Why are democracies less likely – than non democracies – to go to war with each other?

December 22nd

The proposition that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other than non-democracies has been argued to be the closest thing we have to an empirical law in international relations (Owen, 1994). But what are the underlying characteristics of democracies that prevent or discourage conflictual interaction between them? *This essay argues that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other – than non-democracies – due to the fact that they are characterized by domestic institutional constraints and norms which influence the way their state pursue their interests.* Democratic norms influence the creation and evolution of political institutions, and institutions help generate a more peaceful moral culture over time. In this essay, the concept of democracy will be delimited to liberal democracies. Liberal democracies are defined as "a state characterized by free and fair elections involving universal suffrage, together with a liberal political framework consisting of a relatively high degree of personal liberty and the protection of individual rights" (Ferdinand et al., 2018). First, the liberal institutionalist theory will be introduced. Afterwards, five supporting arguments for institutional constraints will be provided, and then the constructivist theory will be introduced, followed by three supporting arguments for democratic norms. Finally, three approaches clarifying other viewpoints on peace between democracies will be presented and fended off, and a conclusion will be drawn.

This essay is partially informed by liberal internationalism, an international relations theory that developed during the enlightenment, associated with Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham. Liberal internationalism is a political ideology that advocates for international cooperation and the promotion of democracy and liberal values around the world. It is based on the belief that the spread of liberal values and institutions can contribute to global peace and prosperity. In Kant's work 'Perpetual Peace', he argued that the transformation of individual consciousness, republican constitutionalism and a federal contract amongst states enables world peace. To back this up, he pointed towards the fact that liberal states in the international arena act peacefully towards each other. One of Kant's main points as to why liberalist countries were less prone to go to war was that; in liberalist countries, the decision to use violence was taken by the people rather than the prince, and the citizens would have" great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise" (Kant 1991: 99-102) (Dunne, 2020: 104-111). Liberal internationalism provides a theoretical basis for institutional constraints being a part of why democracies go to war less with each other.

Democratic institutional constraints such as electoral competition force executives to only wage war when it is just, or they will be replaced by other politicians. Voters are likely to vote on their perceptions of the failures of incumbent policies, especially when an opponent calls attention to it and offers better outcomes (Goldsmith, 2007). Because of this, democratic leaders need to justify war by arguing it is necessary and unavoidable. It is easier to justify a war against a non-democracy than a war against another democracy. The general perception amongst democratic citizens is that non-democratic leaders are aggressive, evil and unwilling to cooperate(UN, 2001). In contrast, the democratic citizen will view war with another democracy that is both representative and respectful of the rights of all citizens as illegitimate (Friedman, 2008). When the United States, as an answer to 9/11, invaded the non-democratic state of Afghanistan in 2001, President Bush justified the action with the desire for justice and freedom within the country, emphasizing that the United States represented the "good" (Flint. Falah, 2004). If Afghanistan were to be a democratic state, Bush would not have been able to justify the means of the war as democratic systems are already free and just, and the war might have been avoidable.

The institutional constraint of elections makes the executive in democratic systems answerable to a public unwilling to pay the cost of war in lives and resources. War affects large segments of the population as it requires public mobilization and often damages the economy and infrastructure. Because of this, war often seems to be an unattractive option for the citizens of a democracy. If a democratic leader fails to respect the public will, he might be punished by removal from office (Dabros, M., Petersen, M. 2013). In 1916, during WWI, President Wilson and the Democratic Party were reelected in the United States presidential election due to keeping America out of the struggles in Europe. Later, in 1918, America entered WWI, which ended up being extremely costly regarding manpower and resources. Also, the war failed to seek its goal of promoting democracy and world peace – which had been the president's justification for the war. As a result, the war was by the public undesired and perceived as a significant failure, severely damaging the support for Wilson and his party. The democrats could not recover from the war's general discontentment, and in the presidential election of 1920, the Republican leader Warren G Harding came to office (Cotton, 1986). This is proof that democratic leaders will be held accountable when engaging in a costly war and that democratic institutions can remove war-prone leaders.

 In contrast to the latter, non-democracies lack institutional constraints such as elections and electoral competition, enabling them to initiate unjust and costly wars quickly. Because of the lack of electoral competition and accountability, executives in non-democracies can act entirely on their preferences

without fearing public repercussions. This heightens the risk of violent disputes as a war-prone leader doesn't have to worry about being punished through the removal of office (Schjolset, 2008). In 1990, the non-democratic leader, Saddam Hussein, ordered an invasion of Kuwait, ultimately leading to the Gulf war. The Gulf war lasted for several months and resulted in significant casualties and damage to infrastructures in Iraq which led to an accuse humanitarian crisis in Iraq. In addition to human and economic costs, the invasion also led to economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the international community, which further punished the civilians for the crimes of a regime they had little ability to influence (Helfont, 2021). Despite the disaster, Saddam Hussein stayed in power for 13 more years (History, 2020). If Iraq were a democracy, the significant failures of the Gulf war would most likely lead to public repercussions such as the removal of office.

