



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 33  
Number 1

Article 7

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10-15-2014

## Political Institutions in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying About the Lack of Democracy

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### Recommended Citation

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Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol33/iss1/7>

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### Abstract

Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper Award, Mythcon 45. Examines traditional political structures, theories of how they work, and how they play out in Tolkien's Middle-earth among fantastic races and landscapes. Especially intriguing is the way in which the immortality of some races and individuals affects the power balance.

### Additional Keywords

Political philosophy in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Political aspects; Democracy; Kingship

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OLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN  
J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH:  
OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING  
ABOUT THE LACK OF DEMOCRACY

DOMINIC J. NARDI, JR.<sup>1</sup>

POLITICAL SCIENTISTS HAVE SOMETIMES STRUGGLED with the depiction of politics in Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium, especially with its treatment of democracy. The heroes fight to restore monarchy and seem skeptical of modern political values, such as equality and popular participation. Blackburn (64) even goes so far as to allege that Tolkien's characters possess a "naïve" faith in enlightened despotism. However, the dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship/authoritarianism overlooks important features of Middle-earth politics. The lack of formal democratic institutions does not mean that the citizens blindly accept despotism. Rather, I propose that we can better understand Tolkien's legendarium by focusing on the extent to which political relationships are institutionalized.

I begin the paper in Section 1 by justifying the need for a reevaluation of politics in Tolkien's legendarium. In Section 2, I demonstrate the problems with the dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy both in real life and in speculative fiction. In Section 3, I discuss the treatment of democracy both in Tolkien's letters and in his legendarium. In Section 4, I examine how institutionalization varies across the Shire, Lake-town, Rohan, Gondor, Isengard, and Mordor. In Section 5, I attempt to provide a possible explanation for this variation using a game theoretic model. In Section 6, I speculate as to why immortality might make Elven politics more consensual. Finally, I conclude in Section 7 with a call for greater dialogue between political science and scholars of speculative fiction.

I have three goals in this paper. First, I hope to better understand—and at times correct misperceptions regarding—how Tolkien's worldview informed his literature. Tolkien's legendarium is not a political treatise, but his works do reflect concerns about political institutions. Second, I introduce new framework for understanding politics in Middle-earth. This should prove especially useful for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, many of who likely—if unjustly—regard unconstitutional monarchy

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was the winner of the Alexei Kondratiev Student Paper Award at Mythcon 45, Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts.

as equivalent to tyranny. This approach can also identify political variables overlooked in the existing literature. Finally, this paper is an experiment in application of political science to the study of speculative fiction. Applying existing analytical tools to radically different types of political systems forces political scientists to think carefully about the generalizability of and assumptions underlying those tools.

#### NAIVETÉ OR FANTASY? THE NEED FOR A REEVALUATION

There has been relatively little analysis of politics in Tolkien legendarium. One strain of scholarship criticizes the depiction of politics in Middle-earth as unrealistic or undemocratic. Barnett worries that *The Lord of the Rings* presents “a distorted picture of politics” because all decisions are resolved by consensus with little sign of debate (386). Blackburn alleges that the characters demonstrate “blind faith in [their] political leaders” (64).<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have gone so far as to criticize Tolkien for promoting nationalism or fascism (see, e.g., Stimpson 8; Inglis 40). However, Curry (36-42) counters that a careful reading of the texts evinces little support for enlightened despotism, much less fascism. Tolkien himself strongly condemned Nazism (e.g., *Letters* 37).

One challenge to studying politics in Tolkien’s legendarium is that the texts do not provide detailed information about political institutions. Ironically, Tolkien was not a terse writer; he famously included minute details about Middle-earth geography and reprinted entire poems. Despite this, there is almost no mention of formal political institutions, such as legislatures or judicial systems. Political disputes are resolved through consensus or moral authority, not by reference to institutional rules rules or procedures. Given that Tolkien engaged in deliberate and careful world-building, this omission is noteworthy and forces a closer reading of the text if we wish to truly understand political relationships in Tolkien’s legendarium.

We should be wary of using “mundane world” history or ideology to “fill in” such gaps. Tolkien famously disliked “mere” allegory in fiction (e.g., *Letters* 144), even warning that *The Lord of the Rings* “is neither allegorical nor topical” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] Foreword xxiii). Just as readers should not equate the War of the Ring with World War II, it would also be an oversimplification to transpose all of our assumptions and stereotypes about historical monarchies onto Gondor or Rohan. Given the vast differences between the “mundane world” and Middle-

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<sup>2</sup> *Game of Thrones* author George R. R. Martin raises a similar critique:

*Lord of the Rings* had a very medieval philosophy [...]. Tolkien can say that Aragorn became king and reigned for a hundred years, and he was wise and good. But Tolkien doesn’t ask the question: What was Aragorn’s tax policy? [...] In real life, real-life kings had real-life problems to deal with. Just being a good guy was not the answer. You had to make hard, hard decisions. (Gilmore 2014)

earth—including wizards and magic—it is not surprising that political institutions in Tolkien's legendarium do not always resemble our own.

Although Tolkien conceived of his legendarium as taking place in a mythicized northern Europe (Shippey xv-xvi), Middle-earth politics differs from that of medieval fantasy literature in important ways. In some northern European traditions, societies chose leaders through acclamation rather than heredity. Rulers would build support by distributing patronage to elites. The most famous example appears in *Beowulf*, where we see King Hrothgar “dol[ing] out rings and torques” (line 80), as well as Beowulf's own ascension to the kingship.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, we observe very little patronage politics or elite bargaining in Middle-earth. Kings tend to ascend to the throne through heredity, not acclamation.<sup>4</sup> Even more surprisingly, both the Shire and Lake-town do have relatively modern democratic governments, which would have been anachronistic in medieval literature.

How should we understand regime types in Middle-earth? What factors shape the relationship between subjects and rulers? Neither the medieval setting nor analogies to modern politics allow provides satisfactory answers. In this paper, I take an alternative approach by using the political science literature. Even in the “mundane world,” political scientists cannot always obtain information about how political systems operate. Not all governments are transparent and some of the most important political negotiations occur behind closed doors. The discipline has developed statistical and game theoretic models in order to make inferences about political behavior. These methods can help compensate for the lack of detail about politics in Tolkien's work and uncover the underlying logic of political behavior in Middle-earth.

