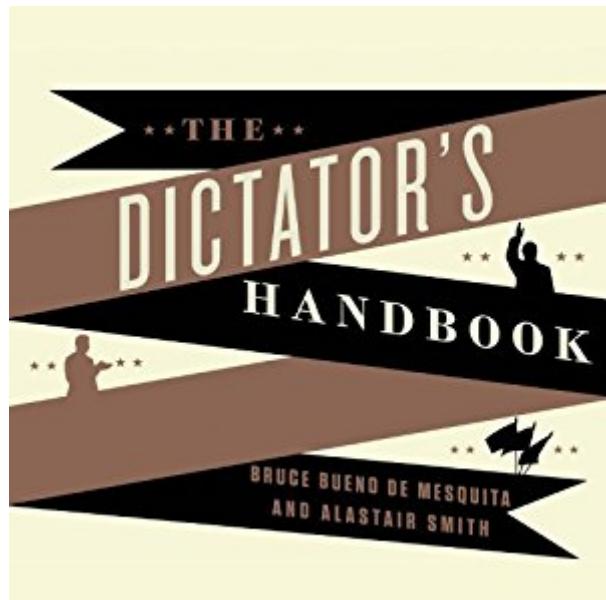


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The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics



Synopsis

For 18 years, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith have been revolutionizing the study of politics by turning conventional wisdom on its head. They start from a single assertion: Leaders do whatever keeps them in power. They don't care about the "national interest" - or even their subjects - unless they have to. This clever and accessible book shows that the difference between tyrants and democrats is just a convenient fiction. Governments do not differ in kind but only in the number of essential supporters, or backs that need scratching. The size of this group determines almost everything about politics: what leaders can get away with, and the quality of life or misery under them. The picture the authors paint is not pretty. But it just may be the truth, which is a good starting point for anyone seeking to improve human governance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

(I agree with the review by Esn024.) The authors put forth a theory: A leader spends most of his efforts just to keep his job. If the leader has to please only a few influential people to keep his job (e.g., the generals of the army), the leader is autocratic and many of the actions you associate with dictators becomes the "logical" thing to do if you want to keep your job. If the leader has to please many people, the leader is democratic and tends to do things that are good for the people. It's a simple theory, but it (may) explain a lot of behavior. And it leads to some interesting consequences (e.g., autocrats want productive (but docile) workers, so they invest in health care and (limited)

education.) Most of the examples are political, but the "leader" term applies to CEOs, mob bosses, and others. This is a "wide-audience" book. It's not supposed to be "bogged down" with definitions and numbers and technical mumbo-jumbo. It's supposed to be a fun-to-read version of the theory. Still, I've read a lot of "wide-audience" books and, while this was fun to read, it wasn't very well crafted.* It uses awkward terms: "leader" and "winning coalition" are fine, but "interchangables", "influentials" and "essentials" are unclear and too long.* It does not clearly define these terms.* It only gives a hazy definition of the theory. (Not much more than I gave above.)* It does not have separate terms for "good policy" (effective at keeping job) vs. "good policy" (good for the populace).* It doesn't define "good for the populace" at all.* It doesn't do a strong job of convincing the reader that the theory is true.* It has multiple examples where it's doubtful that their theory is the major thing at work.

"The Dictator's Handbook" is a book of political theory that aims to follow in Machiavelli's footsteps. It is provocative and has a number of useful ideas, some of which are even backed up by convincing evidence in the book (the section on foreign aid was particularly nice). But at other times, I found reading it to be frustrating. There are a number of things to keep in mind: first of all, it is very much a work of popular fiction, written in common-sense language for the average reader to understand. Many of the assertions made would not hold water in a scholarly discussion because the definitions aren't very carefully defined, and small but vital details are glossed over. Despite attempting to rise above the fray and present an overall picture of the political world that is more accurate than its predecessors, the book is very much a product of insular American political culture, and often propagates American political myths. For example, its poorly-argued assertion that the more democratic a society, the lower its taxes (pg. 13, "taxes tend to be low when coalitions are large"), which would be quite surprising to the Scandinavian countries, not to mention (at the other extreme) Dubai. Another example is the assertion on pg. 6 that the United States "has one of the world's biggest winning coalitions both in absolute numbers and in proportion of the electorate" (the authors define this as meaning that the American government is beholden to no less than about one-fifth of the American population). This point, which aligns nicely with American popular opinion, underpins many of the book's arguments as the actions of America are contrasted with the actions of other, less democratic countries (with smaller winning coalitions).

Robert Rizzo -- nicknamed "Ratzo Rizzo" by L.A. Times Columnist Steve Lopez -- is featured prominently in a new book that rivals Machiavelli's famous "The Prince" in its scope, while being

much more relevant to the 21st Century. Written by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith "The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics" (PublicAffairs, 352 pages, \$27.99) is a good introduction to an academic discipline I'd never heard of, selectorate theory. Rizzo, the former city manager of Bell, California, a small community south of Los Angeles, stayed in power because he had the support of the city council, which was effectively elected by 473 voters (out of 2,235 who actually voted). The 473 constituted the essential electorate. The other two legs of this political tripod are the nominal selectorate -- everybody eligible to vote -- and the real selectorate. In the former Soviet Union, the real selectorate -- the winning coalition -- consisted of a few members of the Communist Party who chose the candidates (some would say this has been revived under the regime of Vladimir Putin, who has the power to reject potential candidates for office). For eighteen years, the authors have been part of a team revolutionizing the study of politics by turning conventional wisdom on its head. They start from a single assertion: Leaders do whatever keeps them in power. They don't care about the "national interest"--or even their subjects--unless they have to. Selectorate theory posits that the difference between tyrants and democrats is that there is no difference. Governments don't differ in kind but only in the number of essential supporters, or backs that need scratching.

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