

Looting as Vocation

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Abstract

What drives a politician? The standard answer in political philosophy is Hobbes' power, strongly supported by Max Weber. However, the emergence of the Putin regime in Russia forces us to theorize the role of economic motivation as *looting*. We find it in all dictatorships, e.g., Burma. The giant financial economy enhances the private prospects of looting, especially in closed societies.

Keywords

Dictatorship, Looting, Principal-Agent Interaction, Asymmetrical Information

1. Introduction

Political regimes come in mainly two forms today: representative democracies on the one hand and many forms of dictatorships on the other hand. In a democracy, there is a set of constraints upon politicians as well as bureaucrats against private utility maximization in the rules of the political game. We call these institutions “rule of law”, and we can employ the measurement of the rule of law to characterize a regime as a democracy or dictatorship.

2. Concept of Rule of Law

There is no neat and tidy definition of the expression “the rule of law”. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following entry:

“The authority and influence of law in society, especially when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behavior; (hence) the principle whereby all members of a society (including those in government) are considered equally subject to publicly disclosed legal codes and processes.”

Now, this sounds rather complicated as well as somewhat legalistic: how to measure it in order to compare states? One may deconstruct this concept with other concepts or criteria like:

- 1) Strong legal formalism promoting equality under the laws;
- 2) Individual rights covering contract, free labor and property;
- 3) Legal system based on notions of justice and economic market rights like the joint stock company;
- 4) Checks and balances, i.e., institutionalized mixed government with countervailing competences between the executive, legislature and judiciary.

A political regime characterized by limited government and countervailing competences may satisfy different institutional models of democracy.

3. Measurement of *Rechtsstaat*

Spreading democracy around the globe is tantamount to inserting the rule of law. The world justice project (WJP) measures today the existence of the rule of law. The WJP unpacks a rule of law regime as follows:

- 1) Constraints on Government Powers;
- 2) Absence of Corruption;
- 3) Open Government;
- 4) Fundamental Rights;
- 5) Order and Security;
- 6) Regulatory Enforcement;
- 7) Civil Justice;
- 8) Criminal Justice.

The WJP underlines accountability, judicial independence, legal formalism and balance of power between executive and legislature. It is worth pointing out that democracy is not mentioned here. The rule of law was conceptualized before the advent of democracy after the Great War. The rule of law as legality, rights and countervailing powers may be combined with democracy as a popular rule, but it has not always been so.

The WJP employs expert opinions in each country to derive an ordinal scale from 0 to 1 for each of the dimensions above. The aggregate scores for the latest years are stated in **Table 1** for a specific number of countries with available information.

Table 1. Aggregated scores for the rule of law dimensions 2018-2021.

Dimension	2018	2019	2020	2021
Constraints on Government	0.57	0.55	0.55	0.56
Absence of Corruption	0.53	0.52	0.52	0.52
Open Government	0.54	0.52	0.52	0.53
Fundamental Rights	0.59	0.58	0.57	0.57
Order and Security	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72
Regulatory Enforcement	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.54
Civil Justice	0.56	0.55	0.55	0.55
Criminal Justice	0.49	0.48	0.47	0.47
Overall	0.57	0.56	0.56	0.56

The trend is slightly downward. This finding comes as a surprise to those who favor an open society and competitive politics (**Table 2**).

Not merely Western countries score above 0.6 on this scale. The rule of law countries includes Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Mauritius and Namibia, as well as Rwanda.

4. Economic Incentives in Government

People play democratic games with expectations of moderate rewards. Those who succeed are paid salaries and pensions. Various democracies have different rules for the public and the private to minimize corrupt practices. Some have introduced state financing of political parties. We have here a gray zone where illegal influence is difficult to police. Yet, politicians who want the *Big Bucks* should operate in dictatorships.

5. Looting at the Top

In a dictatorship, there are fewer restrictions on public money. We thus expect to find a variety of phenomena:

- 1) Bribery;
- 2) Embezzlement;
- 3) Patronage;
- 4) Favouritism;
- 5) Kickbacks;
- 6) Flawed tender;
- 7) Racketeering.

