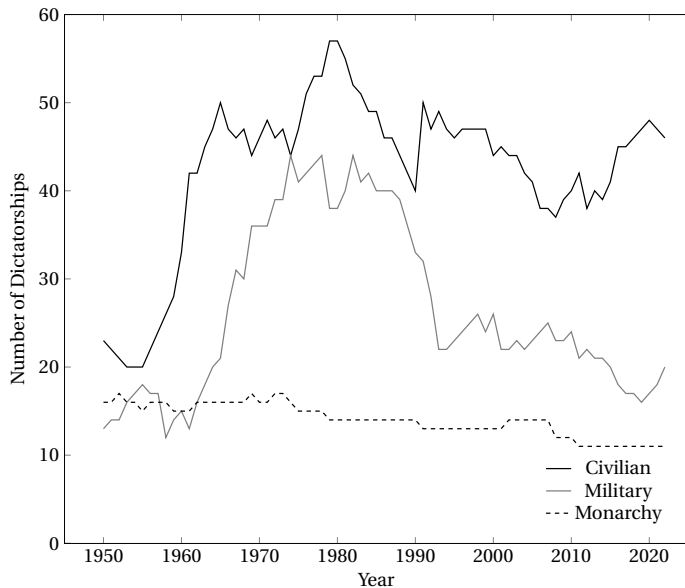
One common typology classifies dictatorships based on the characteristics of their **inner sanctums** or **support coalitions**.

1. A **monarchic dictatorship** is an autocracy in which the executive comes to and maintains power on the basis of family and kin networks.
2. A **military dictatorship** is an autocracy in which the executive relies on the armed forces to come to and stay in power.
3. All other autocracies are **civilian dictatorships**.

Classifying Dictatorships



Monarchic, Military, and Civilian Dictatorships, 1950-2022



Dictators need to keep their support coalitions happy to stay in power.

Dictators tend to be replaced by defecting members of their support coalition.

The persistence of an authoritarian leader's **type** when the particular authoritarian leader is removed is why we often talk of dictatorial **regimes** rather than just dictatorial **leaders**.

Monarchic Dictatorships

Examples: Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, eSwatini.

Less violence and political instability than other forms of dictatorship.

Monarchic leaders survive in office longer than other authoritarian leaders.

More stable property rights and faster economic growth than other types of dictatorships.

Monarchies have developed a political culture where a leader's promise to distribute rents is particularly credible.

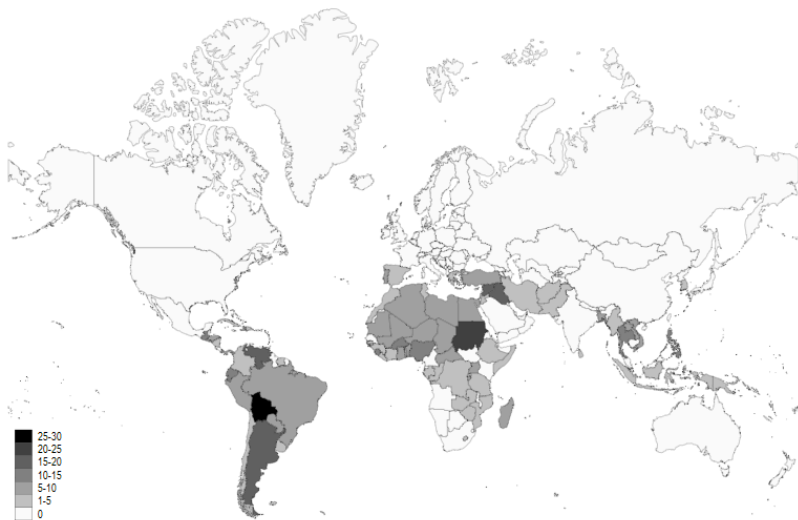
- Clear rules on who is an insider and who is an outsider.
- Rules and norms on how rents are to be shared among members of the royal family.
- Institutions to monitor the actions of the ruler and enforce norms regarding the distribution of rents.

