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## Leopold II and the Selectorate: An Account in Contrast to a Racial Explanation

*Bruce Bueno de Mesquita* \*

**Abstract:** »*Leopold II. und die Selectorate-Theorie: Eine Untersuchung in Abgrenzung zu rassismusbasierten Erklärungsansätzen*«. From 1885 until 1908 Leopold II was not only the King of Belgium but also the personal owner of the Congo Free State. The policy outcomes during his reign turned out to be fundamentally different in the two countries: Whereas in Belgium he improved living conditions, in the Congo he established a brutal tyranny. This paper analyses the reasons for these different leadership styles of Leopold II by means of the 'selectorate theory'. The selectorate theory explains policy outcomes as a function of governance institutions. It assumes that the ruler maximizes his own utility which means first of all to sustain himself in power. Under Belgium's governmental institutions Leopold II required broad support from the general public but in the Congo he only needed a very small group of supporters. To reduce the possibility that Leopold's different leadership styles were caused mainly by racism his period is compared to the reign of the Congolese leader Mobutu Sese Seko.

### 1. Introduction

Only rarely does history provide a nearly-perfect natural experiment for testing a set of deductively derived propositions. The experiences of Belgium and the Congo, especially during the reign of Leopold II, provide such a natural experiment. I investigate the structure of governance and the nature of policy outcomes under Leopold both in Belgium and in the Congo Free State and contrast these with the contemporary record in the Congo/Zaire. In each case I

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seek out evidence for or against expectations derived from the selectorate theory of political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003).

Leopold II was the King of Belgium from 1865 until his death in 1909 and he was the personal owner of the Congo Free State from 1885 until he was compelled to relinquish control by world opinion and the Belgian parliament in 1908. Leopold is a member of a tiny group consisting of people who led more than one country. He did so simultaneously, while others, such as Chiang Kai-Shek (20 years in China and 25 in Taiwan) or Boris Yeltsin (albeit briefly in the Soviet Union and then for a more extended time in Russia) did so sequentially. This club provides a controlled setting in which to investigate the role institutions play in shaping the behavior of leaders. In each case, factors of culture, religion, language, ethnicity, and so forth are held constant. In Leopold's case even personal history is held constant because he ruled both countries at the same time. This makes his experiences ideal for purposes of illustrating the importance of political-selection institutions in shaping policy incentives. As we will see, in one country he was a revered leader and in the other he was, to put it mildly, a despot. In each country his actions were consistent with institutionally-induced conditional patterns of behavior predicted by the selectorate theory.

In the process of exploring how governance institutions constrain policy decisions, we also have an opportunity to explore lessons from history to help separate the effects of racism from those of institutions. By providing an account of the Congo's governance under Leopold and, more recently, under Mobutu Sese Seko, we may uncover a means to help clarify some broader issues regarding variations in the quality of life in different African countries. We will see that governance institutions are strategically chosen by leaders whenever the opportunity presents itself. They select how to govern with an eye to improving their own opportunity to retain power and to maximize their personal well-being. Under some institutional arrangements, especially democratic ones, we will see that the incumbent's welfare is intimately tied to the well-being of his or her subjects. In more autocratic regimes the opposite is true. In those settings, for reasons explained below, bad policy is often good politics for the leadership.

We will see that while racism may have played a part in structuring the institutions inherited by African leaders at independence, those leaders frequently changed the institutions of governance for their own purposes even when those purposes ran counter to the interests of their subjects. And we will see that the institutions chosen by a colonial ruler like Leopold equally seem to have been designed to satisfy their interests whether they were motivated by racism or not. That is, colonialists chose optimally and most of their successors after independence also chose optimally to enhance their own survival in office and the fruits of power whether they were racists or not. As such, I contend that reliance on racism or colonial paternalism is neither necessary nor sufficient to

explain Africa's problems. That is not to deny that racism or paternalism were elements in choices about seizing and governing colonies, but rather to say that other factors are more important in shaping Africa's present and its relatively recent past.

In the next section I provide a non-technical summary of a game theoretic model of governance and the core results from that perspective.<sup>1</sup> Those interested in probing the logic and broader evidence regarding this theory should consult Bueno de Mesquita et al (2003) as well as subsequent journal articles. Here there is only space to provide an overview of the theory and its implications for rulers like Mobutu or Leopold.

The analytic approach derived from the selectorate theory helps inform my examination of the historical record by identifying general propositions that guide the investigation of Leopold's governance in the two distinct settings in which he had the opportunity to influence the choice of institutions and shape policy. Having established the hypotheses, I then turn to an examination of Leopold's actions and policies and contrast them with the actions and policies followed by the Congo's leaders after the Congo – later Zaire – secured its independence from Belgium. We will see that the governance institutions chosen by Mobutu Sese Seko were not terribly different from those selected for the Congo Free State by Leopold. We will also see that Zaire's institutions of governance were quite different from those in place at the time of independence when Patrice Lumumba became the Congo's first democratically elected leader, with institutional arrangements at that time that were not so different from those used then and now to govern Belgium. And we will see that the consequences of governance and of political longevity in office were quite similar under Leopold and under Mobutu. As Mobutu shared the race of his subjects, and the tribal affiliation of many of them as well, and Leopold did not, we will see evidence that racial variation does little to help account for the similarities in governance approaches, barbarity, kleptocracy, or general public policy at least in the cases of the Congo/Zaire and Belgium.

