

1 Decision Makers & Fairness

Decision-making in foreign policy situations is often a complex process, with decisions involving a consideration of policy fairness. This paper argues that the importance decision-makers place on fairness is variable, based upon whether or not they are negatively affected by any unfairness that may occur. Specifically, fairness is always something that is considered by decision-makers as it serves to constrain their win-set. When not negatively impacted by unfairness, however, decision-makers tend to place their own self-interest above fairness. In situations where decision-makers are negatively affected by unfair situations, fairness and their self-interest are often somewhat linked and fairness becomes an argument by which the decision-maker can achieve their goal.

First, fairness always serves to constrain the win-set of a decision-maker. Because the public seems to be averse to any decisions which are grossly unfair to any party in a negotiation¹, decision-makers are constrained to make decisions which are at least somewhat fair. Importantly, the party hurt more by any unfairness will be more sensitive to that unfairness than a party benefited by it. In such instances, decision-makers may often hold fairness in a higher regard as it is an argument in favor of them pursuing their self-interest. In instances where unfairness helps a decision-maker, unfairness is often a secondary consideration as decision-makers seek to maximize their profits within their win-set.

Indeed, the Ultimatum game seems to confirm this. Few grossly unfair offers were accepted during the game, regardless of the individual that was negatively affected by them². Furthermore, individuals seemed to reject offers that they found unfair, even when any offer was objectively beneficial to them. Critically, this occurred more often when the offers were unfair towards them rather than against them, indicating more flexibility with fairness when any unfairness does not hurt them³.

2 Fairness in International Politics

Fairness is often a large factor to be considered in international politics. There are, however, some situations where fairness plays a much larger role than others. Fairness is most likely to be a major consideration in any international politics dealing with some commons.

There are some important, unique features present with commons which make it important to consider fairness when dealing with them. The first is scarcity. Because commons are generally constrained with respect to their resource quantity⁴, use of the commons is often zero-sum. Fairness is an important consideration here because disproportionately high usage of any commons decreases how much other parties may use the commons, which is unfair. The second unique feature of common is that they do not belong to any single individual⁵. Because there is no private ownership, mistreatment of the commons affects everyone that could have benefited from it. While sovereignty is a critical aspect of international affairs, commons wherein sovereignty is not as applicable could be flash-points for politics where fairness is especially important to consider.

3 Fairness Experiments

We can examine a simple experiment to understand the role of fairness. This experiment will be examined at a personal level, then will be adapted to a foreign policy experiment.

¹Ringius, Lasse, Asbjørn Torvanger, and Arild Underdal. "Burden sharing and fairness principles in international climate policy." *International Environmental Agreements* (2002): 1-22

²Sanfey, Alan G., et al. "The Neural Basis of Economic Decision-making in the Ultimatum Game." *Science* (2003): 1755-1758

³ibid.

⁴"About the Commons". *International Association for the Study of the Commons* (2019, September 28). <https://iasc-commons.org/about-commons/>

⁵ibid.

Consider an experiment in which subjects are asked to enter a room and complete a simple math test, unsupervised. They are instructed that after completing this math test, they may take some money from a communal tip jar as payment for their participation. They are told that while they may take as much money as they would like, the tip jar would not be restocked with more money and that 5 more participants following them may also want payment.

Here, the tip-jar is the commons. There is a specific amount of money that is to be shared in some capacity between all participants. How much money each person takes from this commons will be an important indicator to the role of fairness in decision-making. The most beneficial action for each participant is to take all of the money, but it seems unlikely that many would do such a thing.

Similarly, consider a global cap-and-trade system, with initial carbon credits allotted to countries based inversely on their carbon emissions. Given a static pool of carbon credits, each state's decision-maker would be tasked with taking as many carbon credits for their state as they saw fit. They would do this with the knowledge that all remaining states would only be able to take credits from the remaining pool. Here, the carbon credit pool is the commons and each decision-maker must consider how to maximize profits while balancing fairness.

In this manner, an experiment can be designed on both an individual and international scale to understand the role of fairness in decision-making.