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Hobbesian Wars and Separation of Powers

Abstract

This paper formalizes the principle that persecution power of government may generate violent contests over it. We show that this principle yields a large set of theoretical insights on different separation-of-powers institutions that can help to preempt such contests under different socio-economic conditions. When socio-economic cohesion is low, the risk of contests can be eliminated only by individual veto against persecution. Moreover, such unanimity rule is resilient to autocratic shocks only when the chief executive does not control the legislative agenda, i.e., the executive and legislative branches are separate. When socio-economic cohesion is high, the risk of violent contests can be eliminated without individual veto, but only by a persecution-reviewing judiciary whose members cannot join the executive branch in the future, i.e., when the executive and judicial branches are separate. Our results shed light on the evolution of separation of powers in European history.