## 2. Selectorate Theory of Governance

In *The Logic of Political Survival*, Bueno de Mesquita et al. set out a theory in which a politician's motivation to gain and retain power and the institutional context in which that politician operates powerfully influence the content of political debate and the allocation of resources among contending policy

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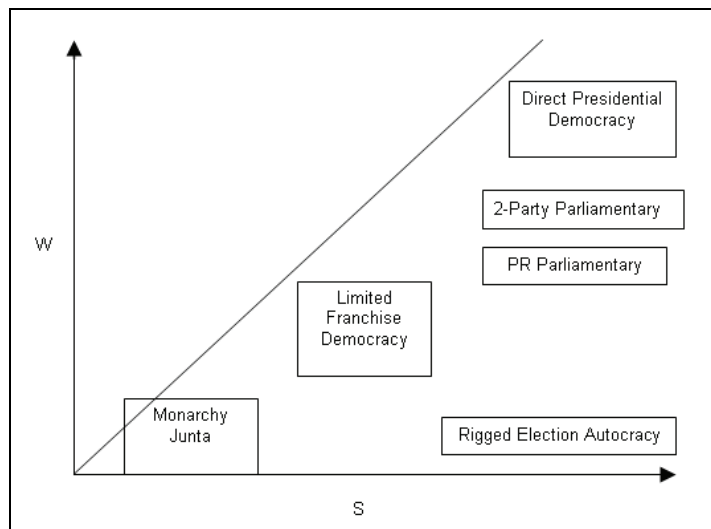
<sup>1</sup> For a full account of relevant parts of this theory, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James D. Morrow. *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge (2003). For extensions of the theory to endogenous institution change, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith. "Political Survival, Revolution, and Economic Productivity," Working Paper, Wilf Family Department of Politics, New York University.

choices. As argued in that study, the governmental structure of each polity is defined by its location in a two-dimensional institutional space. One dimension, the size of the selectorate, reflects the number of people in a polity who have a say in choosing leaders and, more importantly, have some chance of gaining access to the special privileges that every leader and every regime doles out to members of its winning coalition. The other dimension, the winning coalition, is the subset of the selectorate whose support is essential if a leader is to remain in office. Coalition members, depending on the coalition's size, gain more or fewer private benefits and give or withhold loyalty to the incumbent leader.

As can be seen in Figure 1, democratic national governments are characterized by large selectorates and relatively large winning coalitions. Yet, democracies are not all alike in these two characteristics. There are, for instance, systematic differences in the size of the winning coalition in different types of democracies just as there are across a comparison of any pair of states. For example, systems with directly-elected presidents (which is not the case in the United States) foster larger winning coalitions than do British-style parliamentary democracies. These, in turn, rely on larger coalitions than many proportional representation systems.

Autocracies and other non-democratic systems sometimes have smaller selectorates, and always have smaller winning coalitions than democracies do. Military juntas and monarchies normally rely both on small selectorates and small winning coalitions, while rigged-election autocracies are typified by small winning coalitions drawn from relatively large selectorates.

Figure 1: Governance Institutions



The size of a government's selectorate and winning coalition, and the ratio of the two, crucially influence whether leaders survive in office for a long or short time, even when they do not face formal term limits.<sup>2</sup> The size of the coalition also shapes whether leaders disproportionately spend resources on private goods that benefit only a few or on public goods that benefit everyone in society. How easy or hard it is for a leader to survive in office is shown in the selectorate theory to depend on the ratio of the winning coalition's size to the selectorate's size.

The smaller the coalition relative to the selectorate, the larger the share of government revenue that is controlled at the incumbent leader's discretion rather than being under the control of the members of the winning coalition or the society in general. When a leader relies on a small coalition drawn from a relatively large selectorate, he or she has substantial discretionary authority and a concomitantly easy time surviving in office. Such leaders are relatively unconstrained in their spending and so may freely engage in kleptocracy, in putting money aside to thwart threats to their incumbency, or to experiment with pet policy projects. Conversely, when the coalition is a large percentage of the selectorate and the coalition itself is large then leaders must spend nearly all the government's revenue on satisfying the policy demands of their core constituents; that is, their coalition. Yet, because the benefits they provide are primarily public goods that everyone enjoys, whether in the coalition or not, coalition membership is not nearly as valuable as it is in a small coalition setting. Thus, members are more easily tempted away by rival politicians, leading to weak political loyalty. It is this weak loyalty among supporters that compels the incumbent in a large coalition, large selectorate system to spend nearly all of the revenue on keeping the coalition as happy as possible. As a result, the incumbent has only a small discretionary pot of resources – if any at all – with which to salvage incumbency when faced with a threat such as arises during re-election campaigns or in the run-up to a vote of no-confidence.

