

DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

Exam Strategies: Make your essay tailored to the exact question – avoid writing standard DPT Essay! Give priority to your argument. Use a wide variety of empirical examples. Avoid a literature review. Have a strong thesis that you argue for. Adopt different levels of analysis (state, sub-state, individual...) and analyse how DPT can or cannot say much about causes of war on different levels.

My own position: *The “empirical truth” of the DPT may very well be better explained with alternative explanations, e.g. hegemonic peace or capitalist peace. Definitions of ‘war’ and ‘democracy’ matter a lot in this debate: DPT theorists seem to employ a very broad definition of democracy, including shared values, commitment to human rights etc. which goes beyond the concept of a minimal definition of democracy. By including more criteria in the conditions for democracy, the sample size gets smaller and smaller. So DPT might hold only with a broad definition. DPT further lacks the ability to provide insights into “new wars”, like civil wars, or cyber wars.*

DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

- › What are the origins of the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT)?
 - > **Kant (1795)** saw liberal peace, i.e. peace between liberal states, as the best way of achieving perpetual peace. For it to be achieved, states need to be republican, create a “pacific union” among themselves and the process has to be accompanied by the establishment of cosmopolitan moral law.
 - That’s because under such conditions people realize the disastrous effect of war on their welfare and are able to have a final say about matters of war and peace.
- › What does the Democratic Peace Theory say?
 - > It stipulates that *democracies rarely, if ever, fight against other democracies*. Note that this is the **dyadic peace theory** while the theory that democracies are generally more peaceful, the **monadic peace**, has less evidence and support. The DPT is arguably the most prominent liberal contribution to IR and suggests that peace amongst states is possible, depending on their government regime.
 - > Empirical evidence suggests a **striking absence of conflict between democracies** since the end of the Second World War. **Levy (1989)** claims that *“the absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations”*.
- › Why does it matter / Why is the DPT theoretically important?
 - > Because the existence of a democratic peace is usually seen as a **liberal challenge to realist approaches** to IR. It calls into question two tenets of most realist theories: **realist pessimism** about the prospects for international peace, and realism’s **emphasis on systemic factors** as explanations of international outcomes (‘states as black boxes’) (**Brown et al. 1996**)
 - Note that complete acceptance of the DPT would not be a fatal blow to realism, because realist propositions would still apply to relations between nondemocracies; liberal-democratic theory does not say anything about those. Also, **realist variables like relative power and position in the international system nonetheless influence the foreign policies of democracies** (**Russett 1996**)

DEFINITIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND WAR

- › How can ‘democracy’ be conceptualized?
 - > A **minimal definition**: *‘regimes in which government offices are filled through contested elections.’*
 - Other common elements include voting franchise for a substantial proportion of citizens, at least one peaceful transfer of power, minimal period of longevity as a democracy

- > But most DP theorists employ broader definitions of liberal democracies – including competitive elections, representative legislature and civil and political rights of citizens – and a lot depends on this.
 - [Doyle 2005](#) argues that DPT needs: representative governments, an ideological commitment to fundamental human rights and transnational interdependence. These **conditions go beyond the minimal definition** and are those shared by the US and its Western partners – this will make alternative explanations (like from US hegemony) much more likely.
 - [Zakaria 1997](#) criticizes this move beyond a minimal definition, since expanding the definition of democracy turns the term into a “badge of honour” rather than a descriptive category.

- > What are concepts of ‘peace’?
 - > Often understood as the **absence of war**: A standard definition suggests war to be a violent conflict between sovereign states that results in at least 1000 battle deaths.
 - However, the absence of war does not automatically mean that there is no conflict. **Conflict can take many other forms as well**: civil wars, humanitarian intervention, state against non-state groups (e.g. terrorist groups), cyber warfare...
 - [Levy and Thompson \(2008\)](#) employ a broader definition, war as broadly a “*sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations*.” This includes interstate wars, like WWI, colonial wars, civil wars, tribal wars, and other forms of violence.
 - With this definition of war, it becomes evident that the DPT is not able to explain different wars.
 - Broadly, research on DPT accepts the definition of war as “*large-scale, institutionally organized, lethal violence*.” [Russett \(1993\)](#)

 - > [Barkawi and Laffey \(2001\)](#) say that “*none of the terms that enable the DP proposition can be taken for granted*”, because they need to be **historicized and contextualized**. Wars can take many forms - not just interstate wars - and so can concepts of democracy. Furthermore, **Democracy and Liberalism are different things and should not be conflated with each other**.
 - > Danger of the DPT is that it collapses the distinction between the two and further assumes that one single conception of democracy can be used to compare cases over time.
 - > Doyle (1983) speaks about liberalism and democracy almost in the same way, states **liberalism to be based on four institutions**: juridical equality of citizens and freedom of religion and the press; rule by representative legislatures, private property, market economy driven by supply and demand.

