VOX
Research-based policy analysis and commentary from Europe's leading economists

Politicians are overprotected and isolated from the citizens

Bruno S. Frey
24 August 2007

Economic logic suggests that politicians are overprotected and therefore too isolated from citizens; the social cost of a political assassination is much lower than its private cost to the politicians, and the private cost of protection is lower than the social cost. Moreover, authoritarian rulers are more overprotected and isolated than democratic politicians since assassinating them has more impact on policy.

How often were you annoyed when some politician visited your city, and roads or even whole sectors of the city were cleared and sealed off for security reasons? Such operations are a major nuisance, especially for the residents of capital cities. The same procedure takes place when foreign dignitaries visit a country and meet with their hosts somewhere in the countryside, or when there is an international conference of politicians, such as the "G8" which recently convened on the Northern German coast. In Soviet-type countries, it was a matter of course that special lanes of the roads were permanently reserved for the members of the *nomenclatura*. Seemingly, this still holds for the *classe politique* in several post-Soviet countries and elsewhere.

In democracies, the citizens may wonder whether such privileges are consistent with the idea of being part of a political system that is "ruled by the people". The extensive security system to protect politicians isolates them from the population. The *classe politique* tends to form its own worldview and no longer knows or cares what the citizens want.

Trade-off between survival and protection

The stricter are the security measures, the lower is the probability of a politician being attacked and killed. The resulting trade-off is shown in Figure 1. The security measures may consist of employing security personnel (bodyguards), using bullet-proof vests, armored cars, bomb and weapon detectors, as well as shutting down sections of cities and roads, and having restricted access to certain buildings.

Figure 1. The trade off between assassination and security measures and the social optimum

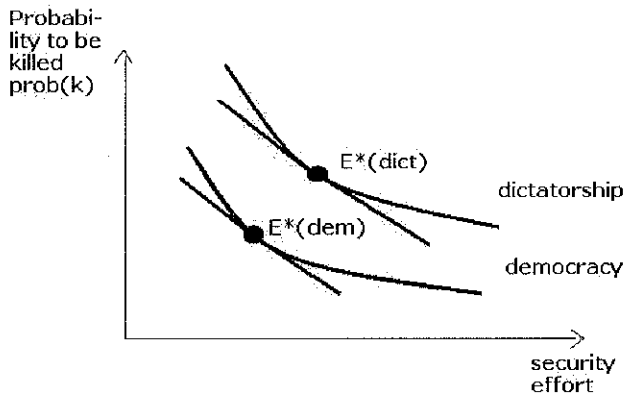


Figure 1 differentiates between two possibility frontiers. A *democracy* is characterized by an orderly change of power, even if the political leader is killed. Political decisions depend little on the personality of politicians, because they are constrained by the citizens. In a pure competitive democracy, the two competing parties are obliged to pursue the same policy (in the median of the voter distribution), and the politicians have no discretionary room. Killing a political leader would have no consequence and therefore would not be undertaken[1]. The possibility frontier for such a perfect democracy is in the origin, where there are neither political assassinations nor security measures. The possibility frontier pictured in Figure 1 is drawn for a less than perfect democracy, one in which the political leaders have some discretionary room and where it therefore matters to some extent who is in power.

Dictators, in contrast, wield large discretionary power and, if they are killed, the political course is likely to change. The possibility frontier of a dictatorship is further away from the origin than a democracy. For a given level of security measures, the probability of being killed is higher for a dictatorial leader than for a democratic leader. The possibility frontier for an authoritarian ruler lies between a democracy and a dictatorship.

The difference in the positions of the democratic and dictatorial possibility frontier is supported by empirical evidence. In a study on the consequences of political assassinations – covering 80 assassinations of Heads of State while in office between the end of World War II and 2000 – Iqbal and Zorn (2005, 2006) find that assassinations are less likely to occur in democratic systems that have a regular and institutionalized mechanism of leadership turnover. Jones and Olken (2006) conclude that autocrats are about 30 percent more likely to be attacked in a given year than democratic rulers.