Perhaps perversely, large coalition leaders must produce effective policy and yet are easily turned out of office and small coalition leaders find it generally in their self-interest to produce bad or ineffective policies and yet retain office for a long time, especially if they survive the first year or so in office. During that initial period in power they face serious challenges while they work to establish their credibility as individuals who can deliver wealth to their cronies. This creates an incentive even for autocrats to emulate the behavior of democrats during the early part of their time in office. Only after the first year or so during which they consolidate their hold on power, autocrats are “liberated” to show their true colors. That is, the likelihood of being ousted from power for non-democrats is higher in the first couple of years than it is for democrats; later the hazard of deposition is reversed. Autocrats who survive the

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<sup>2</sup> The existence and impact of term limits is also influenced by the size of a polity's winning coalition and selectorate.

first two years are considerably less likely to be deposed after that than are democrats. This reversal in survival fortunes is important when we consider shifts in the pattern of governance across time in the Congo or elsewhere.

When leaders can freely choose or change governing institutions, they always prefer to make the winning coalition as small as is feasible and the selectorate as large as is feasible. Of course, they are rarely truly unencumbered in such crucial decisions. More often, institutions change when the leadership faces or anticipates a credible threat of a coup from coalition members or a threat of rebellion or revolution from the general populace. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2007) extend the selectorate theory to assess the conditions under which leaders facing such pressures elect to diminish or expand their coalition of supporters. They show that leaders only expand the coalition if they cannot muster the economic resources necessary to fight off or buy off the threat. They also show that when leaders possess substantial natural resources that can be extracted with minimal increases to taxation, then they are especially likely to contract their coalition when faced with threats or when circumstances otherwise permit. As we will see, that is exactly what Leopold chose to do in the Congo and what his much later successor, Mobutu Sese Seko, did as well.

As intimated above, a key feature of the selectorate theory is its logical and empirical demonstration that leaders who rely on small coalitions retain power primarily by providing private, personal rewards to their winning coalition members, while leaders in large winning-coalition systems tend to maintain their hold on power by providing broad public goods, such as personal freedoms, effective economic policies and national security. When the coalition is small, as was true in the Congo Free State and in Zaire, membership involves valuable personal benefits. If the small coalition is drawn from a large pool of selectors, then a would-be defector to a rival politician incurs a high risk of losing those valued rewards. Naturally, the combination of significant personal benefits and the risk of their loss induce fierce loyalty to the leader who provides the rewards and who demands support in exchange for them.

In contrast to the special-privileges focus of small coalition systems, personal rewards to members of large coalitions, such as those typical of modern-day Belgium and relatively true of Leopold's constitutional monarchy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, are swamped by the greater value of public goods that everyone enjoys through the public policy choices of the leadership. Because the coalition is inherently a relatively large proportion of the selectorate, the risk of losing private benefits by being excluded from future winning coalitions is relatively small. As a consequence, leaders who rely on large coalitions tend to provide successful public policies and enjoy relatively short tenure in office. Because the loyalty of coalition members to the incumbent leader is greatest when the coalition is small and the selectorate is large and weakest when both are large, it is easier for autocrats to survive in office in the face of failed national policies than it is for effective democratically-elected officials.

It should be evident from this summary of the selectorate theory that it implies principles about how leaders who want to retain power will govern in different political contexts. In more democratic political settings, survival depends on successful policy. In a small coalition setting, expenditures on public welfare that come specifically at the expense of private rewards to coalition members diminish the incumbent's survival prospects. Therefore, a prudent autocrat or monarch makes sure to pay off coalition members at a level that is sufficient to keep them from believing they will be better off defecting to a rival. Fortunately for the incumbent, that does not require spending close to the entire available budget on the coalition since its members understand that by defecting they are putting at risk the valued rewards they currently are receiving.

Satisfying the coalition's appetite for private rewards does not preclude the incumbent from doing good works if he or she happens to be civic minded. Rather than stealing from the state, the incumbent can use discretionary resources to do good works. The trouble is first that not many autocrats seem to be civic minded, although examples such as Lee Kwan Yew or Deng Xiaoping certainly show that such people exist, and second that even among the few who are, most have relatively bad ideas about how to advance the public welfare. Leaders such as Mao Zedong or Fidel Castro seem to have been genuinely interested in improving the lot of the poor, but programs like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution inflicted huge hardships that nearly bankrupted China, just as Castro's policies have resulted in a significant diminution in per capita caloric consumption from the level attained during Fulgencio Batista's time in power. Most autocrats, like the late Ferdinand Marcos and Mobutu Sese Seko, or current leaders such as North Korea's Kim Jong-il, seem to lack a sense of civic virtue. They just seem to loot the state for personal gain. This makes reliance on the hope of civic mindedness seem risky indeed.

Democratic governance, by comparison, imparts relatively few private rewards to coalition members and little personal control over national budgets to the incumbent leader compared to what is available in small coalition regimes. Because large coalitions induce leaders to spend primarily on public goods, if they want to be sustained in power they must act as if they are civic minded. Whether they are in fact or not cannot easily be discerned and probably does not matter. Whether out of a craving for power or out of civic virtue, such leaders must produce effective policies or face a high risk of ouster.

