Democracy, Dictatorship, and Polygamy

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Some human societies are democratic; some are dictatorial. Therefore, our evolutionary background must be consistent with either form of government. Can this background tell us something about the basic structure of political power in a society?

It might appear that human societies are naturally hierarchical because most of history records monarchies or other forms of dictatorial governments. But this observation may be deceptive. "History" has only existed since the origin of writing and it records events that occurred after human societies became sedentary and agricultural. This has been the case for the past 5,000–10,000 years. For most of our existence as humans and all of our existence as pre-humans, societies were very different. We must look further back than the historical record.

Humans are primates, and most primates live in hierarchical social groups. This is true of chimpanzees, our closest relatives, and so presumably was true of our ancestors. Thus, biologically, humans seem ready to create a hierarchy and males are quite willing to become dominant when circumstances make that possible.

On the other hand, the best anthropological evidence is that pre-agricultural human societies were relatively egalitarian. Anthropologist Christopher Boehm, who has studied this issue carefully, refers to a "reverse dominance hierarchy" — a situation in which subordinates band together to limit the power of dominants or would-be dominants. This was possible because subordinates collectively could physically defeat any individual and because the mobile nature of societies meant that subordinates could literally move away from dominants. Thus, although humans retained their primate hierarchical nature, circumstances for much of our existence meant that societies were nonetheless relatively politically egalitarian. It is, however, important to note that this egalitarianism applied mainly to males; throughout most of our existence, females were subordinate to males.

HIERARCHIES AND MATING When our ancestors settled down and formed agricultural societies, circumstances changed radically. It is those societies that we study in history, and those societies were decidedly non-egalitarian. Some males became dominant.

Moreover, as anthropologist Laura Betzig has shown, dominant males in early empires acquired large numbers of wives and concubines. This indicates that those subordinates who maintained the reverse hierarchy were making a wise decision.

The reproductive success of dominants was quite substantial. Geneticists recently documented that about 8 percent of the males in a large part of Asia are descended from Ghengis Khan and his male relatives. From a biological or evolutionary point of view, this gain in descendants — what biologists call "fitness" — is the payoff from dominance. Moreover, because dominants leave more offspring than subordinates, any genetic basis for a desire for dominance will persist in a population, explaining why the desire to become a dominant persists in all human societies.

In modern Western societies, we have returned to a relatively egalitarian political system. Indeed, our system is even more egalitarian than those of our early ancestors because we no longer have the male dominance that characterized the earlier systems. This is quite remarkable; our societies are incomparably larger than those of our ancestors (who generally lived in groups of no more than about 200) and yet we have created a political system that is in many senses more open and equalitarian than those of the past.

We do not fully understand the factors that have enabled

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the West to achieve this non-hierarchical society. This is an issue studied by economic historians and development economists. However, one biologically relevant factor is clearly important but it is often ignored: polygamy has long been taboo in the West.

There are two reasons why it is difficult and may be impossible for polygamous societies to become open and democratic. First, the opportunity to acquire many wives creates a powerful incentive for seeking power. Second and more importantly, polygamous societies create tremendous internal tensions. In particular, in societies where some males have more than one wife, other males have none and may not have prospects of marrying. Those males — typically young — are a destabilizing force in society, and it may be necessary for society to be repressive in order to control them.

Of course, as we were reminded by the recent raid on the Texas ranch owned by a religious sect that had broken away from the Mormon Church, there is still some incidence of polygamy in the West. Interestingly, such sects often appear to be run dictatorially. They also oftentimes expel young males (called "lost boys") to reduce competition for wives. It is easy to see that such homeless boys could be a highly destabilizing force. Only a powerful authority would have the ability to force such an expulsion.

Likewise, polygamy is considered acceptable in many Islamic countries, and many of those same countries are ruled by dictators. In contrast, Turkey — the world's most prominent Islamic democracy — prohibits polygamy by law.

