

BULLYS DON'T MAKE GOOD POLICYMAKERS

Representative democracy can be a slow, ponderous thing. Decisions are often not made quickly. Changing the law to solve a problem involves building coalitions, debating in committees, compromising between various stakeholders, negotiation between different parts of the government, and if the process takes too long, surviving electoral change in the process. If you are suffering today from a problem then you'll be frustrated if it takes a decade to solve. You'll be angry with the glacial pace and daunting level of work required to make a policy change to fix it.

This is where the temptation comes in to cut through the red tape and put power in the hands of a strongman who can just force through a solution. Some people will argue in favor of an authoritarian government claiming that it can at least solve problems faster than a democracy. The classic quote is, "at least it makes the trains run on time" or something of that nature. But, the idea that dictatorships run more efficiently and are better at solving problems is wrong. It is the result of those who are suffering hoping for a quick fix, an easy solution. Like is so often the case, this alleged cure-all is snakeoil.

It's certainly true that if a single person gets to set the laws, they can change them quickly. That's true by definition. But, that does not mean those laws will actually solve the underlying problem. They likely won't and will make things overall far worse than before. Modern governments deal with societies so complex and diverse that it is impossible for a single person to make fully informed and sensible decisions. Each person has only a limited amount of time to learn and knows only so much. When addressing problems as complicated as the functioning of an economy, the spread of a disease, the breakdown in social values and connection, weather and natural disasters, the commencement and prosecution of a war and similar scale issues, the amount of information and training needed to understand the data is enormous. The kinds of solutions, involving deploying resources and instructions to hundreds of thousands of workers and officials, each doing a job that is a small part of the whole, are just as massive and beyond the capabilities of a single person to manage.

Figuring out what rules and enforcement will best solve these problems is not a matter of a single man imposing his idea of "common sense" on the problem. Rather, it requires observations and data from multiple sources. The law making process starting from electoral promises and ending in a Supreme Court opinion is not exactly a *scientific* process, but by virtue of the sheer number of stakeholders and discourse involved in deciding on what law to change, the law has an opportunity to better fit the problem. Compared to the resources of a vast administrative state and a legislature representing hundreds of different constituencies, the "common sense" of a despot is probably little better than an arbitrary roll of the dice.

BULLYS DON'T MAKE GOOD POLICYMAKERS

Now, randomness might be useful from time to time. Anyone who has played chess and poker will know that in a game with no randomness, things become predictable. In chess, a higher ranked player will reliably beat a lower ranked player basically every single game. In legal terms, this means an ossified system that is slow to change and then only in predictable ways is vulnerable to experts taking advantage of that system. In poker, by contrast, a weaker player does have a chance of coming out a head in any given hand just based on random chance. In the long run, the skilled player still wins. But, in the short run, randomness adds a level of variance that makes it still worth playing. So, is an arbitrary dictator useful once in a while to shuffle the legal deck?

No. At its best, the random disruption of an autocrat functions like a wildfire, destroying existing norms and systems. There is some truth to the idea that, like a wildfire, if the rule of law returns, then there is a chance to grow something new from the foundations. This is little comfort for those who live during the conflagration. Those who have been deported, imprisoned, impoverished, or worse during the dictatorship suffer needlessly because there are other less brutal ways to accomplish the same renewal and change.

In the United States, for example, we have carefully curated parts of our governments such as the judiciary and regulatory agencies that do have the ability to move relatively rapidly to make rules by interpreting laws. These decisions are subject to deliberative processes that, while not as arbitrary as unfettered dictatorship, also do not require quite as much work as full blown legislative law making. We can get the benefits of slightly more unpredictable results without all of the downsides of assigning the job to a single person.

It is not even obvious that the forest will get a chance to regrow after a dictatorial wildfire at all. Injecting arbitrary changes into the law might brush off the cobwebs of entrenched interests. But, it immediately replaces them with a more corrosive contamination, even worse entrenched positions. Once a single person's "common sense" is the basis for law and policy, the incentives of those trying to predict and game the system change in terrible ways. The same groups that would previously have sought to win the game of chess by playing with interest groups and bureaucrats now have a much simpler game to play: curry favor with the dictator. Instead of advertising, politicking, and coalition-building, now the game is played with bribes, flattery, and influence. Personal friendship of the dictator matters more than the opinions of the millions of the governed. Thus, politics becomes less about debating policy and more about the relationships between "royal families" of the wealthy and powerful. Family gossip becomes political discourse. The news cycle becomes obsessed with any rumor of the autocrat falling ill.

This leads to worse outcomes for everyone. Law and policy become worse than random choices. They are designed primarily around enriching the dictator and those who have

BULLYS DON'T MAKE GOOD POLICYMAKERS

managed to get into his good graces. And, there is a negative feedback loop. The more policymaking is based on the monarch's favoritism, the less it resembles the will of the people. The less the people support the monarch, the more the monarch needs to rely on other mechanisms to maintain control. So, the monarch becomes more inclined to rely on a small group of power brokers to maintain control through misinformation and simple violence. That is why we see dictatorships rely on militaries or law enforcement to keep control through brutality in the past. We still see it today.

Perhaps most tragically, the idea that a strongman will cut the red tape and deliver a solution to his supporters is not true either. Being fast to change laws on paper does not mean that the real world conforms to those laws. Dictatorships do not "make the trains run on time" and the meme was false propaganda to begin with. It started in reference to Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy. He was taking credit for many years of hard work by non-fascists that had improved the rail system after being in very poor repair after World War 1. Mussolini focused on the performance of a few tourist express lines which he used to argue that he had solved problems with train delays. This was a publicity stunt. The regular trains remained as delayed as ever. The people of Italy didn't even get a solution to their actual problem in exchange for surrendering their rights and lives to the dictator.

As Americans, we have a deeply baked-in understanding of these ideas. As Benjamin Franklin supposedly put it, "Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." Dictatorship is anti-American and has been since the very first days of the Republic. Every once in a while, though, we should be reminded of the practical reasons why.