

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

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MICHAEL HART, JUN 20 2014

The democratic peace theory has been described as 'the closest thing we have to an empirical law in the study of International relations' and has heavily influenced US foreign policy.' [1] President Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address argued that 'ultimately the best strategy to insure our security and to build a desirable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.' [2] President George W. Bush noted that 'the way forward in the Middle East... is to promote democracy' and this belief could be seen to have partially underpinned the invasion of Iraq in 2003. [3] The way that this theory has shaped US foreign policy makes the question of "Is democracy a cause of peace?" especially pertinent.

Peace can be a broad term, so this essay shall be explicit and state that it shall be focusing on democratic peace, or the notion that mature democracies do not go to war with one another. This paper will argue that whilst the observation that mature democracies do not go to war with each other is robust, the causal relationship between democracy and peace is far more complex than advocates of democratic peace theory would allow. It shall argue that both the causal mechanism and the positivist epistemology that underpin the theory are questionable and as such the democratic peace should be understood as being part of a more complex causal process. To make this argument this paper will firstly elucidate on the democratic peace theory and its positivist epistemology. It shall then critique the normative and structural causal mechanisms that are offered to support the theory. The final section shall critique its positivist epistemic foundations and argue that the linear causal line that this theory forwards may be inadequate for understanding the complex social world.

Christopher Hobson argues that 'Democratic Peace research has been strongly shaped by... neo-positivist epistemology and methodologies'. [4] Positivist theories of International relations generally seek to provide a parsimonious explanation to some aspect of the world. These theories are modelled on the natural sciences, most notably physics. [5] A theory thus seeks to isolate an independent variable that regularly precedes a dependent variable and establish an association between the two. This is exactly the case for Democratic Peace. Statistical analyses of interstate war and regime type have found a statistical correlation between the regime type of democracy and an absence of war between democracies. [6] Despite criticisms that the combination of the relatively few cases of democracy and the scarcity of war mean that the statistical correlation is insignificant, [7] the observation is a robust one. There is not a single instance of war between democracies in the dataset. [8]

Yet correlation is not cause. Monday always precedes Tuesday, however it cannot be said to be the cause of Tuesday. [9] To establish cause one must establish a plausible causal mechanism or logic. Two logics are generally offered to establish a causal relationship between democracy and peace, both drawing on the works of Immanuel Kant. [10] The first is the normative explanation. The argument thus follows. Democratic leaders are socialised by a domestic political environment that emphasises peaceful resolution of differences. Leaders in democratic states are therefore accustomed to resolving disputes through 'bounded competition'. [11] They externalise this behaviour in the international arena and seek to resolve conflict peacefully with other democratic states, which have also been socialised by the same domestic environment. [12] Peaceful relations are therefore institutionalised between democracies. John Owen provides the example of Franco-American relations in the late 1790s to support the normative assumption. He notes that despite hostilities in the late 1790s, which included a Quasi-War between the US and France, French seizures of US merchant vessels, and the "XYZ Affair, [13] Franco-American relations did not escalate to full-scale war due to 'republican solidarity'. [14]

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

The second explanation is structural. This explanation centres on the structure of democratic institutions and the fact that they make leaders accountable to the population and other interest groups within a state.[15] Democratic leaders, being rational, will avoid costly wars, as they are unpopular and could lead to their ejection from public office. This is based on the Kantian assertion that the general populace, or the citizenry are war averse. Kant states that citizens 'will have a great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise' as this would mean 'calling down on themselves the miseries of war'. [16] Thus, the structure of the democratic state, with regular competitive elections, allow citizens to punish officials 'who violate their rights'. [17] US President Johnson's refusal to seek re-election in 1968 can be seen to be due to the negative public perception of the Vietnam War. Whilst the obvious critique of the above assertion is that democracies still do fight wars, they are only able to fight wars that are broadly supported by the general public. War with other democratic states will not be acquiesced to, as other democratic states are considered 'just, and therefore deserving of accommodation'. [18]

Whilst as abstract assertions the normative and structural mechanisms may appear quite convincing, once the practises of democratic states are delved into, they appear somewhat less so. If the normative argument were to hold then we would expect that the way in which democracies approach their foreign policy would always be peaceful and accommodating to other democracies. A brief look to US foreign policy demonstrates that this is not always the case. Sebastian Rosato argues that during the Cold War 'Washington's commitment to containing the spread of communism overwhelmed any respect for fellow democracies'. [19] He then lists a series of both fledgling and established democracies, including in Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, Iran and Indonesia, which were replaced by US-backed dictatorial regimes. [20]

Rosato further argues that US 'support for democracy was often sacrificed in the name of American economic interests'. [21] He cites the cases of covert US intervention in Iran in 1953 and Chile in 1973. Although Rosato does not go into detail, in 1953 the US and the UK orchestrated a coup against democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddegh, because he threatened to nationalise the Iranian oil industry. Similarly, in 1973 the US was instrumental in a coup against the democratically elected Chilean President Allende after he threatened to nationalise the copper industry. Whilst undoubtedly these interventions were below any meaningful threshold for war, [22] they hardly demonstrate a respect for other democracies that the normative logic would expect.