This brief outline of implications of the selectorate theory suggests the following hypotheses regarding the Congo and Belgium under Leopold and the Congo/Zaire and Belgium in more recent times:

- 1) Although Belgian governance even in 1885 relied on a fairly large winning coalition by the standards of the day, Leopold should have been expected to opt for a small coalition government for the Congo Free State.



- 2) Although the Congo's independence was secured behind a fairly democratic movement led by Patrice Lumumba, its governance as an independent country should have been expected to devolve after a couple of years into a small coalition regime because when faced with threats to power, its leaders could rely largely on sources of revenue – especially copper and foreign aid – that did not require increased taxation on labor.
- 3) Because Leopold inherited a constitutional monarchy that faced no significant external threat to national security during his reign, he did not have the opportunity to diminish the winning coalition and so should have supported effective public policies in Belgium that were oriented toward satisfying that country's large coalition.
- 4) Because Leopold and Mobutu both governed the Congo with a small coalition, they should have produced similarly corrupt and kleptocratic regimes with little attentiveness to the general welfare of their respective subjects.

With these hypotheses in mind, I turn now to a brief examination of the Congo's and Belgium's history as a means to probe the expectations that follow from the selectorate theory.

### 3. Leopold, Belgium and the Congo Free State

When Leopold II succeeded to the Belgian throne, Belgium was already a constitutional monarchy. Still, the king had substantial authority, considerably more than in most constitutional monarchies. His father, Leopold I, had skillfully maneuvered within constitutional constraints. As Margot Lyon notes, he accomplished this, "By appointing and dismissing ministers, indefinitely delaying his signature to bills he disliked, and dissolving the Chambers when he thought fit, he gradually came to possess more power than the drafters of the constitution had envisaged. Through his position as commander-in-chief of land and sea forces Leopold I became his own Minister for War." (Lyon 1971: 46) Leopold II was equally skillful in using his constitutional authority. Twice, for instance, he successfully removed legitimate governing cabinets because he disapproved of their policies (Emerson 1979: 129). Thus, despite the constraints imposed by the constitutional monarchy, Leopold established that the cabinet truly served at his pleasure rather than the other way around. He was an activist constitutional monarch who was not shy about using power. He also was quite outspoken about his regret at having his hands tied by the constitutional structure he inherited.

### 3.1 Leopold's Rule in Belgium

King Leopold II, and the governments over which he presided, depended initially on a fairly large selectorate for its day, though the franchise was still greatly limited, consisting of 137,000 out of a population of nearly six million (Lyon 1971: 54). Figure 2 compares the degree of democracy in Belgium to that in the rest of Europe from Belgium's acquisition of independence in 1830 through to the end of Leopold's reign. The figure plots Polity IV's widely utilized 21 point scale of democracy minus autocracy.<sup>3</sup> For ease of presentation and interpretation, I have rescaled the Polity values so that they fall between 100 – the most liberal democratic regimes – and 0 the most autocratic regimes.

Figure 2: Coalition Size/Democracy: Europe and Leopold II's Belgium (1830-1909)

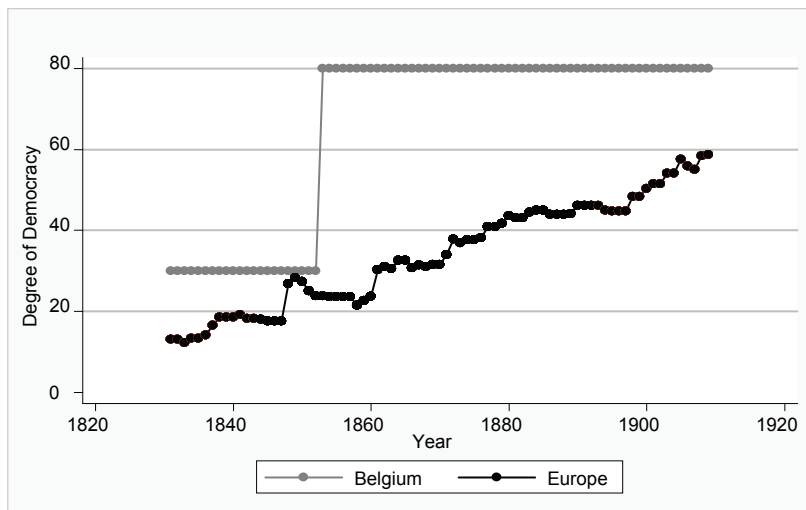


Figure 2 makes clear that Leopold II inherited a governance structure that was unusually democratic for its time. Before about 1850 and after about 1855, Belgium was clearly more democratic than the average European state. Although Europe's democratic inclination grows steadily during the years depicted in the figure, it lags far behind Belgium for most of Leopold's reign, closing in on it only in his last few years. By the Polity indicator, Leopold did not expand Belgian democracy but he did sustain it.

<sup>3</sup> Polity IV offers information on regime and authority characteristics for all states and runs currently from the years 1800 to 2004.

