Main Topic: Introducing students to the purpose of government and explaining why one prominent institution type, autocracies, exist.

1 Key Terms

- political science
- government
- roving and stationary bandits
- legitimacy
- taxation
- authoritarian rule
- fundamental paradox of autocracies
- institutionalized corruption

2 Key Themes/Ideas

Q. What is political science?

Answer: Political science is the study of how societies make collective decisions and the consequences of those decisions.

Q. Why do governments form?

Answer: Governments form to maintain social order, protect life, and secure property rights from "roving bandits."

Q. Why do autocracies work?

Answer: First, people prefer autocracies to the alternative of anarchy. Second, dictators can’t set the tax rate to an optimal level for themselves (e.g. steal everything from the people) because this would increase their risk of deposal. Finally, autocracies are forced to invest in public goods due to institutionalized corruption.

Q. What is the fundamental paradox of autocracies?

Answer: The fundamental problem for autocrats is that in order to maintain power and continue to increase their own wealth they require a group of supporters, but they can’t trust their supporters to not overthrow them.

Q. How do autocrats overcome this problem?

Answer: To stave off challenges, they often engage in one of the 4 P’s: purges, pay-outs, proliferation of extra security forces, or playing father to the poor (mobilizing certain sects of society).

Q. Why are successful autocracies often the poorest countries?

Answer: The strategies they use to consolidate power and deter challenges are economically inefficient because they deter private enterprise, require more goods/resources than otherwise necessary, and entrench corruption.

3 Key Readings

- Mancur Olson, “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development”
- Brad Parker, “The Construction and Performance of Kingship in the Neo-Assyrian Empire”

Iris Malone 2016.

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4 Review Questions

Check your understanding of this week’s material and key ideas with the following questions.

• Does the Parker reading on kingship in the neo-Assyrian era provide evidence that autocrats behave according to Olson’s theory? Why or why not?

• Does the Olson reading predict the type of ‘institutionalized corruption’ outlined in Professor Haber’s lecture as a means of survival?

• In lecture, Professor Haber argued that politics is defined as the rules by which societies make collective decisions. Your friend Negative Nate says this is a bad definition because autocratic regimes are those in which often one individual makes rules for everyone else and one individual does not a society a make. Do you agree with Nate? If not, how would you convince him he is wrong?

• Transitions between monarchs, as mentioned in the Parker reading, are often peaceful events and cause little instability. Nevertheless, Professor Haber mentioned in lecture that most autocratic leadership transitions are often violent, coup-tastic, affairs. What explains the differences between monarchs and other autocratic leaders? Do monarchs face the same fundamental paradox as other leaders? Why or why not?

• If time horizons play an important role in signaling to people that an autocrat is a “stationary bandit” and stationary bandits have less incentive to set higher tax rates than “roving bandits,” why are some countries like North Korea - with long time horizons for successive members of the Kim family - poorer than other autocracies?

• On March 21, 2016, the autocratic leader of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, won re-election, but the 75-year old’s waning health has introduced questions about whom his successor will be and how this will affect Kazakhstan’s next steps. Using your knowledge about autocrat’s time horizons, instability, and the autocrat’s fundamental paradox, hypothesize what you think will happen to Kazakhstan’s political and economic stability both in the run-up to the Nazarbeyev’s departure and immediately following.

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