

The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

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The Democratic Peace Theory

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KEVIN PLACEK, FEB 18 2012

It has been argued that the absence of war between democratic states 'comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.'^[1] Although statistically the probability of war between any two states is considerably low, the absence of war among liberal democracies across a wide range of different historical, economic, and political factors suggests that there is a strong predisposition against the use of military violence between democratic states.^[2] This democratic peace proposition not only challenges the validity of other political systems (i.e., fascism, communism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism), but also the prevailing realist account of international relations, which emphasises balance-of-power calculations and common strategic interests in order to explain the peace and stability that characterises relations between liberal democracies.^[3] This essay argues, however, that the structural and normative arguments of the democratic peace theory together offer a far more logical and convincing explanation for this seeming anomaly. Furthermore, in line with Immanuel Kant's theory of perpetual peace, I argue that the global spread of democracy will result in greater international peace *if* this occurs in parallel with the strengthening of economic interdependence and international organisations. The difficulty lies in the significant risk of instability inherent in the process of democratisation and the uncertainty that remains in an 'incomplete Kantian world' where the Hobbesian state of anarchy has not yet entirely disappeared from the international system.

Structural Explanation

Of the two main variants of the democratic peace theory, the structural account argues that it is the institutions of representative government, which hold elected officials and decision-makers accountable to a wide electorate, that make war a largely unattractive option for both the government and its citizens.^[4] Because the costs and risks of war directly affect large segments of the population, it is expected that the average voter will throw the incumbent leader/party out of office if they initiate a losing or unnecessary war, thus, providing a clear *institutional* incentive for democratic leaders to anticipate such an electoral response before deciding to go to war.^[5] This view does not assume that all citizens and elected representatives are liberal-minded, but simply that democratic structures that give citizens leverage over government decisions will make it less likely that a democratic leader will be able to initiate a war with another liberal democracy. ^[6] Thus, even with an illiberal leader in place, institutions such as free speech, political pluralism, and competitive elections will make it difficult for these leaders to convince or persuade the public to go to war.^[7]

Normative Explanation

Proponents of the normative/cultural perspective, by contrast, argue that shared democratic and liberal values best explain the peace that exists between democratic states.^[8] According to this view, democratic political culture encourages peaceful means of conflict resolution which are extended beyond the domestic political process to other democratic states because leaders in both countries hold a reasonable expectation that their counterparts will also be able to work out their differences peacefully.^[9] Political ideology, therefore, determines how democracies distinguish allies from adversaries: democracies that represent and act in their citizens' interests are treated with respect and consideration, whereas nondemocracies that use violence and oppression against their own people are regarded with mistrust and suspicion.^[10] The importance of perception means that even if a particular state has 'enlightened citizens and liberal-democratic institutions,' unless other democratic states regard it as a genuine liberal

The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

democracy then the democratic peace proposition will not hold.[11] This argument can, therefore, explain a number of contentious cases: Americans did not consider England democratic in 1812 because England was a monarchy (War of 1812) and liberals in the Union did not consider the Confederacy a liberal democracy because of their use of slavery (American Civil War).[12]

Although some scholars regard the institutional and normative explanations as mutually exclusive, a much more intuitive and persuasive defence of the democratic peace theory emerges from combining these two viewpoints. Thus, the particular democratic practices that make war with other liberal democracies unlikely – free and fair elections, the rule of law, free press, a competitive party system – are driven by both ‘converging expectations about what conventional behaviour is likely to be’ (institutions) *and* ‘standards for what behaviour ought to be’ (norms).[13] These two explanations are complimentary and mutually reinforcing: cultural norms influences the creation and evolution of political institutions, and institutions help generate a more peaceful moral culture over time.[14]

Criticism of the Theory

A great deal of criticism of the democratic peace theory is focused on methodology. It is argued that the subjectivity of the specific definitions adopted in such highly empirical studies is likely to significantly affect the results, making it difficult to validate the theory with certainty.[15] But this is largely undermined by a large number of studies that show democracies are highly unlikely to fight each other irrespective of the definition of democracy, the type of cases considered, or the dispute/war threshold.[16] Furthermore, there has already been a significant increase in the number of democratic-democratic dyads from less than 2% of all political dyads in the 19th century, to 13% from 1900-1945, and 11% over the 1946-89 period without any major conflict.[17]

More substantial criticism comes from scholars whom, while not questioning the empirical findings, put forth contending arguments to explain the causal relationship between democracy and peace. Realists argue that it is not common polities but rather common interests that can best explain the low incidence of wars between democracies.[18] Beginning with the Cold War, they point out that democratic states have been far more likely to formally align themselves with other democracies than in the century before, suggesting that common strategic interests are a more important factor than domestic political processes.[19] Thus, the particular structure of the international political system is the key factor determining how states will act.[20] But the realist critique has been largely disproven by studies that have persuasively found that democracy, rather than alliance, prevents conflict and war; nonaligned democracies are less likely to fight each other than aligned nondemocracies; and two nondemocratic states that share common interests are more likely to fight each other than two democracies that do not share common interests.[21]