CAUSES OF WAR

- > When speaking of “causes of war”, we can mean at least three different things ([Suganami 1990](#)):
 - i. What are the necessary conditions of war (sine qua non)
 - ii. Which circumstances make war more frequent?
 - iii. How did this *particular* war come about?

- > It seems like general theories like the DPT only focus on i) or ii). The third aspect of causes of war needs to be seen in the specific historical context, as we cannot take the defined terms in the DPT for granted ([Barkawi and Laffey 2001](#))

- > [Levy and Thompson \(2009\)](#) provide **Levels-of-Analysis Framework for studying War**:
 - > **Individual level**: Aims to explain foreign policy decisions made by political leaders of the state. Presumes that particular individuals in power have an important causal impact (e.g. Hitler in WWII)
 - **The impact of individuals depends on the nature of the regime**: most likely to be important in autocratic or presidential regimes (e.g. if Al Gore rather than George W. Bush had become president, the US would probably not have invaded Iraq in 2003)
 - > **National level**: focuses on institutional structure of the political system and policy-making process, or role of public opinion and economic system

- *This is where the DPT is situated in.*
- > **System / International level:** includes anarchic structure of international system, number of great powers, distribution of military and economic power, alliances, other factors closely related to distribution of power
 - Most realist theories are system-level theories.

Important to note that patterns of behaviour at one unit of analysis are not necessarily replicated at or transferable to another unit of analysis.

The levels-of-analysis framework is useful and goes beyond realist and liberalist frameworks, which have difficulty incorporating individuals and organization levels.

- > **Nature of war is changing:**
 - > Empirical trend shows emergence of new threats to security and peace such as global diseases, ethnic warfare, terrorism (Krahman 2005)
 - > Shift away from Europe to other regions in the world
 - > Significant increase in frequency of civil wars and other forms of intrastate conflict. Ratio of internal to external wars increased from about 2:1 before 1945 to nearly 5:1 after 1945 (Levy and Thompson, 2009)

DPT is a dyadic theory and hence cannot tell us anything about civil wars.
- > How do different theories explain the causes of war? (Levy and Thompson, 2009)
 - > Systems-Level Theories:
 - Realism says that primary cause of war is distribution of power in the international system
 - Security dilemma may lead to inadvertent war (spiral model), Waltz: pursuit of security leads to war (balance of power theory)
 - > State and Societal levels:
 - Theories on this level cannot provide a complete explanation of war and peace. This is because war is a strategic interaction: We need to understand other players in the game and how they interact.
 - State level theories include coalitional models, diversionary theory and DPT

BREAKING DOWN THE THEORY OF DPT

VERSIONS OF THE DPT

- > What is the **monadic** peace hypothesis?
 - > Claim: *Democracies are, in general, more peaceful than non-democracies.*
 - This claim has only weak empirical support: Between 1815 and 1975, the few democracies that existed during that time were involved in 66 of the 108 wars that took place (Rosato 2003)
 - Imperialism and colonialism pose strong counterexamples to the monadic peace hypothesis.
 - > DP theorists accept this fact: Doyle (1983) already pointed out that there is a tendency for liberal or democratic states to go to war with non-liberal states.
- > What is the **dyadic** peace hypothesis?
 - > Claim: *Democracies are more peaceful toward each other.* This claim notes that the external behaviour of democracies is not intrinsically determined but depends on the type of interaction partner.
 - This claim has more empirical support: Maoz and Russett conduct a comprehensive analysis of potential explanations and find that the DPT is substantive because it remains robust even if controlling for other, confounding variables. Validity widely accepted even by those who question the explanatory value of the DPT.
 - **Key point of contestation** is not whether the correlation between democracy and peace holds but whether the qualitative argument that democracies qua democracies don't go to war with each other holds (the causal explanation)!

- > Supporters of the dyadic version of the DPT
 - **Doyle (1983)**: liberal societies are less likely to engage in war against each other because those tend to require consent in order to declare war and the public will be very careful giving theirs, since they are the ones who have to bear the cost.
 - **Owen (2004)**: liberal principles and democratic processes work together to make war between democracies virtually impossible, because the liberal ideology is something which stipulates individuals everywhere to have freedom, leading to wars being fought only in the cause of peace and freedom.
 - There is also a constructivist element to it: Democracies may perceive other democracies less as threats, because they are more likely to accord to international rules and norms. So the perceived identity matters.

INSTITUTIONAL AND NORMATIVE EXPLANATIONS

WHAT ARE INSTITUTIONAL OR STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS?

Claim: The **institutional arrangements of a democracy limit the autonomy and potential of leaders to launch war**. Division of power and accountability mechanisms within democratic governments make it difficult for leaders to wage war without broad popular support. As for authoritarian governments, they face fewer structural constraints.