#### BEYOND DEMOCRACY & DICTATORSHIP: WHY THE KING SHOULD RETURN

Despite the existence of democracy in Middle-earth, the modern dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship/authoritarianism fails to capture key aspects of politics in Middle-earth. Although humans, Elves, and Dwarves are called the “Free Peoples” of Middle-earth (e.g., *LotR* II.iii.275), they do not have democratic governments. The two most common measures of democratization, Polity and Freedom House scores (see Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 1-3; Freedom House), would likely classify Mordor, Gondor, Rohan, and the Elven realms as “authoritarian.” In addition, Middle-earth societies are not egalitarian; characters are conscious of class

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<sup>3</sup> Even some contemporary medieval fantasy touches upon these themes. T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* uses the Round Table to symbolize King Arthur's need to consult with advisors and elites.

<sup>4</sup> There is one instance that superficially resembles acclamation, when Faramir asks a crowd outside the gates of Gondor if they accept Aragorn as king. However, Ioreth notes that this was “just a ceremony [...] for [Aragorn] has already entered” (*LotR* VI.5.967). In other words, acclamation does not actually confer power.

and in some cases social mobility is limited (see Donnelly 18). Yet, Tolkien clearly does not ascribe the same normative value to democracy that Freedom House and Polity scores imply. In other words, Lake-town's government is not depicted as superior to Rohan's, despite Lake-town's status as a democracy.

In the "mundane world," political scientists have increasingly moved away from the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism to focus on institutions more broadly across different regime types (e.g., Gandhi xix-xxi; Shapiro 326-329). For this paper, I define an "institution" as: 1) a relatively enduring set of rules and organized practices; 2) embedded in structures of meaning and resources; and 3) invariant in the face of personnel turnover and individual preferences (March and Olsen 3-4).<sup>5</sup> Institutional rules define how political actions translate into outcomes. This definition is flexible enough to accommodate Middle-earth's relatively informal politics. An "institution" does not necessarily have to be a government body or actor, such as the stewardship of Gondor. For example, the oath that the Guards of the Citadel swear is an institution in that it is an organized practice that has endured under several generations of stewards.

Although political institutions can enable better governance outcomes, institutionalizing political relationships inevitably creates barriers between ruler and subject. For example, in presidential democracies, terms of office lock voters and politicians into a formal social contract that usually cannot be broken or amended until the next election (Mainwaring 199). If a new crisis arises or voters change their mind, voters are stuck with the leaders currently in power. Leaders elected to manage one problem might be poorly equipped to address the next—much as the Master fostered a thriving economy but proved inept at defending Lake-town against a dragon. This risk is mitigated to an extent in parliamentary systems, where the legislature can call for a vote of no confidence (see Strom 265). However, even snap elections are no guarantee that democracy is actually representative and accountable to the public. Voting rules affect voting outcomes such that the order and manner in which legislators vote can have a determinative effect on the outcome.<sup>6</sup>

It is possible to mitigate these problems, but only by limiting government representativeness, accountability, or efficiency. In the "mundane world," politicians establish rules, such as delegating authority to legislative committees, to prevent legislatures from constantly cycling through policies (Shepsle 28). The committee can then use its specialized knowledge to narrow the range of options brought to a floor vote. However, this gives a subset of legislators

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<sup>5</sup> The third prong of this definition explains why this paper does not focus on the characteristics of individual leaders in Middle-earth. Although leadership is crucial, aspects of politics that depend upon a particular leader's preferences are not institutionalized.

<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated by the infamous Condorcet Paradox.

disproportionate power over the agenda. Democratic governments also regularly entrust unelected bureaucrats and judges to formulate policies and manage disputes (e.g., Huber and Shipan 2; Bickel 30). Although these institutional innovations can and sometimes do produce beneficial governance outcomes, they also complicate the notion that democracy enables direct interaction between citizens and political leaders.

In theory, elections should allow voters to hold corrupt politicians accountable (Ferraz and Finan 1274), but in practice elections can encourage corruption because politicians need funds in order to finance their campaigns. Empirically, long-established, liberal democracies tend to suffer less corruption, but there is considerable variation amongst younger democracies, some of which suffer extreme levels of corruption (Treisman 218-219). In open-list proportional representation systems, more competitive elections even appear to encourage more corruption; as the number of voters in a constituency increases, campaign finance violations also increase (Chang and Golden 115). Moreover, it is difficult for voters to hold leaders accountable for corruption because it occurs outside of public view (c.f. Cheibub and Przeworski 238).

Charismatic leaders can take advantage of this information asymmetry in order to distract voters from corruption or poor government performance. Problems can always be blamed on subversive groups or external forces. Such concerns lead some voters to only trust leaders who do not openly seek power. Tolkien himself appeared sympathetic to this view, remarking, "mediævals were only too right in taking *nolo episcopari* as the as the best reason a man could give to others for making him a bishop" (*Letters* 64). This of course gives politicians an incentive to—often disingenuously—disavow any interest in higher office, further distorting the relationship between ruler and subject.<sup>7</sup>

Nor is democracy necessarily a precondition for economic growth and good governance. Some research suggests that democracy increases provision of public goods, such as education and healthcare (see, e.g., Sen 16; Przeworski and Limongi 168-169; Lake and Baum 617-618; Blaydes and Kayser 2). However, other scholars have challenged these results for underrepresenting high-performing authoritarian regimes (Ross 863-864) and oversimplifying measures for democracy (Cheibub et al. 68). Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, several autocracies, including China, have provided economic growth and public goods provision at least as well as the average democracy (Clark et al. 2-3).

More recent models suggest that political constraints, not regime type, provide the key to explaining government performance. In the Selectorate model

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels explored the dangers of charismatic leaders, leading him to observe in *Chapterhouse Dune*: "It is not that power corrupts but that it is magnetic to the corruptible" (59).

