

Why Yes Men Are So Incompetent

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Almost 10 years ago, I co-authored a paper that focused on the interrelationship between loyalty and competency of government appointees in states with nondemocratic regimes. We used what might be called a "toy model" to illustrate our point — much in the same way that high school physics courses use a toy model to demonstrate the parts of an atom. While such models give us a rough idea of how things work, they are often impractical for making precise estimates and forecasts. Yet these kind of simplistic models are perfectly suited to illustrate the events of recent years.

The paper, titled "Dictators and Their Viziers: Endogenizing the Loyalty-Competence Trade-Off," was published in the respected Journal of European Economic Association. Our main argument was that dictators generally prefer appointing less competent but more loyal subordinates because competent candidates tend to recognize the leader's weaknesses and switch alliances sooner. The more tenuous the leader's hold on power and the more he worries about what will happen to him once he steps down, the more he favors loyalty over competence, leading to a generally incompetent administration.

Our paper illustrates these findings by citing historical examples, such as Adolf Hitler. During the final and darkest months of the war, he replaced his professional military leaders with

colleagues who had helped him found the Nazi Party.

We never thought when we described this model a decade ago how well this theory would one day explain the recent government appointments in Russia.

This model explains why the people appointed to the Central Elections Committee lacked basic mathematical and statistical skills and knew nothing about how elections are organized and supervised worldwide. It explains how a top official who plagiarized his dissertation was appointed to oversee the education system.

It also explains why President Vladimir Putin does not fire his press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, who often fails to do his homework to prep the president before he goes in front of the media. For example, in the fall Putin famously distorted former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's accomplishments in agriculture. Above all, he looked most ill-informed about the Sergei Magnitsky case, Pussy Riot and other cases that interested journalists the most.

Judging from the answers that Putin gave at his news conference and his joint news conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in December, it was evident that he is fed up with the inadequate information — and in some cases outright lies — that he is given by his subordinates.

The same model also explains why several ministers spoke out publicly against the recent "anti-Magnitsky act" even though State Duma deputies remained silent. Unlike deputies, the ministers cannot be excessively loyal and excessively incompetent to an autocrat. The reason is that a minister, unlike Duma deputies, has more responsibility.

These are the types of jobs that require absolute loyalty when the ruling regime feels threatened. In this case, loyalty and incompetence are absolutely synonymous.

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