Democratization and Peace: Theories and Empirical Studies

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What is the Democratic Peace Theory?

Core Argument:
- Democracies rarely go to war with each other.
- Some scholars argue that democracies are generally more peaceful.

Famous Quote:
- "The democratic peace comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations." – Jack Levy (1988)

Two Levels of Analysis:
- **Dyadic Level:** Democracies do not fight each other.
- **Monadic Level:** Democracies are generally more peaceful (this is debated).

Why Might Democracies Be More Peaceful?

Institutional Constraints:
- Checks and balances make war decisions harder.
- Leaders are accountable to the public → costly wars reduce their chances of re-election.

Normative Explanation:
- Democracies share norms of peaceful conflict resolution.
- They see other democracies as legitimate and less threatening.

Public Opinion Argument:
- Citizens in democracies oppose wars against other democracies.

Critics of the Democratic Peace Theory

⚠️ **Alternative Explanations:**

- Economic Interdependence: Countries that trade more are less likely to go to war.
- Alliances & Shared Interests: Peace among democracies may result from alliances (NATO, EU).
- Selection Bias: Is democratic peace just a Cold War phenomenon, influenced by U.S. dominance?

Current Debate: Are democracies peaceful due to institutions, norms, economy, or something else?

How This Relates to Our Papers

Ward & Gleditsch (1998):
- Examines whether democratization reduces or increases war likelihood.
- Finds that peaceful democratization reduces conflict risk, but abrupt regime changes can be dangerous.

Bell & Quek (2018):
- Investigates whether public opinion in autocracies influences democratic peace.
- Finds that Chinese citizens are also reluctant to attack democracies, challenging the idea that only democratic publics influence peace.

Conclusion: Both studies challenge core assumptions of the democratic peace theory.

Democratization and Peace: Does Political Transition Reduce or Increase Conflict?

Analysis of Ward & Gleditsch (1998)

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Introduction

Research Question

- Does democratization reduce the likelihood of war, or can it lead to more conflicts?

Debate Overview:

- Democratic peace theory states that democracies rarely fight each other.
- However, some scholars argue that democratization processes can be unstable and increase conflict risks.

Objective of the Study:

- Examining whether countries that transition to democracy become more peaceful or more war-prone.

Theoretical Background

Two Opposing Hypotheses:
- **Democratic Peace Hypothesis:** Democratization reduces war likelihood.
- **Dangerous Democratization Hypothesis:** Political transitions can trigger instability and conflict.

Previous Studies:
- Some scholars (Mansfield & Snyder) argue that democratizing states often use nationalism and conflict to gain support.
- Others believe democracy fosters peaceful institutions and norms over time.

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Research Methodology

Data Sources:
- **Polity III dataset:** Measures political regime characteristics.
- **Correlates of War dataset:** Tracks war involvement.

Variables:
- **Dependent Variable:** Likelihood of war involvement (binary: war/no war).
- **Independent Variable:** Level of democratization (change in democracy score).

Methodology:
- Logit model analysis to test the impact of democratization on war involvement.
- Examines three key factors:
  - **Direction of Change:** towards democracy or autocracy.
  - **Speed of Change:** gradual vs. abrupt transitions.
  - **Stability:** reversible vs. stable transitions.

Key Findings

General Trend:

✅ Democratization reduces war risk by 50%.

❌ Abrupt or unstable transitions increase the likelihood of conflict.

Specific Findings:

- Stable democracies are the least likely to go to war.
- Countries fluctuating between democracy and autocracy are the most war-prone.
- Gradual transitions are safer than sudden regime changes.

Implications & Conclusion

Key Takeaways:

- Democratization is generally a force for peace, but the process matters.
- Abrupt and unstable transitions can fuel nationalism and conflicts.
- A stable and gradual transition ensures long-term peace.

Final Thought:

Democracy fosters peace, but only when political institutions are strong and stable.

Authoritarian Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace

Analysis of Bell & Quek (2018)

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Introduction

Research Question

- Is public support for war against democracies a key factor in democratic peace?

Context:

- The democratic peace theory is based on the idea that democracies rarely go to war with each other.

Main Argument:

- Previous studies have shown that citizens in democracies are less likely to support war against other democracies. This article examines whether the same holds true in authoritarian regimes, using China as a case study.

