

**Governance by True Believers:
Supreme Duties with and without Totalitarianism**

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Abstract. This paper analyzes how governance by true believers differs from that by ordinary idealists and pragmatists. To do so, the paper develops a semi-lexicographic framework for analyzing behavior of persons who have internalized belief systems with “supreme” duties. It uses that framework to analyze the extent to which such duties tend to affect private behavior and demands for public policies. Bernholz’s research on totalitarian systems demonstrates that many of the least attractive governments in human history have been motivated by totalitarian belief systems. This paper agrees with that conclusion but suggests that many other results are also possible and that some of the most attractive governments in human history also have been motivated by belief systems with supreme duties.

Key words: Supreme Values, Supreme Duties, Governing Institutions, Totalitarianism, Political Theory, Semi-Lexicographic Utility Functions, Deontology, Constitutional Constraints, Liberalism

JEL Codes: H11, O21, P16, P26

1. Introduction

Mainstream rational choice analysis takes preferences as “given” and proceeds to analyze implications of self-consistent preferences in a variety of choice settings. However, it is sometimes useful to distinguish among types of self-consistent preferences because they have different implications for behavior and policy. This paper undertakes such an analysis for individuals engaged in political decision making. It suggests that preferences in the sense of rank orderings over opportunity sets emerge from various combinations of genetically transmitted facilities and goals and ideas or rules that are products of human creativity. Among the latter are numerous normative ideas about what “should” be done in particular circumstances. Such ideas may be said to characterize “good” behavior, a “good” life or a “good” society, where the meaning of “good” varies among normative theories. Those theories normally imply that to be “good” one has to undertake particular tasks in particular

ways in particular circumstances—which is to say that such ideas often have implications about the “duties” of a “good” person. To the extent that such ideas are “internalized,” they tend to influence preference orderings and thereby behavior.

A complete analysis of the effects of internalized systems of beliefs is a large and important topic for public choice research but one that has not yet attracted significant attention from public choice theorists, beyond the occasional acknowledgement that ideology (Hinich and Munger, 1996) and ethical ideas (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000) affect the course of governance. That such ideas evidently have impacts on public policy is, of course, indicated by daily news accounts, history, and statistical analysis of the political effects of ideology and trust.

To fully integrate all of the possible impacts of normative theories into the rational choice perspective on governance is a large task and beyond the scope of any single paper. What this paper attempts is a relatively narrow examination of the major policy implications of what might be considered extreme systems of normative beliefs—beliefs that imply duties that are more important than life itself. Even this is a large task as will be evident in the analysis undertaken in this paper. A number of related conceptual, political, and economic issues must be simultaneously addressed to construct such a theory

People who hold such beliefs are referred to as true believers in this paper. True believers have internalized duties that are “supreme” in that they take precedence above all other goals that a person might have. Such duties affect how true believers behave in private life, how they behave as voters, how they behave when they are in subordinate positions within government—as in the legislature, bureaucracy, or service-producing sectors of a government—and how they behave as leaders that can adopt policies.¹

Section 2 of the paper contrasts the motivation and behavior of persons that have

¹ Eric Hoffer’s (1951) book brought the term “true believer” to fame. That book deals with what might be called the psychology of persons inclined to become true believers. This paper simply assumes that a subset of persons have internalized supreme duties and that the term true believer can be used as a descriptor or ideal type for such persons.

internalized “supreme” duties with those of pragmatists and persons that have internalized “ordinary” normative beliefs. Section 3 develops a semi-lexicographic model of the behavior of true believers—persons that have internalized belief systems that imply supreme duties. The model notes that supreme duties can be either bounded or unbounded, and that systems of supreme duties require the highest duties to be bounded in ordinary circumstances. The possibility of bounded supreme duties implies that not all true believers are zealots during ordinary times. Section 4 analyzes general characteristics of the policy preferences of true believers. In general, these tend to be analogous to those routinely assumed in public choice models. True believers have interests that they want their governments to advance—but those interests are more absolute than those normally assumed in public choice models. Some favor totalitarian governance because they believe that governments have unbounded supreme duties. Others may favor limited liberal forms of governance because they believe that governments and government officials have only bounded supreme duties during normal times. Section 5 analyzes possible economic constraints on the totalitarian proclivities that true believers might have. Section 6 analyzes the extent to which political institutions and constitutions may constrain the totalitarian proclivities of such true believers in the long run.

With respect to the political influence of groups of true believers, the analysis implies that groups that have internalized similar systems of supreme duties tend to be more effective than otherwise similar groups of pragmatists, because they have fewer Olsonian free-rider problems to solve than groups without such values. This at least partly accounts for the political influence exercised by both large and small groups of true believers.

Overall, the analysis yields both optimistic and pessimistic conclusions. On the one hand, the analysis implies that true believers do not all have totalitarian proclivities, and those that do have such proclivities may have internalized resource-intensive supreme duties that cause them to favor tolerance over domination whenever tolerance increases the resources available for advancing those duties. On the other hand, the analysis also suggests that political institutions can only temporarily restrain totalitarian tendencies.

2. A Short Digression on “Ordinary” versus “Supreme” Values and Duties

Before starting the analysis, it is useful to distinguish among three types or categories of individuals. The first are what may be termed pure pragmatists. Pure pragmatists are motivated entirely by narrow self-interest, which ultimately might be taken to have biological foundations. These are the persons that populate most economic models of consumer choice. The aims of pragmatists are normally considered to be “narrow” or “self-centered” such as their own (and possibly their family’s) longevity, health, romance, safety, comfort, wealth, and power.

The second type are persons who might be termed “ordinary” idealists. Such persons have pragmatic interests, but also have internalized religious, ideological or moral systems of beliefs that include principles or rules of conduct that influence all or much of their behavior. The normative aims of ordinary idealists can be incorporated into rational choice models in a variety of ways. For example, Congleton (2007, 1991a) assumed that moral and ideological voters have conceptions of ideal behavior or policies and that deviations from norms or ideals are elements in ordinary utility functions. Ordinary idealists prefer outcomes closer to their religious, ideological, or ethical ideal than further away, other things being equal, but are willing to trade off imperfections in behavior or policy to advance other goals such as comfort, safety, or wealth. Being a “good” or “dutiful” person is only one of many goals that ordinary idealists simultaneously pursue.²

The focus of this paper is on persons termed “true believers.” Such persons have internalized a system of beliefs which imply that some abstract goals or duties are more important than all other goals that they might have. Some principles and their associated duties are “supreme” in that they are ranked higher than all their pragmatic interests and, so,

² A subset of “ordinary idealists” may have internalized consequentialist characterizations of ideal behavior and policies. These systems of beliefs include both normative and positive theories. The behavior of persons that have internalized such teleological norms is partly generated by expectations and the process of learning associated with the positive theories used to anticipate and understand the consequences of their actions and, partly, by their normative assessments of those consequences (Congleton 1991a). In general, “ordinary” normative principles and their associated duties can be modeled as one of many goals that a person may have.

are fundamentally more important than life, health, romance, safety, comfort, status, and wealth.

In a subset of circumstances (referred to as emergencies or crises in this paper), true believers have a duty to “sacrifice all” to advance their beliefs or principles. Such systems lack tradeoffs—at least for a subset of internalized duties—and thus Peter Bernholz (1991, 2017) suggests that the behavioral effects of such extreme normative systems should be modelled with lexicographic preference orderings, rather than ordinary utility functions. Such a model of the behavior of true believers is developed in section 3 of this paper. Supreme values play a central role in Bernholz’s (2017) theory of totalitarian governance, a subject also taken up in this paper, although it is not the main focus.³

According to Bernholz, the supreme values that lead to totalitarian systems of governance have two characteristics: (1) Adherents are willing to die to advance or defend their supreme values (in a subset of circumstances). (2) Adherents prefer homogeneous societies, in which all persons have internalized the same supreme value system, to pluralistic societies where they have not. The first characteristic implies that supreme duties occupy the highest ranks in a believer’s associated lexicographic system of preferences. Bernholz (2004) argues that this property of supreme value systems accounts for the behavior of suicide bombers and other extreme forms of devotion and sacrifice associated with some supreme

³ Although Bernholz coined the term “supreme values” and suggested a modeling framework for bringing that idea into rational choice models of governance, he is by no means the first person to recognize that idealistic visions can lead to very unattractive societies that are put in place through processes that cost many lives. Such ideas have motivated many ex post analyses of Communist and Nazi regimes. See, for example, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) or Kirkpatrick (1982).

Bernholz puts supreme values at the center of his analysis rather than a desire for state power, which distinguishes his theory from the various “total state” and “maximal power” ideas of fascist political theorists in the 1920s and Orwell’s famous critique of such systems in his novel, *1984*. Within public choice circles, Wintrobe (1990, 2000), like Orwell, used a desire for maximal power as the motivation for totalitarian regimes.