(see de Mesquita et al. 77-105), a leader must maximize his/her support by distributing patronage to the group that selects the leader (i.e., the selectorate). He/she must distribute enough to thwart potential challengers. The larger the selectorate, the greater the incentive to enact policies benefitting the populace at large rather than engaging in embezzlement. In democracies, the selectorate tends to encompass the entire voting-age populace. In a similar model, Myerson (134-135) shows that, in the face of competition, rulers have an incentive to establish a strong royal court to serve as a commitment to supporters. These models are particularly helpful for Middle-earth because they demonstrate that one does not need democracy or even formal institutions in order to constrain political rulers.

#### DEMOCRACY IN MIDDLE-EARTH: WHO ELECTED THE MASTER?

Given these insights from the political science literature, it is worth reexamining the problem of democracy in Tolkien's legendarium. Tolkien does not use the failure of democracy or political leaders in Middle-earth as an excuse to accept dictatorship. In fact, we see subjects and subordinates actively resisting bad government. Both Éomer and Beregond dissent against unwise orders when the kings of Rohan and Gondor fall under corrupt influences (Gríma Wormtongue and the *palantír*, respectively). After a brief punishment, both are rehabilitated and their dissent at least partially legitimated. In *The Return of the King*, the Hobbits even launch an insurgency against Sharkey and his thugs. As Curry notes, "what is 'The Scouring of the Shire' [...] but an account of local resistance to fascist thuggery and forced modernization?" (41).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to democracy comes from Lake-town. According to Blackburn, the contrast between the Master and Bard suggests that:

what is wrong with democracy is that it carries to power, not those who have the best right to rule as stewards of the common good, but those who, through the power of their eloquence, are able to manipulate the ignorant masses. (64)

However, even here it appears that the problem is in how Lake-town institutionalized democracy rather than popular participation generally. The narrator in *The Hobbit* tells the reader that the Master owed his position to "trade and tolls, to cargoes and gold" (*Hobbit* X.210). This could simply mean that residents approved the Master's management of the economy, but could also imply that the Master used patronage to influence the outcome of elections. Moreover, the Master does not internalize popular sentiment in order to deliberate on policy, but rather follows the "general clamour" (X.211). By contrast, the restoration of monarchy does not lead to the abolition of popular participation. When Bard is described as rewarding "his followers and friends freely" (XVIII.304), it is hard not to see hints of the Selectorate model's informal constraints and patronage politics.



Some of Tolkien's letters do express skepticism of democracy. In a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, he points out that the Greek word for democracy (δημοκρατία) better translates as "mob-rule" (*Letters* 107). In discussing Hobbit values, he declares, "Not that I am a 'democrat' in any of its current uses [...]" (215). However, a closer analysis suggests that Tolkien's criticism centers on modern, institutionalized democracy, not on popular participation in governance. This is perhaps best expressed in a 1956 letter, where he claims, "I am not a 'democrat' only because 'humility' and equality are spiritual principles *corrupted by the attempt to mechanize and formalize them*" (246, emphasis added). In this context, the failure of Lake-town stems from the lack of a dialogue between government and the people; the Master follows the forms of democracy, but does not provide leadership (i.e., "mob-rule").

Tolkien describes his own political leanings as "more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control [...])—or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy" (*Letters* 63). Political scientists would typically place "unconstitutional monarchy" and "anarchy" near opposite ends of the political spectrum (in fact, dictators often equate "democracy" with "anarchy"). However, by grouping these two regime types together, Tolkien is emphasizing his aversion to institutionalization. During the 1930s and 1940s, the world's major democracies had drastically expanded the size and scope of government in response to the Great Depression and World War II. Totalitarianism, with its regimentation of society, represented an even more extreme form of institutionalization. For somebody who preferred deinstitutionalized politics, neither option was a viable alternative.

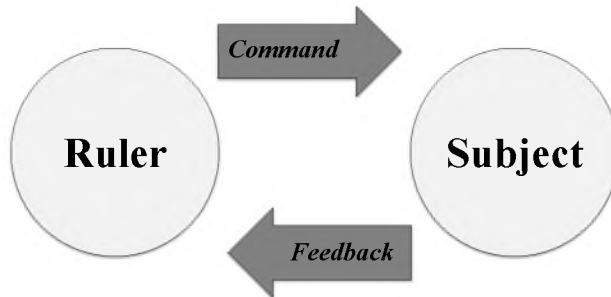
Ultimately, Tolkien's legendarium is not a political manifesto<sup>8</sup> and does not attempt to solve the problems of institutionalized democracy. Taken literally, *The Lord of the Rings* would be, as Blackburn claims, "dangerous as a guide to deeds" (62). However, the legendarium is politically salient in that it engages with broader political themes. Indeed, in his skepticism of government, Tolkien shares some of the same concerns that motivated Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons*. Ostrom (30-38) argues that community policing can prove more effective in managing natural resources than either state control or privatization. Her approach does not work under all conditions and is probably only applicable to smaller communities. Nevertheless, her scholarship is useful in that it demonstrates the possibility for something resembling Tolkienian politics even in the modern world.

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<sup>8</sup> Especially when compared to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, published shortly after *The Lord of the Rings*.

**VARIATION IN INSTITUTIONALIZATION: RINGWRAITHS AS BUREAUCRATS**

In this section, I consider how political institutions vary in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>9</sup> In Middle-earth, the most important indicators of institutionalization are: 1) the ability of subjects and rulers to interact, 2) the formality of political processes, and 3) the layers of bureaucracy. Ideally, political relationships between ruler and subjects involve two-way communication (see Figure 1). Rulers transmit commands to the populace through laws, bureaucracy, speeches, or propaganda. At the same time, rulers need information about subjects' preferences to ensure that they do not become so dissatisfied as to attempt regime change. Subjects can also provide rulers with useful insight about the enforcement and impact of government policies (McCubbins and Schwartz 165).



*Figure 1: Model of Interaction between Ruler and Subject*

Governments need to find an equilibrium between command and feedback. Relying solely on information provided by subjects risks mob rule. The U.S.