If the selectorate perspective is correct, Belgium's Leopold should have promoted effective public policy in that country regardless of his personal predilection. Indeed, recognizing the constraining political reality of his circumstance as a constitutional monarch, Leopold helped promote the adoption of universal adult male suffrage in free, competitive elections, thereby greatly expanding the selectorate as well as the winning coalition size. This suggests an emphasis on – if not a personal taste for – public goods in his domestic Belgian context. In fact, by general account, Leopold II, though regretful that he did not have the authority of an absolute monarch, was an excellent leader of Belgium (Lyon 1971; Emerson 1979; Langer 1980). Early in his reign he declared:

The new administration will exercise the utmost economy in the use of governmental funds, at the same time taking great care not to disrupt the functioning of established public services. It will study the best way to make use of our increasing financial resources; it will extend public works programmes but at the same time will seek means to reduce taxes on basic food stuffs (quoted in Emerson 1979: 123-124).

Leopold was true to his word. Belgium experienced remarkable economic growth and rapid industrialization during his monarchy. Fueled by a free-trade economy, imports and exports expanded at a remarkable clip and coal production was almost equal to that of the much larger French Republic. Although Belgium was already on an impressive growth trajectory before Leopold ascended to the throne, a statistical examination of the marginal impact of his reign on growth in, for instance, Belgian energy consumption – a good indicator of economic activity – shows that he had a significant impact in strengthening the growth trend.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Leopold's effective policies, Belgium proved to be particularly vulnerable to a downturn in the business cycle, which began to have severe effects in 1873. Working conditions, especially for urban workers, were abysmal even by the standards of the day. Already in 1866 Leopold had declared his intention to improve the lot of the working class. International threats to Belgian security (first the Seven Weeks War of 1866 and then the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71) deflected attention from domestic social issues, but with the resolution of the Franco-Prussian War and the global economic downturn, attention was returned to the domestic plight of workers. In 1873, Belgian workers were given the right to strike and other pro-labor reforms were instituted (Emerson 1979: 131). These reforms were progressive for their day and represented a dramatic change over Belgian policy before Leopold's ascent to the crown.

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<sup>4</sup> A regression analysis of the logarithm of commercial fuel consumption in Belgium over time, based on the Correlates of War Project's energy consumption variable, while controlling for the years of Leopold's reign with a dummy variable coded as 1 when he was king and as 0 in all other years (1830 – 1991) indicates:  $\text{Log}(\text{Energy Consumption}) = -69.31 + 0.04 \text{ Year} + 50.29 \text{ Leopold} - 0.02 (\text{Leopold} * \text{Year})$ ; test that  $\text{Leopold} + (\text{Leopold} * \text{Year}) > 0$  is significant with  $p < .00001$ ,  $F = 158.90$ .

The impetus for reform did not end. In 1886 – while already engaging in atrocities within his Congo fiefdom – Leopold strongly supported a huge public works program that included road and railway construction designed to alleviate unemployment, promote urbanization and enhance commercialism. In 1889, again with the King’s support, legislation was passed to protect women and children. The law of 1889 protected children by forbidding their employment until they turned twelve and then limited their work day to twelve hours (Emerson 1979: 133). By modern standards this may seem modest, but in the context of the times it was a progressive move.

Leopold was instrumental in promoting numerous additional reforms within Belgium, including the introduction of widespread improvements in education, including compulsory primary education, the introduction of proportional representation voting, the signing of treaties with Britain, Prussia and France guaranteeing Belgian neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War, and efforts to improve Belgian defenses against threats to Belgian neutrality and sovereignty from France and Germany. As Emerson, in a study generally (and understandably) hostile to Leopold II, observes, “Throughout his life the king’s attitude to social questions changed little: he favoured the alleviation of misery in a spirit of benevolent paternalism . . .” (131). However monstrous he was in his leadership of the Congo, a place where he showed no hint of benevolence and where he fostered unspeakable misery, it is evident that he worked hard as king to promote the delivery of public goods to the mass of the Belgian population. He did so in Belgium, but not in the Congo, before and during his personal reign over the Congo Free State.

### 3.2 Leopold’s Rule in the Congo

Leopold rose to the throne at a time that many states in Europe were building empires on the backs of colonial labor. He aspired to be a member of that club. After several aborted efforts to become a colonial power in various parts of the world, he finally succeeded in acquiring vast tracks of land in Africa’s interior. Unlike Britain’s, France’s, Spain’s or others’ colonies, however, the Congo Free State was not acquired by a colonizing sovereign state, but rather as Leopold’s personal property. In ruling Belgium, he depended on the largesse of a popularly elected government; he depended, in other words, on a large winning coalition. The Belgian leadership included not only Leopold, but the prime minister and cabinet whose choice depended on popular support within a selectorate that had been greatly enlarged by Leopold. In ruling the Congo, Leopold relied only on himself and the (quite literally) hired guns that went to the Congo in support of his objectives. The political system he erected in the Congo relied on a miniscule winning coalition. Of course, this is just the form of government an unencumbered leader would like to choose. The selectorate model suggests that in the Congo Leopold would turn his efforts to generating

private goods for his backers and opportunities for kleptocracy for himself. He did exactly that.