That “supreme values” drive such “total states” has also been stressed by political philosophers such as Isaiah Berlin (2014), but without the analytical framework that Bernholz developed. Bernholz (1991) was the first to bring this idea to public choice, rational choice politics, and political economy.

value systems. The second characteristic is a feature of supreme value systems that tends to support totalitarian governance, a subject on which Bernholz has undertaken pioneering research. Together these two properties can justify steps to dominate, convert, exile, or kill all persons in their societies with belief systems that differ from those of the dominant group.⁴

For the purposes of this paper, the first property is assumed to be true for all supreme value systems and their associated duties. Persons that have internalized such systems of beliefs and duties are termed true believers in this paper. The second property is regarded to be a characteristic of a subset of supreme value systems—but not all such systems.⁵ Bernholz’s conclusion that the preferences of true believers are lexicographic or at least include lexicographic elements is also adopted by this paper. Without such preferences, it is not likely that a believer would willingly perform duties that are likely to end his or her life in even a small subset of circumstances. It is the willingness of true believers—in a crisis, emergency, or other unusual circumstance—to dutifully sacrifice all to advance or protect their belief systems that distinguishes true believers from ordinary idealists.

This paper focuses on the political behavior of such believers. However, it begins by developing a model of the private behavior of true believers. That model has implications

⁴ Bernholz (2017) mentioned these properties of supreme value systems several times. For example, in section 7.6, he noted, “It follows that what we may call the “intensity of totalitarian demands” is another factor determining how totalitarian a regime is. Here, again, all degrees of intensity are possible, from zero intensity in a free society to the highest intensity measured for the respective individuals by certainty of death.” The word “die” is used some 75 times in Bernholz (2017) often as a characterizing feature of supreme values but, at other times, as a common penalty imposed in totalitarian regimes for violating its supreme value system. The term “death” is used 25 times, usually as a penalty for violating the rules of a totalitarian society. It is important to note that those violating the supreme value systems of a totalitarian regime have evidently also internalized a supreme value system— one that includes supreme duties to violate their totalitarian ruler’s laws.

⁵ I use the term “supreme value system” rather than “supreme value,” because most such systems of beliefs have many interconnected and reinforcing parts, including ideas about ultimate goals, the best means for advancing those goals, and rules that determine when a particular goal has been achieved. The complexity of most supreme value systems is evident in their grounding book-length texts; the many interpretative texts of major religions, ideologies and philosophies; and by the education systems created to train successive generations of believers. If supreme values were a clear single idea, no lengthy treatments of them would be necessary.

for the policy preferences of true believers for much the same reason that ordinary utility functions have implications for the behavior of pragmatic voters and politicians. True believers also desire policies that tend to advance their interests.

3. Rational Choices by Persons with Supreme Duties

Individuals with lexicographic preferences have a hierarchy of goals. The highest or most important goals are given priority over lower or less important ones. In the subset of lexicographic preferences generated by a supreme-value systems, at least a subset of a believer's associated supreme duties are more important than their lives on earth. Creating lexicographic preference orderings that include this property requires at least two analytical puzzles to be resolved.

- If a supreme duty is literally more important than life, why live? In other words, why are not all of one's resources devoted to supreme values rather than divided between life support and supreme duties?
- If less than all resources are devoted to supreme values, is it really the case that a true believer's preferences are lexicographic and that some values are more important than life itself?

It is clear that every plausible characterization of a lexicographic preference ordering—whether induced by a system of supreme values or not—must also support personal survival to be viable. Without this property, such preferences would quickly disappear.⁶

Two possible solutions to this survivorship constraint are used in the model developed below. First, the technology for advancing or producing particular supreme values may imply duties that are consistent with preserving one's life in normal circumstances.

⁶ It bears noting that according to some psychological theories—as with those of Maslow (1943) and many others with similar views—lexicographic preferences are commonplace, rather than extremely rare, as normally assumed in economic texts. Maslow's classic paper on the hierarchy of human needs has been cited more than 30,000 times. However, in his hierarchy of needs, physiological needs are ranked highest—which implies that a typical person's own life is his or her most important value, and must be satisfied before moving on to other needs. Such persons are thus not true believers.

Second, it is possible that one's supreme duties are bounded and thus leave a residual for other purposes—including one's physiological necessities.

For example, consider the hypothetical beliefs and associated duties of a person fully devoted to religion. For purpose of illustration, assume that a supreme value system requires pleasing a divine entity. Assume further that doing so requires prayer, the more prayers the better. Moreover, assume that prayer is the only factor of production in the process through which the divine being is pleased—at least as far as this individual is concerned. In order to pray, the believer must provide for his/her own survival, which implies bounded duties to eat, drink, and sleep. Insofar as more prayers are better than fewer prayers, this production process also implies duties to support organizations that effectively support and promote praying to the divine entity. The productivity of such organizations at inducing others to pray implies that support for such organizations is more important than one's own prayers. Thus, in terms of tangible behavior (duties), the highest duty implied by this relatively simple supreme value system is supporting one's religious organization(s), which in times of crisis might require sacrificing one's life. Doing so in such circumstances would advance the aim of pleasing the divine entity by maximizing the total number of prayers received by the deity. This supreme duty is followed by bounded duties to sustain one's own life, followed by personal duties to pray, and so forth. Note that this very simple characterization of supreme values and duties does a reasonable job of characterizing the monastic duties and life of many medieval Catholic monks and nuns.

In this case, only one of the implied duties is ranked higher than life itself, but in other more complex supreme value systems, a variety of duties may be so ranked. Only after a believer's supreme duties are fully dispatched does a devotee turn his or her attention to nonreligious activities. The latter are icing on the cake. Supreme duties are the cake—the most important activities in a believer's life.

3.1 A Rational Model of Choice of True Believers

The following model captures most of the characteristics of true believers discussed above and addresses the survivorship conundrums discussed in the previous subsection.

True believers maximize a semi-lexicographic utility function defined over supreme duties $S_1, S_2 \dots S_M$ and ordinary goods or objectives $X_1, X_2, \dots X_N$. Each supreme duty is advanced (produced) with time (t) and expenditure (e) in a manner that is conditioned on state variable γ , with $S_i = s_i(t_i, e_i, \gamma)$. The same general form of “production” is assumed with respect to ordinary goods, $X_j = x_j(t_j, e_j, \gamma)$. The time and wealth available to an individual are bounded (finite), with $T_a = \sum_i t_i + \sum_j t_j$ and $W_a = \sum_i e_i + \sum_j e_j$.

A typical true believer—a person that has internalized a supreme value system with associated supreme duties—attempts to allocate time and wealth to maximize:

$$U = u(S_1, S_2 \dots S_M, X_1, X_2, \dots X_N) \quad (1)$$

with u being a semi-lexicographic ordering. Maximizing utility is done sequentially when preferences orderings are lexicographic. In this model, each step is subject to resource and technological constraints:

$$T_a = \sum_i t_i + \sum_j t_j \quad (2.1)$$

and

$$W_a = \sum_i e_i + \sum_j e_j \quad (2.2)$$

with

$$S_i = s_i(t_i, e_i, \gamma) \text{ for } i = 1..M \quad (3.1)$$

and

$$X_j = x_j(t_j, e_j, \gamma), \text{ for } j = 1..N \quad (3.2)$$

Supreme duties $S_1, \dots S_{L-1}$ are deemed more important than life in at least a subset of conditions. Other duties $S_{L+1}, \dots S_M$ are valued less than life, but above “ordinary” consumption. The list of supreme values always includes duties to maintain one’s life (S_L), but life is never a true believer’s highest duty, by definition.⁷

Each duty may be bounded (finite) or unbounded (infinite). There are two aspects of boundedness. Finite duties can be represented as the supremum, S_i^* , that completes one’s

⁷ It bears noting that some pragmatists may also have lexicographic utility functions, but for them assuring their own lives and those of their children would tend to occupy the highest ranks. Modelling the behavior of such pragmatists is, however, largely beyond the scope of this paper.

duty for that value. A believer may be, for example, duty bound to pray for a few minutes several times per day, to pray before eating and sleeping and/or to eat only a subset of readily available kinds of food. Such duties are bounded in that they require only finite resources to be fully dispatched. Whether a supreme duty can be dispatched or not is partly a consequence of the extent of that duty, partly a consequence of the duty production function, and partly determined by the resources available for advancing that duty. A particular duty can be fully achieved when the duty is bounded and the resources at hand are sufficient to accomplish that duty.

Note that whether a duty is fully dispatched or not is based on philosophical or theological considerations rather than physiological satiety or exhaustion, per se, although these may be relevant conditioning factors (e.g. included in vector γ). The conditionality of supreme duties is characterized with state variable γ in the various production functions, which for most purposes should be considered a vector of conditions rather than a single indicator. More resources may be required to dispatch a duty in some circumstances than others. In extreme circumstances, formerly bounded duties may become effectively unbounded.

However, emergencies are largely neglected in this paper in order to focus on the implications of internalized supreme duties during “ordinary” times.