Argument from responsiveness

- > Democratic leaders are more responsive to their citizens than authoritarian leader, since their legitimacy and power depend on them. Wars tend to require public consent and the public will be very careful giving theirs. Thus, public opinion is a powerful force against war as citizens oppose wars which would impose serious costs upon them, both in lives and taxes (**Doyle 1983**). Doyle follows Kant here and attributes the liberal peace to features of republican regimes, characterized by market economies, legal equality of citizens and representative governments with a separation of powers.

It is supported by other empirical patterns: Democracies fight shorter wars (**Reiter and Stam 2002**); democracies suffer fewer casualties when they fight wars (**Valentino et al 2010**); when democracies fight wars, popular support for the leadership declines as casualties escalate (**Mueller 1973**)

- > Objections to the argument from responsiveness:
 - **Same argument should apply to wars with non-democratic states, but doesn't** (**Rosato 2003, Layne 1994**) If the pacific public opinion really were sufficient for democratic peace, then we should also observe that citizens would reject all wars equally, as they do not significantly differ in their costs. This would imply monadic peace, but there is no supporting empirical evidence.
 - See Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" hypothesis: democracies fighting non-democracies
 - **Public opinion sometimes pro-war**. Institutional argument seems to assume that leaders have more warlike preferences than do their publics, so that leaders need to be constrained, but this is not always true. Belligerent public sometimes push their leaders into wars those leaders prefer to avoid (**Levy and Thompson 2008**)

Example: Often argued that before Kennedy's assassination in 1963, he realized that an American victory in the Vietnam War wasn't possible, so planned to withdraw troops from Indochina. But he was afraid to do so until after the next election, because he feared that he would be blamed politically for losing Vietnam to the communists (**Ellsberg 1972**)

Example: Between 46% and 60% of the US population was in favour of the Iraq invasion in March 2003 (dependent on UN approval). This goes to show that public opinion is sometimes in favour of war, and is facilitated by several distinct mechanisms (Rosato 2003):

- Costs of war typically only fall on small subsets of the population, not on everyone.
 - Nationalism is a powerful force which can “**rally citizens around the flag**” and in favour of war
 - **Democratic leaders may also influence public opinion**, it is not just one-way. **Propaganda** mechanisms may help to create support in the population by making the war appear attractive.
- **Public opinion is not always policy-guiding**: People’s preferences are not always accurately represented by their parliaments; elected leaders have other things to take into account apart from public support (though of course it is one main factor).
 - Example: In 2003 significant parts of the British population were opposed to the Iraq War, however the HoC still approved it with an overwhelming majority.

Argument from transparency

- › The transparency of democratic politics provides greater opportunities for foreign partners to **monitor any signs of defection on declared commitments**. It also gives an assurance that democratic leaders will not defect because they would face domestic opposition when defecting from previous commitments (Lipson 2005)

The unique advantage of this approach is that it recognizes the DPT as an **interactive phenomenon** – it would be a mistake to just focus on the properties of an *individual* democracy, as the institutional argument does.

- > Objections to the argument from transparency:
 - Constraints are inefficient: Democratic structures do not always impose effective constraints on leaders
 - Example: US President Bush saying that even if Congress wouldn’t have authorized the use of force in the Gulf War, he would have still ordered troops into combat.

WHAT ARE NORMATIVE EXPLANATIONS?

Claim: Democracies are less likely to go to war with each other because their liberal ideology means they share important procedural norms concerning conflict resolution and are thus more likely to settle disputes by compromise.

Democratic states are reluctant to violate human rights and self-determination (“*live and let live*”)

Says that liberal principles and democratic processes work together to make war between democracies virtually impossible, because the liberal ideology is something which stipulates individuals everywhere to have freedom, leading to **wars being fought only in the cause of peace and freedom**. (Owen 2004)

- › Doyle (1983) states that liberal societies stand on the **principle of freedom of the individual**, and so they respect autonomy above anything else. **Liberal states will only fight for liberal reasons**.
 - > However, Doyle acknowledges that even though liberal principles may create a separate peace among liberal states, this may also cause liberal aggression against non-liberal states. Liberal interventions in the internal affairs of weak states, however well intentioned, often fail to achieve their objectives and actually may make matters worse.
- › Dixon (1994) describes the interaction between democracies as “bounded competition” – even if values and interests can diverge between democracies, there is a strong presence of rules, procedures and guidelines which rests on “contingent consent”, i.e. all sides agree to regulate competition and abide by the rules if others do so as well

- > This allows the conceptualization of dyadic democratic peace as a form of “security community” in which shared (liberal) values allow for security cooperation (e.g. NATO).
 - BUT this argument **depends on the existence of shared values which go substantively beyond the core elements of a minimally defined democracy!** Those shared values can be found in constitutional liberalism, which is distinct from a democracy as such.
 - Liberalism and democracy are different things, should not be conflated. As the definitions broaden, alternative explanations become stronger in their explanatory power.

