

The Influence of Democracy on International Peace

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Democracies rarely, if ever, engage in war with one another. The resulting democratic peace theory has been a catalyst for investments in democracy promotion as a means of securing peace. Yet, the conclusion that democracy, and not alternative factors, is the main underlying driver of peace has required extensive research faced with fundamental empirical challenges. The most sophisticated statistical analysis supports the conclusion that democratic governance is a primary determinant of peaceful relations between similarly-democratic states. Scholars also offer theory and evidence on the specific mechanisms that make war less likely between democratic states, although this question remains unsettled.

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The Case for Democracy series. This brief is part of the The Case for Democracy series, which curates academic scholarship on democracy's impacts across various domains of governance and development. Drawing from an exhaustive review of the literature, this analysis presents selected works that encompass significant findings and illustrate how the academic conversation has unfolded. For more information on the series, visit <https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/dal>.

Background

War appeared to be an inevitable feature of international relations while European states engaged in near-constant warfare during their processes of state formation. Yet, Immanuel Kant's 18th-century vision of "perpetual peace" introduced a radical proposition: that the proliferation of republican governments might fundamentally alter this pattern of belligerence. Kant's insights remained in the theoretical realm of political philosophy until the mid-20th century, when a vast scholarship emerged to empirically evaluate the democratic peace theory.

The "Democratic Peace Theory:" Democracies Don't Fight Each Other

THE "DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY" EMERGED AS AN EXPLANATION for the observation that democracies rarely, if ever, engage in war with one another, contributing to stability in the anarchic international system. This empirical pattern is one of the few "law-like" regularities in international relations and has led scholars to examine whether, and why, joint democracy is a sufficient condition for peace between states. While early debates questioned this correlation, most studies find this relationship is robust, including recent work relying on cutting-edge statistical methods and updated data.

DEAN V. BABST (1964) PIONEERED THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION of the democratic peace theory by analyzing whether independent

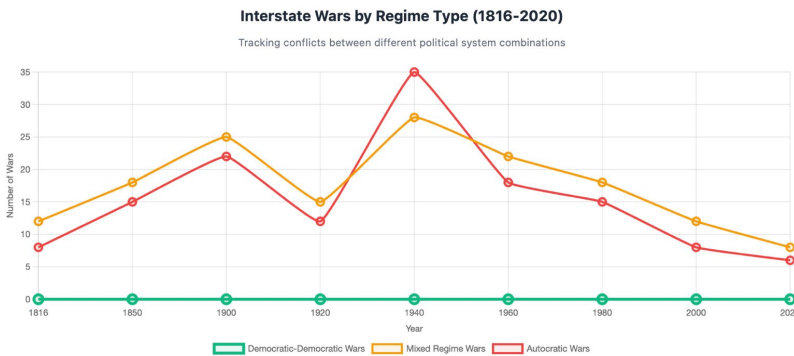


Figure 1: Interstate wars over time by regime type of pairs of countries (1816-2020), created using data from the Correlates of War Project <https://correlatesofwar.org>

nations with freely elected governments have historically avoided military conflict among themselves.¹ To test the theory, Babst analyzed Quincy Wright's historical list of 116 major wars from 1789 to 1941 and found no cases of war between two independent, elective governments. Although the major wars of World War I and II included many nations that elected their leaders through democratic means, these countries were always allied and did not fight one another. This is despite the fact that many of these European countries were frequently at war prior to their democratizations. Famously, England and France, which frequently engaged in warfare, ceased fighting following the establishment of modern electoral systems. These dynamics result in "security communities," in which states not only refrain from conflict but also do not anticipate or prepare for hostility with one another.

Theorized Mechanisms: What is it about Democracy that Generates Peace?

SCHOLARS HAVE PROPOSED SEVERAL MECHANISMS² FOR HOW democracy makes war between similarly-governed states rare. One set of scholars posit a normative or cultural mechanism. Upon confirming the absence of wars between democracies from 1815 onwards, Bruce Russett (1993) posits two sets of mechanisms. First that democracies extend their internal norms, or culture, of peaceful conflict resolution to their interactions with other democracies.³ Even though democratic states are not necessarily, nor inherently, peaceful seeing as they can exhibit belligerent behavior against non-democratic states. John M. Owen (1994)'s theory clarifies that mutually perceived liberalism is the key element that fosters peace between liberal democracies.⁴ He argues that liberal ideas encourage citizens and elites to trust other states they perceive as fellow liberal

¹ Babst, Dean V. "Elective Governments—A Force for Peace." *The Wisconsin Sociologist* 3, no. 1 (1964): 9–14.