3.2 Implications for Private Behavior

Having created an analytical characterization of dutiful behavior by persons that have internalized supreme duties, we next examine some of its implications. The first concerns common properties of all viable supreme value systems during “ordinary” times. Sustainability requires that all the supreme duties that are more important than life are bounded during ordinary times and can be fully dispatched with a typical believer’s available resources. Without this property, all true believers (who all have lexicographic preferences) would starve to death, because the highest supreme duty cannot be preserving one’s life—by definition. If this were not the case, higher values would absorb all of a believer’s wealth and time. An unbounded duty that is more important than life itself would leave no resources for

sustaining life.⁸

To simplify the exposition, the rest of the implications for private behavior are obtained by assuming that advancement of each supreme duty takes place through a production function that requires fixed proportions of the two inputs (time and wealth). In effect, each supreme value is assumed to have specific value-producing “rituals” associated with it. The least-cost method of dispatching a bounded duty [$S_i^*(\gamma)$] with respect to supreme duty i in ordinary circumstance γ^o is $S_i^* = s_i(t_i^*, e_i^*, \gamma^o)$. Thus, supreme duty S_i^* can be fulfilled (the duty satisfied) if and only if $t_i \geq t_i^*$ and $e_i \geq e_i^*$. Some duties may require only a time commitment (contemplation) and others only an expenditure commitment (purchases or contributions to the purchases of physical inputs and services), in which case the minimal necessary commitment of the irrelevant input is zero. These assumptions are not critical assumptions, but simply shortcuts for characterizing the most effective combination of time and resources for advancing each supreme duty.

Because other duties and “frivolous” activities are also utility producing, true believers do not waste time or wealth when dispatching their supreme duties and so use the least time and wealth that satisfies each supreme duty. A believer will set $t_i = t_i^*$ and $w_i = e_i^*$ for each of the bounded supreme duties associated with his or her supreme value system.

Decision making with respect to lexicographic supreme duties is sequential. If the first supreme duty is bounded and feasible, the balance of one’s time and wealth, $T - t_1^*$ and $W - e_1^*$, is available for the second supreme value, S_2 . The second duty will be fully dispatched if $T - t_1^* \geq t_2^*$ and $W - e_1^* \geq e_2^*$. This process continues until a supreme duty cannot be completed with one’s remaining resources or until all duties are fulfilled and one is “free” to pursue ordinary consumption and other frivolous activities. In such cases, the time and

⁸ It is likely that Bernholz (2017) had such problems in mind in the modelling sections of his book. The final chapters use two-dimensional Cobb-Douglas utility functions to characterize the behavior of totalitarians, rather than a one-dimensioned objective function, which would imply supreme value systems in which the highest supreme duty was unbounded. The model above shows how such a division of efforts can be generated within a lexicographic system of values.

wealth available for ordinary consumption are $T - \sum_i t_i^*$ and $W - \sum_i e_i^*$. The final optimization uses that residual to best advantage and is assumed to take place in a single step as in ordinary models of consumer choice.

The allocation of time and money among both “supreme” and “ordinary” areas of life thus resembles those characterized by Lancaster (1966) and Stigler and Becker (1977), except for the lexicographical nature of supreme duties. The overall pattern of time and wealth allocation characterizes an individual’s lifestyle.

That ordinary consumption takes place implies that price theory characterizes the behavior of true believers only when they have internalized bounded supreme duties that can be fully satisfied with their available resources. Ordinary consumer theory does not fully account for the resources devoted to the pursuit of supreme values because of their lexicographic and conditional nature. There are no marginal rates of substitution and changes in the extent or nature of one’s supreme duties induce changes in ordinary consumption that cannot be accounted for by relative price or income effects.⁹

Such changes do not necessarily require crises or major innovations in supreme value systems. The conditionality of a subset of one’s duties implies that even minor changes in circumstances may alter one’s supreme duties with the consequence that fewer or more resources are available for ordinary consumption. Similar changes are also associated with minor changes in one’s understanding of supreme duties. A believer’s understanding of the particular duties associated with his or her system of beliefs may change through time because of experience, advice, or his or her own epiphanies. Technological innovations may also change best practices for dispatching one’s duties.

⁹ In the model, prices are implicitly being held constant for the period of choice, so that expenditures can be used as an index for the goods and services purchased in the service of supreme values and for ordinary consumption. In a society with stable patterns of life, technology, and values, the assumption of a stable equilibrium price vector is a reasonable first approximation of the situation confronted by most consumers and simplifies the discussion and model without significant loss of generality. However, changes in the prices of inputs required to advance supreme values can affect the extent to which supreme duties can be dispatched, more or less, in the same manner as changes in other circumstances can do so.

3.3 The Continuum of True-Believer Lifestyles

The “residual” nature of ordinary consumption by true believers allows it to be used as an index of the “totalitarian tendencies” of an individual’s supreme value system. Zealots use all of their resources in the performance of supreme duties and devote little or nothing to ordinary consumption. They live ascetic lives. In contrast, moderate supreme value systems include only bounded duties that can be fully satisfied with a fraction of a typical believer’s time and wealth. Moderates in this sense can nonetheless be classified as true believers because circumstances exist in which they are prepared to devote all of their resources and risk their lives to dispatch their supreme duties.

Ordinary idealists also tend to pursue a variety of activities not all of which are mainly motivated by their normative beliefs. However, ordinary idealists are not willing to sacrifice “all” for their normative theories even during a crisis. Even during crises, they make marginal adjustments rather than all-or-nothing adjustments in their allocations of resources among ordinary and moral goals. Among true believers, only a subset (zealots) devote all of their resources to their supreme values during ordinary times. They do so because they have internalized at least one unbounded supreme duty or because they have too few resources to fully achieve their supreme duties (as they understand them) even during ordinary times.

These properties allow supreme value systems to be ranked in terms of their tendencies to generate zealotry or totalitarian lifestyles during ordinary times.¹⁰ “Totalitarian” supreme value systems imply duties that consume all or most of a believer’s time and wealth during ordinary times. Supreme value systems can be said to be less and less totalitarian as

¹⁰ The term “totalitarian lifestyle” is not the best one imaginable. It, like the use of the term “authoritarian personality” in psychology, is used for convenience rather than to cast aspersions on the persons so characterized. A person whose life is devoted to his or her ideals may be a pleasant and honorable person, but their lives are nonetheless fully determined by their supreme value systems. The association of “totalitarian” with lifestyles simply attempts to minimize the specialized terminology developed in this paper. Terms such as zealot, fanatic, or extremist would serve as well and are used in the text as synonyms. The term “true believer” is used in this paper as a term for persons that have fully internalized a supreme value system but not necessarily ones that include unbounded supreme duties for themselves or for governments.

the requirements of their associated duties decline and a larger and larger residual is left for ordinary consumption for a given endowment of time and wealth. True believers that have internalized supreme value systems with only very modest supreme duties (during ordinary times) devote only a small fraction of their time and wealth to supreme duties during such times, although they are willing to sacrifice all during emergencies.¹¹

4. The Political Propensities of True Believers

Most supreme value systems also have implications for the duties of government officials and governments. In most cases, the implied political duties require supporting policies that encourage fellow citizens to internalize and perform their supreme duties. Insofar as some private duties are more important than others, a government's duty to encourage or facilitate the performance of some duties is also likely to be deemed more important than others. Thus, a true believer's assessment of a government's or policy maker's supreme duties also tend to be lexicographic, with some duties (or areas of public policy) taking precedence over others, and some being more important than the survival of the state or its citizenry.

Political duties, however, may differ from those of private individuals because the capacity of individuals to make or influence policy differs according to whether one is inside or outside government and because some tasks are possible for governments that are not possible for ordinary individuals. A government can adopt and enforce laws that encourage citizens to perform their supreme duties (as understood by those with the power to adopt

¹¹ It should be acknowledged that this ordinary-consumption index for assessing a believer's totalitarian tendencies is not perfect. Supreme value systems may also include rules for engaging in "ordinary" consumption of the sort that economists analyze. For example, there may be duties with respect to food types and origins. Persons that have internalized what might be called "environmental" supreme value systems are duty bound to minimize their use of carbon-based products used in ordinary consumption—these may affect choice of transport type (buses and trains being favored over cars and airplanes), as well as demands for food and housing. For true believers, such rules may ultimately determine most of their "ordinary" consumption. Thus, the ability to engage in "ordinary consumption" is not always evidence that a supreme value system is bounded—although it is a sufficiently good index of totalitarian tendencies for the purposes of this paper.

laws) and to punish persons for failures to do so. A government can impose taxes to fund monumental public works, supreme-value training programs, and establish awards for extreme devotion. Such programs are beyond the reach of the typical believer outside government, and thus obligations to promote such policies may be more bounded for persons outside government than inside it.

Although most supreme value systems have similar implications about duties at this level of abstraction, they differ with respect to conclusions reached about the specific duties of individuals and the specific government policies that governments have duties to adopt. For example, under some supreme value systems, governments may have only bounded duties to assure that individuals dispatch their supreme duties, whereas others may imply that governmental duties in that policy domain are unbounded.

Bounded supreme duties generally imply less encompassing and less expensive public policies than unbounded ones—other things being equal.

4.1 Two Indices of the Supreme Duties of Governments

That normative beliefs differ in their implications for a government's supreme duties allows a ranking of such belief systems with respect to their implied governmental duties and associated ideal policies to be developed. Two indices are useful for the purposes of this paper. The first is what might be termed the degree of economic totalitarianism. Support for economically totalitarian economic policies occurs whenever a government have a single unbounded resource-intensive supreme duty. Unbounded resource-intensive supreme duties imply that governments should consume or directly control all economic resources are economically totalitarian. Supreme value systems that imply that governmental duties are bounded tend to be less economically totalitarian. The more bounded are a government's resource-intensive supreme duties, the less control over a nation's resources is necessary to dispatch its supreme duties.