Figure 1 also indicates the optimal position on the possibility frontier from a *social* point of view. The *social* indifference curve between the probability of a successful political assassination and the effort to protect politicians crosses the possibility frontier from below. For simplicity, the utility trade-off is taken to be a straight line and to have the same slope for democracy and dictatorship; i.e. the type of regime does not affect the social evaluation. (It can be shown that assuming

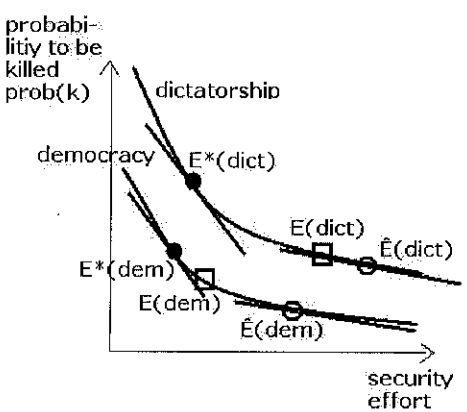
reasonable and empirically relevant differences between political regimes strengthens the derived results). The best possible points on the possibility frontiers, or the *social optimum* in Figure 1, is at E*(dem) and E*(dict). In this equilibrium, dictators are associated with a higher probability of being killed and require a higher level of security measures than democratic leaders.

The private optimum

The *private* considerations of the *political leaders* with respect to being killed and making efforts to protect themselves differ fundamentally from social considerations. Like anybody else, politicians want to stay alive and therefore place a very high cost on being the target of an attack and getting killed. The cost of protection for them is low as it is financed by the general public budget. The non-monetary costs in terms of inconvenience and time loss is externalized and imposed on the general public.

For simplicity, the two private indifference lines are again taken to be straight lines and parallel to each other. The private indifference lines are (much) *flatter* than the social ones, as politicians place (much) more emphasis on their own survival than does society as a whole, and because they tend to disregard the cost of protection which society as a whole takes into account. Figure 2 shows the resulting private equilibria Ê(dem) and Ê(dict) associated with a lower probability of being killed and higher security measures, compared to the respective social equilibria E*(dem) and E*(dict).

Figure 2. Actual position [E(dem) and E(dict)], compared to the socially [E*(dem) and E*(dict)] and personal [Ê(dem) and Ê(dict)] optimal positions on the democratic and dictatorial possibility frontiers.



Actual position

Political decision makers have no incentive to choose the position on a trade-off that is best for society. They would prefer to choose what is best for them. However, they are restricted in their possibilities. In a democracy, a major constraint is imposed by the need to be re-elected in order to stay in power. In a well-functioning polity, this constraint ensures that the politicians are

compelled to stay close to the social optimum. Figure 2 indicates this point E(dem) on the democratic trade-off. This means that the probability of being killed is higher, and that fewer resources are spent, and imposed on the citizens, than the individual politicians would privately desire. In contrast, a dictator has less binding restrictions by the people he rules. But a dictator must always take into account that unpopular policies may lead to an uprising either of the people or, more likely, by a contending group such as the military. Nevertheless, a dictator can certainly choose a position closer to the private optimum than a democratic ruler can. This is indicated by E(dict) in Figure 2.

Conclusions

Our analysis comes to the conclusion that "*politicians are overprotected*" and therefore *too isolated from the citizens they rule*. This conclusion is based on the insight that the social cost of a political assassination is much higher than its private cost to the politicians, and that the private cost of protection is lower than the social cost. The analysis also brings us to the conclusion that "*authoritarian rulers are more overprotected and isolated than democratic politicians*". There is a higher demand to kill authoritarian rulers than democratic rulers, and democratic rulers must stay closer to the social optimum than authoritarian rulers.

What possibilities are there to reduce excessive protection of politicians and force them to become more integrated again with the citizens they rule? Politicians in power have no incentives to reduce social losses and to approach the social optimum. The only possibility of rectifying the situation is at a constitutional level. Rules can be established, prohibiting the excessive protection of politicians. However, it cannot be guaranteed that these rules will be observed in the current political process, even in well-established democracies. Politicians' security has always been an area of state activity and is deliberately kept secret. While the prospects of immediate action must be considered low, the considerations outlined may at least place the problem on the agenda of scientific discourse.

References

Iqbal, Zaryab and Christopher Zorn. (2006). Sic Semper Tyrannis? Power, Repression, and Assassination Since the Second World War. The Journal of Politics, Vol. 68, No. 3: 489-501.
Jones, Benjamin F. and Benjamin A. Olken. (2006). Hit or Miss? The Effect of Assassinations on Institutions and War. Mimeo.

Footnotes

1 Excluding assassination attempts by mentally deranged persons.

Topics: Politics and economics
Tags: politicians, privileges, protection, security