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth discussing what constitutes domestic politics in this context. Sovereignty in Middle-earth appears more fluid than the norm for modern nation-states. For example, as king of Gondor, Elessar is expected to keep the peace on roads as far north as Rivendell (*LotR* VI.6.988) and prohibits Men from entering the Shire (App.B.1097). Despite this, Shire Hobbits never behave as if they owe allegiance to Gondor. The Shire has its own government, which regulates all domestic matters. Gondor only seems involved in the Shire's interaction with the outside world.

In general, I consider a realm sufficiently autonomous if there is a government that regulates domestic affairs and there appears to be no overlapping domestic jurisdiction with another government. Accordingly, it would be more appropriate to characterize the Gondor-Shire relationship as international, even if nominally the Shire falls under Gondor's aegis. In the "mundane world," such informal relations between great powers and tributaries were not uncommon before the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States provides public goods and security to other states, such as patrolling international waterways.

Founding Fathers created a representative government in order to receive information about citizens' preferences, but combined it with checks and balances to avoid a tyranny of the majority (e.g., Madison No. 51). Authoritarian regimes also need feedback, but subjects are less likely to volunteer information that contradicts or criticizes official policy for fear of retribution. This makes gathering accurate information more costly (see Kuran 30-31).<sup>10</sup> Some authoritarian regimes establish "democratic" institutions, such as legislatures, in order to interact with citizens and gather information (e.g. Gandhi xix-xxi). Governments can also attempt to compensate by creating a vast surveillance apparatus to spy on the populace.

In Middle-earth, there is considerable variation in the extent to which governments can issue commands and receive feedback (see Figure 2). At one extreme, Mordor has a complex political hierarchy with many bureaucratic layers. Although we learn relatively little about Mordor, we encounter courtiers (e.g., the Mouth of Sauron), bureaucratic agents (e.g., Ringwraiths), tributary states (e.g., Harad), elite soldiers (e.g., trolls), and common troops (e.g., Orcs). Not only is the hierarchy rigid, but different classes are also strictly segregated by race. There is no permeability across class lines. Although Orcs might sometimes informally converse amongst themselves, we never observe Ringwraiths or Orc chieftains—much less Sauron himself—informally interacting with Orcs.

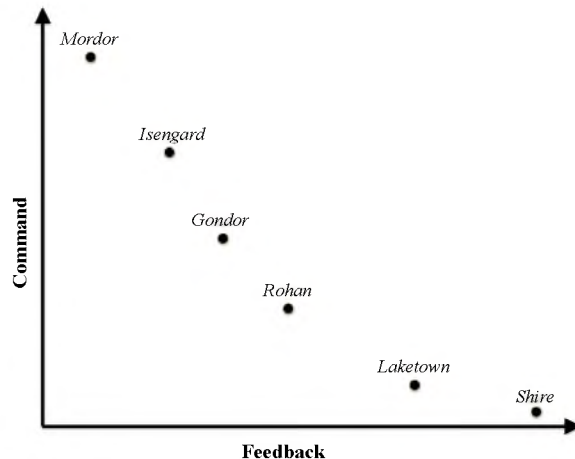


Figure 2: Feedback vs. Command in Middle-earth Realms  
(Placements along the axes are approximations.)

<sup>10</sup> It is this tendency that forces King Henry to dress as a commoner in order to learn about his soldiers' fears on the eve of battle in Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*.

Sauron's oppression stifles informational communication between subjects and ruler. This is not a polity in which subjects willingly volunteer information likely to upset elites. Two of the Mordor Orcs, Shagrat and Gorbag, are forced to whisper their belief that "even the Biggest, can make mistakes" (*LotR* IV.10.738), as if acknowledging the fallibility of a leader is cause for punishment. To compensate, Sauron expends considerable effort conducting surveillance over his realm. As Shagrat claims, "they've got eyes and ears everywhere" (IV.10.737). In Tolkien's legendarium, Mordor's omnipresent surveillance apparatus is symbolized by references to the "Eye of Sauron."<sup>11</sup> However, Sauron's efforts ultimately fail. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, he consistently lacks crucial information about the Ring and the intentions of the protagonists. He could not even detect the presence of the Hobbits in Mordor until Frodo puts on the Ring in Orodruin.<sup>12</sup>

Isengard's political structure resembles Mordor's, but with fewer layers of hierarchy. Saruman, the undisputed leader, has a courtier (e.g., Grima Wormtongue), soldiers (e.g., Uruk-hai), and mercenaries (e.g., the Dunlendings). Again, there is no evidence of social mobility. Although Saruman and Wormtongue do interact, theirs is not an informal, personal relationship. Saruman constantly emphasizes his superiority over Wormtongue by issuing arbitrary and abusive commands, such as the order to kill Lotho Sackville-Baggins. Saruman shows little interest in receiving feedback from Wormtongue about his policies, going so far as to taunt Wormtongue for obeying his commands (*LotR* VI.8.1020). After Sharkey seizes control of Bag-End, he symbolically and practically cuts himself off from feedback by not revealing himself to the Hobbits and pretending that Lotho remains in charge.

Gondor and Rohan lie in between the extremes. Both have several layers of government, including a king, advisors, and generals, but Rohan's hierarchy is much more horizontal than Gondor's. Before marching to Gondor, Théoden has to call upon his vassals to muster their soldiers to Dunharrow. By contrast, Gondor has a relatively centralized command and control structure, allowing the ruler to summon troops from outlying territories. Moreover, Gondor has more levels of hierarchy, including lesser nobles (e.g., Prince Imrahil) and lords of cities (e.g., Faramir of Osgiliath). In fact, the Council of Gondor is the only formal political institution mentioned in the entire legendarium. However, unlike Mordor, Gondorian subjects can not only interact with the elite, but also join it. For example, Beregond—a "plain man of arms" with "neither rank nor lordship" (*LotR* V.1.767)—was promoted to Captain of the White Company after saving Faramir.

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<sup>11</sup> In Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film adaptations, this literally becomes a giant flaming eyeball.

<sup>12</sup> Although Shagrat brings Frodo's Mithril shirt, Elven cloak, and sword to Lugbúrz, the Mouth of Sauron clearly does not know the Hobbits' true mission. As Gandalf says, "Indeed, I know them all and all their history, and despite your scorn, foul Mouth of Sauron, you cannot say as much" (*LotR* V.10.889).