. The feasibility of complete economic totalitarianism has attracted the attention of numerous economists in what has been termed the socialist calculation debate (Boettke, 2000). The critics of economic totalitarian theories are correct, complete economic

totalitarianism is unsustainable. However, it may still serve as an ideal type for purposes of discussion.

It bears noting that a system of beliefs may support totalitarian lifestyles without supporting totalitarian public policies. For example, in the nineteenth century many persons devoted much of their lives to promoting doctrinaire liberalism in forms that were similar to what in the twentieth century would be termed doctrinaire libertarianism. These true believers argued that dispatching the supreme duties of government required control over a small fraction of the total resources of society—indeed some argued that it was government’s duty to achieve all of its other duties with the least possible use of such control.

In between are a variety of “economically moderate” supreme value systems that imply bounded governmental duties that may require significant economic resources to dispatch, but less than full control over national resources. Such believers may also devote much of their lives to lobbying for government policies that support their supreme value systems, but conclude that the policies necessary to do so require significant resources, but less than complete control over all of their polity’s resources. For example, only modest efforts to build monuments or support the transmission of supreme values may be deemed necessary (e.g. part of a government’s highest duties).

Similar moderate conclusions may be reached by “ordinary” idealists, but the process through which such conclusions are reached tends to differ. Ordinary idealists may conclude that governments have duties that require intermediate levels of control over society’s economic resources because of tradeoffs (marginal rates of substitution) among their goals. Moderate true believers, in contrast, reach such conclusions based on conclusions about the nature and extent of a government’s supreme duties rather than from tradeoffs among goals.

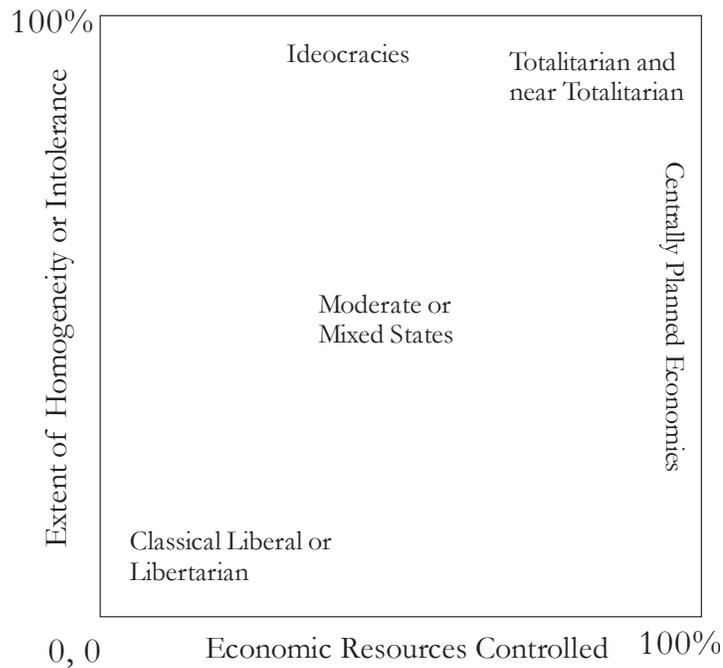
The second index is an indicator of what might be termed belief or cultural totalitarianism. Most supreme value systems include duties to induce other persons to have the “correct” understanding of their duties as individuals, citizens, and leaders. Such duties allow supreme value systems to sustain themselves and expand their cadre of believers. However, the implied “proselytizing duties” for governments vary in their boundedness and

in the methods that are deemed “acceptable” for converting nonbelievers.

At the totalitarian end of this spectrum are supreme value systems that imply that governments have an unbounded duty to convert, exile, or kill all nonbelievers. Such systems prioritize religious, ideological, or cultural homogeneity over pluralism and are prepared to use any and all means to achieve the desired homogeneity. At the non-totalitarian end of this spectrum of belief systems are those that are almost or entirely indifferent to the extent of cultural diversity. Indeed, they may regard tolerance, per se, to be a supreme duty for both individuals and governments. In between are supreme value systems that accord governments a bounded duty to support particular systems of beliefs or to protect a preexisting culture or language. A government’s duties for moderates would be bounded. It might, for example, be limited to assuring that a polity’s tax-financed school system includes particular courses on “supreme duties” such as classes on religious doctrine, civic duties, or ethics. More demanding moderate supreme value systems may also conclude that governments have a duty to sponsor specialized facilities or programs for inculcating particular beliefs and rewarding persons for devoting significant portions of their lives to promoting such beliefs.

Figure 1 illustrates this two-dimensional characterization of the policy domain for true believers and labels some subregions.

Figure 1: The Policy Domain of True Believers



In principle, a full range of government policies may advance a true believer’s interests, because there are a wide variety of supreme value systems with a wide variety of implications about the nature of supreme duties. Nonetheless, it bears keeping in mind that all true believers—both moderates and extremists—care deeply about whether their ideas determine governmental policies or not. Indeed, many true believers—not only those holding totalitarian beliefs—are willing to devote substantial resources to achieving the specific government policies that advance their supreme values. There are many types of zealots. And during times of crisis or unusual opportunity, all true believers are willing to risk their lives to dispatch their supreme political duties.¹²

¹² See appendix A.1 for a discussion of what many economists regard to be a relatively benevolent and rational form of economic totalitarianism. See appendix A.2 for a discussion of supreme value systems that imply unbounded personal supreme duties but limited domains for governance.

4.2 The Effectiveness of Groups with Well-Ordered Supreme Duties

Groups that have internalized the same supreme duties tend to be more influential than similarly sized groups of pragmatists, because they have lower organizational costs. The lexicographic character of supreme duties implies that all true believers perform their duties if they have sufficient resources to do so. To the extent that personal resources allow, all true believers thus dutifully contribute to the production of supreme public goods. In the limiting case of clear, common, well-ordered, semi-lexicographic preferences, their organizational costs fall to zero. Free riding would be immoral and simply not done by true believers—indeed, it might not even be contemplated as a possibility.

The only public goods and coordination problems that exist among co-believers with clear well-ordered supreme duties are those associated with inadequate resources. To remedy such problems, wealthy idealists who can easily dispatch all of their duties often have duties to donate to relatively poor believers so that they too can fulfill their supreme duties. In the absence of such perfectly internalized duties, an organization of some kind would be necessary as stressed in Olson (1965), but these tend to be relatively easy to organize and fund by such groups, because they agree about both aims and duties and tend to be averse to free riding.

When supreme duties exist but are not clear and well ordered, there may be public goods and coordination problems among co-believers because of ambiguities or misunderstandings of their supreme duties. In such cases, there may be collective advantages associated with a unique sophisticated interpretation of supreme value systems and supreme duties. The provision of such “interpretation” services may be delegated to specialists in supreme values within supreme-value promoting organizations or to government officials in cases in which a government is dominated by persons holding the relevant values.¹³

¹³ This paper generally ignores problems associated with bounded rationality in order to focus on implications of the semi-lexicographic choice model developed above. Nonetheless, such problems are likely to exist with respect to implementing complex systems of supreme values. Lexicographic choice models with some aspects of bounded rationality have been explored by

In addition to interpretation services, a supreme-value-based organization or government may also attempt to overcome public goods and coordination problems in areas in which supreme duties exist but are not fully internalized by all believers or supported by nonbelievers. The provision of supreme public goods may, for example, be enhanced by taxing nonbelievers and transferring the proceeds to relatively poor true believers or using tax receipts to finance meeting places, monuments, and other facilities and services that advance the group's supreme values and duties, or tax revenues may be used to enforce laws mandating the performance of one's supreme duties as they are understood by government policy makers.

In general, a powerful central government is unnecessary for large communities that have internalized a single supreme value system with clear, well-ordered, supreme duties. In a polity populated by devout Christians or Muslims, glorious cathedrals and mosques get built and schools and safety net programs get funded by private donations. In a polity populated by devout utilitarians, there is no need for a benevolent central planner. Free riding, the production of negative externalities, and rent seeking all reduce aggregate utility and so would be unethical and hence avoided by all devout utilitarians.

In cases in which government policies can nonetheless advance a group's supreme value system—possibly because their supreme values are held by only a minority of the members of the polity of interest—the group's true believers would all turn out and vote in favor of candidates that advance their beliefs. Their higher turnout rates and interest group activities would tend to give them more influence over electoral outcomes than “ordinary”

Manzini and Mariotti (2012) using what they refer to as lexicographic semi-orders. They analyze a special case of bounded rationality in which it is not always possible for individuals to tell which level a particular issue or good belongs to—a type of fuzziness among lexicographic categories that can generate intransitive preference orderings. In the context of this paper, it would imply that adjacent lexicographic categories may, in effect, overlap at the margin creating “cycles” and other intransitivities of the sort that economists associate with irrationality—although choices may be entirely systematic. Some electoral implications of preference ambiguities similar to those analyzed by Manzini and Mariotti were analyzed by Congleton and Steunenberg (1998).

voters.¹⁴

True believers would also form and finance organizations that conduct persuasive campaigns and lobby governments for specific policies.¹⁵ And, in cases in which governments are not responsive to such efforts, true believers may also form, finance, and staff revolutionary groups that attempt to overturn the existing government.