The structural explanation also similarly suffers when applied to reality. The assumption that public opinion will directly influence democratic leaders and elites is far less robust than the structural explanation would expect. Firstly, rather than being passive recipients of public opinion democratic leaders often shape and lead public discourse. [23] The media theory of framing provides a valuable insight into this issue. Framing is to select 'some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient... in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. [24] Research from Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky highlight how the manner in which a particular issue is framed stimulates different responses to that issue. [25] If we consider that democratically elected officials are imbued with the authority of office and have access to the mass media, it becomes possible to imagine that they have the ability to shape public opinion.

Secondly, the structural explanation is premised on the public being aware and effected by "miseries of war". Whilst both World War I and II provide the starkest examples of the miseries of war being inflicted on the general public, war is increasingly becoming a remote affair affecting less of the population. Most modern democracies rely on professional armies rather than conscript armies or national service meaning that most citizens will not have a personal stake in warfare. [26] Technological advances also mean that war is moving even further away from the public eye. Drone warfare means that modern militaries are able to apply lethal force without having to deploy personnel. We could therefore be heading towards a situation where there is virtually no public connection to war, other than financing it.

Thirdly, the structural explanation also rests on the electorate's ability to punish a belligerent public official. However, this is based on the assumption that there is a viable opposition for the public to elect to replace the official with. If we look to the 2003 Iraq War we can see that, in the UK at least, both of the main political parties, Labour and the Conservatives, were broadly supportive of the invasion. In fact the main body of opposition for the Parliamentary vote

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

came from within the governing Labour ranks.[27]. Although the subsequent election returned the Labour government with a reduced majority, Prime Minister Blair was not ejected from office.

Whilst the above critiques demonstrate that the Democratic Peace Theory's causal logics are less than robust, they do little to address whether or not this type of theoretical postulation is adequate for understanding the social world. Whilst this may seem like irrelevant academic musing, it does have important real world implications. If the theory does not adequately reflect the social world then its proscriptions may be inadequate too. The next section of this essay will question the positivist epistemic foundations of the Democratic Peace Theory.

Steve Smith argues that positivist scholarship in International Relations has four implicit assumptions that rarely get addressed.[28] The first assumption is a 'belief in the unity of science (including the social sciences)'. [29] As such, positivists feel legitimated to utilise methods generally used for enquiry into the natural world. Positivist Fred Chernoff argues that the Democratic Peace Theory satisfies a number of definitions of scientific progress, listing Newtonian mechanics, optics and organic chemistry as compatible scientific areas of research.[30] However, this assumption rests on the "dualist" notion that the social world is "out there", capable of being objectively observed and independent of how it is thought of.[31] Whereas the natural world can be observed independently of how we conceive of it, this is not the case with the social world. John Searle makes this distinction by differentiating between 'brute' and 'institutional' facts.[32] Brute facts, such as mountains and molecules, are independent of how we conceive of them;[33] however, institutional facts, such as democracy, are constituted 'through being identified and explained' by its observers.[34] Hobson notes that the popularity of the Democratic Peace Theory has entered into the mainstream of public discourse and 'has influenced actors' perceptions of the relationship between democracy and peace.[35] Understood in this context, Democratic Peace Theory becomes a very different proposition. Rather than being an objective state of international relations, Democratic Peace becomes dependent on how it is conceived of by actors.

The second assumption that Smith highlights is that positivists make a distinction between facts and values in the social world.[36] Concepts such as democracy are as much value statements as they are facts. Chernoff notes that both proponents and opponents of the Democratic Peace have sought to adopt definitions of democracy based upon those offered by Freedom House and the Polity indexes.[37] Whilst he celebrates the uniformity of the datasets, he fails to acknowledge that the data is value laden. For instance, since 1800 the US has consistency achieved near top scores in its Polity ratings.[38] This is despite universal suffrage not being achieved until 1920 and institutional racial segregation existing into the latter half of the 20th Century.

Ido Oren further argues that 'apparent objective coding rules by which democracy is defined in fact represents current American values.' [39] He notes that the US defines democracy in such a way as to emphasise its differences with its opponents. Oren contrasts President Wilson's positive perception of German governance prior to the WWI, with his denunciations of German autocracy after the War. Oren argues that this was so the US could define democracy in such a way as to accentuate its differences with Imperial Germany [40] Democracy can therefore be seen to be a reflection of Western values rather than an objective fact.

The third assumption is that regularities exist in the social world.[41] Whilst in the natural world regularities may generate law-like statements, in the reflexive social world this is not the case. Drawing on Max Weber, Richard Lebow notes that regularities in the social world have a 'short half life... as they disappear and change as human goals and strategies evolve'. [42] By understanding the social world in this context we can engage with Smith's fourth assumption, the belief in 'empirical validation or falsification' as the 'hallmark of "real" enquiry'. [43] Whilst the Democratic Peace is clearly a falsifiable theory, does this actually tell us much about democracy as a pacifying factor in international relations? If we consider that the social world is reflexive and builds upon previous understanding of the world, then the Democratic Peace might best be understood as a feature contingent to a very particular specific set of initial conditions. Whilst it may not be a pacifying factor in the future, would that in any way disprove its pacifying effects of the past?

