

“Make the best argument why it might be useful to 'drill down' to individual preferences when explaining foreign policy”

States are composed of people. It seems likely that their preferences would influence state behavior. However, to properly model state behavior we need only include individual preferences if our unitary models produce inaccurate results without them. We thus face two additional questions. Do we need to model the interest groups in society that act to influence government policy, and do we need to model the influence of “public opinion” beyond that conveyed by interest groups themselves?

Complicating matters, the influence appears to run in both directions. Gourevitch (1978) argues that international considerations impact domestic politics. The international system is not only a consequence of domestic politics and structures, but is also a cause of them. International relations and domestic politics are fundamentally interrelated, and should be analyzed simultaneously. Short of outright invasion, external pressures are seldom fully determinative of state action, and this condition has not changed in the modern era despite a high degree of interdependence.¹ The strategic choice approach allows us to deal with this exceedingly intractable problem by taking preferences as given in one context (allowing us to ignore their partial determination by international political behavior – our dependent variable) but not in another – the “boxes within boxes” approach.² The apparent epistemological problems raised by this sleight-of-hand do not seem to have been an obstacle to considerable fruitful work over the past two decades.

Frieden (1999) emphasizes the importance of separating preferences from other characteristics of the strategic setting (compare Moravcsik 1997, *infra*). He distinguishes among preferences over outcomes, strategies for achieving preferences, and the environment given which these strategies are constructed. However, because the strategic approach proceeds according to a nested, “boxes-within-boxes” approach, what counts as a preference, outcome or strategy may differ according to the scale at which the phenomenon in question is examined.³ Frieden sets out three common sets of errors made with respect to preferences – scholars have (1) confused them with strategies, (2) ignored the environment or context within which action occurs, or (3) overemphasizing the environment at the expense of the preferences themselves. Preferences themselves are, of course, unobservable directly. Strategic interaction makes direct inference of preference from behavior impossible, but Frieden proposes three ways we might nevertheless infer an actor’s preferences: we can assume them, observe them, or derive them from theories of the preferences of subnational units. Expressing a strong preference for this last approach by

¹ This “double structuring” is a focus of the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984).

² This counterintuitive strategy is common in criminal trials, and is known as double pleading. “I wasn’t in La Jolla on the night in question because I was in Arizona, but if I *was* there it was because I had to turn in my étude.”

³ “Preferences depend on the specification of the problem” (43).

process of elimination, Frieden describes it as an essentially recursive process, whereby “the preference used in the “box” of interest is deduced from a prior “box”” (61). This chain of reasoning will ultimately depend on preferences that have been assumed or observed.⁴

Frieden and Rogowski (1996) set out the mechanisms by which domestic politics might influence international behavior, and they develop a set of hypotheses concerning the domestic constituencies most and least impacted by international shocks. They rely heavily on standard trade models and their distributional consequences, most notably Heckscher-Olin (with Stolper-Samuelson) and Ricardo-Viner (specific factors). Observing that an exogenous easing of the conditions of international exchange should prompt the “import” of global monetary trends and a consequent synchronization of the impacts across states. They identify static and dynamic “efficiency costs” of closure to the world economy (essentially deadweight losses), and they argue that these costs stimulate both domestic innovation and political coalition-building (33). These observations lead them to argue that an exogenous easing of international trade will, *ceteris paribus*, increase pressure to liberalize, and this pressure will be greater in inverse proportion to the degree the state was closed and to the extent that latent (exploitable) gains from trade are available. They generalize this to the proposition that pressure for liberalization rises as terms of trade increase and falls as they decrease.⁵ Finally, they expect democratic regimes to liberalize more quickly, particularly where there are fewer distinct constituencies and less partisan fragmentation.

One of the most salient ways that domestic politics affects state behavior is through the character of state institutions. Doyle (1983a) argues that state behavior is dramatically shaped by the character of these institutions, specifically their liberal character. In states featuring political equality, property rights, representative government and market economies, something about the interaction of these institutions reduces the propensity for aggressive war with other such states (the “democratic peace”). Mutual respect for one another’s autonomy predisposes liberal states to tolerance (213). Kant’s predictions of a “pacific union” among liberal states and the consequent emergence of a “spirit of commerce” and “cosmopolitan law” mandating decent treatment of foreigners lead Doyle to conclude that liberal states are qualitatively different and have established a “separate peace” (232). He further argues that realism cannot explain this liberal peace. However, he argues that liberal states have failed to support the conditions for this peace by assisting liberal institutions in their fellow states to remain liberal and resist backsliding. While he argues that liberal states have overcome the problem of hegemonic transitions (fortunately, our future Japanese

⁴ It seems troubling that Frieden prefers derived preferences on the basis of fatal problems with assumption (scope) and observation (certainty) if these derived preferences are themselves ultimately based on defunct mechanisms for ascertaining preferences. Perhaps less troubling if we drop a romantic attachment to “the truth” and accept that things are only true within particular explanatory frameworks. But the same urge to unify that bedevils physics leads me to wish for a preference in one box to not be a strategy in another.