We must consider seriously the possibility that a society that allows polygamy may not be able to become an open democracy. This may be one of the most important links between biology and politics. R

Fear and Cloning

By Henry I. Miller
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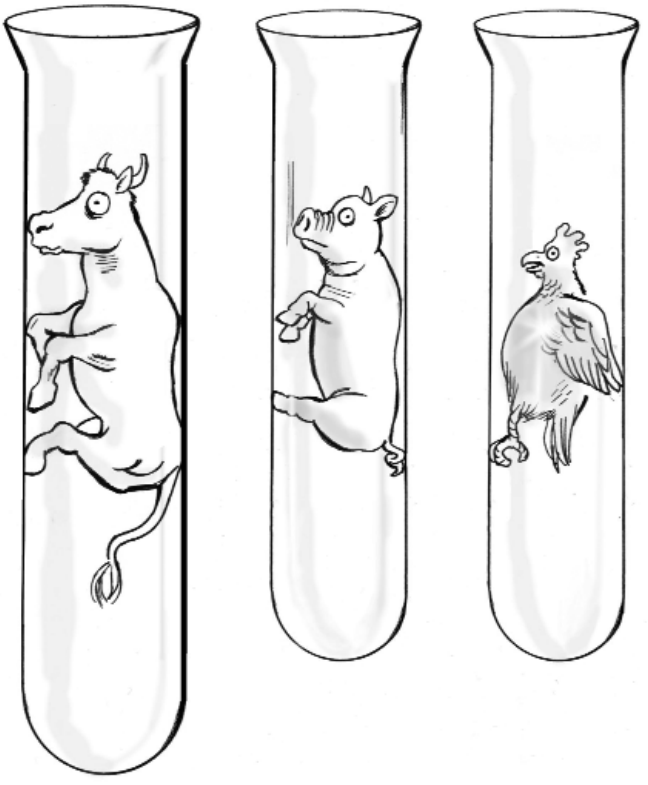
After six years of deliberation, last January the Food and Drug Administration finally — and rightly — concluded that food from cloned animals is safe and may be sold and consumed. This decision, which ended a "voluntary" moratorium on commercialization by companies that produce clones, was based on voluminous and persuasive scientific data. But two things took the luster off the announcement.

First, it was far too long in coming. Scientists — including those at the FDA — have known for years that the clones are indistinguishable genetically, biochemically, and nutritionally from the parent.

Second, on the very day that the decision was announced, another federal agency attempted to undo the positive effects of the FDA's proclamation. While not quibbling with the consensus about safety, Bruce I. Knight, under secretary of agriculture for marketing and regulatory programs, called for an indefinite continuation of the existing "voluntary moratorium" on the marketing of cloned animals and their offspring. He said that, "given the emotional nature of this issue," U.S. and foreign consumers will need "an acceptance process" for the next few years.

Arguably, Knight's request represents a new nadir in bureaucratic reasoning. It is the sort of stunning debacle that makes policy wonks wonder — not for the first time — whether anyone is actually in charge of federal agencies' decisionmaking. Where is the Decider-in-Chief when we need him?

My advice to Knight is to worry less about the emotions of consumers and more about the importance of letting bureaucrats elsewhere in the government do their jobs, and of permitting new, innovative technologies to provide safer, cheaper, and more nutritious food. Why not simply let the marketplace decide the viability of these demonstrably safe products? Besides, if consumers really need "an acceptance process," wouldn't profit-hungry corporations bear that in mind?



Cloning technology of one sort or another is widely applied to a variety of foods that we consume routinely and uncontroversially. As the authoritative journal *Nature Biotechnology*

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observed in a January 2007 editorial:

> The irony in all this is that food from clones has been a part of our diet for years. Many common fruits (e.g., pears, apples, oranges and lemons) and several vegetables (e.g., potatoes and truffles) are clones. And most of us have probably ingested meat and dairy products from livestock cloned by natural reproduction (monozygotic siblings), mechanical embryo-splitting or even nuclear transfer from an embryonic donor cell into an enucleated oocyte. Regulators traditionally paid scant attention to clones as a group — and rightly so.

