Constrained Monarchs, Stable Bargains*

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Abstract

How do rulers with weak or non-existent bureaucracies distribute goods to remain in power and avoid conflict? Unlike their counterparts with robust bureaucracies, low-capacity autocrats face constraints when powersharing with elites. Rulers can overcome this and reduce elite rebellion by distributing goods that 1) transfer sufficient coercive capacity to elites and 2) provide sufficient rents back to the ruler once distributed. I argue that land meets these criteria in the case of late medieval and early modern England (1226-1572). To test this, I collect three novel datasets (600,000 charters and patents, rebellious counties from 32 civil conflicts, and 502 elites' grants and participation in the Second Barons' War). Elites who received land grants were less likely to join the rebels during the civil war, and counties were less likely to rebel immediately after receiving a land grant. Thus, even monarchs without bureaucratic buying power can build stable bargains.

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