That groups of true believers—and their organizations when they have them—tend to be more effective than groups without supreme values gives them a significant advantage over “ordinary” groups in both peaceful and military conflict. The “anti-free-riding” effect of internalized systems of supreme duties accounts at least partly for the existence of numerous governments in history that have been grounded on particular supreme value systems. These include totalitarian systems of governance but also many other forms of government grounded in shared beliefs about the duties of governments.¹⁶

¹⁴ Because of the lexicographic nature of supreme duties, such true-believer voters are often “single issue voters” that rank candidates by their positions on the highest governmental duty that has not yet been dispatched. See Congleton (1991b) for his analysis of the outcomes and normative properties of voting by such persons.

¹⁵ For example, Congleton (1991a) demonstrated that competition among ideologically based interest groups are more likely to escalate than competition among economic interest groups, which gives them an advantage in contests within polities that are not totalitarian. See Congleton (2015) for a discussion of how a subset of internalized normative dispositions can solve or reduce a variety of collective action problems for interest groups.

¹⁶ The reduced coordination and free-riding problems associated with members of such groups partly explains the association of religion and state power in many societies. These span the time from the dawn of history, as in Sumer and Egypt, to the medieval Christian kingdoms of Europe and Islamic caliphates of northern Africa during roughly the same time period, to religion-based governments today, as in Iran.

That non-totalitarian systems of government are also often grounded in supreme value systems is evident in most Western constitutions, which often begin with statements of principle that justify their governments and/or characterize their supreme duties. See, for example, Nannestad (forthcoming) for a discussion of the present German constitutional duty to assure human dignity.

4.3 On the Totalitarian Policy Propensities of Supreme Value Systems

All the above implies that it is not simply the internalization of a supreme value system that produces support for totalitarian governance but the specific political duties implied by the supreme value system internalized. True believers may favor all manner of governments and government policies. Distance from the upper righthand corner of figure 1 may be used as a combined totalitarian index. The more resource-intensive and less tolerant a supreme value system's implications for government policies, the more totalitarian it tends to be. Distance from the lower lefthand corner of figure one may be used as an index of doctrinaire liberalism. The lower the resource costs of governance and greater the tolerance implied regarding a government's supreme duties, the more liberal or anti-totalitarian a system of beliefs or ideology tends to be.

As figure 1 and the discussion above implies, the supreme value systems that support totalitarian governance normally imply that governments have (1) at least one unbounded resource-intensive supreme duty and also (2) an unbounded supreme duty to induce cultural homogeneity that regards extreme forms of encouragement and punishment to be appropriate methods of pursuing that duty. With respect to the latter, devotees normally favor banning books, news accounts, and organizations that undermine support for their supreme values or duties. For example, Lenin's and Mao ZeDong's understanding(s) of communism induced them to close all churches and temples within their territories.¹⁷

In contrast, moderate forms of the similar supreme value systems—those based on

¹⁷ For example, Wikipedia summarizes communist policies under Lenin as “the doctrine of state atheism” under which “there was a government-sponsored program of conversion to atheism” conducted by Communists. The Communist regime targeted religions based on State interests, and while most organized religions were never outlawed, religious property was confiscated, believers were harassed, and religion was ridiculed while atheism was propagated in schools.” Other belief systems were not formally banned but suppressed in virtually every way possible. (This quote from *Wikipedia* was downloaded 10-06-2019.) Gouda and Gutmann (forthcoming) provide statistical evidence of similar forms of discrimination in contemporary Islamic countries that mention Sharia law in their constitutions.

similar religious, ideological, or moral beliefs—regard such governmental duties to be bounded. Although moderates also favor expenditures in support of supreme values and cultural homogeneity, but the supreme values of governments are bounded. At the opposite end of the spectrum are anti-totalitarian or doctrinaire liberal belief systems that attempt to minimize the extent of taxation and government support for specific norms, subject to the lower bound required to sustain comfortable attractive societies. Such systems of belief imply only very bounded supreme duties for governance.

Proponents of any and all such conceptions of a government's supreme duties may be zealots, who devote most of their lives to advocating their ideas and preferred policies, but not all zealots support totalitarian policies.

5. To Dominate or Not?

Having demonstrated that true believers do not all support totalitarian governmental policies, the next two sections of the paper focus on the subset of true believers that do tend to support totalitarian policies. In this section and the next, it is assumed that persons with supreme value systems that support totalitarian public policies hold political authority. They may do so either because they have violently risen to power through their lower organizational costs and greater effectiveness at producing credible threats. Or, they may have peacefully risen to power because similar beliefs are held by a plurality or majority of the persons within the territory of interest.

To simplify the analysis and exposition, it is assumed that there are two groups of citizens, one controlling the government and another smaller or weaker group outside of government. It is assumed that both the stronger and weaker groups have internalized systems of normative beliefs, but different ones. It is further assumed that members of both groups are true believers as opposed to ordinary idealists. This allows group choices to be modelled as if they are made by single individuals for reasons implied by the previous section. Similar conclusions would follow for well-organized groups whose leaders are true believers.

A series of game matrices is used to illustrate the economic trade-offs confronted by

dominant groups whose supreme value systems include resource-intensive goals. These are presented as one-shot games, although the same matrices can be used to characterize the sub-game perfect equilibria of finitely repeated versions of the same games. The aim of the game theoretic analysis is not to create a complete social model but to demonstrate sufficient conditions under which would-be totalitarians tend to moderate their policies.

The true believers in government decide whether or not to impose their vision of a good society on all other persons in their community. The true believers out of government choose whether to defer to the policies of the stronger group, resist those policies, or exit. The outcome of the dominance game is jointly determined by their supreme value systems and associated duties of the members of both groups, because these determine the rank order of each group's payoffs for the six possible combinations of strategies.

5.1 Supreme Values and Totalitarian Governance

The first case examined is that focused on in Bernholz's research on totalitarianism, namely, a choice setting in which the stronger group decides to impose its values on a weaker group and members of the weaker group defer or acquiesce to the stronger group's policies, which may be totalitarian in either or both the economic and belief sense discussed above. The relative size of the payoffs of typical members of the dominant group (realized utility) is represented alphabetically, as a , b , c , d , and e , and those of typical members of the weaker group similarly as v , w , x , y , and z . The relative size of the payoffs reflects their alphabetic position, with $a > b > c$ and so forth. (Alphabetizing is a typical lexicographic ordering.)

Table 1. A Dominance Game with a Dominance Outcome			
Strong/Weak	Acquiesce	Resist	Exit
Dominate	a, w	b, x	e, z
Tolerate	c, v	d, y	e, z

The rank order of payoffs in Table 1 implies that members of both groups have dominant

pure strategies. The stronger group dominates, regardless of the strategy chosen by the weaker group. The weaker group defers to the stronger group, regardless of the strategy chosen by the stronger group. The Nash equilibrium is thus the upper left-hand cell. The strong group dominates the weak, and the weak group defers or acquiesces to its policies. This equilibrium will be referred to as the Bernholz equilibrium.

The relative payoffs reflect various combinations of the priorities associated with supreme duties and the best methods for advancing them. Domination is the dominant strategy for the stronger group, for example, (1) if its members have internalized supreme values with unbounded duties to produce resource supreme value services and to convert nonbelievers to the stronger group's supreme value system or both, and (2) if sufficient resources are available to implement the implied policies. The weaker group defers to the stronger group (1) if resistance is not a supreme duty and pointless because the dominant group can easily overcome all resistance and (2) if exit lacks appeal because of difficulties associated with emigration. Exit may be unattractive, for example, because it is punished by the stronger group, because members of the weaker group have very strong attachments to their current location, or because all the attractive alternatives have restrictive immigration policies. Note that the Bernholz equilibrium does not require Olsonian free riding by members of the weaker group.

5.2 A Digression on Pragmatic Reasons to Adopt the Dominance Strategy

The above ordering of payoffs characterizes the political-economy choice settings of totalitarian states with rational rulers and subjects. However, it bears noting that the ordering is compatible with populations of true believers but does not require them. An "ordinary" utility-maximizing dictator (a pragmatist) who enjoys resource-intensive forms of consumption may also choose to dominate others in order to maximize his or her tax receipts, as in Brennan and Buchanan's (1980) characterization of leviathan governance or Olson's (1993) characterization of stationary bandits. Such "extractive" rulers may attempt to enslave most persons in their polities. Or, if commerce generates more revenue and/or

more attractive uses for revenue than slavery does, a pragmatic ruler would adopt commercial laws to facilitate trade and use high taxation and other forms of rent extraction to obtain the revenue to support his or her extravagant lifestyle. (Maintaining authority may also require some form of rent or revenue sharing, but that is beyond the scope of this short digression.)