Democratic institutional constraints legitimize the executive, enabling them to extract more resources and build a greater defence in wartime. Due to institutional provision of monitoring, voice and exit abilities for society, constrained executives are less likely to extract rents from their citizens if not for legitimate reasons. Therefore, constrained executives are more likely to be trusted when implementing unpopular or costly policies such as increased taxation to increase the state's capacity. This enables them to extract greater military resources during wartime and finance larger and longer wars, outspending their rivals and ensuring victory. Their ability to effectively rearm and construct a strong defence constitutes a great deterrence mechanism and less belligerent peacetime—the both-sided deterrence of two democracies in conflict results in relative peace (Goldsmith, 2007). During the Second World War, the United States managed to increase the number of taxpayers from thirteen million to fifty million and raised the tax burden on the rich. This ended up financing 41% of the total war cost. (Blakey. R, Blakey. C, 1942). Some historians say that America's ability to send out large amounts of bombers, tanks and warships might have been the winning key to world war 2. (Dettmer, 2020). The fact that the United States could rent money from its citizens might have contributed to its success in the war.

Democratic institutions constrain the executive from acting militarily without consulting the legislative branch, which lowers the risk of war. In democracies, government responsibilities are constitutionally distributed among different poles of power. Due to the separation of power, the executive can not take military action without consulting the legislative branch. (Dabros and Petersen, 2013) This slows down the mobilization of societal groups in support of military action. In non-democratic systems, the lack of institutionalized constraints on the executive enables them to quickly reach the necessary consensus on

using force(Kinsella. Rosseu, 2008). When a dyadic democratic conflict occurs, the slow mobilization on both sides provides time for dispute management and increases the likelihood of a diplomatic resolution (Maoz, 1997). An example of a democracy that has been able to hinder the occurrence of war by using the separation of power is the United States. In 1973, the Congress of the United States passed the war power resolution. The resolution ensured that a collective judgment of the congress and the president would have to apply for an introduction of United States armed forces into hostilities (Joint resolution of November 7, 1973). Since the war power resolution was implemented, it has prevented the U.S army from proceeding with combat on several occasions (Matthew C. Weed, 2019). One of them was as late as 2020, amid the tension between Iran and the U.S. when congress disapproved of President Donald Trump's fighting Iran with military force (Foran & Byrd, 2020). The conflict might have escalated into war if it weren't for the institutional constraints hindering Donald Trump.

This next part of the essay focuses on democratic norms and is mainly informed by social constructivism. Social constructivism was developed after the end of the Cold War in the 1980s and is an international relations theory. The theory emphasizes how a global society can develop shared identities, norms, and attitudes and that these shape state interests. According to social constructivism theory, the social and political reality is not fixed or predetermined but constructed and negotiated through the interactions and communication of individuals within a society. This approach suggests the way we understand and perceive the world is shaped by the social and cultural context in which we live, and our beliefs, values and behaviour are shaped by our social interactions and the cultural norms that we learn and internalize. The social constructivist theories argue that how countries interact and perceive one another is shaped by their shared democratic values and norms, which encourage peaceful conflict resolution (Barnett, 2020).

Due to democratic norms, democracies are more likely – than non-democracies - to cooperate through intergovernmental organizations, enabling peaceful settlements. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) provide a forum for countries to discuss and address common issues, often with mechanisms in place for resolving disputes peacefully (Harvard law school). The political scientist Arend Lijphart argues that as democracies build on consensus, they tend to adopt kinder and gentler foreign policies (1999). Due to these policies, democracies tend to rely more on negotiation and compromises to resolve conflicts. This generates a higher willingness to enter IGOs where cooperation promotes peace. The Kantian thesis suggests a similar argument: democratic structures and learned norms presumably help create a desire to

join IGOs (Rey. Bardkull, 2005). For example, when Germany unified in 1990, it started to observe and adopt the federal principles that followed member states of the European community. Later, in 1992 integrated into the European community, which settled for peaceful and effective relations with the other member states. This put an end to the previous escalating wars that had occurred between Germany and France (Attia, 2016).

Domestic democratic norms generate trust between democracies as they believe in having a shared liberal identity, enabling a more peaceful environment. When a democracy accepts another state for being democratic, they believe they share the same values, attitudes, traditions and institutions. Relying on shared identity, democracies expect each other to be reasonable, predictable and trustworthy. The expectation of handling conflicts similarly makes democracies view each other as less threatening, which reduces the likelihood of either party seeking to resolve political disputes against each other with military force (Kinsella, Rousseau, 2008) For this to apply. In 1873, during Virginia's affair, many Americans, including the Secretary of State, pushed for peace between the two states precisely because they both at the time were Republicans. Later, in 1892, when President Benjamin Harrison hinted at war, the Americans once again expressed opposition referring to the fact that Chile also was a republic(Owen, 1994). The perception of affinity between democracies, although in the 19th century more recognized as republics, increased indulgence and promoted peaceful intentions towards each other. Applying this to the institutional constraints of democracies, where the executive has to take the public will into account, the feeling of unity between citizens in different democracies will impact the executive's decision on whether to wage war on them or not

