# Theories of Democratic (Liberal) Peace

The absence of major wars between democracies has generated a profusion of potential explanations. The empirical regularity that democracies do not fight wars with one another has widespread support in the literature (Maoz and Russett 1993, Maoz and Abdoladi 1989, Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Gartzke 2007). Theoretical explanations of the democratic peace run the gamut of plausibility, but the finding itself appears durable and worthy of continued attention. This paper will briefly survey proposed theories of democratic peace, and I will then offer some thoughts on the research program as a whole. We will grapple throughout with definitional problems, and the results reached in this body of research depend on precise and disputed operationalizations of the concepts "democracy" and "war".

Immanuel Kant (1795) famously observed that most people would choose to avoid war except in cases of self-defense. It follows from this observation that states where "the people" are in power will fight fewer wars, *ceteris paribus*. Kant's conclusions may have been anticipated by Thomas Paine (and were enlarged by Alexis de Tocqueville), but for our purposes it is sufficient to acknowledge the deep antecedents of democratic peace theorizing. There appears, however, to be considerable nuance. We might propose that democracies simply fight fewer wars overall than other states, but this does not appear to be the case (Russett and Oneal 1993). Theories of democratic peace must explain both a reduction in war propensity within democratic dyads *and* the absence of any observable change in war propensity where other regime types are concerned.

Ironically, the academic debate around democratic peace began with a null result. Small and Singer (1976) found an absence of wars between democratic states (with exceptions), but argued that the pattern was not statistically significant. From these early stages, the operationalization of both democracy and war have varied dramatically across this research agenda, and definitions of democracy in particular continue to be problematic.

Either the researcher defines democracy narrowly, limiting cases to the late modern era, or the researcher chooses a broader definition, in which case the democratic peace effect becomes less apparent or disappears altogether.

The literature divides broadly into domestic and system-level explanations. Domestic explanations are most commonly based on factors such as norms, institutions and economic interdependence. Explanations based on norms have usually focused on democratic norms shared by both parties. Dixon (1994) found that the observed democratic peace is an artifact of a propensity among democratic states towards the peaceful settlement of disputes (both internal and external), deriving this propensity from the basic democratic norm of "bounded conflict". These norms of domestic political culture are said to be incorporated into interstate relations, but it is unclear what the corresponding theory of war would be, as dyads both with and without this norm are mostly conflict-free.

Institutional explanations focus on the unique costs that democratic institutions impose on leaders who choose war. Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2004) rely on an application of selectorate theory to show that democratic leaders heading large coalitions will operate more conservatively in crisis than will autocrats or leaders of smaller coalitions. The theory relies on a continual reassessment process that is said to occur more frequently in democracies than in other regime types, with the result that democracies will notice more quickly that they are losing and commit resources more readily to redress the imbalance.

The context in which democratic decisions are made is salient in many findings. Ostrom and Job (1986) modeled presidential decision-making in democracies, concluding that the decision to use force is made in a thoroughly political context, and that the extent of popular support for war was the single most important influence on the decision to go to war. Similarly, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) find that decisions to go to war are fundamentally a product of the domestic political setting, and that democratic leaders are more conservative in their choice to engage in war than are authoritarian leaders. Despite

its inefficiency for the state as a whole, war may not be ex-post inefficient for individual leaders (Chiozza and Goemans, 2004).

It may be that some other aspect of democratic regimes (other than their democratic character) is creating the observed effect. Explanations based on economic interdependence began with Kant. The basic idea (articulated by, among others, Norman Angell (1909)) is that democracies have too much to lose from a disruption in trade to consent to war. Russett and Oneal (1997) found that increased economic interdependence reduced the likelihood of military conflict. Both democracy and trade were found to constrain the use of force, and the authors found that the size of the “democratic gap” was a significant predictor of conflict. Gartzke (2007) argues that economic development, free markets and similar interstate interests, or more generally “capitalism” are sufficient to generate the democratic peace. While agreeing that democracy may ultimately be bound up with the emergence of capitalism, he argues that capitalism itself provides a more parsimonious explanation for the absence of conflict than democracy. Changes in the nature of economic development may also have made territorial expansion less desirable for great powers (Gartzke and Rohner 2010). I am personally inclined to lay great stress on this last explanation. States compete for markets in the same way they once competed for territory. This has disaggregated territorial ownership from rent extraction. It is intuitively plausible that conflict would decline as a result *and* that it would decline most in dyads where marketization is most complete, *i.e.* democracies.

Systemic explanations focus on international context, particularly on causes of bargaining failure such as issue indivisibility, commitment problems and incomplete information (Fearon 1995). Cederman and Gleditsch (2004) argue that collective security is an essential precursor of democratization, and that the regime type of states in the immediate neighborhood exert a strong influence on democratization propensity, making it hard for a few democracies to emerge but setting the stage for an inexorable wave of

democratization once the first few democracies have appeared. It seems sufficient to say of this argument that the inexorable wave seems to have stalled. Havard et al. (2001) argue that the democratic peace may be an artifact of democratic transition, with the implication that it is not so much democracy as stability in regime type that results in a tendency towards peace. Indeed, "the direction of change has no discernible influence on the probability of civil war," though there may still be advantages to achieving democracy since the authors identify it as a "more stable" end state than autocracy.

Fearon (1994) and others have suggested that democratic leaders bear higher "audience costs" for poor decisions, making them more reluctant to engage in crisis bargaining. The underlying mechanism is that high audience costs make democratic leaders more vulnerable to removal for failing to follow through on threats, but these high audience costs also work to make threats more credible, reducing the incidence of war (Fearon 1994). Schultz (2001) looked for (but did not find) differential audience costs for democratic leaders in crisis bargaining, emphasizing the political danger to democratic leaders who provoke and then back down from a crisis and reminding us that off-the-path-of-play audience costs can influence equilibrium behavior. Cases of institutional conflict may also lead to war initiation, though the mechanism is unclear (Dassel and Reinhardt 1999).

Research design in this area is very difficult, as operationalization of the variables in play has tended to obscure nuance in the findings. As we have seen, the choice of how to operationalize thick concepts like democracy and war is not obvious, and the democratic peace may simply be an artifact of particular operationalizations (Schwartz and Skinner 2002). Indeed, dichotomous measures of conflict may introduce aggregation bias, and the presence of rivalry may indicate temporal dependence (Mitchell and Moore, 2002). Some of my previous work (Draper 2019) has addressed operationalizations of democracy and whether there is substantial continuity in definitions over time. We must also consider

potential problems of multicollinearity (there may be multiple, correlated causes of the democratic peace) and severe recency bias (to the post-WWII era).

To students of ancient history, the idea of a democratic peace must seem a little surprising. Greek democracies fought one another frequently, most famously during the Peloponnesian War (the ill-fated Sicilian expedition pitted Athens against Syracuse), and the Punic wars pitted the Roman Senate against the Carthaginian Senate. While the true democratic nature of these societies can be disputed, so can our own. The existence of a genuine democratic peace seems to turn crucially on definitions.

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