Attempting to empirically validate or falsify a theory also assumes that it is possible to isolate an independent variable. In some physical sciences isolating an independent variable and positing a testable hypothesis may well be

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

a suitable means of knowledge construction, but in the reflexive and interdependent social world it is not. Whilst as an analytical task it is useful to demarcate different variables, in the social world we cannot assume the independence of variables.[44] Is it possible to argue that, *ceteris paribus*, absent democracy war would be more prevalent between “democratic” states? Azar Gat argues that the Democratic Peace should be understood as being part of a more complex causal process and the dichotomy of ‘democratic/nondemocratic’ is ‘crude and misleading’.[45] Gat argues that ‘industrialization and the escape from the Malthusian vicious circle’ underlays the Democratic Peace.[46] He notes that variables such as increased societal prosperity, the growth of metropolitan life, the sexual revolution, the women’s franchise, and nuclear weapons have all contributed to the Democratic Peace. [47] If we understand the Democratic Peace as being contingent on the confluence of social, economic and strategic conditions, it then becomes a very different concept. Democratic Peace therefore becomes the product of a far more complex causal chain. The simplistic linear causal equation of democracy and peace becomes problematic, especially if one considers research that concerns issues that arise during the process of democratization.[48]

To conclude, this essay has not sought to dispute the observation that democracies do not go to war with each other, or even that it is a cause of peace between democracies. Instead it has sought to emphasise that the notion that democracy is a cause of peace is more complex than advocates of Democratic Peace Theory allow. Firstly, both the normative and structural causal mechanisms that are offered do not always operate in the manner described. The normative logic ought to inhibit aggressive relations between democratic states, however instances such as US support for coups against the democratically elected governments of Iran and Chile suggest that respect for democracy is secondary to material concerns. The structural logic suggests that accountability ought to inhibit unpopular aggression by democratic leader; however this appear to be based on an idealized democratic model. In reality democratic leaders have the ability to shape public opinion and the public are generally affected very little by the miseries of war.

The second, and more fundamental critique of the Democratic Peace Theory, stem from its epistemic foundations. The positivist epistemology upon which the Democratic Peace Theory rests is not necessarily well suited for study of the social world. It is not possible to objectively research social phenomena such as democracy and peace, as they are constituted by how the researcher conceives of them. Also, the distinction between facts and values is misguided, as social facts are the result of a political process. Understanding democracy as an independent variable is also not reflective of the complex web of causation in the social world. It is this sort of reductionist thinking that leads to simplistic policy proscriptions. Whilst democracy may be a cause of peace, it is not necessarily the cause of peace between democratic states.

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Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

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- [1] Jack Levy in Owen, (1994), p87
- [2] President Clinton, State of the Union, January 1994

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

[3] President and Prime Minister Blair Discussed Iraq, Middle East, 12th November 2004

[4] Hobson, (2011), p1909

[5] Tilly & Tarrow, (2007), p29; Lebow, (2014), p12

[6] Doyle, (1986),

[7] See Russett et al, (1995)

[8] For a working definition of democracy see Russett, (1993), p14-16

[9] Lebow, (2014), p25

[10] Limited space only allows for the brief discussion of two causal logics, however most other causal mechanisms are derivatives of the two being discussed. See O'Neil & Russett, (1999); Owen, (1994);

[11] Dixon, (1994), p16

[12] Rosato, (2003), p586

[13] The French government tried to exhort thousands of dollars from US envoys in Paris. Owen, (1994), p105

[14] Owen, (1994), p105

[15] Rosato, (2003), p587

[16] Kant, (1970), p100

[17] Owen, (1994), p99

[18] Doyle, (1986), p1161

[19] Rosato, (2003), p590

[20] Ibid, p591

[21] Ibid, p591

[22] The Correlates of War (CoW) define interstate war as 'sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1,000 battle-related combatant fatalities within a twelve month period'. See The Correlates of War

[23] Rosato, (2003), p595

[24] Entman, (1993), p52

[25] Kahneman & Tversky, (1984), p343-344

[26] Rosato, (2003), p595

[27] 'UK Parliament backs Iraq war', BBC, 19th March 2003

Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?

Written by Michael Hart

[28] Smith, (2008), p16

[29] Ibid, p16

[30] Chernoff, (2004), p50

[31] Hobson, (2011), p1907

[32] Searle, (1995), p2

[33] Ibid, p9

[34] Hobson, (2011), p1907

[35] Hobson, (2011), p1907

[36] Smith, (2008), p16

[37] Chernoff, (2004), p56

[38] Data Market, Democracy Score (Polity)

[39] Oren, (1995), p147

[40] Ibid, p148

[41] Smith, (2008), p16

[42] Lebow, (2007), p6

[43] Smith, (2008), p16

[44] Lebow, (2014), p2

[45] Gat, (2005), p76

[46] Ibid, p85

[47] Ibid, p89-96

[48] Mansfeld & Snyder, (2002)

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