The clones that were the subject of the FDA's risk assessment are produced by taking a single cell from an animal that is to be replicated and fusing it with a cow egg that has had its DNA removed. Then, a small electric shock induces the egg to grow into a copy of the original animal, resulting in the creation of an embryo that can be transferred to and gestated in a surrogate mother animal. The newborn is a replica of the animal that donated the initial cell. As one farmer who owns a pair of clones of a prize-winning Holstein cow observed, they are essentially twins of "a cow that was already in production." Just as a breeder of racehorses would like to have a duplicate of a Triple Crown winner, farmers want copies of exemplary animals.

Certain sectors of the food industry have expressed fears that consumers might reject milk and meat from cloned cows, but history argues otherwise. Twenty years ago, there were similar concerns when dairy farmers began using a protein called recombinant bovine somatotropin, or rbST, to stimulate milk production in cows. Some analysts predicted that its introduction would so frighten consumers that milk consumption could drop as much as 20 percent. Although the milk is in no way different or less wholesome than that obtained from untreated cows, activists demanded special regulations, including mandatory labeling of dairy products from rbST-treated animals. The FDA demurred; the product was hugely successful; and a decade after milk from rbST-treated cows began to be marketed, an analysis from the USDA's Economic Research Service concluded: "Scientific evidence about food safety will not prevent controversy.... Even intense controversy may have minimal or no effect on total demand [and] the absence of reports of harm from consumption contributes to continued consumption."

The rbST experience serves as a reminder that the mere presence of controversy — or pseudo-controversy generated by anti-technology activists and bureaucrats — should not cause industry or government regulators to overreact.

Cloning technology will offer yet another tool for animal breeders to make foods cheaper and more consistent, nutritious, and tasty — if the bureaucrats can be held at bay. The producers of clones have waited too long as it is and should push ahead without further delay. R

What's the Emergency?

By Veronique de Rugy
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Rarely does a fiscal year pass without some type of emergency requiring a response from the federal government. When a disaster strikes, lawmakers need prompt access to federal funds, which is provided by the supplemental spending process. In theory, supplemental bills fund programs that cannot wait until the next appropriations cycle or programs whose authorizations were just enacted or renewed.

Recently, however, serious concerns have emerged about the nature and size of supplemental appropriations bills. Once a small blip among federal outlays, emergency spending exploded after 2002 when the Republican Congress let a key legislative restriction on their use expire. In May 2007, for instance, President Bush signed into law the biggest supplemental bill in history, $120 billion, to fund military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and pay for hurricane recovery and agriculture-disaster relief at home. As this goes to press in the late spring of 2008, there is talk that this year's supplemental could be as much as $193 billion. By contrast, the average annual amount of emergency supplemental spending in the 1990s — a decade that saw interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo — was just $13.8 billion.

The government's appetite has no limits. To that end, supplemental bills have become the tool of choice for Congress and the White House to avoid budget caps designed to promote fiscal responsibility, resulting in dramatically increased government spending.

BUDGET RULES While the regular appropriations process does include some emergency funding, the majority of emergency funding goes through the supplemental process. However, not all spending in a supplemental bill is for emergencies; the bills often contain both emergency and non-emergency appropriations.

In Fiscal Year 2006, $165 billion of federal spending received an emergency designation. Emergency allocations in the regular appropriations process accounted for $70 billion. The remaining $95 billion came through the supplemental process and formed almost the entire total of FY 2006's $96 billion in supplemental spending.

