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The Democratic Peace Hypothesis: From Description to Explanation

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Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World.
By Bruce Russett. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. 192 pp., \$19.95.

The idea that democracies almost never go to war with each other is now commonplace. The skeptics are in retreat and the proposition has acquired a nearly law-like status, confidently invoked by policy makers as well as by scholars. This “zone of democratic peace” raises further doubts about the validity of realist theory and its primary focus on systemic-level explanations for international behavior. It also provides additional hope to those who believe that world politics is undergoing a fundamental transformation in which war will play a more limited role, and that activist state policies to encourage the spread of democratic institutions and attitudes on a world scale can contribute to this transformation. The descriptive phase of scholarly research on the absence of war between democratic dyads has been largely completed, and attention is now shifting to alternative explanations for this well-confirmed empirical generalization.

The best place to begin, both for a summary of the descriptive evidence and for an attempt to explain it, is Bruce Russett’s *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, which builds in part on previously-published work by Russett and his collaborators. Russett demonstrates that there are no clear-cut cases of democracies fighting each other since 1815 and explains away potentially contradictory cases raised by critics, including the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and Finland against the West in World War II. (See Ray, 1993 for further discussion of possible exceptions.) For the period since 1945, he also shows that the absence of war between democracies is not the spurious result of economic or geopolitical factors correlated with democracy.

Russett then develops two alternative theoretical explanations to account for the dual findings that democracies rarely fight each other but that they are no less likely than non-democracies to be involved in interstate wars. In the “cultural/normative model” the norms of peaceful conflict resolution that have evolved within democratic political cultures are extended to relations between democratic states. In the “structural/institutional” model checks and balances, the dispersion of power, and the need for public debate make it more difficult for democratic states to use force against each other. Both models presume that there are fewer normative or institutional constraints on the use of force by authoritarian regimes, who often attempt to exploit the conciliatory tendencies of democracies. This undermines democratic political leaders’ expectations that their peaceful conflict resolution strategies will be reciprocated, reduces their internal constraints on the use of force, and provides additional incentives for

democratic regimes to use force to eliminate the violent tendencies associated with authoritarian regimes. As a result, wars between democratic and non-democratic regimes are common.

Although the normative and institutional models overlap to a considerable extent, Russett finds that the former is somewhat superior. Whereas the normative model accounts for both the tendency of democracies not to get involved in disputes with each other and the tendency of those disputes not to escalate to war (as measured by both the militarized interstate dispute data and the international crisis behavior data), institutional constraints are more important in preventing the escalation of disputes between democratic dyads to war than in preventing the outbreak of disputes in the first place.

These findings are based on a meticulous empirical analysis for the 1946–1986 period. Russett measures democratic norms in terms of the degree of political stability and the relative absence of violent internal conflict and constructs a regime index from the Polity II data (Gurr, Jagers, and Moore, 1989), classifying states as democracies, anocracies, or autocracies. Institutional constraints are measured in terms of the degree of concentration of power, executive constraint, centralization of power (unitary/federal), and state ability to mobilize resources. Although the variety of democratic systems complicates the task of constructing operational indicators that are valid across types of societies, Russett's measures are reasonable and thoroughly explained.

Perhaps the most original parts of the book are Russett's attempts (with coauthors) to extend the empirical analysis to the Greek city-state system of the fifth century B.C. (Chapter 3) and to nonindustrial tribal societies (Chapter 5). Although these political systems differed significantly from 20th century systems, Russett and his collaborators demonstrate that, with a sensitivity to contextual differences and to possible selection effects in the data, it is possible to construct valid empirical indicators, to code states as more or less democratic (or, for tribal societies, more or less participatory), and to evaluate the relative war-proneness of these dyads.

In the Greek case, Russett concludes that institutional constraints were weak and normative constraints only partially developed. This helps to explain the rather mixed results: democracies were not more peaceful than oligarchies, and democracies often went to war with each other (Athens and Syracuse, for example). The findings are more conclusive for the anthropological evidence, which is based on ethnographic data from Murdock and White (1969). The aggregate data analysis shows that warfare is lower among units in societies characterized by more participatory institutions, a finding which is supported by some interesting case studies but which was not anticipated in the anthropological literature. For both of these systems, however, the findings must be regarded as tentative until they can be confirmed by further investigations.

Grasping the Democratic Peace is particularly significant because it brings to bear a variety of methodological orientations. It supplements aggregate data analysis with a form of deviant case analysis to help explain the conditions under which the democratic zone-of-peace hypothesis might break down. It also extends the empirical domain to other systems which require fundamentally different data sources. But the study does have its limitations. A better integration of the individual empirical studies into a single overall research design would have been useful. Likewise, an extension of the analysis to include the previous century is needed, even if this creates some data problems and thus complicates the task of controlling for other possible influences on the conflict behavior of democratic dyads. Future research might also make more explicit attempts to falsify the alternative hypothesis: that the causal relationship between democracy and war is reversed, with democratic regimes arising in those places where the

foundations for peace have already been established. It might also be useful to broaden the institutional model and consider not only formal institutional constraints but also constraints on leaders' access to societal resources.

We will undoubtedly see other books which attempt to confirm the reality of the democratic peace, to explain it theoretically, or to extend it to other historical systems. But *Grasping the Democratic Peace* defines the current state of the art and suggests some innovative directions for future research.

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