The parallel oaths that Merry and Pippin swear allow for a direct comparison of institutionalization in Gondor and Rohan. In Rohan, Merry simply asks King Théoden, "May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap [...]?" With equal informality, Théoden replies, "Gladly I will take it" (*LotR* V.2.777). The oath is not a precondition for Merry to serve and interact with Théoden, but rather formalizes a relationship that had developed through conversations about pipeweed and other lighthearted subjects. Where the Rohirrim oath is informal and personal, the Gondorian process is formal and formulaic. Pippin swears fealty to Denethor by reciting:

Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Peregrin son of Paladin of the Shire of the Halflings. (*LotR* V.1.756)

Denethor's response is equally formal and formulaic:

And this do I hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance. (756)

Unlike Merry's oath, Pippin's is part of a scripted ritual in which all soldiers of Gondor must partake; the oath itself is an institution. Pippin and Denethor did not have a preexisting friendship before the oath and afterwards only interact pursuant to the fulfillment of their vows. The oath also rigidly delineates responsibilities of both the ruler and subject, further separating the two and reducing the space for personal, informal interactions.

Gondor and Rohan demonstrate how institutionalization can lead to a principal-agent problem. In theory, a bureaucratic agent should act in the best interests of the ruler. In practice, an agent's preferences might diverge from the ruler's (see Fearon 55-60). For example, Wormtongue would distort and reinterpret information before passing it on to Théoden. Thus, when Gandalf arrives, he must to remove that layer of bureaucracy in order to ensure that Théoden receives his message. In Gondor, the *palantír* erects a similar barrier to communication. Like Wormtongue, the *palantír* has a different agenda from Denethor. The *palantír* does not actually present untruth, but does tint information with despair. By the siege of Gondor, Denethor becomes so dependent upon the *palantír* that he refuses advice from Faramir before the attack on Osgiliath and from Pippin before nearly burning Faramir alive. In short, Denethor no longer invests in relationships with subjects for information.

Aragorn's ascension to the throne seems to promise a relatively less formal political relationship with his subjects, but he does not completely abolish formality. His coronation ceremony is marked by ritual, including trumpets, flower-laden streets, and a formal recitation in Elvish (*LotR* VI.5.967). Indeed, as Aragorn nears Gondor, he transitions to speaking in more formal—even regal—diction. Although there are crucial differences between Denethor and Aragorn's reigns, there are also deeper political institutions and rituals in Gondor that do not disappear after leadership turnover.

Lake-town under the Master represents another extreme, government ruled by feedback—or “mob rule.” Although Lake-town's government is relatively underinstitutionalized, those institutions that do exist do not facilitate two-way communication. The Master follows the whims of his subjects, presumably to guarantee his reelection. When Thorin and company arrive in *The Hobbit*, the narrator reveals that the Master doubted Thorin's claims to kingship. However, rather than express his doubts and encourage a debate as to the wisdom of entering the Lonely Mountain, he simply follows the “general clamour” (*Hobbit* X.211). He is also pays too much heed to “trade and tolls” (210)—the electorate's short-term concerns—rather than making the grim but foresighted preparations to defend the town. Ironically, despite his title, the “Master” is unable to issue unpopular commands or demand sacrifices from his subjects.

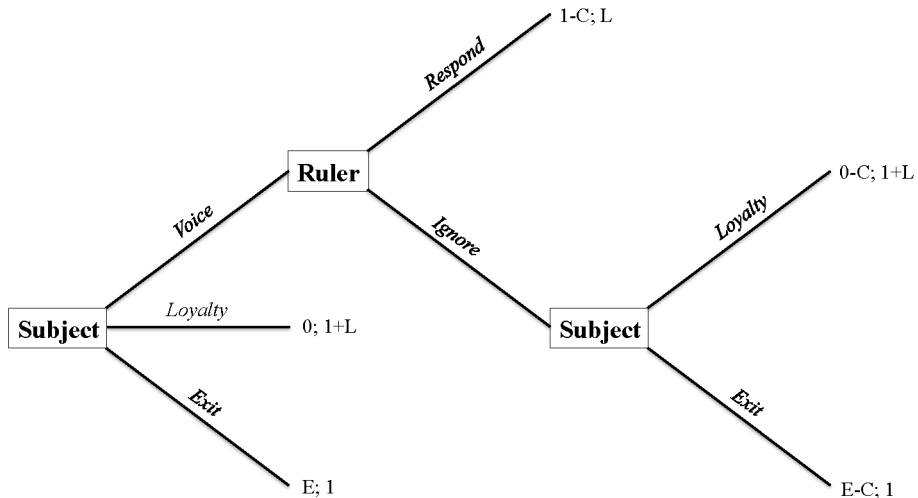
Finally, the Shire has “hardly any ‘government’” (*LotR* Prologue 9), making for a relatively flat political structure. The only political hierarchy is an elected Mayor, the Thain, and Shirriffs. By the War of the Ring, only twelve Shirriffs remained in service and the Thainship had become largely honorific. The Mayor's duties are limited to managing banquets, the Messenger Service, the Watch, and animal control (*LotR* Prologue 10). The government serves a role in coordinating and managing public services, but appears to have little institutional power to mobilize or extract resources from Shire society. Although economic and social inequality do exist in the Shire, there is evidence of significant social mobility. Sam Gamgee, the archetypal working class Hobbit,<sup>13</sup> is elected mayor for seven seven-year terms. The Shire's minimalist government does come with a cost; as with Lake-town, the Shire government has insufficient command ability to defend against external threats (although Mayor Will Whitfoot does earn readers' sympathy for defying Lotho).

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<sup>13</sup> *The Silmarillion's* brief synopsis about the War of the Ring refers to Sam merely as Frodo's “servant” (303).

