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The allure of tyranny [1]

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Brett Stephens had an interesting column in the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday, discussing [3] *The Allure of Tyranny*. Why did 80 percent of Russians vote for parties allied to Vladimir Putin's Kremlin (another 11.5 percent voted for the Communists)? Why did 49 percent of Venezuelans vote for Hugo Chavez's constitutional reforms, which would have established him as president-for-life? There are three usual explanations but, as Stephens writes, none of them is completely satisfactory.

The first rationalization of why people choose tyranny is culture. Some countries are too tribal, some too religious. Others, like Russia, demand an iron fist. But cultural determination can only explain so much ? "China is counterexampled by Taiwan; Zimbabwe by Botswana; Jeddah by Dubai..." and so on.

The second explanation is manipulation ? the tyrant is so tactically skilled, so adept at propaganda, that people are truly misled, and do not realize quite what they are voting for. Again though, this runs afoul of reality. Plenty of people vote for tyrants with their eyes wide open.

The other theory is that tyranny relies on intimidation and dirty tricks for its success. Yet this does not explain why some tyrants are so genuinely popular. Indeed, with each explanation you look at, you come back to the same point. Jean-Francois Revel put it like this:

> *[S[ome important part of every society consists of people who actively want tyranny: either to exercise it themselves or ? much more mysteriously ? to submit to it. Democracy will therefore always remain at risk.*

This is why limited government is so important, and why the slippery-slope argument against infringing liberty is so valid. Put simply, democracy alone cannot be relied upon to maintain freedom. In an age driven by opinion polls and focus groups, we all need to remember that.

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