⁵ This monotonic effect seems only likely as a first approximation – the incentives must be more complex.

overlords are also liberal), he worries that the decline of US hegemony may reduce the propensity of the liberal international community to support the liberal character of its members. Doyle (1983b) identifies a deficiency in the foreign policy of liberal states vis-à-vis their non-liberal counterparts, and argues that the very principles that promote cooperation within a liberal zone of peace make liberal states hopeless incompetents in relations with non-liberal states. Indeed, he speculates that over time, liberal states will be increasingly unlikely to elect the sort of ruthless, realist leaders required to deal with the menace of non-liberal peer competitors.

In a curious combination of the approaches of Doyle and Frieden, Moravcsik (1997) advocates for a microfoundational view of politics where competing interest groups capture states and deploy them for their own interests. Arguing that this “liberal” view of politics is analytically prior to realism, institutionalism and constructivism, Moravcsik argues that the fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups (516).⁶ The interaction of sets of these actors and the states they capture can take positive-sum or zero-sum forms, and it is shifts in the fundamental preferences of states rather than shifts in the strategic circumstances in which they interact that produces consequences.⁷ International conflict is caused by “revisionist preferences”. While Moravcsik does not deny that the “structure of other states’ preferences” determines the scope of action, he thinks this less fundamental than the actual preferences pursued by some dominant faction. “Ideational liberalism focuses on the compatibility of social preferences across fundamental collective goods like national unity, legitimate political institutions, and sociomeconomic regulation. Commercial liberalism focuses on incentives created by opportunities for transborder economic transactions. Republican liberalism focuses on the nature of domestic representation and the resulting possibilities for rent-seeking behavior” (524). By formalizing the liberal assumptions Moravcsik has rendered them somewhat incredible. What is most “fundamental” in determining behavior seems to me to be as fruitless a line of inquiry as Aristotle’s attempt to differentiate between essential and accidental characteristics. Arguing that preferences are somehow ontologically prior to everything else. does not help us model state behavior.

Russett and Oneal (2000) show that the influence of domestic politics on international state behavior is both direct and interactive, following multiple causal pathways. Arguing that peace produces positive externalities that exert a systemic effect, the authors imply that this effect is best sustained by deepening cooperation among existing liberal states. Emphasizing the success or failure of domestic actors to reach political agreements, Milner (1997) responds to the relative gains debate by arguing that

⁶ This seems to raise immediate problems – how can one fundamental actor be itself composed of other fundamental actors?

⁷ “...liberals causally privilege variation in the configuration of state preferences, while treating configurations of capabilities and information as if they were either fixed constraints or endogenous to state preferences” (520).

international cooperation is most affected not by relative gains considerations but rather by the domestic distributional consequences of cooperative endeavors. This process will be mediated by a state's institutions for power sharing and the distribution of preferences and information among the domestic actors. She models the strategic interaction, concluding that the equilibrium outcome will be bounded by the preferences of the domestic executive and legislature, and that the probability of a successful cooperative agreement will be higher the more power is concentrated in the hands of the most "dovish" actor. She also finds that the ratification procedures themselves often emerge as a stake in the game, so she argues that they should be modeled endogenously. She concludes that Schelling's famous conjecture about the utility of tied hands in negotiation only applies where the domestic actor (legislature)'s ideal point is between the points proposed by the two executives. Baum and Potter (2008) modify Milner's model by adding the mass media as a strategic actor. They describe interaction between the public, leaders and the media as a market for information.

I suspect that the difficulties in this debate stem not from confusion over the role of individuals but from confusion regarding the concept of preferences. The doubly-determined nature of preferences seems to force consideration of how they are shaped and an acceptance of their partially endogenous nature even within particular contexts (or "boxes"). For instance, recent research in international political economy (Guisinger 2009) confirms Converse's (1962) findings that the public is more or less entirely ignorant of the distributional consequences of international trade. Their interests are not being aggregated, but rather catered to anticipatorily by politicians seeking instrumental goals. Many international outcomes (*contra* Moravcsik) do not emerge from the preferences of individuals or even the domestic institutions comprised by them. The social science concept of a preference seems to be blocking a more fruitful understanding of the origins of international outcomes.

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