The dominance policies of pragmatists and totalitarian true believers differ in some respects. The specific dominance policies of leviathan are those necessary to maximize the government's net real revenue and thereby ruler utility of the usual non-idealistic variety. Its policies do not necessarily include efforts to impose a particular view of the good life or a particular vision of the good society on persons within the territories governed. The values reinforced by the educational efforts of stable extractive governments are limited to those that increase (risk-adjusted) expected net revenue flows. For example, a revenue-maximizing government might promote a work ethic and deference to authority through its educational system, both of which tend to increase expected net tax receipts—the former by increasing economic output and the latter by reducing monitoring and suppression costs.

In contrast, a totalitarian ruler may promote his/her supreme values even if tax receipts fall precipitously when his or her vision of “the” good society is imposed on the weaker group. Such ruling persons or groups are not concerned with economic efficiency or tax revenue, except when obtaining resources to advance resource-intensive supreme duties. Reductions in revenue associated with policies motivated by supreme values are significant only when resource-intensive duties are ranked higher than the duties that reduce economic output and thereby the ability of the regime to advance higher goals. Such secondary goals may or may not be pursued as demonstrated in the next subsections.¹⁸

Other aspects of dominance by pragmatists and true believers tend to be quite similar. Much of the economy may be centrally planned with particular ends in mind.

¹⁸ Note that such reductions in economic output do not necessarily imply Pareto inefficiency. From the perspective of a totalitarian ruler, advancing supreme values takes precedence over the production of wealth except insofar as wealth is necessary for the production of resource-intensive supreme values. Any reduction in the achievement of relevant supreme duties makes the ruler(s) worse off.

Everyone in the territory governed may have to publicly support the values of the ruling group, even if significant numbers do not approve of the policy agenda adopted and/or disagree with the dominant group's values and policy goals. Under a pragmatic extractive regime, everyone would claim to work hard, defer to authority, and loyally pay their taxes, although they may secretly attempt to shirk and attempt to minimize their tax payments, while disrespecting the ideas and character of members of the ruling group. Under totalitarian governance, all would profess the ruling group's supreme values and behave in accord with their implied supreme duties in public, although they might ignore and criticize them in private.¹⁹

Such behavior would, of course, be anticipated by ruler(s), and it is for this reason that both authoritarian and totalitarian governments normally have various forms of “secret police” that find and punish persons who deviate from the dominant group's policies in public or are suspected of doing so in private. In the case of extractive regimes, the secret police are tax agents looking for tax evaders and those conspiring to overthrow or undermine the current ruler or ruling group. In the case of totalitarians, the secret police are “thought police” that seek out and punish those with deviant ideas and lifestyles—including those advocating overthrowing the current regime but not limited to them.²⁰

That the Bernholz equilibrium does not depend entirely upon supreme values is historically significant. It implies that dominance outcomes—although not full-fledged totalitarianism—are likely to be more commonplace than totalitarian supreme value systems. The dominance policies of pragmatists discussed in this subsection—which include both extraction and mandatory deference and loyalty to the ruler(s)—tend to occupy the upper right-hand region of figure 1 between moderate and totalitarian regimes. They are the policies of what North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) termed “natural states.”

¹⁹ For a book-length examination of pressures that can generate “preference falsification” in public by rational actors, see Kuran (1997). For a book-length rational-choice-based discussion of how authoritarians hold onto power, see Tullock (1974, 2012).

²⁰ See Wintrobe (2000) for a book-length overview of different forms of authoritarian states.

5.3 Resistance, Supreme Values, and the Cost of Dominance

Economic considerations can reign in the totalitarian proclivities of true believers when resource-intensive supreme values are ranked above cultural homogeneity. Resistance may be an effective strategy in such cases for the weaker group if it is able to impose choice-relevant costs on the ruling group. In such cases, the payoffs of the stronger group in the central column are reversed and resistance is ranked higher than that of acquiescence by the weaker group. These two changes in the relative rankings of both group’s strategies change the Nash equilibrium, as illustrated in table 2.

Strong\Weak	Acquiesce	Resist	Exit
Dominate	a, x	d, w	e, z
Tolerate	c, y	b, v	e, z

In this form of the dominance contest, the Bernholz equilibrium remains the ideal for the stronger group (“a” is its highest payoff), but the cost of achieving it is too great, given the resistance of the weaker group and the dominant groups’ resource-intensive supreme duties.

Note that economic considerations themselves are not a supreme value or duty. However, economic resources may be sufficiently important for advancing the most important supreme duties that the stronger group is better off “turning a blind eye” to the resistance of the weaker group because this frees resources for the highest supreme duties and may indirectly increase resources available to do so by increasing the tax base.²¹

²¹ An instance of what I have in mind here was the Dutch manner of dealing with forbidden religions during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in which either Protestantism or Catholicism were illegal faiths. During the Catholic period of the early sixteenth century, Protestants met in “secret” churches in town or in the countryside. Of course, meetings of relatively large groups occurring at routine intervals (every Sunday) could easily have been discovered and punished. Instead, a blind eye was turned to them as long as they did not cause trouble. They were ignored or tolerated rather than punished by the provincial governments.

5.4 Exit as a Constraint on Dominance

The exit case is similar to the resistance case but is worthy of consideration in its own right. Two versions of this game are of interest. The first is a one-shot game or finitely repeated game similar to those previously analyzed. The second is a sequential version of the game in which return is possible. When exit is a relatively attractive option, the exit payoffs may be ranked higher by the weaker group than as characterized by Table 1. Table 3 illustrates this effect by reversing the relative payoffs of the top row exit and acquiesce strategies of the weaker group. Alphabetical order is again used to indicate the ranking of payoffs.

Strong\Weak	Acquiesce	Resist	Exit
Dominate	a, z	b, x	e, w
Tolerate	c, v	d, y	e, z

In the case illustrated by Table 3, the weaker party exits if the stronger party attempts to dominate but will acquiesce (defer in public) if largely left alone. The weaker group never resists in this choice setting. Emigrations by weaker groups are, of course, commonplace in world history.²²

After the Protestants took over governance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, they traded facilities—with Catholics meeting in many of the former secret churches of the Protestants and the Protestants using the former Catholic cathedrals as their churches. Religious tolerance was relatively great in the Dutch Republic by historical standards, but Catholic religious organizations were formally banned for about 250 years.

²² For example, Bernholz mentioned the Puritan colonies in the areas near present-day Boston, Massachusetts as an instance of a totalitarian regime. The Massachusetts Bay Colony's punishments for nonbelievers included both the death penalty and exile. However, exit was also possible for those who disagreed with Puritanism as interpreted by the elected leaders of the Boston colony. The colony of Rhode Island was founded by persons that were exiled or emigrated from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. See Congleton (2011b) for a public choice overview of how exit produced a relatively liberal colony. Congleton (2014) provided a somewhat more abstract analysis

In a sequential version of the game, the choice of strategies tends to be more complex and the possibility of emigration may moderate tendencies of stronger groups toward domination. For example, consider a finite sequence of myopic choices. If the potentially dominant player chooses first, he/she/they will choose to dominate, the weaker group would exit, followed by a change in policy by the stronger group because $c > e$. After the stronger group chooses to “tolerate,” the weaker group returns ($v > w$), followed by dominance ($a > c$), and so on.

The stronger group benefits from permanently turning a blind eye toward the weaker group whenever $c > (p)a + (1-p)e$, where p represents the anticipated fraction of time in which the dominate-defer payoffs are realized and $1-p$ the fraction of time that the dominate-exit payoffs are realized. In such cases, the dominant group benefits from replacing a sequence like *aeaeaeaeae...* with *cccccccccc...* (Exit is likely to be faster than return, thus $p < 0.5$, although there are exceptions to this rule.) The weaker group’s “threat” to exit is entirely credible in this game because $w > z$.

The tax base tends to be larger when the weaker group is present, which provides the dominant group with additional resources that can be taxed and used to pay for resource-intensive policies that are ranked higher than cultural homogeneity. The economic services provided by the weaker group also allow the stronger group to spend more time contemplating its supreme values. The stronger group may also benefit from feelings of greater relative religiosity or morality. The stronger group prefers outcomes in which all residents agree with their supreme values ($a > c$) but, nonetheless, finds tolerating nonbelievers to be a better strategy than attempting to dominate them.²³

of how free exit tends to liberalize governmental policies, when at least one liberal alternative exists.

²³ In the long run, the possibility of exit may also induce supreme and other value systems to evolve. See Vanberg and Congleton (1992) or Congleton and Vanberg (2001) for simulations that demonstrate how relatively low-cost exit can affect the evolution and distribution of internalized norms in the long run. Their results suggest that dutiful or moral behavior (of the conditional variety) can advance personal as well as social interests in both the short and long run. Strategies that never defected in PDE game settings were always among the highest performing and largest groups in evolving populations of players.