Military Dictatorships

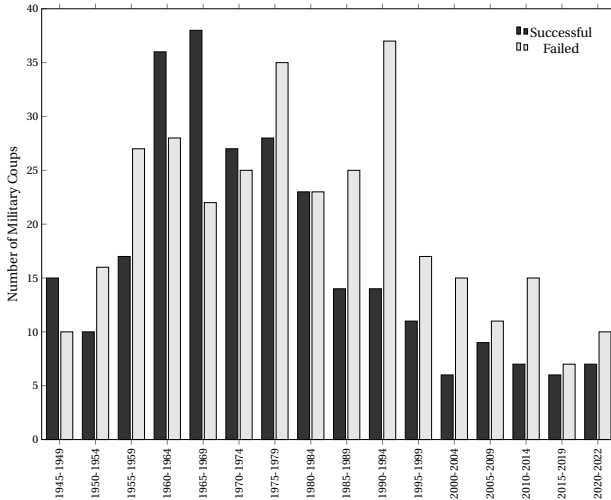
Examples: Thailand, Myanmar, Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Sudan.

The most pressing threat to the stability of military dictatorships tends to come from within the military itself.

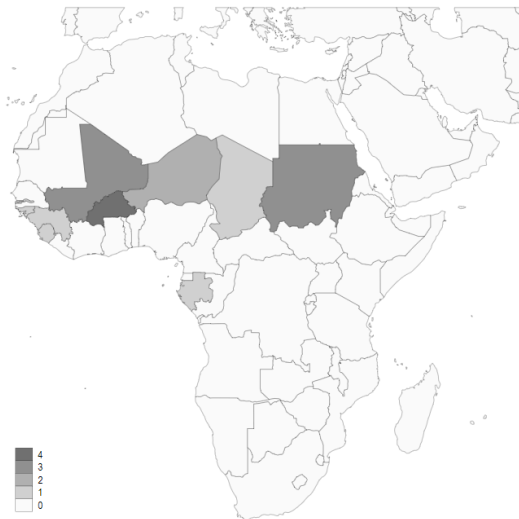
Total Number of Failed and Successful Military Coups, 1945-2022



A decline in the number of military coups since the 1960s



Africa's Military Coup Belt, 2020-2023



Military dictatorships tend to have short durations and are more likely to end with negotiations as opposed to violence than other types of authoritarian regime.

More likely to leave behind competitive and democratic forms of government than other types of dictatorship.

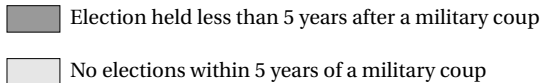
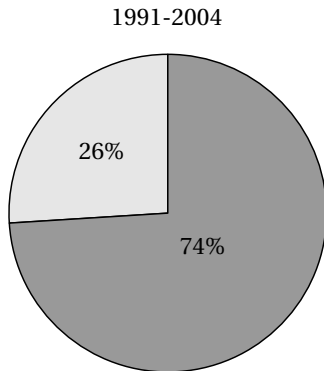
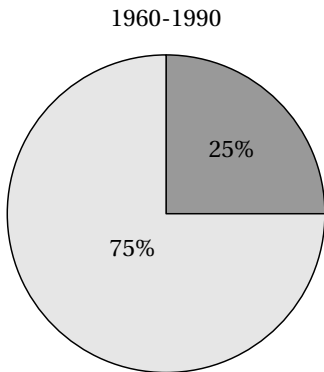
The value associated with giving up power is considerably higher for military dictatorships than for other forms of dictatorship.

Because the military has all the guns, it retains a credible threat to re-intervene in politics.

The military can give up power safe in the knowledge that whoever wins the elections will still have to take account of its preferences.

In many cases, the military will negotiate the handover of power to make sure that its interests are protected.

Timing of Elections after Military Coups



Civilian Dictatorships

Examples: Belarus, China, Egypt, North Korea, Russia, Syria, Turkmenistan.

Unlike monarchic and military dictatorships, **civilian dictatorships** don't have an immediate institutional base of support; instead they have to create one.

Many civilian dictators do this with the help of **regime parties** or **personality cults**.

