

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Political Science Faculty Research and
Publications

Political Science, Department of

7-2020

Food and Power

Brian Palmer-Rubin

Marquette University, brian.palmer-rubin@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/polisci_fac



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Palmer-Rubin, Brian, "Food and Power" (2020). *Political Science Faculty Research and Publications*. 89.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/polisci_fac/89

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Political Science Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION.

Access the published version via the link in the citation below.

Governance, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2020): 720-722. [DOI](#). This article is © Wiley and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Wiley does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Wiley.

Food and Power

Brian Palmer-Rubin

Department of Political Science, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Food and Power addresses two important questions in the political economy of development: Why do states intervene in agricultural markets? And what effect do these interventions have on regime stability?

Ambitious in its scope, this analysis addresses the logic of both democratic and authoritarian rulers in determining whether and how to intervene in agricultural markets—either to boost agricultural prices to favor the economic interests of rural producers or to depress prices, benefiting urban consumers. Authoritarian regimes are predicted to be biased further toward urban areas than democracies are, because the former are more vulnerable to dissident movements (which typically generate in cities) while the latter are more responsive to numerically important rural populations. The exceptions to urban bias in authoritarian systems are those countries where the agricultural sector is dominated by large landholders, whose capacity to organize and threaten the stability of authoritarian rulers yields rural bias in pricing.

Thomson combines a wealth of statistical and case study evidence to test these claims. The first three empirical chapters analyze diverse sources of cross-national data for over 70 countries over the last half century to test a series of hypotheses about the effect of regime type, landholder inequality, and level of economic development on commodity prices as well as the relationship between agricultural market interventions and regime stability. Particularly convincing is the analysis in Chapter 3, which demonstrates that authoritarian regimes prop up agricultural commodity prices under conditions of landholder inequality but depress agricultural prices where

agricultural land is more equally distributed. This finding supports the notion that nondemocratic regimes work against development goals, particularly in the presence of oligarchic economic institutions (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, [1]; Mahoney, [5]).

Case studies of Germany and Malaysia offer fine-grained illustrations of the mechanisms behind urban and rural bias in authoritarian systems. In 1870s imperial Germany, a regime that depended on the support of powerful rural oligarchs through the "iron and rye" coalition adopted protectionist policies to strengthen the economic prospects of large landholders against falling grain prices. In 1970s Malaysia, a shift to a more protectionist agricultural policy bolstered a famously stable authoritarian regime during a moment of crisis.

This argument builds on and contributes to recently neglected debate kicked off by a classic work on development policy—Bates' ([2]) *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*. Like Bates, Thomson details how political incentives push leaders to implement agricultural policies that cripple their own developmental trajectories. Yet in conducting an analysis with a much wider scope—cutting across regime type and regions—Thomson sacrifices some degree of local context in favor of making broadly generalizable claims.

In the end, this combination of evidence is quite convincing, particularly regarding the logic of authoritarian regimes. The basic intuition that authoritarian states respond to the interests that pose the greatest threat to their survival is reasonable and appears to hold true in the policy area that Thomson analyzes. The logic for democratic regimes was more difficult to follow and left me with more questions than answers. The argument goes that democratic regimes respond to rural interests because of their electoral weight. Would we expect this argument to hold in industrialized societies where the bulk of citizens live in cities? Would it depend on unbalanced electoral institutions that award disproportionate political influence to rural populations, such as the United States or Argentine federal systems (Samuels & Snyder, [6])? Furthermore, Thomson argues that democracies respond to a greater degree to rural interests as they become wealthier, as agricultural price supports are relatively cheaper and high food prices are less likely to offend a more affluent citizenry. Yet in the presence of the widely documented endogenous relationship between democracy and development, it is difficult to sort out how much causal weight is being lifted by the regime type and how much by the dynamic process of industrial transformation.

Thomson's book also raises a broader set of questions about how leaders weigh long-term developmental goals against short-term political goals. For instance, motivated by the need to make simplifying assumptions, Thomson adopts a view of authoritarian leaders as predatory and asserts that "interventions in agricultural markets generate rents" under any regime type. While it is certainly the case that decisions to subsidize, protect, or tax agricultural production are often made with the goal of generating rents for regime allies—particularly in authoritarian states—a more nuanced view of authoritarian elites' motives might lead to contrasting predictions. In highly stable authoritarian systems, such as in 20th-century Malaysia, Mexico, or South Korea, might leaders resort to agricultural subsidy as part of a long-term strategy for economic growth, therein bolstering the legitimacy of the regime?

In Thomson's statistical analysis, agricultural market interventions are measured in terms of the direction and degree to which commodity prices within a country deviate from international market prices. But the large number of cases makes it impossible to present direct evidence of the exact policies that countries implement that lead to these prices, let alone whether these policies are designed to generate rents for regime cronies or instead belong to a long-term goal of nurturing an export-oriented agricultural sector, a form of state intervention that today is widely approved of by the international development community (Byerlee, de Janvry, & Sadoulet, [3]). To this end, a fruitful extension of the analysis might be to address the conditions under which states (either authoritarian or democratic) adopt agricultural policy goals more oriented to long-term developmental goals than to short-term political expediency. Such an analysis would require a much more

nuanced approach to conceptualizing and operationalizing agricultural interventions, distinguishing between "predatory" and "developmental" approaches (Evans, [4]).

To conclude, *Food and Power* impresses with its massive amount of empirical evidence and highly detailed approach to analysis. Its argument is both eminently reasonable and, at times, intriguingly counterintuitive. It was a pleasure to read and should be of considerable interest to scholars of authoritarianism and political economy of development.

References

1. Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. A. (2005). Chapter 6: Institutions as a fundamental cause of long-run growth. In P. Aghion & S. N. Durlauf (Eds.), *Handbook of economic growth* (Vol. 1, pp. 385 – 472). Elsevier.
2. Bates, R. H. (1981). *Markets and states in tropical Africa: The political basis of agricultural policies*. University of California Press.
3. Byerlee, D., de Janvry, A., & Sadoulet, E. (2009). Agriculture for development: Toward a new paradigm. *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 1 (1), 15 – 31.
4. Evans, P. (1995). *Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation*. Princeton University Press.
5. Mahoney, J. (2010). *Colonialism and postcolonial development: Spanish America in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Samuels, D., & Snyder, R. (2001). The value of a vote: Malapportionment in comparative perspective. *British Journal of Political Science*, 31 (4), 651 – 671.