Monadic Explanation

Of course, the point on which critics of the democratic peace theory are largely correct is that liberal democracies *are* not significantly less likely to go to war with other nondemocratic states. The available evidence largely disproves the monadic proposition that democratic states are less prone to use force regardless of the regime type of the opposing state.[22] This is likely due to the fact that democratic states still function in an ‘incompletely Kantian world’ where democracies have only recently gone from being a minority to the slight majority within the post-Cold War period. [23] Power politics, therefore, is still a necessary reality for most democratic states, particularly given the high levels of conflict between mixed dyads.[24] Nonetheless, there are a number of important advantages for democracies: they are more likely to enter low-level conflicts than full-scale wars; more willing to refrain from escalating disputes into an actual war;[25] and less likely to initiate the use of violence against another state.[26]

More importantly perhaps, democracies that do initiate war are more likely to win than nondemocratic states.[27] Because public support for war in democracies decreases considerably over time, there is a strong incentive for democratic leaders and decision-makers to not only choose to initiate only wars that they can win, but ones they can win quickly.[28] Although there are a number of notable exceptions, such as the U.S.-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam, this does suggest that the global spread of democracy would bring additional benefits beyond simply reducing the possibility of war between democratic states. This would include a greater number of low-level conflicts

The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

in proportion to full-scale wars, an increase in the number of states less likely to either initiate war or escalate non-violent confrontations into war, and a greater number of short, successful wars as opposed to long and protracted wars. Thus, even though an increase in the number of democratic states may not reduce the overall number of democratic-nondemocratic conflicts, this should not detract from these largely positive *qualitative* changes one would expect to occur.

Dyadic Explanation

A much more substantial argument comes from the dyadic proposition of the democratic peace theory: the observation that democracies create a *separate and joint* peace among other democratic states.[29] With an autocratic-democratic dyad, if the autocracy is replaced with a democracy it is argued that the likelihood of conflict will drop by 33 percent.[30] Moreover, beyond conflict and war, the evidence suggests that interstate rivalries among democracy dyads are also exceedingly rare and that a change in regime (from nondemocracy to democracy) will not only reduce the propensity for conflict or rivalry between any two states, but will actually accelerate this trend more rapidly over time.[31] It similarly follows then that coalitions of democratic states will also be better able to maintain mutual commitments and obligations because the institutional constraints of liberal democracy make it difficult to reverse any mutual commitments made through autonomous and accountable political institutions.[32] This predictability is not only absent for nondemocracies due to the lack of transparency and openness of their political systems, but actually negatively impacts their ability to win wars: the number of democratic partners increases the probability of winning a war by 62% whereas the number of nondemocratic partners decreases this likelihood by 44%.[33] What this suggests is that democracies should work to strengthen their formal alliances not only for normative or ideological reasons but for the expected efficiency gains this would provide and as a practical way of avoiding the collective action problems that frequently plague nondemocratic or mixed regime coalitions.

More positively, that there has not been any war between democracies *despite* a rapid growth in the number of democratic dyads within the international system (and thus an increase in the probability of conflict between democracies), [34] points to a significant trend: the incidence of conflict should gradually decline over time *if* more countries become democratic.[35] This is important not only because liberal democracies must still retain military force as a means to prevent or defend themselves from aggression in the current international system, but because democracies are more likely to receive challenges and threats to their security while this peace still remains 'separate.'[36]

Democratisation

There are two notable reasons, however, why the global spread of democracy may actually undermine prospects for international peace and they both have to do with the difficulties associated with the process of democratisation. First, a number of studies have shown that democratic transitions which occur when a country's political institutions are particularly weak (often at the outset of the transition from autocracy to democracy), or when the elites within that country are threatened by the democratisation process itself (by having to respond to a wide and divergent range of newly-formulated interests), have a greater likelihood that this process will trigger aggressive nationalist sentiment and/or the outbreak of civil or inter-state war.[37] If political institutions are weak at the early stages of a transition, the rising demand for mass participation can provide an incentive for elites to adopt nationalist, ethno-religious, or populist policies, yet, crucially, *before* these elites can be held sufficiently accountable to the wider electorate.[38] A number of examples can be cited ranging from Napoleon III's France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Taisho Japan to more recent cases such as Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic (the Yugoslav Wars), Peru and Ecuador in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Cenepa War 1995), Ethiopia's 1998-2000 border war with Eritrea following the collapse of the Dergue dictatorship, and the 1999 India-Pakistan war after limited moves towards democratisation in both Pakistan and Kashmir.[39] This also extends to the observation that the vast majority of civil wars over the past century have occurred within transitional or mixed regimes, as opposed to either democratic or authoritarian regimes, which are more able to effectively contain repression by democratic or violent means, respectively.[40] Taking this into account, therefore, it is far more likely that a country will be able to successfully consolidate its transition if democratisation occurs according to a particular historical sequence: the emergence of a national identity, followed by the institutionalisation of the central government, and then mass electoral and political participation.[41]