As liberal, progressive a reformer as Leopold was in the Belgian context, he was a monstrously cruel and greedy leader of the Congo. There, through his surrogates (Leopold himself never set foot in the Congo), Leopold ruled for the purpose of making himself and his key backers rich. Slave labor extracted the rubber that fueled Leopold's kleptocracy and the corrupt gains of his overseers. Those Congolese who failed to meet their quotas were beaten, maimed and often killed. As many as ten million may have been killed so that Leopold and his cronies could become rich (Hochschild 1999; Forbath 1977; Emerson 1971; Conrad 1903).

At first, Leopold used his authority over the Congo to exploit it for ivory. Later, as demand for rubber grew, the Congo became a major source of rubber throughout the world. Extracting the rubber was a tedious, labor-intensive undertaking. To insure that demand was met, Leopold's government included the creation of the notorious *Force Publique*. This "police" force was paid a low salary. The income of its members depended heavily on commissions paid in exchange for delivering wealth to the king. Leopold imposed rubber quotas and the *Force Publique* saw to it that they were fulfilled. Unrestricted by any law governing their conduct and provided with a huge financial incentive through the commission system, the "police" used whatever means they saw fit to meet the quotas.

These means included torture, maiming (chopping off right hands) and mass murder. Hands were cut off as proof of how many allegedly anti-government rebels were killed. The "rebels" were more often than not just locals who resisted their exploitation as forced, slave labor. The "police" were rewarded for killing anti-government rebels and so quickly took to indiscriminate mutilation as a means to boost their hand count and, thereby, their fees. An eyewitness account by a Danish missionary, reports:

If the rubber does not reach the full amount required the sentries attack the natives. They kill some and bring the hands to the Commissioner. That was about the time I saw the native killed before my own eyes. The soldier said, 'Don't take this to heart so much. They kill us if we don't bring the rubber. The Commissioner has promised us if we have plenty of hands he will shorten our service.' These were often smoked to preserve them until they could be shown to the European officer (Forbath 1977).

An American eyewitness noted:

Imagine them returning from fighting rebels; see on the bow of the canoe is a pole and a bundle of something on it. These are the hands of sixteen warriors they have slain. 'Warriors?' Don't you see among them the hands of little children and girls? I have seen them. I have seen where the trophy has been cut off, while the poor heart beat strongly enough to shoot the blood from the cut arteries at a distance of fully four feet (Forbath 1977).

One prominent officer in the *Force Publique*, Captain Léon Rom, was reported to have decorated the outer-perimeter of the flower-bed in front of his house with more than twenty human heads.

Leopold and his supporters in the *Force Publique* grew fabulously wealthy from their ill-gotten gains from the Congo Free State. Virtually nothing was invested in improving conditions in that hapless land. Roads were built only where they facilitated moving rubber to market. Laws protecting women and children or worker rights to strike were unheard of in the Congo Free State, even as Leopold promoted just such legislation in Belgium. Much as Leopold worried about protecting the security of his Belgian subjects, he worked to undermine the security of his Congolese subjects. Virtually the only items exported to the Congo Free State were weapons for the *Force Publique*, while vast riches were imported to Belgium. Indeed, it was this extraordinary imbalance in trade that eventually led to the discovery by outsiders, especially Edmund Morel, that Leopold was growing rich on the use of slave labor. Eventually, in 1908 the evidence of atrocities reached such a level that they could no longer be denied and Leopold, with great reluctance, was forced to cede his control to the Belgian government. They certainly did not rule well by contemporary standards, but compared to Leopold's rule, the Belgians were a significant improvement.

Leopold's circumstance was close to unique. Britain and France had vast African and global colonial empires. Portugal and Germany also participated in the colonization of African lands. These cases, however, primarily involved European governments imposing themselves on African people; they did not involve a single individual, like Leopold, who governed at his personal discretion. The government structures back home acted as at least a modest constraint on what European colonists could and did do; not so for Leopold. His conduct in his personal fiefdom in the Congo left him impervious to outside pressures for decades. Finally, although European atrocities were commonplace in much of Africa, they did not rise to the level of such atrocities committed on Leopold's behalf in the Congo. He had the freedom to choose how to govern unconstrained by a parliament at home and he chose to do exactly what the selectorate theory suggests any unencumbered leader will do: exploit the wealth of the people and the place almost completely without limit.

But then Leopold was a fine leader in Belgium, also following the expectations of the selectorate theory, in this case for an incumbent encumbered by a relatively large coalition. This compels us to ask: Who was the real Leopold? Was he the civic-minded king of Belgium or the murderous ruler of the Congo Free State? We must conclude that the latter comes closest to the mark. In Belgium, as we have noted, Leopold operated under the institutional constraint of a large winning coalition. He did not select such a system – he inherited it – and he acted in accordance with the incentives created by such an institutional framework. In the Congo, Leopold was free to choose whatever institutional

arrangements he wanted. No precedent or inherited institutions precluded his choosing a system that induced incentives to rule in the interest of public welfare. Finding himself unconstrained, he chose to focus on providing private goods for a small coalition and vast opportunities for kleptocracy for himself. In each case his actions were consistent with the institutional incentives he faced and, therefore his behavior was radically different in Belgium from what it was in the Congo.