They are all often subsumed under the label “corruption”. Here we have the sources of the Russian billionaires or oligarchs as well as the Moslem billionaires. It has been argued following Barry (1995) in the literature on corruption that the above is a manifestation of one and same—called “partiality”. I disagree. Friendship and kinship imply partially but not the above, which are different aspects of state looting.

Table 2. Regional scores for the rule of law 2021, mean, min and max scores.

Region	Min	Average	Max	Number of countries
East Asia & Pacific	0.33	0.60	0.83	15
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	0.43	0.51	0.60	14
EU + EFTA + North America	0.53	0.74	0.90	24
Latin America & Caribbean	0.27	0.53	0.71	30
Middle East & North Africa	0.36	0.50	0.65	8
South Asia	0.36	0.45	0.53	6
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.34	0.47	0.63	31

Source: WJP, 2021: p. 16.

It is feasible to subjugate a whole people by means of naked power. It all depends upon the solution to the political agency question: “*Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” The response to Roman Juvenal’s question is the rule of law and citizen or people responsiveness by means-end of electoral competition. When Madison wrote the American constitution, he targeted the rule of law but missed out on people’s participation—an omission never fully undone or overcome.

6. Cui Bono in Government?

Modern dictatorships have a conspicuous economic face. It is driven by the search for material advantages like a luxury lifestyle and the accumulation of wealth and properties. Nowhere is this motivation more apparent than in the former USSR and the Gulf monarchies. Let me call this human drive “*looting*”. It is closely connected with the orientation of dictators and their entourage towards the family and kin (Belton, 2021).

7. Weber on Political Motivation

Max Weber writes in his famous article “Politics as a vocation” that politics is all about power. No, I would say. In dictatorships economic benefits are the end and policy the means, whereas in open polities economic policies are the means and power the end (Weber, 2007).

The Weber focus is power, as ends and means. Nowhere does he talk about economic motives. Instead, he opposes the ethics of *righteousness* with that of *realism*.

In a democracy politicians and bureaucrats are openly paid a fixed salary in combination with strict rules about the public and private. In looting, things are entirely different. Even in *ad hoc* dictatorship established by *coup d’etat* the political elite engages in embezzlement. In a stable dictatorship, the private control of the dictator and his entourage or kin may include banks and firms, resources and finance as well as foreign trade and finance. Huge yatch figures prominently in Russian looting (Fachy & Blas, 2022).

I would argue that looting is typical of dictatorships. In Argentina, loot included children of Leftists. Military coups occur when salaries fail. Looting has been taken to a new level in Russia, although it is the nomenclature acting as in China. Political power is the means of looting, like in Pakistan and Burma. In North Korea, looting is based on worship.

8. Root of Looting: Agent Dominance

Government is basically the management of the public sector. The principal is the nation or the people/citizens. They hire managers to handle state affairs by sending signals like voting, laws, constitution and opinion polls. In a dictatorship, these restraints are few and not taken seriously. Instead the dictator employs them with myths about the will and needs of the state or the ordinary man and woman.

It was of great significance when the book on a new class by Djilas (1957) came to attention in 1957. The principal-agent theory would predict Djilas' finding. The agents of the people—the communist nomenclature—would only put in the great effort if they could capture a rent somehow. With asymmetrical information (propaganda, control), the rent becomes a burden on society. Looting at the top is never disclosed.

9. Conclusion

The remuneration of politicians may get out of hand. This is very much the case when looting occurs. It is feasible in any dictatorship—actually its main reason. Weber stated that a regime based upon *naked* power was unstable. And Lenin (1917) argued that the revolution needed an agency—the *party vanguard*. Both were wrong. The agents can sit for a long looting the principal.

Only the rule of law and competitive politics can stop looting. Politicians may give themselves favors only when they collude. In one parry state, the collusion tends to all-encompassing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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