Two subcategories of civilian dictatorships:

1. A **dominant-party dictatorship** is one in which a single party dominates access to political office and control over policy, though other parties may exist and compete in elections.
2. A **personalistic dictatorship** is one in which the leader, although often supported by a party or military, retains personal control of policy decisions and the selection of regime personnel.

Dominant-Party Dictatorships

- After authoritarian monarchies, they are the longest-lived dictatorships.
- Majority factions within regime parties try to co-opt minority factions rather than exclude them from power.
- Regime parties often engage in electoral fraud to deter regime party defections and discourage opponents.
- Economic downturns can create problems with stability for dominant-party regimes because they reduce the resources available for buying off potential rivals.

Personalistic Dictatorships

- A weak or nonexistent press, a strong secret police, and an arbitrary use of state violence that keeps the population living in fear.
- Elaborate personality cults.

A **cult of personality** consists of a set of beliefs, values, myths, symbols, and rituals directed at the adulation of the leader.

Personality Cult of Kim Jong-il in North Korea

- North Korea, Part I, click [▶ here](#) (9:49)
- North Korea, Part II, click [▶ here](#) (6:50)
- North Korea, click [▶ here](#) (1:36)

What role do personality cults play in keeping civilian dictators in power?

- Creations of narcissistic and power-hungry leaders who wish to be flattered and deified.
- They create loyal citizenry – ‘true believers’ – by producing false beliefs in the population through state indoctrination.

But personality cults and the propaganda claims made by authoritarian rulers are often ridiculously unbelievable.

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If personality cults aren't really about persuasion, what are they about?

One story is that personality cults are **strategies of domination**.

The use of cult imagery and discourse is designed to habituate citizens into behaving **as if** they believe the official rhetoric by enforcing rules on acceptable speech and behavior.

They intimidate the masses by showing what the regime is capable of making the people say and do.

Another story is that they act as a **screening device** for loyalty and other desirable characteristics of supporters and subordinates.

Rulers have to delegate tasks such as repression or policy implementation to subordinates or **agents** to act on their behalf.

Adverse selection problem: How can you make sure that you delegate to the right **type** of agent?

The **dictator's dilemma** is that he relies on repression to stay in power, but this repression creates incentives for everyone to falsify their preferences so that the dictator never knows his true level of societal support.

Personality cults can help with adverse selection problems by allowing you to screen out less loyal agents.

Elaborate personality cults can arise when people try to outdo each other when trying to signal their loyalty to the ruler.

By repeating outlandish claims, supporters of the leader enhance the credibility of their loyalty signal by tainting their reputation with opposition groups, thereby reducing their exit options.

The psychological costs of preference falsification may be lower for more loyal and unscrupulous individuals.

Personality cults are a rational tool for helping dictators stay in power and achieve their goals.

This story can help to explain why some leaders in democracies also make outlandish and demonstrably false claims and why some people publicly repeat or accept them.

Personalist Dictatorships

- The leader's faction frequently keeps tight control over the spoils of office.
- More likely to end in violence than other types of dictatorship.
- Become unstable only when there's an economic catastrophe, when the security apparatus and military defect, or when the leader dies and the system of patronage based around him collapses.

The Two Fundamental Problems of Authoritarian Rule

There are two fundamental problems of authoritarian rule:

1. The problem of authoritarian power-sharing
2. The problem of authoritarian control

The **problem of authoritarian power-sharing** focuses on intra-elite conflict.

When a dictator first comes to power, there is a **power-sharing agreement** on how to share rents among the members of his support coalition.

Regime type – democracy and dictatorship – is a **foundational political institution**.

In contrast to contracts between private actors that can be enforced by a third party (the state), there's no higher independent authority with the power to force a democratic or dictatorial state to comply with the rules of the game.

Dictatorial (and democratic) rulers abide by the rules of the game only if it's in their interests to do so.

Power-sharing agreements in these situations must be self-enforcing.

Without third-party enforcers, the threat of violence plays a prominent role in the resolution of political conflict.

Power-sharing agreements reflect the underlying balance of power between different sets of political actors.

If the balance of power changes, so does the power-sharing agreement and with it the nature of the regime.