Leopold's pattern of behavior both in the Congo and in Belgium were consistent with the expectations deduced from the selectorate theory. But perhaps this compliance with the expectations derived from the game theoretic logic of the selectorate theory is just coincidence. To probe whether that is the case, I turn now to an investigation of the Congo in a more contemporary setting.

#### 4. Zaire/the Congo: the Mobutu Years

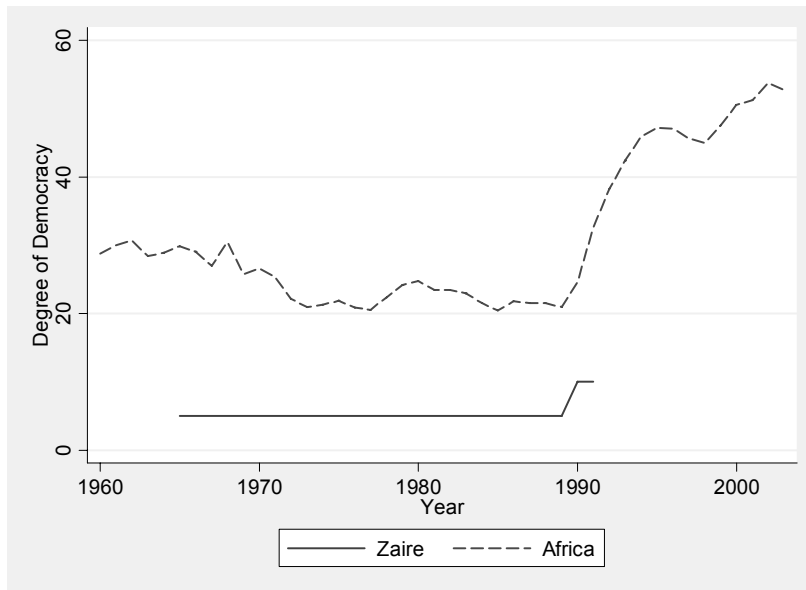
In June 1960 Patrice Lumumba was elected as the Congo's first freely chosen prime minister. He was murdered on January 17, 1961, just half a year later. Lumumba ran into difficulty with western democracies because of the policies he adopted. He spoke out vehemently against the years of Belgian rule over the Congo. In a speech during Congo's independence celebration less than a week after his election as Prime Minister, Lumumba announced, "Nous ne sommes plus vos singes [We are no longer your monkeys]" (Meredith 2005: 102). In an effort to remove Belgian troops and diplomats from the Congo and to defeat the secessionist movement in Katanga Province led by Moïse Tshombe he sought Soviet military assistance. The massive bulk of evidence today points to US and Belgian complicity in Lumumba's murder. Later the United States would become closely associated with the Congo's (i.e., Zaire's) Mobutu Sese Seko who, unlike Lumumba, was neither democratic nor pro-Soviet.

We will never know whether Lumumba was a true democrat or was emulating democratic practices to shore up his hold on power as is the wont of many would-be dictators early during their tenure in office. If the former was the case, it is truly tragic for the people of the Congo that he did not live. If the latter was the case, then probably he would have been no different from so many other leaders who at independence were freely elected only to turn their countries into petty, personalist dictatorships. We cannot evaluate how Lumumba would have governed. We can, however, evaluate the record of Mobutu Sese Seko.

Mobutu assumed power in 1965 and quickly eliminated competitive elections and most of his political opponents. He received massive foreign economic assistance, especially from the United States and Belgium, and apparently stole so much of it that the word "kleptocracy" was coined to describe his form of rule. Figure 3 compares the average Polity score for African countries

(excluding the Arab states and Israel) to Zaire's.<sup>5</sup> As poor as Africa's performance has been on governance, Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo has been worse. And how have these people of the former Belgian Congo done since independence? Have they enjoyed a steadily growing quality of life based on the massive foreign aid and natural resource wealth of their country? As with governance, so too with quality of life, things have not gone well for the Congolese.

Figure 3: Democracy/Coalition Size in Zaire/Congo and in Africa



Figures 4 and 5 provide two diverse indicators of quality of life, each comparing the former Belgian Congo's record to the average for its fellow-African states. In figure 4, we see the World Bank's data on per capita income. In recent years parts of Africa have begun to enjoy significant real growth and with it rising hopes of alleviating poverty. Still, Africa remains a deeply impoverished continent. And yet, the former Belgian Congo, despite – or perhaps because of – its enormous natural wealth and massive foreign aid receipts, especially during the cold war, persists in being well below average even for Africa on this crucial indicator. In Africa, only former Portuguese colonies seem to do as badly or worse. The people of the Congo were poor under Leopold even as he grew rich on the back of their labor and the people under Mobutu were

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Africa is defined as all countries with a Polity country code greater than 399 and less than 630.



likewise poor even as he grew rich. Not only do contemporary Congolese have poverty in common with their brethren of a century or more ago. They have also shared the life of oppression suffered under Leopold. Here again, they generally fare much worse than other African countries whose colonial heritage is not Belgian.