**ORIGINS OF GOVERNMENT: WHY THE SHIRE IS A DEMOCRACY**

In this section, I offer one possible causal explanation for institutional variation in Middle-earth based on a game theoretic model adapted from the economics literature (see Hirschman 1). There are two players in the *Exit, Voice, & Loyalty* game: a Ruler and a group of Subjects. Before the game begins, the Ruler issues a policy that costs the Subjects 1 unit of welfare (i.e., in rights or property loss). The Subjects can then choose to: 1) voice their dissatisfaction, 2) remain loyal to the Ruler, or 3) exit from the state. In the latter two scenarios, the game ends and both players receive a payoff (see Figure 3). If the Subjects choose voice, the Ruler can either: 1) respond to the demands, or 2) ignore them. If the Ruler responds, then the Subjects remain loyal and both players receive a payoff. If the Ruler ignores them, the Subjects must again choose to: 1) remain loyal, or 2) exit the state.



**Legend Parameters:**

- E Citizen's exit payoff
- 1 Value of benefit taken from the citizen by the state
- L State's value from having a loyal citizen who does not exit
- C Cost of using voice for the citizen

Figure 3: *Exit, Voice, & Loyalty Model*

Ultimately, the Ruler and Subjects make their decisions based on the expected payoff at each stage of the game.<sup>14</sup> If the Subjects receive some positive value from exiting ( $E > 0$ ), they would prefer to exit rather than remain loyal ( $E - C > 0 - C$ ). Likewise, if there are significant costs associated with exit ( $E < 0$ ), then the Subjects would prefer to remain loyal. If the Ruler responds, then the 1 unit of welfare is returned to the Subjects. However, using voice is costly because Subjects must expend resources ( $C$ ) in order to mobilize. Thus, the Subjects will only voice dissent if the value of what they lost is greater than the benefit of either loyalty or exit ( $1 - C > E > 0$  or  $1 - C > 0 > E$ ).

After appropriating the citizen's assets, the Ruler receives that 1 unit of welfare. If the Subjects remain loyal, the Ruler receives a value for their loyalty and service ( $L$ ). Thus, the Ruler has an incentive to prevent the Subjects from exiting the state. If the Ruler values the Subjects' loyalty more than the welfare seized ( $L > 1$ ), he/she might be willing to respond to their grievances (i.e., return the 1 unit of welfare) in order to prevent them from fleeing. If this game were extended beyond one round, the Ruler might need a way to commit to not seizing the Subjects' assets in order to prevent them from protesting or exiting in the first place. This might lead the establishment of democracy or a constitution, which would impose institutional constraints on government discretion (see North and Weingast 805-808).

In the "mundane world," we cannot obtain precise values for  $E$ ,  $C$ , or  $L$ , but we can estimate the relative values based on the bargaining power of subjects. From the perspective of the ruler, the benefit of subjects' loyalty ( $L$ ) depends upon the ease with which the state can extract resources and services. If subjects can hide their assets or flee, then it becomes more important for the state to retain loyalty in order to prevent capital flight or labor loss (see, e.g., Scott 106). If the ruler has access to natural resource rents or slave labor, then he/she does not require subjects' loyalty in order to obtain revenue and services.

Subjects who are more willing and able to leave a polity have a higher exit value ( $E$ ) and thus more bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the ruler. Exit is easier when subjects possess portable assets that can be taken in the event of flight. By contrast, loyalty becomes more attractive when dangers outside the polity threaten the subjects' person or property. In such cases, subjects are more likely to cede power to the state and allow it to develop stronger institutions in return for protection (see Tilly 170-175; Slater 5). The costs of voice ( $C$ ) depend on the ability of subjects to organize and mobilize themselves. If subjects are relatively self-sufficient and can survive without assistance from the state, then they face less risk of retribution.

Geography has a particularly important impact on these parameters. Harsh or rugged terrain can impede government efforts to control subjects, while

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<sup>14</sup> Technically, if this were not a game of complete information, one would also need to calculate each player's beliefs about the other player's choices.



fertile lands can allow subjects to grow their own crops and become self-sufficient. Fortunately, Tolkien was famously meticulous in the care with which he depicted Middle-earth geography, going so far as to include maps in his books (see generally Fonstad ix-x). Although Tolkien certainly did not have the *Exit, Voice, Loyalty* model in mind when writing, because he took such care with the geography it is reasonable to extrapolate how geography might have affected the development of political institutions in Middle-earth.

The Shire's geography makes it ideally suited to decentralized, democratic government. The Shire is described as a hilly area. Most Hobbits—especially the richest and poorest—build their homes in holes in the ground rather than external structures (*LotR* Prologue 7). This makes it relatively easy for Hobbits to hide themselves and their assets from inspection. The government cannot simply observe a Hobbit's fields or house to assess his or her wealth. Indeed, after Bilbo returned from Erebor, the other Hobbits knew he had obtained some treasure, but they could not ascertain the extent of his wealth (I.1.23). Hobbits are also secretive and so skilled in "the art of disappearing" that humans rarely see them (Prologue 1). Thus, exiting and escaping government oversight is relatively easy. In order to convince Hobbits to remain loyal, the government must make the Shire an appealing place in which to live—as it seems to have done, given Frodo and Sam's longing descriptions of their homeland.

Hobbits also demonstrate both the means and the will to voice dissent against oppressive government. The Shire has fertile cropland and can grow enough food for subsistence (*LotR* Prologue 9), meaning that individual Hobbit families do not require government assistance. Hobbits are frequently depicted engaging in collective activities, including banquets, showing that private citizens can and do organize mass events. It took Lotho the assistance of armed human ruffians and Saruman to impose an economic system that does "more gathering than sharing" (VI.7.999). Despite that advantage, the Hobbits could still engage in massive, widespread resistance and overthrow the Lotho-Sharkey regime. In the long run authoritarianism is simply not a stable equilibrium in the Shire.

Lake-town geography appears to have a similar effect, but for different reasons. Living on a lake makes exit easier as subjects can hide their assets underwater or flee using their boats.<sup>15</sup> Before Smaug's attack, Lake-town has bountiful resources, including fish. The residents discount Bard's prophecies of "anything from floods to poisoned fish," suggesting neither had happened recently (*Hobbit* XIV.258). Assuming residents have access to fishing gear and boats, they are

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<sup>15</sup> This occurred in Peter Jackson's film adaptation, *The Desolation of Smaug*, when Bard hides weapons in the water under his house.

not dependent upon the Master for their livelihoods.<sup>16</sup> As in the Shire, the people of Lake-town demonstrate their autonomy by overthrowing the Master and installing Bard as king. It is noteworthy that the only two examples of successful domestic revolutions in Tolkien's legendarium occur in the two states with the least costly exit options.