The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

The second problem relates to the first: most countries undergoing a transition to democracy will *not* necessarily be in a position to follow this particular sequence, yet even if they are it is not guaranteed that liberal democratic states will be able or willing to help. It is, therefore, important to be aware of the obvious limits of external military intervention. Even if liberal states adopt a cautious cost-benefit analysis in which they only intervene or assist states when they are certain that there is substantial and legitimate internal support present and when they have the consent of international bodies such as the UN (i.e., in Korea, Libya, Afghanistan), the act of helping overthrow an authoritarian regime may undermine those very liberal norms and values underpinning the democratic peace.[42] That the costs associated with such interventions are often quite considerable and can be difficult to justify domestically also means that even if there is a clear moral argument for helping authoritarian states democratise, political and economic considerations may still prevail. Similarly, although it is often states undergoing democratic transitions that initiate wars, their military weaknesses and political and social instability can also make them attractive targets for attack.[43] This was the case for East Timor following its independence vote in 1999 and Iran after its 1979 revolution when they were invaded by Indonesian and Iraqi forces respectively.[44] Thus, even though there is a very clear normative benefit to increasing the number of democracies within the international system, there is a real risk of instability and conflict *if* the transition does not establish the institutional preconditions for effective and accountable governance prior to mass political participation and elections, and if it takes place within an unstable regional/international environment.[45]

Wider Implications

Similarly, how liberal states conduct their foreign policy on an individual basis and collectively at the international level will largely determine whether the Kantian system can be successfully expanded. It is often argued by realists that the democratic decision-making process itself deprives policymakers of the necessary 'coherence, long-range planning, flexibility and secrecy' required to conduct an effective foreign policy.[46] According to this view, public opinion exerts an autonomous influence on the actions of political leaders that can distract democratic states from focusing on the most important imperatives: power and security.[47] But, as mentioned earlier, the very political institutions and patterns of behaviour that characterise liberal democracies also allow these states to best defend themselves and adopt a more cautious and effective approach to the use of force, thereby achieving the 'best, securest, and safest outcomes for the most people.'[48] Therefore, this not only challenges the key assumptions underlying realism – that normative goals preclude a clear and accurate analysis of international affairs – but the idea that relative military capabilities and the distribution of power among great powers alone should dictate foreign policy strategy.[49] Rather, democracies can best guarantee their own security by empowering their citizens and strengthening institutional checks and balances because these very factors have been shown to uphold the democratic peace *and* facilitate a more prudent foreign policy.[50]

At the international level, the recent increase in the number of democratic states provides a unique opportunity to reconstruct the norms and values underpinning the international system to more accurately reflect the peaceful interactions of democracies.[51] This would ideally mean strengthening the two other aspects of the Kantian system: international organisations and economic interdependence. Although the democratic peace represents the possibility of 'uncoerced peace without central authority,'[52] it is also the case that this liberal order has been best served when there has been a liberal state (i.e., the United States after World War II) that is both able and prepared to sustain the economic and political foundations of the wider liberal society beyond its own borders.[53] Strengthening a dense network of inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) that extend this responsibility to a larger number of democratic states and encourages greater cooperation among members through greater consultation and coordination, such as the WTO, IMF, World Bank, UN, and International Criminal Court, would arguably provide a stronger foundation for extending this perpetual peace outwards.[54] This also builds on studies that have shown the constraining effect of IGOs is greatest for politically relevant dyads – 'contiguous pairs of states and pairs that include at least one major power' – which also happen to account for the majority of interstate disputes and conflict.[55] Focusing efforts to more proactively include the largest nondemocracies (China, Vietnam, Russia, Iran) into this liberal international order, and to strengthen those elements of constitutional liberalism (rule of law, institutional checks on power, individual freedoms) lacking in *illiberal* democracies (Belarus, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Romania, Malaysia etc.) would arguably help consolidate the democratic peace most effectively.[56]

