
**Reviewed by** Charles E. Ziegler (University of Louisville)

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Why do smaller states concede sovereignty to great powers? The answer from a realist perspective would appear to be simple: as Thucydides reminds us in the Melian Dialogue, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. In the face of far greater power, states will make rational bargains in order to survive. Increasingly, however, international relations scholars have utilized David Lake’s concept of a global order structured hierarchically, in which relations between large and small powers may be coercive or may consist of a mix of coercion and voluntary subordination.[1]

Jesse Dillon Savage, assistant professor of global politics at Trinity College Dublin, agrees that considerations of political survival will motivate actors to give up sovereignty, but he makes a persuasive case that under certain conditions elites may voluntarily relinquish sovereignty. Domestic politics is an essential and neglected dimension in this decision. Drawing on the insights of political economy and historical institutionalism, Savage proposes two key independent variables that impact decisions on whether or not to concede sovereignty: elite competition within smaller states and the opportunities for rent seeking. Power may be important in explaining certain interactions, but elites in smaller states may at times resist efforts at subordination by larger states while in other cases they readily agree to give up sovereignty. Elite behavior depends on the degree of contestation within the polity and the availability of privileged benefits through the government.

The empirical material presented in this study concentrates on Russia’s relations with its former republics—the author conducted fieldwork in Georgia and Ukraine and uses these countries as case studies. Shifts between acquiescence and resistance to Russian control in these two states, Savage argues, can be explained by high levels of competition between elites, some of which are more inclined to surrender sovereignty in order to stay in office, and competition over rents in the form of oil and natural gas transactions, customs revenues, or subsidies that can be converted to patronage.

To broaden his set of cases beyond hierarchy in the post-Soviet space, Savage turns to European imperial governance in China, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire as an alternate form of hierarchical order. In each case the European colonial powers preferred informal empire to direct control as less costly, ruling through domestic institutions that benefited certain key actors in the colonial state. Colonialism consisted of a mixture of coercion and material incentives, the latter derived from trade revenues that allowed local elites to accumulate
wealth and consolidate their position through patronage. In the case of nineteenth-century Egypt, with the breakdown of Ottoman rule and emergence of centralized, uncompetitive institutions, informal British control provided few benefits to the local elites. Under these conditions the viability of informal hierarchical relations between metropole and colony diminished, leading to the Urabi nationalist revolt of 1881-82, British occupation, and the establishment of direct colonial rule.

In chapter 4, Savage presents a quantitative analysis using survey data from Georgia and Ukraine to test the relationship between contestation, rent seeking, and willingness to concede sovereignty. He finds that societal-level data on rent seeking (defined as perceptions of corruption and lack of faith in the rule of law) reflect elite responsiveness to Russian demands for abridging sovereignty—commitment to sovereignty drops as perceptions of corruption increase or confidence in the rule of law decreases. Chapter 6 extends the quantitative analysis to measure cross-national variation in sovereignty and hierarchy. Savage finds that higher levels of corruption and competition result in increases in Russian hierarchy, operationalized as membership in Russian-dominated organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Economic Union, and various other military and economic cooperation arrangements.

Of particular interest is the second part of this chapter, where Savage, using the Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz dataset on autocratic regimes,[2] finds that regimes classified as Personalist are more likely than Party regimes to concede sovereignty to Russia. Personalist regimes have narrower patronage bases (and therefore face greater competition over resources) than their Party counterparts, which tend to be more inclusionary and distribute patronage more widely. Elites in less stable Personalist regimes are more willing to trade sovereignty for survival; elites in more institutionalized Party regimes less so.

At this point culturalists might question the rational-actor premises underlying Savage’s analysis. What about the role of nationalism in challenging colonialism or other hierarchical arrangements? This would certainly seem to explain much of Ukrainian or Georgian resistance to Russian control, the Egyptian uprising that challenged European colonial dominance, or Qing dynasty revolts against European exploitation.

Savage responds that “nationalism and identity are not a sufficient explanation for resistance and, depending on the domestic political situation, can even lead to support for foreign encroachments on sovereignty” (p. 11). The Abkhaz and South Ossetians, he observes, responded to Georgian nationalism by readily supporting Russian incursions. More persuasive is the fact that over time Georgian and Ukrainian elites demonstrated considerable variation in their willingness to subordinate their state to Russian demands, as Savage details in his case studies.

Savage concludes that “elites who are engaged in contestation with other elites in high rent-seeking environments are more likely to give up sovereignty” (p. 217), while unified elites and low levels of corruption provide fewer incentives to accept hierarchy. This means the potential for great-power influence depends in large part on the domestic arrangements of the subordinate actor, and not simply on the amount of coercive force a larger state can exert. If domestic politics in the subordinate state are contentious and elite competition intense, then the hierarchical relationship is more likely to be stable.

Political Survival and Sovereignty in International Relations is not an easy read. However, for specialists in political science and international studies the volume constitutes a major contribution toward bridging the gap between comparative politics and international relations by adding a crucial domestic dimension to the literature on
hierarchy in global politics. If the twenty-first century does indeed herald the return to great-power competition, this work can help us understand how smaller states might reject or support Russian, Chinese, and American efforts at building hierarchy.

Charles E. Ziegler is Professor of Political Science and University Scholar at the University of Louisville. He is author or editor of five books and has published more than one hundred peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. Ziegler is also Faculty Director of the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order, and Executive Director of the Louisville Committee on Foreign Relations.

Notes


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