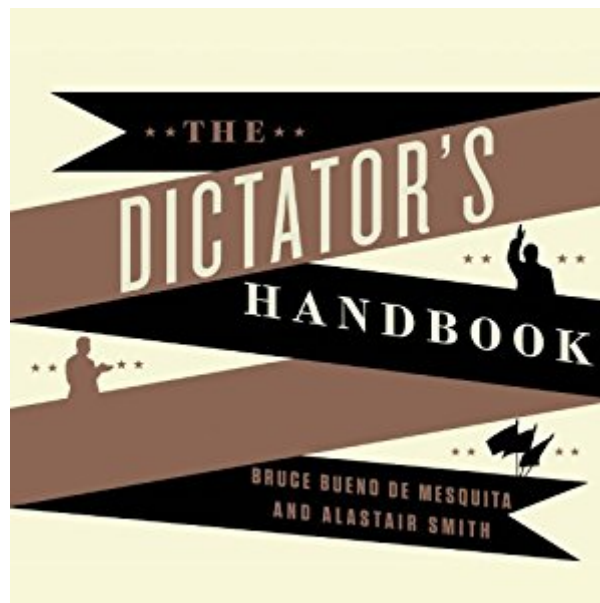




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# **The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics**



## 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

No one rules alone and all rulers depend on a coalition of supporters to keep themselves in power. To keep their coalition's loyalty, they must pay them, and they must pay them first. Only then can the dictator take his share. If there is any surplus, the dictator can build a school or a hospital if he or she feels like it. This rule of course applies to all dictatorships, say authors Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, but it also applies just as surely to liberal democracies. It is the size of a ruler's coalition of supporters that makes a state one or the other. In a dictatorship, the ruler controls the money and pays off a few cronies, a few generals for instance, who can coerce and control the citizens. The cronies must pay their team, so the ruler must pay his cronies well so

they can in turn pay their soldiers. As long as the ruler has the money for all this, nothing will topple him. The money can come from international aid, from income taxes on the citizens or from selling natural resources. In a liberal democracy, the ruler has much less control over the money. For one thing, most of a country's budget is fixed, civil service pensions, social security, military commitments, etc. For another, the ruler must follow the law when spending what is not already earmarked. He can't just write blank checks to whom he please. But once those differences are taken into account, power inevitably follows the same principles: all government is about paying off the ruler's coalition. Effective rulers keep their coalitions small. A city in California did this by relying on voter apathy. Hardly any one voted in municipal elections so that a few hundred voters in effect controlled the budget and paid themselves lavish salaries. To pay the coalition in poor countries, the dictator insists on handling any cash given as aid; he'll redistribute it and if the needy are very lucky they'll get a tiny bit of it. In rich dictatorships, the dictator sells oil or metals or any other valuable commodity and keeps the money for his cronies and himself while providing minimal health and education services to the poor, if they really have to. In aThe same rules apply in rich countries: the ruler pays off the electors with universities, infrastructure and healthcare. And he will still get kicked out in a few years because inevitably the large coalition will feel it isn't getting enough. This is not a libertarian manifesto! The authors are quite clear: the answer is MORE government, not less, or at least much more of the good kind of government. First, we should aim for a larger coalition of cronies, a coalition that in effect includes every citizen. That way, the only way for the ruler to pay off the cronies is to deliver public goods that pay off everyone. Second, we should improve governance. That way policy decisions are made more transparently and the money can't be easily diverted to a small clique of hidden enforcers. My only complaint with the Dictator's Handbook is its relentlessly cynical tone; but maybe the authors are simply being honest. Vincent Poirier, Montreal

I found this book to be well worth reading and would recommend it for anyone interested in thinking about or analyzing international politics, the development of governmental power structures, historical developments of organizational elites, the "real" effects of such things as foreign economic aid, and so forth. Having said that, why then did I give it only four stars? The reason is that I'm still not sure how strongly the authors believe in their fundamental premise, which is that just about every decision (or is it absolutely every decision) made by those in power in organizations of whatever nature base their decisions solely, totally on their own self interest. While I can, and do, accept that such a standard is far, far too common, particularly among political elites or those whose

economic interests will be aided by political decisions of the elites, I (perhaps naively) still believe that occasionally people can make decisions based upon what's good for society, or simply because it's the right thing to do, even if it doesn't advance their own material interests. Possibly the authors make this assumption as a form of teaching lesson, i.e., make the somewhat simple sounding, wide-ranging blanket statement to get the "students' " attention, and then have them study the examples given to develop a more nuanced or subtle understanding of the topic. Fine if that's the case; the absolutism of the "self-interest" rule does seem to make the examples come to life and somewhat easier to analyze, but ultimately I believe we can add some modifications to make the analytical process a bit more realistic. In discussing the examples, the authors do an excellent job of showing how their pattern of analysis can readily be applied in a large number of areas and they also explain, quite clearly, a very useful way of thinking about the various elements within the particular "society" (country, corporation, major economic group, etc.), that is, those in power, those just below them whose loyalty is necessary for the leaders to continue in power, the next group down who want to enter the second level, and so forth. How members of these various groups will tend to act, who they will support and under what general conditions, and similar matters are all discussed in a clear and enlightening manner. So, in sum, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in how the world works (or at least how one can think about certain aspects of how it works in a number of cases).

The authors give many examples of how political structures makes for political dynamics. Overall, the policy proposals were convincing. The description of foreign aid was devastating but dead on. The arguments for democracy were cogent and empirically based. The biggest belly flops were misrepresentations of the arguments for the electoral college, the unsupported call for increased immigration and the oversimplification of how England transitioned to a constitutional monarchy.

One of the best books I've ever read. It explains a lot about how we govern ourselves and why the leadership ultimately lends itself to corruption and cronyism. A must read for every citizen of the world.

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita addresses that no one man can rule alone, and that instead that man must keep certain key people happy. That is the only form of governing, as the only difference between dictatorships and democratically elected officials is the number of key people to keep happy. The author proves this point well citing several different real life incidents of what this

process can cause and how essential it is to politics. There are few problems I could find with this book but one of the most glaring is the constant cynical mood the author expresses, at first it isn't too bad but after getting half way through the book the point of it was clear. Overall, a good read if your looking to deepen your understanding of the political process

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