When a dictator first comes to power, there is a **power-sharing agreement** on how to share rents among the members of his support coalition.

But the dictator always has an incentive to alter the power-sharing agreement to his benefit.

The only thing stopping the dictator from grabbing more power is the ability of the support coalition to replace him via a coup.

When the threat to remove the dictator is credible, we have a **contested dictatorship** where power is shared between the dictator and his allies.

When the threat to remove the dictator isn't credible, we have a **personalist dictatorship** where power lies only in the hands of the dictator.

The support coalition has **limited information** about whether the dictator is actually violating the power-sharing agreement.

Coups are costly.

The uncertainty about the dictator's actions and the reluctance of the support coalition to rebel creates incentives for the dictator to try to gain more power.

In this account, personalist dictatorships arise when the support coalition repeatedly fails to act in response to a series of power grabs by the dictator.

When the support coalition can't fully monitor the dictator's actions and can't be confident the dictator is following the agreement rather than trying to surreptitiously consolidate power, they might either launch an **unnecessary coup** or, through inaction, find that they have been **marginalized** (or worse).

Political institutions can help solve the **asymmetric information** or **monitoring problem** at the heart of intra-regime conflict.

- Legislatures and parties can provide a forum for exchanging information and deliberating about policy.
- Having formal rules and protocols makes it easier to see when they've been violated.

We've seen that dictatorships adopt institutions such as legislatures and political parties to reward their allies in the support coalition and to co-opt members of the opposition.

But they also adopt them to help solve **informational problems** within the authoritarian elite.

Information on its own, though, isn't sufficient to create a stable power-sharing arrangement.

The support coalition still needs the ability to **credibly punish** the dictator if he reneges on the agreement.

This means that dictatorial institutions designed to support power-sharing agreements aren't only about information gathering.

They also have to **share** or **transfer** enough power to the support coalition that it can actually constrain the dictator.

Making a stable power-sharing agreement is difficult.

To credibly commit to any power-sharing agreement, the ruler needs to share enough power that the support coalition can constrain him.

But how can the support coalition credibly commit to not using its increased power to renegotiate the power-sharing agreement on more favorable terms?

A stable authoritarian power-sharing agreement requires institutionalization and a fairly even distribution of power between the dictator and his support coalition.

This has implications both for when we'll see dictatorships institutionalize and for the effectiveness of authoritarian institutions.

Strong dictators have no need to institutionalize. If there *are* institutions, they won't constrain the dictator because they won't be empowered.

Weak dictators have an incentive to create institutions and empower them. These institutions will constrain the dictator.

If dictators have **middling strength**, then institutionalization will improve the monitoring capacity of the support coalition.

- If the balance of power is equal, the institutions will constrain the dictator.
- If the dictator has more power, the constraining effect of the institutions will decline over time.

The **problem of authoritarian control** focuses on conflict between the elite and the masses.

There are two distinct strategies to solve the **problem of authoritarian control**.

1. Repression

2. Cooptation

Repression is a double-edged sword.

- Strengthening the military and police can help the dictator control the masses.
- Strengthening the military and the police gives them leverage over the dictator.

This trade-off depends on the level of societal opposition.

If societal opposition is high, only the military has the institutional capacity to put down violent unrest.

The military will demand policy concessions, large budgets, and institutional autonomy.

The military won't need to intervene openly in politics.

There will be a system of military tutelage.

If societal opposition is low, the dictator can afford to keep the military weak.

The dictator will give few resources to the military but reward a small and loyal palace guard.

The military won't be able to intervene in politics.

There will be a system of civilian control.

If societal opposition is moderately high, things get interesting.

The military may threaten to intervene to obtain concessions, but the dictator may call the military's bluff.

The military may intervene in politics if miscalculations are made.

There will be a system of military brinkmanship.

Is a military coup a sign that the military is strong?

Is a military coup a sign that the military is strong?

A really strong military has no need to intervene openly in politics.

This is another example of where power is often at its greatest when it's least likely to be observed.

Rather than repress the masses, the dictator can try to coopt them.

Dictators often create institutions such as parties and legislatures to coopt opposition groups.

