



The Law of the Rings: Re-evaluating Politics in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth

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Abstract:

Political scientists have often struggled with the depiction of politics in Middle-earth. The heroes fight to restore monarchy and seem skeptical of modern political values, such as equality and democracy. Some political scientists allege that Tolkien's legendarium demonstrates a "naïve" faith in enlightened despotism. In this paper, I reevaluate politics in Middle-earth in light of recent political science research and find that the two are surprisingly compatible.

First, I argue that constraints on political rulers and their tolerance for sharing power are more important to understanding Middle-earth politics than the dichotomy between democracy and monarchy. Unlike modern democracies, however, constraints in Middle-earth are seldom institutionalized. Indeed, the legendarium hints at skepticism towards institutionalization. Rather, constraints stem from rulers' relationships with their constituents and subjects.

Another important political fault line in Middle-earth is how each ruler views political power. The totalitarian Sauron views political power as indivisible in that the prospect of sharing power is anathema. By contrast, Men and the Elves view power as divisible and realize that sharing power sometimes strengthens their political standing.

Finally, I use political science to discuss how political constraints might have developed in each of the major Middle-earth realms. Political scientists stress that citizens who are able to flee from oppressive governments are better able to impose their demands on the ruler and push for constraints on governance. I show that Middle-earth complies with this theory in that more "democratic" realms, such as the Shire, allow citizens to easily flee or hide, whereas Mordor allows for few exit options.

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