Key Conclusion:

- Chinese citizens show the same reluctance as citizens in Western democracies to use force against other democracies. This challenges the idea that public opinion alone can explain democratic peace.

Theoretical Framework: Public Opinion and Democratic Peace

- Democratic peace is one of the most studied theories in international relations.
- It is believed that citizens in democracies follow norms that make them see other democracies as legitimate and less threatening.
- Previous studies have suggested that public opinion in democracies discourages war against other democratic states.

⚠️ The problem:

- This argument assumes that public opinion in autocracies is different, but this has never been empirically tested.
- If citizens in autocracies also avoid attacking democracies, the public opinion explanation for democratic peace loses strength.

Research Design

- Experimental survey in China with 2,920 participants conducted in 2015.
- Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario in which a country was developing nuclear weapons, and China had to decide whether to attack it.

One key variation:
- Version 1: The target country was described as a democracy.
- Version 2: The target country was described as an autocracy.
- After reading the scenario, respondents were asked whether they would support a military attack.
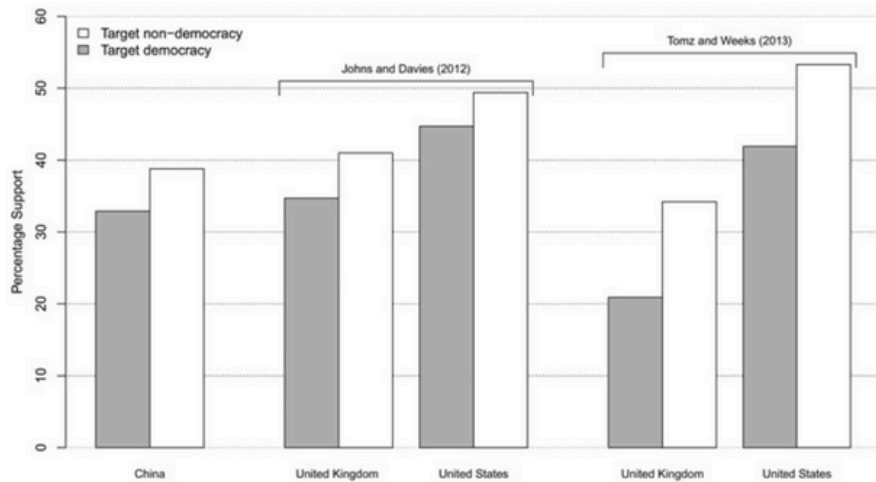
Results

FIGURE 1. *Support for participating in military strike scenarios in which the target is democratic or nondemocratic in China, the United Kingdom, and United States*

- Chinese citizens were significantly less likely to support an attack on a democracy than on an autocracy.
- The effect size was similar to findings in public opinion surveys conducted in the U.S. and the U.K.

Key Implications:

- This challenges the idea that only democratic public opinion favors peace among democracies.
- The political regime (democracy or autocracy) does not seem to determine public attitudes on this issue.

Implications and Conclusion

Main Takeaways:
- If citizens in autocracies also prefer avoiding conflict with democracies, then public opinion alone is not sufficient to explain democratic peace.
- Perhaps democratic institutions, rather than public opinion, better explain democratic peace.
- The study recommends further research in other authoritarian countries to see whether this pattern is universal.

Final Conclusion:
- "Public opinion alone is not enough to explain democratic peace. Other factors—such as political institutions and the structure of the international system—must be considered."

Conclusion:
Comparing Both Studies

Key Takeaways

Study	Key Focus	Main Findings
Ward & Gleditsch (1998)	Democratization & War	Gradual transitions reduce conflict; abrupt shifts increase war risk.
Bell & Quek (2018)	Public Opinion & Peace	Chinese citizens also avoid war with democracies, questioning public opinion's role in peace.

Ward & Gleditsch (1998):
- Democratization is mostly peaceful, but unstable transitions can be dangerous.

Bell & Quek (2018):
- Public opinion in autocracies also favors peace with democracies, challenging traditional democratic peace explanations.

If democratization is mostly peaceful, but public opinion is similar across regimes, what really explains democratic peace—institutions, norms, or global power structures?

Thank you!