But why create institutions to coopt opposition groups rather than buy them off directly?

But why create institutions to coopt opposition groups rather than buy them off directly?

One possibility is that the dictator's promise to provide direct transfers isn't credible.

A second possibility is that institutions can give the masses a stake in preserving the regime.

Selectorate Theory

All leaders are motivated by the desire to gain and maintain office.

If all leaders have the same goals, why do we get variance in outcomes?

Some environments encourage leaders to behave in ways that benefit society, whereas others encourage them to behave in way that benefit only themselves and a few others.

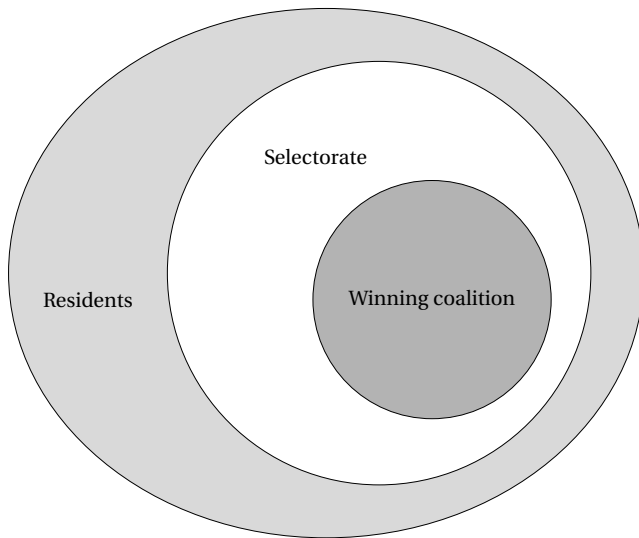
The key factor is how the leader is **selected**.

All governments can be characterized by their location in a two-dimensional institutional space.

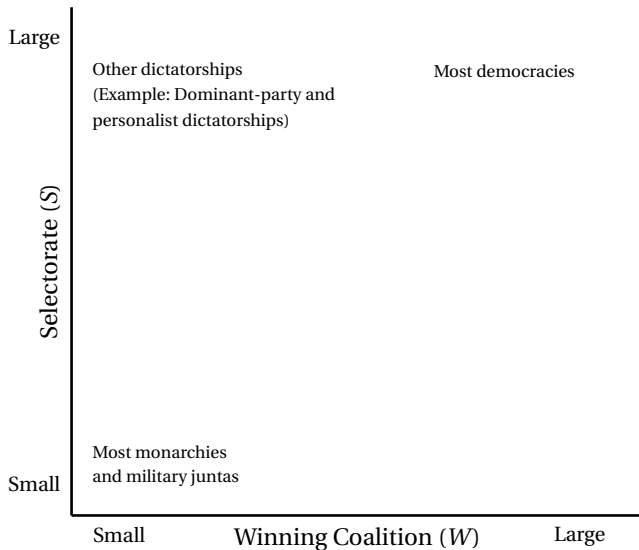
1. The **selectorate** is the set of people who can play a role in selecting the leader.
2. The **winning coalition** includes those people whose support is necessary for the leader to stay in power.

The **disenfranchised** are those residents who do not have a legal right to participate in choosing the government.

The Institutional Environment in Selectorate Theory



Selectorate Theory and Regime-Type Location



Leaders must keep their winning coalition satisfied to stay in power.

Leaders can distribute:

1. Public goods, which can be consumed by everyone.
2. Private goods, which can be consumed only by the winning coalition.

The leader chooses a tax rate to generate revenue.

A **challenger** also makes an offer regarding public goods, private goods, and the tax rate.

Whoever makes the best offer obtains the support of a winning coalition and is selected as the leader.

Two factors are key:

1. The loyalty norm, W/S .
2. The size of the winning coalition, W .

Loyalty Norm

Individuals in the winning coalition who are disgruntled must weigh the costs and benefits of defecting.

Defectors have no guarantee they'll be in the next leader's winning coalition and, thus, risk losing access to private goods.

The probability of being in a leader's winning coalition is W/S .

The size of W/S generates a loyalty norm.