The distinction between emergency and non-emergency funding is important because normal budget controls do not constrain emergency-designated funds. Until recently, the Bud-

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get Enforcement Act of 1990 (BEA) regulated emergency and supplemental appropriations. Under BEA rules, emergency-designated spending was given special exceptions from budgetary rules designed to restrain spending. For instance, emergency requests were exempted from pay-as-you-go rules that required across-the-board cuts in spending if the sum of the proposed new spending and revenue measures increased the deficit. Also, emergency bills were exempted from spending caps limiting budget authority and outlays for discretionary spending.

However, because emergency requests lack the usual detail used to justify the federal government's annual budget request, the BEA also strongly suggested that the emergency exemption only be used in case of dire emergency and that as much funding as possible be offset with rescissions.

In FY 2002, the president and Congress allowed the BEA to expire and they relaxed the dire-emergency and offset rules. In theory, supplemental bills are still subject to budget caps unless Congress makes an exception. However, since 2002, the exception has become the rule.

Since 2002, the budget resolution has exempted from the budget rules "appropriations for contingency operations directly related to the global war on terrorism, and other unanticipated defense-related operations." In addition, Congress rarely places limits on the amount it may spend above the budget caps.

During the last 25 years, single supplemental bills net of rescissions have varied in size from a low of $1.3 billion in FY 1988 to a high of $120 billion in FY 2007. But supplemental spending as a share of total discretionary spending gives a true measure of its increase. Since 1991, nearly all supplemental appropriations have gone toward discretionary spending.

As indicated in Figure 1, the trend is striking. Except for a sharp spike in 1991 to fund the first Gulf War — which was largely offset later — emergency appropriations remained a very small share of new discretionary spending — less than 3 percent — through most of the 1990s. Compare that to 2007, when Congress appropriated over 14 percent of all discretionary spending through the supplemental process.

Moreover, the data show that after the expiration of the BEA, the amount of supplemental appropriations offset by rescissions dropped significantly from 40 percent to only 0.4 percent. This has a serious cost. According to the Congressional Research Service, if just 25 percent of the supplemental appropriations in FY 2003 through FY 2005 had been offset, the offset would have reduced the federal debt held by the public by over 1 percent, or almost $65 billion.

SPENDING EXPLOSION Today, the White House and Congress use supplemental spending to circumvent budget caps in order to increase overall spending. The heart of the problem is the concept of an "emergency." As explained earlier, emergency bills are given special exceptions from budgetary rules designed to restrain spending. However, Congress has never defined the term "emergency" specifically other than to say that they must be necessary, sudden, urgent, unforeseen, and temporary.

Lawmakers have used this loophole to fund many non-emergency items through emergency bills instead of using regular appropriations. For instance, most of the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — approximately $900 billion through the end of 2008 — has been funded through supplemental bills — effectively on top of the Pentagon's regular budget. While the costs of the wars may be necessary and not permanent, they are by no means sudden or unforeseen.

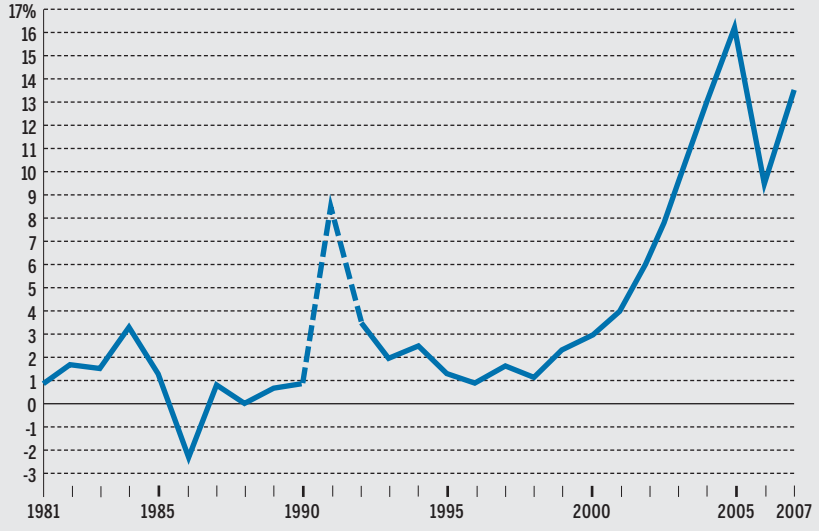
During conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and Bosnia, supplemental funding was used only initially to finance U.S. military operations. Thereafter, as soon as even a limited and partial projection of costs could be made, the administrations in power during those conflicts funded ongoing military operations through regular appropriations bills. Although clearly capable of projecting costs in Iraq, the current Bush administration has chosen instead to ignore historical precedent.