The data. The methodology that informs the main evidence base on the effect of democracy on interstate conflict is focused on the study of dyads: pairs of states considered as units of analysis representing potential conflict relationships. This methodological approach involves classifying each country's regime type and relevant political attributes annually, then pairing states to understand potential initiator–target interactions. The dyadic level of analysis is key to testing the theory, given it predicts pairs of states with similarly democratic regimes are less likely to fight each other, not necessarily that democratic countries are less belligerent overall.

² A *mechanism* in social science is the causal link, the "how" or "why", that connects a cause and its effect.

³ Russett, Bruce. 1993. *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton University Press.

⁴ Owen, John M. 1994. "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace." *International Security* 19 (2): 87–125.

democracies, while they regard illiberal states as potential threats. Citizens and elites then constrain leaders through institutions, preventing war with states perceived as liberal while sometimes supporting conflict with perceived illiberals. This logic posits that in seemingly exceptional cases such as the Spanish-American War and the Anglo-American War of 1812, the actors involved either did not perceive each other as liberal democracies or lacked genuine liberal features.

A SECOND SET OF MECHANISMS RELATE TO INSTITUTIONS OF DEMOCRACIES. James D. Fearon (1994)'s influential audience cost⁵ model concludes that electoral institutions, which operate as mechanisms of accountability, can moderate the security dilemma⁶ between democracies.⁷ This model proposes that international crises can be understood as political wars of attrition driven by domestic political audiences. The intuition of the model is that, when leaders engage in public escalations, backing down entails audience costs, such as loss of credibility or reputation, and these audience costs increase as the crisis escalates. Electoral accountability in democracies makes domestic audience costs much larger for leaders, making their signals more credible. As a result, democracies are able to emit more credible signals than authoritarian states, mitigating the security dilemma between democratic states. Fearon (1994)'s accountability mechanism squares with Russett (1993), who proposes that in addition to culture, institutional constraints, such as checks and balances and public debate, can slow down the decision to use force and provide time for a peaceful resolution. In sum, because democratic leaders face voters who can punish them for reckless behavior, they only escalate conflicts when they truly mean it; and other democracies, knowing this, are more likely to head their warnings seriously and find peaceful solutions.

BENJAMIN E. GOLDSMITH, DIMITRI SEMENOVICH, ARCOT SOWMYA, AND GORANA GRGIC (2017) further builds on Fearon (1994) arguing that political competition within states is the key institutional factor driving explaining dyadic democratic peace.⁸ Political competition, with a viable opposition, compels leaders to carefully consider domestic political consequences before initiating conflict with other democracies, while these incentives are less pronounced in low competition contexts. Leaders in highly competitive political systems hesitate to initiate conflict with democracies because the normative, moral, and material grounds for justifying such conflicts are weaker and more easily criticized.

⁵ *Audience costs* are the political penalties leaders pay when they back down from public threats or commitments, such as looking weak, losing credibility, or being voted out of office by disappointed constituents.

⁶ A *security dilemma* is a situation where one state's efforts to increase its own security (like building up military forces) makes other states feel less secure, prompting them to also arm themselves, creating a spiral of mistrust even when no one initially wanted war.

⁷ Fearon, James D. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88 (3): 577–92.

⁸ Goldsmith, Benjamin E., Dimitri Semenovitch, Arcot Sowmya, and Gorana Grgic. 2017. "Political Competition and the Initiation of International Conflict." *World Politics* 69 (3): 493–531.

Alternative Explanations: Realism and Foreign Policy

CRITIQUES OF DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY argue democracy may not be the driver of peace but instead a byproduct of other structural conditions and broader economic dynamics. Although the pattern of peace between democracies is generally uncontested by scholars, some argue that the cause of the democratic peace lies elsewhere. Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali (1989) challenge the role of democracy and instead propose that regime stability and well-defined political systems are the underlying drivers of the observed pattern of democratic peace.⁹ Authors analyze historical data on political regimes and disputes expanding beyond the existing focus on country pairs (dyads) and consider different levels of conflict: disputes, conflicts and wars. First authors find that at the country level, there is no strong relationship between regime type and conflict involvement; democracies are not less likely than other regimes to initiate or join disputes, although they are less likely to escalate wars. Second, at the dyadic level, their findings corroborate the democratic peace: pairs of democratic states rarely go to war and are less likely to engage in militarized disputes. But among pairs of democracies and non-democracies, authors find that democracies do initiate conflicts with non-democracies. Finally, at the system level, during periods when the world has a higher proportion of democratic dyads there are more conflicts overall but with fewer wars and a lower percentage of disputes escalating to war. These findings lead authors to conclude that regime stability and clearly defined political systems are key factors that reduce the risk of severe conflict.