- When W/S is small, members of the winning coalition are extremely loyal to the incumbent leader.
- When W/S is large, members of the winning coalition will be less loyal.

The size of the loyalty norm affects the performance of leaders.

Society A

- Tax revenue = \$1 billion.
- Winning coalition = 1,000.
- Selectorate = 100,000.
- $W/S = 0.01$.

Society B

- Tax revenue = \$1 billion.
- Winning coalition = 1,000.
- Selectorate = 10,000.
- $W/S = 0.1$.

The leaders of both societies **could** give \$1 million to each member of their winning coalitions. **But ...**

Society A

The probability of being in the challenger's winning coalition is $W/S = 0.01$.

$$\text{Expected payoff (Defect)} = (0.01 \times \$1,000,000) + (0.99 \times \$0) = \$10,000$$

While the leader could give \$1 million to each member of the winning coalition, he need only give them slightly more than \$10,000 to stop them defecting.

Society B

The probability of being in the challenger's winning coalition is $W/S = 0.1$.

$$\text{Expected payoff (Defect)} = (0.1 \times \$1,000,000) + (0.9 \times \$0) = \$100,000$$

While the leader could give \$1 million to each member of the winning coalition, he need only give them slightly more than \$100,000 to stop them defecting.

Leaders in small W/S systems with strong loyalty norms like society A have greater opportunities to engage in kleptocracy and corruption.

Corruption is when public officials take illegal payments in exchange for providing benefits for particular individuals.

Kleptocracy is when corruption is organized by political leaders with the goal of personal enrichment.

Unlike leaders in large W/S systems who have to perform well to maintain the loyalty of their winning coalitions, leaders in small W/S systems have incentives to produce poor public policy.

Size of the Winning Coalition

Leaders always prefer to buy the support of the winning coalition with private goods.

- Challengers can't credibly commit to give defectors access to private goods.

But using only private goods isn't always possible.

As the size of the winning coalition, W , increases, the value of the private goods going to each member decreases.

Society A

- Tax revenue = \$1 billion.
- Winning coalition = 1,000.
- Maximum value of private goods = \$1,000,000.

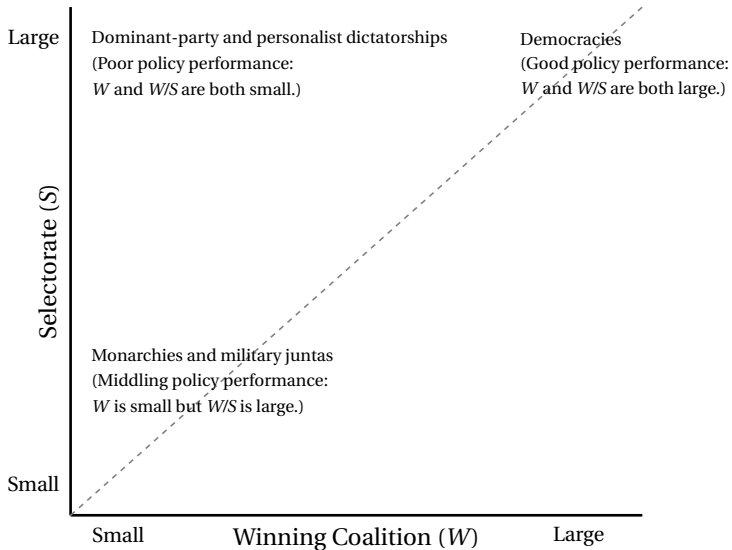
Society C

- Tax revenue = \$1 billion.
- Winning coalition = 1,000,000.
- Maximum value of private goods = \$1,000.

At some point, it becomes more efficient to buy the support of the winning coalition with public goods rather than private goods.

- Leaders in small W systems provide private goods.
- Leaders in large W systems provide public goods.

Public goods increase with the size of the winning coalition.



Civic-minded leaders are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce good economic performance.

- Civic-minded leaders confronted with a small W , small W/S system will produce poor public policy if they want to stay in power.
- Selfish leaders confronted with a large W , large W/S system will produce good public policy if they want to stay in power.

Institutional preferences.

