Democratic Peace or Pieces; an examination of US Foreign Policy and the Democratic Peace Theory

The US government and the Clinton administration in particular have quoted the Democratic Peace Theory as a justification for spreading democracy throughout the world and intervening on behalf of emergent democracies in order to support them in their transition, as well as other US foreign policies. The veracity of the Democratic Peace Theory has never been convincingly proven however, and the theory of War and Democritization seems to almost directly oppose it. The question then remains if a tenuous theory opposed by another actually has strength enough to support US foreign policy. In order to fully verify if this so or not, both the theories must be fully understood.

The Democratic Peace Theory comes in two basic types, the dyadic and monadic. The dyadic version is the more popular type and often considered indicative of the Democratic Peace Theory in general. The main hypothesis of the dyadic type is that democracies do not go to war with each other. It proposes that this does not happen because of shared economic, cultural and political norms (Miriam, pg. 443) which all contribute to create a set of shared liberal values that foster peace. The effect of this is that democratic governments would look more favorably and trustingly upon other
democratic governments and would be more likely to pursue diplomatic conflict resolution. Another shade of the dyadic type is the structural or institutional version.

This version’s main arguments for the dyadic type is that democracies’ political processes are set up so that it is more difficult for their leaders to declare war in general. This begs the question of whether democracies are more peaceful in general than non-democracies. The statistics put forward by Mansfield and Snyder quite firmly rebuke this version of the dyadic type by showing that all regime types are basically equally likely to go to war in general. Since this version has aspersions cast upon it easily and is not fully relevant to wars between democracies only it will not be considered in the examination of the Democratic Peace Theory. The other type of the Democratic Peace Theory is the monadic type.

The monadic type considers only the internal properties of democratic governments important, as they supposedly keep democracies from using force against any other country regardless of government type. The monadic type hinges on the democratic process of free election, namely that “…leaders … are less likely to initiate wars that are expected to be severely violent or … high overall costs.” (Miriam, pg. 445) The phenomenon of layers of bureaucracy separate leaders from the ability to declare war argues for generally peaceful democracies without bias toward a non-democratic governments.

Specifically, these biases materialize as: repeated attempts of negotiation if at least one of the states in conflict is a democracy, bargaining, an absence of destructive diplomatic tactics such as stonewalling and bullying and that disputes involving a democratic state are less likely to degrade into armed conflict. (Miriam, pg.445) In
general, the monadic version espouses that democracies are more likely to give up on methods or actions that seem to lead to conflict or escalate an extant dispute. This theory only applies to countries that are already democracies, pursuant to the justifications for US foreign policy, the theory of Democratization and War addresses the instability of countries that undergo the change to democracy.

In general, Mansfield and Snyder’s research and data demonstrates that any country that experiences a regime change will have a period of instability and be more likely to go to war. This is a common phenomenon, however out of the three types of regime changes studied, changes to democracy are more likely to result in war. Specifically, they find that, “Democratizing states … were two-thirds more likely to go to war than states experiencing no regime change” (Mansfield and Snyder, pg. 229) and that of regimes becoming democratic, the probability of going to war increases by an average of 81 percent with highs of 135 percent compared to 70 percent increase during anocratization and a 35 percent increase during autocratization. (Mansfield and Snyder, pg. 234-235)

In explanation Mansfield and Snyder assert that in other regime changes political power is becoming more centralized and less checks to the leader’s powers are provided. Under such a system it is much easier for a leader to maintain civic order through force, or to solve external problems quickly without the added apparatus of democracy before they blossom into war. For instance, in the Balkans, when Tito died and the regime changed from a more authoritarian type to democratic, ethnic tensions erupted into conflicts that quickly became full-scale war. A further cause of conflict in democratizing states is the disenfranchisement of elites.
Resting firmly in between the leader of a country and the people he leads are the inevitable elites, who take the leader’s directives and translate them to orders. In democratization a leader may translate into a President, but elites would be left with no position to fill other than rank citizen, or possibly a Secretary which would inevitably be a position with much less power than they are used to. Often elites have a vested interest in war, as they are often involved with the national army directly or are involved in the nation’s industrial and production facilities. In the instability of democratization, it is often these elites who take hold of nationalist or ethnic propaganda in order to persuade the people to either resist the change directly or indirectly by warring. In the crisis and furor of war democratization is often put on the back burner while the previous apparatus of state is put into action to deal with the new crises.

Not only do elites lose power through democratization, but the common people gain a lot of power as citizens. When no longer directly oppressed by their government, often years, if not decades, of grievances and tensions break loose at once. These are not always government-related tensions, however. Many times ethnic issues that were not important in the face of the depredations of a despotic leader rise to the surface. Many citizens also misinterpret their ability to ‘bear arms’ and form impromptu militias that quickly begin to clash for a host of reasons.