⁹ Maoz, Zeev, and Nasrin Abdolali. 1989. "Regime Types and International Conflict, 1816-1976." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33 (1): 3-35.

The data. A fundamental challenge to the empirical assessment of the democratic peace theory relates to issues of confounding. For instance, democratically similar states may also be likely to be states that engage in global trade as Gartzke (2007) contends. Holding these structural factors constant is challenging because they are tightly correlated with regime type. Still in light of these challenges to causal estimation, Imai and Lo (2021)'s sensitivity analysis offer the most compelling approximation to the particular role of democracy as compared to other factors.

CHRISTOPHER LAYNE (1994) CONTENDS THAT REALIST EXPLANATIONS offer a more robust framework than mutual restraint or respect.¹⁰ Layne (1994) analyzes four case studies from the 19th and early 20th centuries in which democracies were on the verge of war. He reviews government records and elite statements from periods of Anglo-American tension, such as the Trent Affair (1861-63) and the Venezuelan boundary dispute (1895-96), as well as other diplomatic confrontations. These cases illustrate that democratic leaders prioritized geopolitical interests, security needs, and power considerations. Additionally, public opinion and parliamentary debate revealed minimal evidence supporting a norm against war between democracies, indicating that institutional constraints are insufficient. Instead, national self-interest and relative power shaped attitudes and constrained escalation. Layne (1994) ultimately asserts that when vital interests were under attack, democracies both threatened and prepared for war against one another.

¹⁰ Layne, Christopher. 1994a. "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace." *International Security* 19 (2): 38.

THE CAPITALIST PEACE THESIS AND THE TRADE STRUCTURE ARGUMENT emphasize the role of economic interdependence. Erik Gartzke (2007) contends that economic development, financial openness, and shared capitalist interests explain why advanced states rarely fight.¹¹ Wealth is tied to mobile, intangible assets and financial integration provides non-military mechanisms for resolving disputes. Relatedly, Katja Kleinberg, Gregory Robinson, and Stewart L. French (2012) shows that peace also depends on the diversification of extradyadic trade networks, where reliance on multiple global partners decreases incentives for conflict.¹² Together, these critiques propose that capitalism, territorial stability, and global trade networks better explain the observed pattern.

¹¹ Gartzke, Erik. 2007. The Capitalist Peace. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(1), 166-191.

¹² Kleinberg, Katja B., Gregory Robinson, and Stewart L. French. 2012. Trade Concentration and Interstate Conflict. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(2), 529-540.

Emerging Themes

RECENTLY, SCHOLARS HAVE RETURNED TO THE EMPIRICAL PATTERN of the democratic peace with new methods and updated data. Their findings corroborate that joint democracy is likely a major driver of the pattern of consistent peace between democratic nations. Kosuke Imai and James Lo (2021) provide evidence that the negative association between joint democracy and interstate conflict is robust to cutting-edge statistical analysis.¹³ Their findings suggest that for the democratic peace relationship to be explained away by an unobserved confounder, that confounder would have to be extraordinarily pervasive; 47 times more prevalent in democratic dyads than others—making the democratic peace five times as robust as the association between smoking and lung cancer. Adding to this recent re-examination are David Altman, Federico Rojas-de-Galarreta, and Francisco Urdinez (2021) who introduce complexity to the measure of democracy.¹⁴ Authors find that while regime similarity alone is insufficient for peace, higher levels of democracy do reduce the probability of militarized disputes between states.

¹³ Imai, Kosuke, and James Lo. 2021. "Robustness of Empirical Evidence for the Democratic Peace: A Nonparametric Sensitivity Analysis." *International Organization* 75 (3): 1-19.

¹⁴ Altman, David, Federico Rojas-de-Galarreta, and Francisco Urdinez. 2021. "An Interactive Model of the Democratic Peace: Revisiting the Theory with Elastic Measures." *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (3).

Looking Ahead

WILL WE OBSERVE MORE WAR AS DEMOCRACY RETREATS around the world? And if so, how can we distinguish the effect of democratic backsliding from other major changes in economic interdependence, multilateralism, appetite for democracy promotion, alliances, and international order generally? These questions remain central to understanding how contemporary global trends may reshape the patterns that have defined international security for decades.

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