- Leaders like to set up political systems with small W and small W/S .
- Members of the winning coalition like to set up political systems with small W and large W/S .
- Members of the selectorate and disenfranchised like to set up political systems with large W and large W/S .

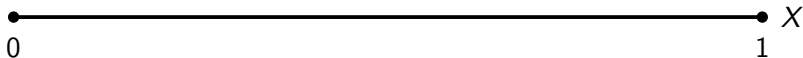
- Selectorate Theory, *The Rules for Rulers*, click [▶ here](#) (18:12)
- Selectorate Theory, *Death and Dynasties*, click [▶ here](#) (5:38)

The Difficulty of Making Stable Power-Sharing Agreements

Let's look at James Fearon's famous bargaining model of war.

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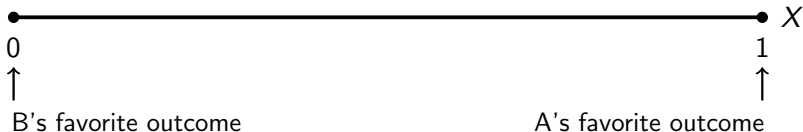
Consider two states, A and B , who have differing preferences over some issue X that can be represented by an interval that runs from 0 to 1.



We could think of X as a piece of land or a policy space.

State A likes more control over X than less: $u_A(x) = x$.

State B likes State A to have as little control over X as possible:
 $u_B(x) = 1 - x$.



Should A and B fight over X or should they negotiate?

Should A and B fight over X or should they negotiate?

What happens if A and B engage in war over X ?

One possibility is that A wins and B loses.

If A wins, it will obviously implement its most preferred value of X , which is $x = 1$.

In this scenario, A receives a payoff of $u_x(1) = u_A(1) = 1$ and B receives a payoff of $u_B(x) = u_B(1) = 1 - 1 = 0$.

The other possibility is that A loses and B wins.

If B wins, it will obviously implement its most preferred value of X , which is $x = 0$.

In this scenario, A receives a payoff of $u_x(1) = u_A(0) = 0$ and B receives a payoff of $u_B(x) = u_B(0) = 1 - 0 = 1$.

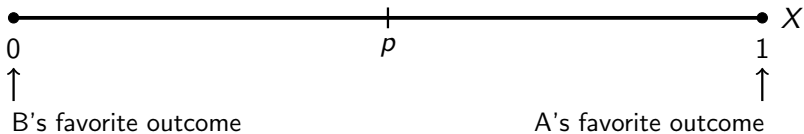
The state that wins, receives a payoff of 1.

The state that loses, receives a payoff of 0.

The outcome of war is uncertain.

You might win or you might lose.

Let's assume that the probability that A wins (B loses) is p and that the probability that A loses (B wins) is $1 - p$.



War is also costly.

Let's assume that the costs of fighting are c .

What does A get from war?

With probability p , A wins the war and gets a payoff of 1. And with probability $1 - p$, A loses the war and gets a payoff of 0. Whether A wins or loses, it must pay the costs c of fighting.

Thus, A 's expected payoff of war is

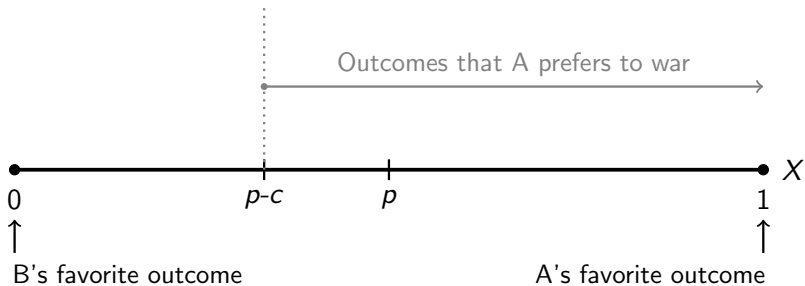
$$p \times 1 + (1 - p) \times 0 - c = p - c.$$

A will prefer any bargain (division of X) that gives them a higher payoff than this.

We need to find an x such that

$$u_A(x) = x > p - c$$

In other words, A will prefer any x larger than $p - c$ to fighting.