At the opposite extreme, Mordor's geography facilitates totalitarianism and stifles resistance. The Plains of Gorgoroth are described as deserts where nothing grows and the water is bitter (*LotR* VI.2.923). Rather, food comes from "slave-worked fields" in the Lake Núrn region, giving the state a monopoly over the supply and distribution of provisions—and making Orcs dependent on the state for their livelihoods. Despite the low quality of life, exit is not feasible. Outside Mordor, Elves, Men, and Dwarves kill Orcs indiscriminately, to the extent that elf-countries instill a "cold fear" (*LotR* VI.1.907). As such, defection to neighboring states is not an option. By contrast, as part of Sauron's army, Orcs not only receive collective defense, but also war booty. Thus, even if they evade Mordor's internal surveillance system, the benefits of fleeing Mordor are low compared to those of remaining loyal.

If Orcs were to attempt flight, Mordor's geography makes doing so nearly impossible. Mordor is enclosed by the Ered Lithui ("Ash Mountains") in the north and the Ephel Dúath ("Fence of Shadow") in the west and the south, blocking overland passage. The only accessible exits are through the heavily guarded Black Gate (Morannon), Minas Morgul, or Shelob's lair. Aside from Orodruin, the land within the boundaries of Mordor is flat and barren, providing the "Eye" of Sauron an unobstructed view of any point within his realm. Indeed, Shagrat and Gorbag express a desire to desert, but fear that they would be caught (*LotR* IV.10.738). For Sauron, Orcs are expendable, in part because he can recruit additional mercenaries from Harad and Rhûn. In short, Sauron has no incentive to accommodate any Orc demands for greater rights or share of the booty because Orcs have no bargaining power.

Rohan's geography makes a relatively decentralized government likely, but still allows for monarchy. Rohan is covered by a vast plains situated in a vale between the Misty Mountains and the White Mountains. This has two important implications. First, as in the Shire, the fertile plains provide greater agricultural opportunities, allowing farmers to be relatively self-sufficient. This prevents Rohirrim from being too dependent upon the king. In fact, the king is dependent upon vassals to supply military forces (see *LotR* V.3 "The Muster of Rohan"). Second, the land is suitable for

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<sup>16</sup> There are other hints that Lake-town was not poor. The narrator notes that the people of Lake-town "still *throve* on the trade" [emphasis added] (*Hobbit* X.204). They even have enough spare resources to supply Thorin's company and dress them "in *fine* cloth of their proper colours" (emphasis added, X.211). Interestingly, *The Desolation of Smaug* depicts Lake-town as an authoritarian state in which resources are scarce. The Master rejects elections and has a vast spy network. Bard threatens Alfred with food riots if he cannot bring his fish past the tollgate.

horses and Rohan is a horse culture. Horses provide the Rohirrim with much greater mobility, making both collective mobilization and flight easier. However, both horses and farmland are observable—and hence taxable—assets, giving the king some leverage in extracting resources from his subjects.

Gondor's geography allows for more centralized government than Rohan's. The Pelennor Fields are relatively fertile, providing sustenance for Gondorians. However, the realm of Gondor is spread out along the edges of the White Mountains, the Anduin River, and Bay of Belfalas; with a population spread over such a large area, it is relatively difficult for citizens to engage in collective mobilization.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most important feature of Gondor's geography is its location opposite the Black Gates. As Boromir points out, Gondor has long served as the front line of defense against Sauron's forces (*LotR* II.2.245). Given the outside threat, exit is a less attractive option. Gondorians are more willing to cede wealth and power to the state in return for protection, allowing rulers to fund massive infrastructure projects like the Great Gate of Minas Tirith.

Following this logic, we should expect the Rohirrim to be more likely to voice dissent against oppressive or arbitrary rule than the Men of Gondor. Although the Rohirrim do not collectively initiate open revolt against Gríma Wormtongue, some individuals do engage in active or passive resistance. Éomer questions decisions Théoden made while under Wormtongue's influence and is subsequently exiled. Later, Háma permits Gandalf to bring his staff into Meduseld, disobeying clear orders to the contrary. By contrast, in Gondor there is no purely indigenous resistance against Denethor's reckless decisions. Faramir obeys Denethor's orders to recapture Osgiliath, despite his better judgment. Beregond only attempts to prevent Denethor from burning Faramir at Pippin's urging. Unlike Éomer and Háma, who were not punished for their dissent, Aragorn prohibits Beregond from ever setting foot in Minas Tirith (although this is coupled with a promotion to captain).

We know relatively little about the internal politics of Isengard, but there is some evidence to suggest exit is relatively costly. The tower of Orthanc is surrounded by the Ring of Isengard, a large, circular stone wall. The only exit points are the River Isen and the Gate of Isengard, making exit from the immediate vicinity difficult. The area surrounding Isengard was originally covered by forest, which would have made exit and hiding easier. However, Saruman cut most of the trees down in order to fuel his war machines, incidentally also making it easier for Saruman to track his subordinates. Moreover, just as Mordor Orcs fear the Elves, any Uruk-hai and Wild Men who flee Isengard would confront the Rohirrim, who in the *The Two Towers* hunt

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<sup>17</sup> The Drúadan Forest provides an instructive counterexample. Although in Gondor, it is much more difficult for governments to penetrate forests, allowing the Woses (Wild Men of the Woods) to live there in autonomy. They appear to have no allegiance to Gondor, even when they find out that Minas Tirith is under attack.

and kill a band of Uruk-hai merely for trespassing on Rohan territory. Although not quite as difficult as in Mordor, Orcs have relatively little incentive to flee or resist Saruman. Wormtongue’s spiteful comments against Saruman are the only visible signs of dissent in Isengard, and even those serve to emphasize Saruman’s hold over his servants.