Democratic political norms are externalized by decision-makers when they become embroiled in international disputes, leading to peaceful settlements. Democracies are based on the rule of law in which the norm emphasizes regulated political competition through peaceful means. Democratic norms promote settling conflicts through mediation, negotiation and cooperation. Political leaders that are exposed to such democratic norms throughout their lives tend to have complete confidence in them and apply them when resolving conflict and also in the international sphere. In non-democracies, the absence of a tradition of the rule of law socializes them to resolve disputes through physical violence and coercion, where the winner takes it all. This way of handling political disputes creates distrust and fear, resulting in political leaders using violent conduct to protect their political interests in international conflicts rather than cooperate. (Maoz, Russet, 1993). However, the externalization of democratic norms is conditional

and only happens when a democracy expects similar behaviour from its counterparts. As democratic leaders expect non-democracies to act in violence and through coercion, they will use similar tactics when dealing with their opponents (Gries et al, 2020). These claims have been proven in empirical research regarding several nations from 1946-1986. The empirical analysis shows a significant relationship between political constraints or political norms and the regime type. (Maoz, 1998)

Neorealists conceptualize one opposing view towards the liberal argument of democratic peace. Neorealists focus on international regimes' role in reducing the probability of conflict (Henderson, 1999). The Neorealist Layne (1994) opposes the view that the characteristics of democracies function as a constraining factor in terms of the calculations of leaders. Instead, he argues that war is avoided due to cost and benefits calculations connected to power relations and alliances, and other realist variables. Further, Layne questions all liberalist explanations for democratic peace and claims them invalid. Bremer (1992, 1993) and Maoz and Russet (1993) show that although relative power and alliances might affect the probability of war, it doesn't sufficiently counter the argument of joint democracy. Instead, they assert that these arguments can co-exist and that they both, in many cases, make identical predictions (Maoz, 1997). Furthermore, evidence shows that as the number of democracies increases in the world increases, wars seem to decrease (Jamison, 2022). This can be argued to be strong evidence of a correlation between democratic characteristics and peace.

Another criticism of this line of argument has claimed that common interests produce peace between democracies rather than common polities. These critics claim that alliance patterns after 1945 reflect how common interests provide peace (Farber and Gowa, 1995). Farber and Gowa argue that during the Cold War era, democracies avoided conflict, with each other, due to shared interests based on the common disapproval of communism (1995, 1997). However, there are two contradictions to this argument. Firstly, if the democratic countries could avoid war between each other based on shared interests, it would be arguable that this would have been a sufficient peacekeeping mechanism for the communist opponents as well. However, several armed conflicts occurred during the Cold War between communist states. Furthermore, the statement that the "anti-communistic" alliances formed during the Cold War have led to peace does not hold up. On the contrary, several countries on the anti-communistic side have had military conflicts with each other after the Cold War, for example, Honduras- El Salvador and Turkey-Greece (Ray, 1998).

One alternative answer to this essay's line of argument is that economic interdependence is the main factor as to why democracies don't fight each other. Economic interdependence is the idea that countries with strong economic ties are incentivized to avoid conflict to protect their economic interests. This would create a "peace through commerce" dynamic, where nations are more likely to prioritize economic cooperation over military conflict (Gartzke, Westerwinter, 2016). However, political scientist Gasiorowski has addressed that interdependence is double-edged; it sometimes prohibits conflict but occasionally promotes conflict (1986). While economic interdependence may be one factor in preventing war between countries, it is not a complete explanation. It does not prove a blank statement that interdependence is the key to peace. Throughout history, there have been multiple wars between countries with strong economic ties. During the First World War, all involved parties were engaged in extensive trade, and globalization flourished. Despite the extensive economic globalization, a world war erupted; hence, interdependence had no systematic influence on peacekeeping in the conflict (Mansfield, Edward, 2021).

In conclusion, this assignment has argued that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other – than non-democracies are less likely than - non-democracies to go to war with each other because they are characterized by domestic institutional constraints and norms which influences the way their state pursue their interests. This assignment has been informed by two theories, liberal internationalism and constructivism. The factors for democratic institutional constraints and norms that are argued to enable peace between democracies are; (1) electoral competition forces executives of democracies to justify actions of war, (2) elections in democratic systems hold the executive accountable for public opinion, (3) the lack of institutional constraints in non-democracies enables their leaders to act explicitly on their own will, (4) the separation of power in democratic countries constraints the executive from acting military without consulting other political actors, (5) Democratic leaders can rearm fast in times of war and build strong defence which works as a deterrent mechanism (6) democratic norms make democracies more prone to cooperate through IGOs, (7) Domestic democratic norms generate trust between democracies, (8) decision-makers externalize democratic political norms. Besides, the assignment has presented and fended off alternative theories and approaches to the question of democratic peace.

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