

*"Why do we wish to use domestic institutions to explain foreign policy?"*

We may take two views of the role domestic institutions play in mediating international interaction. On one view, these institutions are merely “congealed preferences” (Riker 1980), while on the other view these institutions shape the environment in which choices are made and thus must be considered alongside individual preferences. As Rogowski (1999) points out, we need only model domestic institutions if they introduce bias into the international interactions we seek to explain. To the extent that they are only aggregating preferences, we need not explicitly model them. The research discussed here indicates that domestic institutions seldom, if ever “merely” aggregate preferences, and as a result we should regard these institutions as exogenous “over more than the short run” (116). The variety of domestic institutions introduces differential bias into international political action, and particularly important among these are the franchise (its size and membership), representation and decision rules (veto points).

Putnam (1988) argues that neither purely domestic nor purely international analysis can account for political outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Observing that decisionmakers within states usually disagree as to the content of the national interest, and pointing to the entanglement between domestic and international pressures, Putnam suggests that we think of international negotiations as a two-level game, whereby domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and national governments simultaneously negotiate to maximize their ability to satisfy domestic pressures. Moves that are rational in one game may be irrational in the other, but there are powerful incentives for consistency, and clever players may be able to make favorable things happen in one game by making moves in the other. Putnam emphasizes the counterintuitive possibilities of synergistic issue linkage, heterogeneous domestic interests, involuntary defection, asymmetric win sets, and principal-agent breakdowns (451-453).

The systematic effects of domestic institutions extend beyond policy bias. They may affect the credibility of the state and its leaders (Cowhey 1993, Schultz 1999, Broz 2002), a state’s ability to strike bargains (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999, Milner 1997), or the decision rules by which choices are made (Milner 1997, Broz 2002, Schneider 2020). No matter the mechanism, fundamental to modeling institutions is some systematic bias beyond the aggregation result. However, it is immediately obvious that the disaggregation of the unitary state to account for domestic institutions is a continuous process, in that we can further disaggregate the domestic institutions themselves. How far should we go?

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Gourevitch 1978.

In an attempt to give a taxonomy of the possibilities for disaggregation, Allison (1969) distinguishes among three conceptual models of state behavior. In the rational process model (Model I), the state acts as a unitary rational actor, making decisions in its interest. In the organizational process model (Model II), policy is an organizational output produced according to previously established procedures, and the state is a constellation of loosely allied organizations. In the bureaucratic politics model (Model III), policy is made as a result of bargaining games played by the leaders of large bureaucratic organizations driven by positional interests. Allison is clear that each model has utility, but that it is crucial to choose consciously (715). Bendor and Hammond (1992) criticize Allison's use of conceptual models in five ways: (1) underlying assumptions are opaque, (2) hypotheses do not follow from the initial assumptions, (3) the "simple rules lead to simple outcomes" inference supporting Model II is false, (4) Model I is too simple and Model II is too complex, and (5) Allison misinterprets key aspects of rational choice theory, organization theory and bureaucratic politics. Interestingly, they also identify what they take to be an inherent tension between explaining events and constructing models (318).

Fey and Goemans (2007) demonstrate that preference intensity among the selectorate can drive institutionally-induced preference intensity among state leaders, and that the relative preference intensity of two nations' selectorates can be decisive in international crisis bargaining. In their complete-information two-state model, the leaders of each state care only about remaining in power, while their selectorates care about the outcome of the crisis itself (35).<sup>2</sup> Because the selectorate is unable to make a credible commitment not to remove a poorly-performing leader, leaders are induced in certain circumstances to seek a "rational gamble" (36). Such gambles are only rational under the following circumstances: the gambling leader must expect to bear greater personal consequences for the war than his or her opposite number, this leader must expect that the other leader knows not only that a rational gamble is possible but the approximate magnitude of such a gamble, and that gambling would be the only way for the leader to stay in office. The need to retain the loyalty of a segment of the selectorate generates risk-accepting behavior over at least some range of crisis outcomes (49). In related research, Leventoglu and Tarar (2005) show that public precommitment by opposing leaders can result in a prisoner's dilemma situation where both sides make high public demands that cannot be satisfied, even though they would have been better off if they could commit to not making public demands.

Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999) show that a formal model incorporating institutional constraints on leaders' international behavior can generate six of the eight findings commonly taken to constitute the

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<sup>2</sup> We can easily think of circumstances where this assumption would be unhelpful – existential crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis probably go some way towards aligning the incentives of leadership and selectorate. This alignment would be even more likely in the (vast majority) of historical regimes where leaving office after a horrendous blunder might not be conducive to a long and happy retirement.

democratic peace (791), including the most important – that democracies rarely fight one another. While many other accounts of the democratic peace have focused on the spread of norms, on this account the behavioral incentives facing leaders are endogenous to political institutions and the interests sustaining them (793). Unfortunately, the authors’ model is marred by several apparently unrealistic assumptions. The idea that autocrats have less to fear than democrats from public policy failure does not seem plausible in the case of war. While it is true that autocrats are less likely to be removed from office during low-intensity conflicts, the reverse obtains for high-intensity conflicts – contrast the fate enjoyed by recent post-conflict leaders of Libya, Iraq and Egypt to that of the American presidents who presided over the debacle in Vietnam. Second (and for similar reasons), it seems implausible that an autocrat would accept a higher chance of losing in order to continue channeling resources to a winning coalition.

Weeks (2012) usefully points out that some kinds of dictatorships permit regime insiders to hold leaders accountable for their foreign policy decisions (343). However, contrary to the predictions of selectorate theory, she finds that even small-coalition audiences (such as those in political machines) have an incentive to jettison a leader who deviates from their preferred policies, and she anticipates Yahri-Milo’s (2014) finding that military and nonmilitary members of the selectorate view threats in a systematically different manner. Finally, she argues that the types of individual who are likely to rise to the top are “precisely the types of individuals who seek out international conflicts” (343). She is emphatic that we cannot deduce preferences simply from the relative size of the domestic audience or winning coalition, nor can we simply focus on the presence or absence of constraints, because their impact is mediated through the audience. This theory is intriguing, but it seems incomplete, because she is using the Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset (Maoz 2005) as her dependent variable. We might also wish to know how many wars states refrained from fighting.

The research discussed here suggests that domestic institutions are indeed structuring the choice environment in which international interaction takes place, and that it should (in most cases) be accounted for by social science models. However, the extent to which these domestic institutions need themselves to be disaggregated is likely to be problem-driven. While Fey and Goemans are correct that Allison’s Model III is exceedingly complex, we cannot abandon its conceptual utility on these grounds alone. It is a virtue for models to simplify, but if we simplify beyond the essential elements, our models will not clarify the problems we seek to understand. Putnam’s two-level games approach may be a way to model complex behavior with a parsimonious set of underlying assumptions.

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