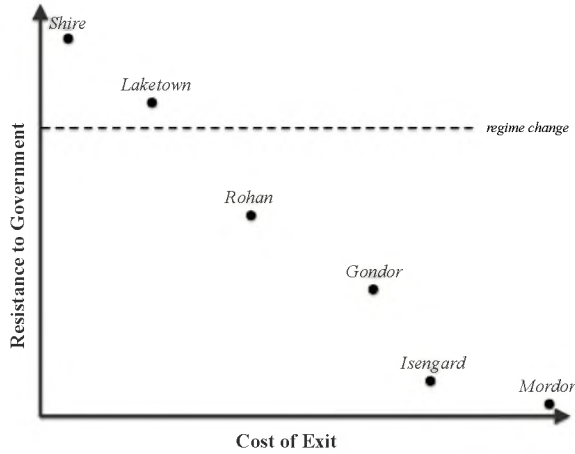


Figure 4: Exit vs. Resistance in Middle-earth Realms  
(Placements along the axes are approximations.)

Following this analysis, there is indeed a correlation between the cost of exit as determined by geography and the amount of resistance to oppressive or arbitrary government (see Figure 4). However, I certainly do not mean to imply geographic determinism. Other potential factors, such as leadership, can and do matter. For example, the Master could have tried to emphasize the threat of the dragon in order to militarize Lake-town and quell any opposition to his power. Instead, he chooses to ignore the threat, diminishing the effect that Lake-town’s proximity to the Lonely Mountain has on local politics. The game theoretic model simply demonstrates that under certain conditions leaders’ choices are constrained by geography and other variables.

#### ELVEN EXCEPTIONALISM: MORTAL POLITICS, IMMORTAL ELVES

The Elven realms do not quite fit into my theoretical framework. They are not democratic. Both Rivendell and Lothlórien have highly centralized governments, with leaders who remain in power for centuries (i.e., Elrond and Galadriel), despite very different geographies. Despite this, and contrary to what Barnett claims, Elven realms are not “essentially totalitarian” (385). Elven leaders are highly consensual,

even to the point of refusing to impose their will on others (Ruane and James 22). For example, when Elrond chairs the Council, he allows the various parties—including Dwarves and Men—to participate in the debate, even though given the circumstances he might have been justified in invoking emergency powers to expedite the meeting. Upon meeting Gildor, Frodo recalls an adage that one should not go “to the elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes” (*LotR* I.3.84).

Current political science tools are simply not properly equipped to analyze immortal beings such as Elves. Models such as *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* assume that participants have relatively short time horizons. Rulers find political power valuable because they can use it to enact policy change or extract resource rents. Abuse of power, such as theft of public property or natural resource destruction, might be attractive because the perpetrators receive immediate gains but do not have to deal with the long-term consequences. However, because Elves are immortal, they have much longer time horizons. In theory, Elven rulers and subjects could find themselves interacting over an infinite period of time. In this respect, although Hobbits and Orcs are both fantastical races, they more closely resemble humans than Elves do.<sup>18</sup>

Immortality could lead to a very different equilibrium in a game theoretic model as players revise their expectations over time. For example, Axelrod and Hamilton (1393-1395) show that, over the long run, there are viable strategies that lead to more cooperative outcomes in non-cooperative game theoretic models. If one player behaves non-cooperatively, then the other player can inflict a punishment during future rounds. Thus, reputation becomes crucial to deterring bad behavior. Something similar might have occurred amongst the Elves. In *The Silmarillion*, Elves initially appear interested in worldly power; even Galadriel yearns for a realm of her own (84). The Noldor attack other Elves who refuse to aid their quest for the Silmarils, leading to the Kinslayings. Ultimately, the decline in the Noldor's reputation and the madness wrought by Fëanor's oath serves as a lesson in the costs of non-cooperative behavior. By the Second Age, the Elves had settled into a more consensual and peaceful pattern of politics.

#### CONCLUSIONS: WHAT THE TWO TOWERS CAN TEACH THE IVORY TOWER

In this paper, I offer one possible causal explanation for the political behaviors we observe in Middle-earth. I cannot and do not claim that Tolkien consciously or even unconsciously used such reasoning in writing his legendarium. Rather, the point of this exercise is to demonstrate that there is a logic to politics in Middle-earth that is, at the least, not inconsistent with the political science literature.

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<sup>18</sup> Sauron is also immortal, but because his subjects are mortal a single-round game still applies. Immortality simply gives Sauron an even greater bargaining position because he can outwait any Orc demands for greater rights or resources.

As noted above, the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism breaks down in Middle-earth. Instead, the more salient difference is the extent to which relationships between ruler and subject are institutionalized. In some polities, such as Mordor, relations are formal and the obstructed by multiple layers of hierarchy. By contrast, in the Shire, government is decentralized and flat. Moreover, as anticipated by the *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* model, Middle-earth realms with a more mobile and empowered citizenry are more likely to have less institutionalized governments. Finally, I posit that immortality might make Elves more cooperative over the longer term.

Ultimately, we should not expect speculative fiction to be perfectly consistent with political science. As the Elven example demonstrates, there are sometimes differences between a subcreation and the “mundane world” that lead to divergent outcomes. Rather than preventing dialogue, this tension creates opportunities. One of the biggest challenges in political science is that we have limited counterfactuals. For example, we cannot compare economic growth in the United States under both democracy and dictatorship because historically only one possibility exists at a given time. Out of necessity, political scientists compare two different polities or time periods, but it is nearly impossible to control for all potential variables. By contrast, speculative fiction allows us to explore counterfactuals that we cannot replicate in the “mundane world” (i.e., it is easier to write about an Al Gore administration than to change the results of the 2000 election). As Ruby points out, “the only place in which [we] could explore the sociology of a situation that has not yet happened is in fiction” (128). Thoughtful sub-creation design can allow us to test political science with more interesting and rigorous counterfactuals.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Janet Brennan Croft, David Oberhelman, Corey Olsen, and the participants of Mythcon 45, the 2014 Midmoot, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Mythmoot for valuable comments and feedback.



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