In cases in which several weaker groups exist and exit options differ among them, those with poor exit options—as in the original case of Table 1—would be dominated and those with good exit options as assumed in Table 3 would not. A blind eye, for example, might be turned to behavior of international traders and tourists but not to persons who are more firmly rooted in the territory governed. In-between groups might be dominated or not according to their value to the regime, the ability to resist, and their exit options.²⁴

6. Political Institutions and the Inhibition of Totalitarian Propensities

The analysis to this point suggests that the Bernholz equilibrium is feasible whenever a stronger group can easily dominate a weaker group. Pragmatic extractive regimes also tend to favor the Bernholz equilibrium because it improves the security and consumption opportunities of the ruling elite (those sharing the governments net revenues). Avoiding the Bernholz equilibrium requires either supreme values that do not support totalitarian governance or economic reasons to tolerate “deviant” behavior by weaker groups. Highly ranked resource-intensive supreme duties in combination with either effective resistance or good exit options can provide economic reasons for would-be totalitarians to adopt relatively pluralistic policies.

Another possible moderating factor is a nation’s preexisting political institutions: its constitution and legal system. For example, both democracy and rights-based systems of rule of law can moderate the totalitarian tendencies of true-believer rulers that are motivated by totalitarian supreme value systems—at least in the short run.

6.1 Majority Rule and the Moderation of Supreme Values

Totalitarian regimes are usually authoritarian regimes. Their rulers are not formally elected, and thus it is not likely that their policies command majority support. However,

²⁴ Epstein et al. (1999) explores how rent extraction by governments can induce immigration by different segments of their populations. Much of that analysis would carry over to a totalitarian ruler who holds more or less stringent supreme values and demands more or less fealty to those ideas.

there are cases in which rulers with totalitarian aims have risen to power through elections—as in Germany during the 1930s—and implemented many, perhaps most, of their policies through formal legislation. Moreover, there are others in which rulers with totalitarian aspirations were elected but failed to fully implement their preferred policies—as true of several leftist socialist rulers in South America during the twentieth century. The choice setting focused on in this section of the paper is one in which past support for liberal constitutional governance caused relatively liberal political and legal institutions to be adopted in the past, but support for those institutions subsequently declined.

Within the majority-rule-based governance typical of such constitutional regimes, the distribution of voter ideal points is of major importance. The supreme duties of governments may differ with respect to their boundedness, even in cases in which quite similar supreme value systems have been internalized by all voters. In cases in which voters vote their interests—including their interests in dispatching supreme duties—it will be the median voter’s conclusions about the supreme duties of governance that characterize the center of gravity for public policies.

In most cases, the median voter is a “moderate” because his or her ideal policies lie precisely in the middle of the spectrum of voter ideal policies. If he or she is a true believer, he or she is likely to regard his or her government’s supreme duties to be bounded.

6.2 Electoral Competition as a Constraint on True Believers

If a government’s supreme duties are bounded and moderate according to the median voter’s interpretation of the dominant supreme value system, then relatively moderate policies tend to be adopted. To include the possibility of “moderate” degrees of domination, a new middle row is added to the dominance game used above. Moderate true believers choose to partially dominate weaker groups rather than completely do so because an intermediate degree of dominance is sufficient to accomplish the bounded supreme duties of governance (as the median voter understands them). In such cases, the median voter’s rank order of outcomes resembles that characterized by Table 4, and the Nash equilibrium is the middle left-hand one of partial domination.

Table 4. Majority Rule and Supreme Values			
Strong\Weak	Cooperate	Resist	Exit
Complete Dominance	b, z	h, y	e, x
Partial Dominance	a, u	f, w	d, v
Tolerate	c, r	i, t	f, s

A median voter (or majority coalition) with bounded supreme duties may favor subsidizing the construction of monumental public works in accord with their supreme duties but oppose devoting the entire national gross national product to such works. They may favor encouraging public and private schools to educate everyone about their supreme value systems and duties but allow other subjects and normative ideas to be taught as well. Only a subset of businesses may be required to close during some parts of the Sabbath or holidays in honor of their supreme values and so forth. The less extensive the pivotal voter regards their government's supreme duties to be, the more modest supreme-value-supporting spending, regulation and penalties for violating supreme duties tend to be. The policies of such governments are largely determined by supreme duties but are not totalitarian because the pivotal rule maker believes that governments have only bounded supreme duties.²⁵

However, it is not necessarily the case that the pivotal rule maker's understanding of his or her system of supreme values includes only bounded supreme duties; nor is it necessarily the case that such duties tend to become more moderate through time. If the median voter's supreme value system evolves to include more demanding duties, the ideal extent of governmental support for those duties tends to increase. Indeed, if the median

²⁵ Diminished religiosity in Europe and the United States is, for example, evident in the moderation of religion-based regulation of commerce. Sunday closing laws were commonplace throughout the West a half century ago. However, such laws have been significantly reduced during the past half century to the point where, in many countries, such closing laws have nearly or entirely disappeared.

voter comes to believe that the government has unbounded duties to support his or her supreme values, totalitarian policies would be adopted, subject to the economic considerations analyzed in the previous section.²⁶

That a majority of voters or a majority coalition may favor totalitarian policies is not a new idea. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2012), among many others, raised concerns about the tyranny of the majority, partly with the terror of the French Revolution in mind. Democracy—even when perfectly stable and well implemented—does not always avoid the problems noted by Bernholz. It is the variety and boundedness of supreme value systems internalized by voters and the boundedness of associated governmental duties that ultimately moderates policies within a democracy dominated by true believers, rather than majority rule by itself. Neither the median voter theorem nor Condorcet’s jury theorem necessarily implies moderation or tolerance, only that the policies adopted tend to advance the median voter’s interests, whatever those may be.

6.3 Rights and Civil Law as Constraints on True Believers

Political constitutions create rules through which specific persons and groups are delegated the power to dominate. The same body of constitutional documents and law also tends to constrain the domain in which domination is possible. For example, liberal democratic constitutions include numerous restrictions on a government’s authority. They prevent governments from (1) taking resources from private individuals and groups without compensating owners for their losses, (2) regulating (most) political and religious beliefs, and (3) banning the publication of all opinions that disagree with those held by the majority. The latter includes most books and editorials that conflict with the supreme values held by the majority.

Such constitutional constraints and their associated rights-based legal systems create

²⁶ An instance in which religiosity has evidently been increasing through time is in Turkey, where dress styles in public have become increasingly driven by religious norms, and the government has eliminated previously existing bans on wearing headscarves and the like in governmental offices.

protected spheres in which each citizen can make choices without fear of punishment by government officials. Liberal constitutions thereby attempt to rule out the complete dominance strategies associated with the top row of Table 4.

To constrain elected true believers with totalitarian tendencies, such rights have to be defined in unambiguous language and overseen by a court system that is substantially independent of political influence and whose judgement about the law is accepted by government officials and voters.²⁷ Such legal systems provide what is referred to as the “rule of law.” In cases in which constitutional or other high-level laws define rights that apply to all within the polity of interest, such legal systems also tend to promote equality before the law, although one can have rule of law without equality before the law as in the southeastern United States until the 1960s. Such rights-based systems of law make totalitarian governance impossible by creating a protected domain of private choice.

Rule of law alone, however, does not entirely rule out totalitarian governance. Bernholz (1991 and 2017, Ch. 7) noted that totalitarian systems are normally rule bound and often have legal systems that provide significant equality before the law.²⁸ The laws enforced and extent of the rights protected also matter. Moreover, an initially liberal system of civil rights and civil law can gradually be transformed into a totalitarian legal system through reinterpretation and amendment.

The extent of civil liberties ultimately varies with interpretation of the laws that circumscribe them. Laws against sedition or blasphemy, for example, may be interpreted as banning only the most aggressive or violent forms of disapproval for state policies or the dominant religion. Alternatively, they may be interpreted as banning all possible expressions

²⁷ See Feld and Voigt (2003) for a discussion of differences between *de juri* and *de facto* independence and empirical evidence of their relevance for economic development. Such difference would also be significant for the evolution of constitutional law.

²⁸ Bernholz (1991) notes that totalitarian regimes normally have a written or unwritten constitution that reinforces the supreme value(s) of the dominant group. Totalitarian regimes are law bound, although their legal systems are not necessarily ones in which the equality before the law principle holds. True believers may be subject to different formal laws than nonbelievers.

When a group with supreme values aspires to domination but is not able to do so, Bernholz (2004) notes that such groups often resort to terrorism.

of disapproval of government policies and church leaders. A shift from the first interpretation toward the latter can gradually transform a society in which open criticism of and peaceful demonstrations against public policies and widely held supreme value systems are possible into one in which essentially all public expressions of dissent are ruled out.

Such reinterpretations do not require formal changes in law or constitutional protections.²⁹ A modest trend in judicial reinterpretations that shrinks the protected spheres of private choice can allow groups of true believers with totalitarian beliefs to gradually “take over” a polity with an initially liberal legal system by gradually transforming an initially liberal system of rights into one that dutifully supports the dominant group’s supreme values and suppresses all others.³⁰

6.4 Implications of the Institutional Analysis

Overall, this short analysis of the possible moderating effects of political and legal institutions implies that neither democracy nor a rights–based legal systems can prevent totalitarian forms of government from emerging when supreme value systems that imply unbounded supreme duties for governments become widely held by voters and policy makers in the polity of interest. Institutions can moderate the policy agendas of persons with supreme value systems that support totalitarian policies and they may also slow the transformation of an initially liberal regime into a totalitarian one; however, they cannot completely rule out totalitarian governance if a supermajority of persons in an initially liberal polity comes to favor totalitarian policies.