Not that Congress minds. Lawmakers use the emergency gimmick to increase non-war spending. By transferring some defense spending from the regular Department of Defense budget to an emergency-designated supplemental bill, lawmakers free up space under the spending caps. That allows them to increase defense and non-defense spending in the regular budget.

The latest war bill included 17 transfers,

Figure 1

Discretionary Supplemental Appropriations as a Percentage of Total Discretionary Appropriations (1981–2007)



SOURCES: *Author's calculations based on the Office of Management and Budget's "President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2007" historical tables and the Congressional Budget Office's reports "Supplemental Appropriations for the 1970s," "Supplemental Appropriations for the 1980s," "Supplemental Appropriations for the 1990s," and "Supplemental Appropriations from 2000 to 2007."*
NOTE: *The 1990–1991 uptrend reflects supplemental spending for Desert Storm. Contributions from allied nations repaid those costs.*

totaling almost $800 million, from peacetime budgeting to "emergency" war spending The transferred money freed the Pentagon to buy one F-15E fighter-bomber ($65 million), two Littoral Combat Ships ($440 million), and hundreds of other, smaller purchases. Because most of the regular budget's procurement accounts have similar gimmicks, Pentagon-watchers say that emergency transfers add up to tens of billions of dollars, allowing the Defense Department to boost other parts of its budget in equal share.

President Bush shares some of the blame. His latest emergency war request included many non-emergency items, some not even related to war. According to a document released by the Senate Budget Committee, $4.2 billion of the $196 billion supplemental does not have anything to do with Iraq or Afghanistan, including $500 million for six electronic warfare planes — neither Iraqi insurgents nor Al Qaeda has an air force or radar — and $400 million for two developmental aircraft that will not see service until 2013.

An ever-greater number of non-emergency, non-defense programs are finding their way into emergency war bills, increasing overall government spending while avoiding the usual consequences.

The most recent supplemental bill, signed by the president in June 2007, contained $24 billion in non-emergency spending, including $120 million for the shrimp and menhaden fishing industries, $283 million for the Milk Income Loss Contract program, $60.4 million for salmon fisheries, $100 million for California citrus growers, $50 million for asbestos mitigation at the U.S. Capitol plant, $1 billion for avian flu, and $1 billion for NASA.

Also, it has become routine for lawmakers to shift budget-resolution funds from defense to domestic programs, knowing that additions to the next supplemental bill can replenish the defense funds. For instance, in May 2006, then-chairman of House Appropriations Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.) asked that his fellow lawmakers shift $6 billion of proposed defense increases to erase almost $4 billion worth of cuts in domestic programs.

CONCLUSION Congress has several options that would fix the current process and stop the abuse. The best one would be to stop exempting emergency spending from budget rules. That means that supplemental spending — whether an emergency or not — should be offset with funding cuts in low-priority programs and should also be included in deficit accounting. If that option is not available, another would be to retain the emergency exemption but establish specific criteria for designating spending as "emergency." A third would be to retain the emergency exemption while requiring a supermajority vote of Congress to approve emergency spending. The final option would be to create a reserve fund for emergency spending.

Those options are not mutually exclusive. Lawmakers could combine some of them to form a more thorough method of curtailing emergency spending. But no matter which option prevails, lawmakers must stop pretending that predictable costs are an "emergency." R

Readings

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