All of these phenomena are only present in full force in democratization (some are present in a lesser form in anocratization) where power is taken from a small, privileged group of elites and their leader and spread among not only the nation’s citizenry but new Congresses, Senates and local governments of townships and governorships. When power is condensed often the internal stability increases if not only because there are less people
in power but that there are less controls on use of force to quell revolt and dissidence.

When power is spread out however, the enforced peace that autocracy provides is lost and
many stresses that were not felt before spill out as well as the additional problems that
power recentralization causes. As demonstrated, the theory of Democratization and War
is rather robust. It is supported by data that yields similar statistical results under many
manipulations and closely follows predictable patterns of human behavior. As such it
leaves little interpretation or statistical analysis but relies quite solely on the empirical
data collected. Somewhat to the opposite however, is the Democratic Peace Theory.

One thing that is incredibly necessary to the Democratic Peace Theory are
definitions, specifically those of democracy and those of war. The Democratic Peace
Theory and the theory of Democratization and War both use the same definition of war, a
hostile action in which at 1000 individuals are killed. Even though the number of battle
deaths may be a little low to designate a full war, it is used and found adequate by both
theories, which creates a useful point of congruence. In general, with reference to the US
Army’s Land-War Doctrine published in the latter half of 1996, modern battle deaths
have been on the decrease due to more accurate weapons and more violent, faster-paced
conflicts. In all a total of 1000 battle deaths then is a lower bound, but not an
unreasonable one.

The second critical definition, that of democracy, is quite different between the
two theories. The theory of Democratization and war recognizes a continuum of
governments, making it rather more robust than a single-point examination, as is done by
the Democratic Peace Theory. Many conflicts that also would be damning evidence
against the Democratic Peace Theory are shifted away through careful specification of
definitions. One example of definitions carefully turning aside counter-evidence is the discounting of the Israeli war of independence, in which democratic Lebanon had sided with other Arab states against the Israelis. (Miriam, pg. 448-449) The argument put forward to justify the exclusion of this instance is that the assumption of statehood did not exist, even though all the elements of a democratic political process were well-entrenched in both countries. (Miriam, pg. 449) In fact, the combination of all of the required qualities of democracies serve to block out all but rich, mature democracies.

Not only must there be free elections open to the majority of the populace, peaceful transfers of power between opposing political groups, civil rights but there must be an assumption of sovereign statehood. The only countries that can really afford to be sovereign and support national elections and keep their populace in order while transferring power peacefully are often already well-established older, mature democracies. With this much smaller effective definition, many other democracies are left out that are not large or rich enough to often fit all of the criteria fully. Through definition manipulation often many possible points of comparison are lost, artificially shrinking the amount of comparable instances, which weakens the Democratic Peace Theory considerably in the face of more general empirical and complete studies like the Democratization and War theory.

In comparing the two theories it is found that they do complement each other ideologically to a degree. The main postulate of the Democratization and War theory is that nascent democracies are more prone toward warfare, with the implication that once they begin to mature they become more peaceful. This argument is somewhat weakened by some indirect conclusions that can be drawn from Mansfield and Snyder’s data. They
found that, over time, new democracies are more likely to go to war. The main difference between mature and new democracies is simply the amount of time the respective countries have been democracies. Mansfield and Snyder never specifically investigated the periods beyond 10 years after democratization to see if there is a drop-off point in hostility, so such an argument is easily inconclusive but does warrant investigation.

Beyond the single point of aging democracies however, there are few areas where the Democratization and War theory can be questioned. It is mostly dependent upon continuums of robust data, while the Democratic Peace Theory is based on ideological examination of an incomplete trend. As such the Democratic Peace Theory is simply more difficult to prove or state as convincingly as the Democratization and War theory.

With regard to US foreign policy the Democratic Peace Theory may also give a dangerous flavor to US interventions. If inventions are carried out to help countries simply become democratic, with aid being slackened or cut off immediately after, such actions could cause more local warfare than the presence of non-democratic regimes. As shown in the Democratization and War theory, newly-democratizing nations are most prone to go to war than any other type of regime change. If the Democratic Peace Theory is accepted in full, one may think that the simple conversion to democracy would be enough to stabilize a country when in all likelihood it will have the opposite effect, at least for the 10 years directly after the change.

To base US foreign policy on such a theory would not only be somewhat irresponsible in that the theory itself is somewhat unstable and can be made to fit whatever data it cares to validate, but it could cause even more upheaval than peace if
taken literally as outlined above. In view of such analysis, it would seem foolhardy to use
the Democratic Peace Theory for anything more than academic or scholarly argument and
not as a basis from which to enact policy or make world-shaping decisions.

Works Cited

The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics, ed. Robert J. Art and

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