What is ultimately more important than political and legal institutions is the nature of the most broadly held normative belief system(s) within the polities of interest.

²⁹ See Congleton and Rasch (2006) for a discussion of formal and informal procedures for amending constitutions and for evidence that more stringent amendment procedures reduce the rate of formal amendments.

³⁰ Such possibilities were a major concern in Hayek’s most widely read book, the *Road to Serfdom* (1944/2007).

7. Conclusions: Supreme Duties with and without Totalitarianism

Bernholz's research emphasizes the importance of supreme values in totalitarian systems of governance. He argues that they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for totalitarian systems to emerge (2017, preface). The analysis of this paper affirms that conclusion but focuses most of its attention on the converse problem. It explains why totalitarian systems of governance are less common than are ruling groups that have internalized supreme values. Not all supreme value systems support unbounded policy domains. Moreover, economic and political constraints can make it difficult for true believers to implement their preferred totalitarian policies once in power.

This paper suggests that true believers are likely to play significant roles in governance and constitutional transitions because their internalized supreme duties reduce Olsonian organizational problems. Their willingness to devote much of their lives to a "cause" also implies that they are more likely to rise to positions of influence and authority than less devoted "ordinary idealists" or pragmatists—other things being equal. Such groups may also have a disproportional influence over public policies whenever it is possible for groups to lobby or otherwise influence their governments. All this suggests that groups of true believers—even when they are far less numerous than groups of "ordinary" idealists or pragmatists—tend to be politically significant, although they have been largely ignored in rational-choice based political research.

True believers are likely to influence constitutional evolution for similar reasons. If we assume that governments by pragmatists tend to be extractive authoritarian regimes similar to those analyzed in section 5.2, most deviations from what North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) refer to as the "natural" form of government may be consequences of the efforts of true believers. If so, this implies that many of the most attractive as well as the most repulsive forms of government in human history have been consequences of the efforts of true believers. For example, the liberal democracies of the West arguably emerged partly because of liberal doctrines that provide support for limited rather than encompassing forms of government (Congleton, 2011a). Consistent with Bernholz's characterization of persons with supreme values, liberal reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

were often zealots that devoted most of their lives to supporting liberal ideas and reforms.³¹ Nonetheless, even though the supreme value systems of many liberal reformers implied fully encompassing personal duties, they did not imply fully encompassing domains for public policy. Instead of totalitarian states, the proponents of liberalism reinforced rights-based legal systems, adopted minority protections, and supported open competitive forms of democracy and commerce.

That supreme value systems do not always support totalitarian regimes is an important conclusion. It implies that totalitarianism is not always associated with strong commitments to ideologies or ethical ideas. Rather, it is the nature of the ideas and internalized duties that determine the degree to which a particular system of beliefs—even when strongly held and highly influential—tend to produce totalitarian policies or not.³²

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³¹ In the American case, the well-known statement by Patrick Henry “give me liberty or give me death” provides an example of a reformer holding supreme values. Similar sentiments are associated with the famous story of Wilhelm Tell in the Swiss case. Other liberal reformers are less known, but also devoted much of their lives to pressing for liberal reforms such as constitutional democracy, religious tolerance, public education, the end of slavery, and free trade. During times of war, many who have internalized liberal supreme value systems have been willing to die to defend, preserve, or promote liberal democracy—as evident in the most recent world wars and several regional conflicts.

³² This paper has benefited from several comments and conversations at the 2019 Silva Plana conference, especially those of Arye Hillman, Peter Nannestad, Peter Bernholz, Vivekananda Mukherjee, and Jerg Gutmann. It has also benefited from numerous helpful suggestions by several insightful referees.

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Appendices

A.1 Utilitarian True Believers and Governance

It bears noting that zealotry is not always a product of “irrational” or “crazy” belief systems. Supreme value systems may be internally consistent (as true of those that conform to the model developed above), and the values, duties, and best methods for promoting them may be products of thoughtful analysis. For example, the “benevolent” or “utilitarian” planner models of contemporary public economics characterize an ideal ruler—the planner—as a person that is motivated only by his/her supreme value system. His or her supreme value is to maximize the social welfare of society as he or she conceives it. It is the planner’s highest value—indeed his or her only value in most applications of that model.

The planner is normally assumed able to use the entire potential wealth of a society and/or manipulate all laws and prices (and thereby personal wealth and income) to produce a unique “social welfare” maximizing outcome. He or she is an economic totalitarian. (The concavity assumptions of those models usually imply a unique “ideal” society and particular patterns of consumption [or lifestyles] for its citizens.)

The “good society” to be imposed by a “benevolent central planner” varies with the particular social welfare function assumed to motivate the all-powerful planner or policy maker. Most public economists implicitly assume that the weights in the social welfare function are equal, but the mathematics implies that this assumption is “unimportant”; so, the approach is potentially compatible with slave-based societies, elitist societies, and egalitarian societies, as well as utilitarian societies. Virtually the entire domain of policy characterized by figure 1 can emerge according to the weights and interests of the individuals included in the social welfare function.

The only apparent difference between the welfare functions normally maximized by a “benevolent planner” and the supreme values systems analyzed in this paper is that social welfare functions are normally assumed fully differentiable, rather than partially so. Nonetheless, the benevolent planner is a zealot and his or her government is totalitarian. The “benevolent” planner’s welfare function characterizes his or her unbounded supreme

duty (maximize W) and the economic constraints characterize the value-producing function (the functions that link policy variables to W).

The usual benevolent-planner model assumes that “ordinary persons” receive all of their utility from ordinary consumption, which of course, would not be true if some or all have internalized normative value systems, many of which are likely to differ from that of the planner. Consequently, only pragmatists and fellow believers are likely to be advantaged by the policies of “benevolent” planners. Those that have internalized other normative systems are unlikely to receive significant benefits from what may be termed the planner’s “supreme value services,” although they may bear significant costs for those services.³³

A.2 Zealotry without Support for Totalitarian Governance

Although it is clear that the subset of supreme value systems that supports totalitarian governance is historically important, so is the subset of supreme value systems that support bounded, moderate policy agendas. There are two general types of value systems that tend to do so: (1) moderate ones with bounded duties as discussed above and (2) extreme ones with unbounded duties, but which imply moderate “ideal” public policies. The latter are examined briefly in this section of the paper.

For example, a supreme value system that includes unbounded duties to perfect oneself may support totalitarian lifestyles (one devoted to advancing a particular supreme value system) but not totalitarian governance. Examples include those who have internalized Aristotelian or Kantian ethics. Adherents to such theories tend to be uninterested in expansive governments because their supreme value systems can be only modestly advanced through government services and/or regulation. Their duties are self-oriented and abstract rather than global and resource-intensive: to perfect themselves and better understand the nature of moral and intellectual excellence in the case of Aristotelians, or to perfect their will

³³ See Berlin (2014) for penetrating overviews and critiques of other secular philosophical perspectives that tend to support totalitarian governance. Among the philosophies that Berlin considers supportive of totalitarianism are those of Rousseau, Hegel, Saint Simon, and Maistre.

and their understanding of universal laws and associated duties if they are Kantians.

Similarly, supreme value systems that include highly ranked anticoercive supreme duties, such as those held by pacifists and libertarians, also tend to lack support for totalitarian governance. Such supreme value systems favor voluntary over coercive relationships. Such supreme value systems imply duties to oppose all coercive measures to impose particular beliefs on others or to take control of all of a society's economic resources. Devotees of those supreme value systems may invest in considerable effort to persuade others to adopt their views but would never use coercive means.

Another class of supreme values systems that tends to restrain rather than empower governments includes ones that regard equal liberty to be among the highest values. Examples include the theory of justice associated with Rawls (2009) and the ethical theory developed by Spencer (1892). The equal-liberty principle implies duties that tend to restrain and moderate governance by requiring opposition to policies that unnecessarily reduce personal liberties or discriminate among individual citizens. Theories that imply governments should treat all citizens equally also imply duties that tend to restrain and moderate governance rather than extend it (Buchanan and Congleton 1998)—although the meaning of “equal treatment” is not always obvious and is sometimes associated with totalitarian rhetoric.

Internalization of such supreme value systems or ideologies may lead to totalitarian lifestyles by a subset of adherents—which is to say lives devoted entirely to duties implied by those values—but their associated supreme duties imply only bounded spheres for public policy and limited use of coercion to induce others to adopt their preferred supreme value systems. Extremists of the nontotalitarian subset of supreme value systems may want governments to be devoted to advancing particular supreme values—virtuous conduct, voluntariness, or equal liberty—but the values themselves imply that governments can use only limited means to dispatch their supreme duties during ordinary times.³⁴

³⁴ Two quotes capture the spirit of what I have in mind here. One is taken from the old town

hall of Basel, Switzerland: “Freiheit ist uber silber und gold,” that is, freedom is more valuable than silver and gold. Another is from the Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States in 1964, Barry Goldwater, “extremism in defense of liberty is no vice and moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue.”

During time of war, as during the twentieth century, liberal democracies arguably became temporarily totalitarian in their efforts to overcome threats from authoritarian and totalitarian governments, but after the wars were won, they reverted to limited (albeit somewhat expanded) forms of governance.