What does B get from war?

With probability p , A wins the war and B gets a payoff of 0. And with probability $1 - p$, A loses the war and B gets a payoff of 1. Whether A wins or loses, B must pay the costs c of fighting.

Thus, B 's expected payoff of war is

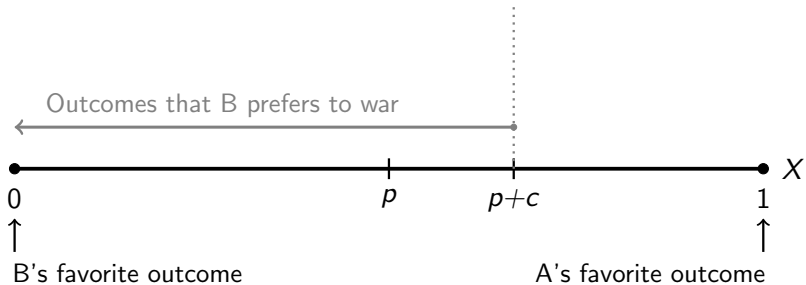
$$p \times 0 + (1 - p) \times 1 - c = 1 - p - c.$$

B will prefer any bargain (division of X) that gives them a higher payoff than this.

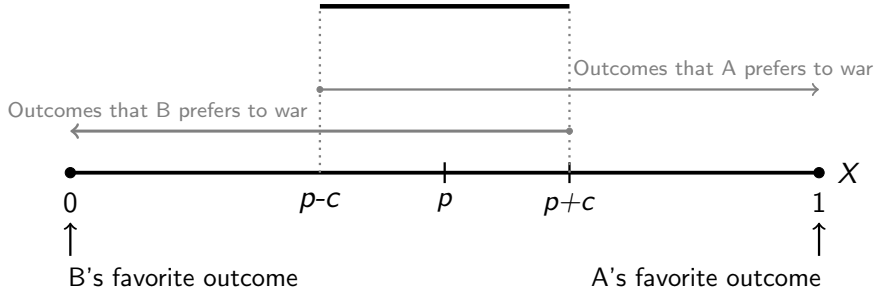
We need to find an x such that

$$\begin{aligned}u_B(x) = 1 - x &> 1 - p - c \\ x &< p + c.\end{aligned}$$

In other words, B will prefer any x less than $p + c$ to fighting.



Bargaining Range



The bargaining range is $(p - c, p + c)$.

So long as war is costly, a bargaining range will always exist.

War is *ex post* inefficient.

It's always possible for countries that go to war to have been made better off by reaching a bargaining agreement ahead of time to divide up whatever it is they're fighting over.

But what if we're negotiating over a power-sharing agreement?

Are things different if X represents a division of power?

But what if we're negotiating over a power-sharing agreement?

Are things different if X represents a division of power?

Yes!

This is because a power-sharing agreement divides up power and thus affects the probabilities p and $1 - p$ that each side would win in a future fight.

Suppose we're in some time period t .

We know there always exist peaceful settlements (a bargaining range) in X such that both states would prefer to see one of these settlements implemented rather than go to war.

But ...

The key thing to recognize is that any peaceful settlement in a power-sharing context results in a **change to the underlying distribution of power.**

Suppose that the original power-sharing agreement saw B cede some of its power to A .

A is now more powerful and thus has a higher probability of winning a war in period $t + 1$ than it did in period t .

The problem is that A can't credibly commit to not using its increased power in this future time period to renegotiate the original settlement to seek a better deal.

There's obviously a bargaining range in period $t + 1$ that both sides prefer to war.

But this would see A become even more powerful, which might lead it to renegotiate the peaceful settlement once again in period $t + 2$.

This process might continue until B has ceded all its power to A .

Realizing this, B may decide that it's better off fighting in the first period and taking its chances rather than accepting a negotiated settlement.

Making a stable power-sharing agreement is difficult because it requires that both actors can credibly commit to it.

But how can these actors credibly commit to not using any increased power they might obtain now to renegotiate the power-sharing agreement in the future in order to get a better deal for themselves?