The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

This is also the case for economic cooperation and interdependence. The observation that the likelihood of conflict between any two states with high levels of bilateral trade will be 33% lower than if those states only had an average level of economic interdependence suggests that democratic states will greatly benefit from upholding a liberal international economic system free of protectionism and mercantilist policies.[57] Because maintaining free and open trade relations rests on the assumption that market-based forces, rather than violence or coercion, will determine future economic transactions, the accompanying sense of mutual dependence will often act as a restraint on the use of military force.[58] Any accompanying increase in the quantity or quality of interstate communication is also likely to make it easier for democracies to understand the intentions and preferences of nondemocracies as well as their willingness to adhere to mutual agreements and commitments.[59]

Conclusion

The institutional and normative aspects of the democratic peace proposition, thus, provide a very clear, logical reason why the global spread of democracy will result in greater international peace: democratic political institutions make it difficult for governments to initiate war without the consent of the electorate, and the accompanying cultural norms mean democracies will favour a peaceful means of conflict resolution with one another. Of course, this would not necessarily reduce the overall incidence of war as the monadic proposition that democracies are less likely to use conflict regardless of regime type does not hold. But this would still produce a positive qualitative change: democracies are less likely to initiate wars, escalate nonviolent disputes into full-scale war, or engage in long and protracted military conflicts. More importantly, an increase in the number of democracies would extend the liberal peace to a greater number of countries, and increase the probability of winning war – arguably providing a strong normative and practical rationale for liberal states to conduct a more Wilsonian foreign policy. Recognising the inherent difficulties implicit with the democratisation process, however, greater effort should be made to encourage the consolidation of political institutions prior to mass political/electoral participation in transitional states. Strengthening international organisations that embody liberal norms and values, and encouraging economic interdependence with nondemocracies would also help mediate the strategic uncertainty and misperceptions that exist where the Kantian peace meets the Hobbesian state of anarchy.

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The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

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The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

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- [5] Russett, "Democracy, War and Expansion through Historical Lenses," 21-22.
- [6] John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 123-24; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing To Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go To War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 23-27.
- [7] Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," 123-24.
- [8] Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Need for a Qualitative Test of the Democratic Peace Theory," in *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?*, ed. Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 11-12.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," 89-90.
- [11] Ibid.: 96-97.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing To Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go To War*, 29-30.
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The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

[22] Elman, "The Need for a Qualitative Test of the Democratic Peace Theory," 14-18; Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," 12-13.

[23] Russett, "Democracy, War and Expansion through Historical Lenses," 13-14.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Democratic states are, however, more willing to enter into non-violent confrontations even if they generally refrain from escalating these disputes into war.

[26] Russett, "Democracy, War and Expansion through Historical Lenses," 14.

[27] Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 10-11.

[28] Ibid., 178-79.

[29] Elman, "The Need for a Qualitative Test of the Democratic Peace Theory," 10-14.

[30] Russett and Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*, 114-16.

[31] Paul R. Hensel, Gary Goertz, and Paul F. Diehl, "The Democratic Peace and Rivalries," *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 4 (November 2000): 1187.

[32] Ajin Choi, "The Power of Democratic Competition," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 144-45.

[33] Ibid.: 146-49. Ajin Choi elaborates that, 'According to the results of the marginal impact analysis presented in Table 1, the number of democratic partners variable increases the probability of winning a war by 62 percentage points as this variable moves from its minimum to maximum value and all other variables are set at their mean or modal values. The number of nondemocratic partners variable, on the other hand, decreases the probability of winning by 44 percentage points under the same conditions.'

[34] Maoz, "The Controversy over the Democratic Peace: Rearguard Action or Cracks in the Wall?," 190.

[35] Russett and Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*, 114-16, 22-24.

[36] Gelpi and Griesdorf, "Winners or Losers? Democracies in International Crisis, 1918-94," 645-46; Russett and Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*, 302. It is argued that the perceived reluctance of liberal democracies to use force may actually lead to a greater number of military challenges in spite of their military capabilities because the openness of their political system paradoxically only makes their bargaining tactics credible to opponents when they appear willing to use force.

[37] Christian Davenport and David A. Armstrong II, "Democracy and the Violation of Human Rights: A Statistical Analysis from 1976 to 1996," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (July 2004): 551-53; Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing To Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go To War*, 265-66.

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The Democratic Peace Theory

Written by Kevin Placek

- [40] Russett and Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*, 70-71.
- [41] Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing To Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go To War*, 16-19.
- [42] Bruce Russett, "Can A Democratic Peace Be Built?," *International Interactions* 18, no. 3 (1993): 279-80.
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- [46] Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," 659-61.
- [47] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 195-97.
- [48] *Ibid.*
- [49] Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," 49; Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 195-97.
- [50] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 202-05; Choi, "The Power of Democratic Competition," 153.
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- [58] Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 1," 231.
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The Democratic Peace Theory

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