Figure 4: African and Congo/Zaire per Capita Income

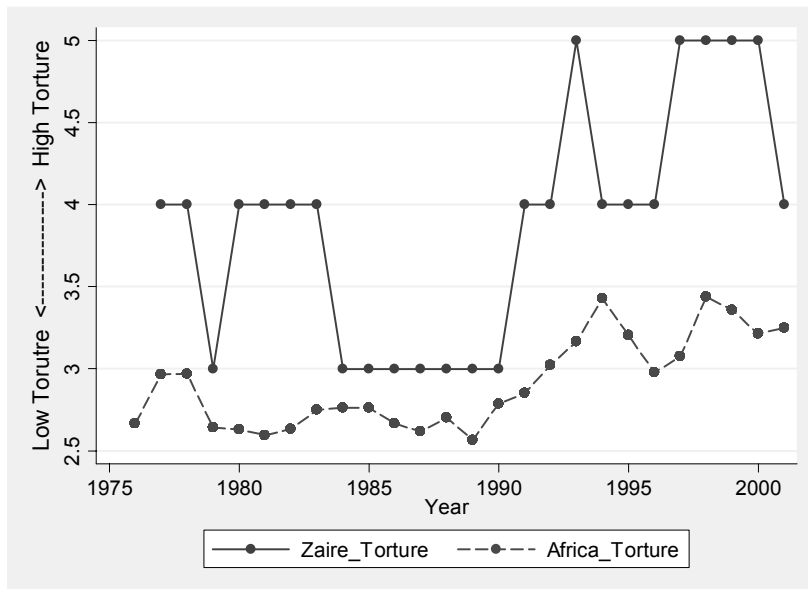


Leopold, as noted earlier, is estimated to be responsible for the murder of millions of people, Mobutu of hundreds of thousands. Leopold surely ranks near the top of anyone's list of mass murderers. Rudolph Rummel's assessment of the worst genocides in the twentieth century ranks Mobutu 21<sup>st</sup> out of the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of country leaders during that century (Scaruffi 2005). Among post-World War II national leaders, he ranks 15<sup>th</sup> for his murderous ways, and among post-World War II African leaders, he ranks sixth. As is clear from figure 5, Mobutu not only murdered many of his fellow Congolese, but he out-tortured most of Africa. Despite the African continent's poor record on human rights, the Congo under Mobutu, as the Congo under Leopold, managed respectively to be a much worse place to live than the rest of post-independence Africa or colonial Africa.

What are we to infer? The Congo was a particularly harsh place to be born in during the colonial era. It remained a particularly harsh place to be born in under the thirty-two year reign of Mobutu. He, like Leopold, ran a small coal-

tion, rent-seeking regime. Leopold managed to hold on to power in the Congo for 23 years, giving up power under enormous international pressure only after it became known that he was suffering from a terminal illness; that is, when it was known he could no longer be relied upon to deliver private rewards to his cronies. Mobutu also fell from power when it became known that he had a terminal illness that meant he could no longer be relied upon by the military to take care of them. One's reign of terror might be attributed to racism, but the others cannot be. Nor can colonialism and racism alone be the general explanation of differences in governance. After all, most of the rest of Africa was also subjected to colonial and presumptively racist rule. Most of the rest of Africa has done poorly and that may be why. But it has done better than the Congo/Zaire on numerous indicators of quality of life and on numerous indicators of oppression.

Figure 5: Torture in Africa and in Zaire: Amnesty International's Assessment



The Congo had exactly the mix of resources that made it an especially attractive place for particularly oppressive autocratic governance. It possessed huge resources that made ruling extremely valuable and that made buying off threats straightforward. In each case, its leaders have followed the expectations of the selectorate theory as laid out in the four hypotheses presented earlier. And in each case, we have been able to account for the particularly miserable record without appealing to such human shortcomings as racism and imperial-

ism. Whatever they may add to the account, we have seen that the structure of governing institutions can go a long way to explain a good or bad record of performance in a manner consistent with the deductive logic of the selectorate theory, a theory that assumes all leaders want the same thing: to maximize their survival in office and, subject to achieving that goal, to maximize their discretionary control over national resources. Mobutu and Leopold certainly achieved both of those goals in the Congo. Leopold was much more limited in his ability to control the Belgian economy and so he opted for public-spirited policies that ensured his political survival in that context as well.

## 5. Conclusions

The institutions of coalition size and selectorate, mediated through the loyalty norm defined by the ratio of the two, consistently shape incentives for good or bad governance. The incentives created by a large winning coalition foster what most people think of as good government. A small winning coalition, especially combined with a large selectorate, helps foster governance that seems indifferent to producing income for its citizens within a secure environment. Instead, such governments promote corruption, black marketeering and cronyism. We have seen this in the record of both the Congo Free State under Leopold II and Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko. When governance conditions encourage good behavior, even bad people – and surely Leopold was a bad person – may govern well as was true for Belgium during the approximately forty year reign of Leopold II. The lesson for those who wish to see conditions improve in Africa is clear. Improve African governance before solving other problems, and Africans will solve their own problems skillfully and effectively.

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