REALISM’S CHALLENGES OF THE DPT

- > [Layne \(1994\)](#) argues that the causal logic behind the **DPT is flawed** and that **realism is superior**, because of “near conflict escalation” cases where democratic states were at the brink of waging war against each other. Here the neorealist lens would be more appropriate
 - > Example: **Franco-German Ruhr crisis in 1923**, where France did not hesitate to use military force against democratic Germany, since they primarily cared about the threat to their own security. Here Layne concludes that there was no evidence that the democracies avoided war because they were democracies, but rather, they behaved in a manner predicted by realism: they acted on the basis of calculations of national interest, paid attention to strategic concerns and particularly the distribution of military capabilities. France cared about its own security issues most, not which regime type its opponent had
- > Some realists go beyond challenging the logic of the DPT and argue that the existence of the peace is a myth
 - > Claim: **Shifting and arbitrary definitions exclude cases of war between democracies**, e.g. U.S. Civil War (even though status as civil war does not technically violate the ‘no war between democracies’ criterion, the war does violate the spirit of many of the theoretical arguments advanced for DPT), Spanish-American War and Finland’s declaration of war against the Western democracies in WWII ([Layne 1994](#)). Also, WWI can be regarded as a war between democracies.
 - > Thus, there have been democracies fighting wars against each other – challenge of the empirical premise
 - Resp.: Proponents of the DPT point out that the apparent exceptions to the democratic peace are few and far between.
- > Others argue that **other factors account for the absence of wars between democracies**, which can still be explained with standard realist systemic variables.
 - > E.g. geographical distances, alliances against common enemies, prudent desire to avoid unnecessary wars
 - Resp.: Presented additional quantitative studies that show that the virtual absence of war between democracies is statistically significant, controlling for the possible effects of geography, alliances and levels of development ([Maoz and Russett](#))
 - > After WWII virtually all democracies were aligned against the Soviet bloc – so it was the perverse **stability (bipolarity) of the international order which determined peaceful relations** among countries, not their regime type.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DPT

- > **Capitalist Peace (Gartzke)**
 - > Claim.: It is **economic interdependence** which prevents states from fighting against each other, rather than regime type. Increasing economic interdependence makes wars between countries increasingly costly, so they will be less likely to occur.
 - > Challenges the DPT by conducting research on the relationship between democracy and militarized interstate disputes while controlling for economic variables like market integration, financial openness

and trade. Previously significant relationship between democracy and war becomes insignificant as soon as economic variables are introduced.

- > A larger argument: Since 1945, there has been growing interdependence and changing norms of conflict resolution, which meant that there has been very little war in general. Therefore, it is not very surprising that there is no war between democracies either!
- > **Hegemonic Peace based on US Power**
- > US has been and continues to be a powerful hegemon that places strong emphasis on regional peace (though this emphasis has dissipated somewhat under Trump’s reign). The Western security community (e.g. NATO) is tied together by values broadly known as constitutional liberalism that the US promotes.
 - > DPT exists primarily in period after WWII and **happens to coincide with Cold War and American power which suppressed potential conflicts** between democracies (Farber and Gowa 1995)
 - > This hegemonic power is seen in the fact that the US has helped to create a liberal world order, comprising both civil institutions like the WTO as well as security institutions such as NATO.
 - Allies are portrayed as democratic and opponents as non-democratic (Oren 1995)
 - If we take Doyle’s (2005) criteria for what DPT needs, namely representative governments, ideological commitment to fundamental human rights and transnational interdependence, then we get essentially the similarities between the US and its Western partners.
 - > Supported by empirical evidence: **DPT is essentially a post WWII phenomenon restricted to the Americas and Western Europe**, i.e. the areas in which the US has been the dominant power and placed a strong emphasis on regional peace
 - > Thus, could be argued that it is hegemony doing the work here rather than the democracy.
- > When applying the DPT systematically to individual regions, the **empirical evidence does not hold in any region outside the Western world** (Cohen 1994, Henderson 2008)
- > In Africa, politically open (if not fully democratic) states are more likely to fight each other as those countries with higher levels of legitimacy are least constrained from sending troops abroad to fight (Henderson 2008)
 - Examples: militarized disputes between Niger and Mali 1993, South Africa and Lesotho 1994, Botswana and Namibia 1997
 - > Latin American democracies are more likely to fight each other
 - Example: Cenepa War between Ecuador and Peru in 1995
 - > 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan (though less than 1,000 battle dead – which is often the required threshold for ‘war’)
 - India clearly a democracy, Pakistan coded a democracy by Polity III data.

OTHER LIMITS OF THE DPT – TURNING IT ON ITS HEAD

- > Some evidence for a “**dictatorial peace**”, i.e. evidence that specific types of authoritarian regimes are more peaceful toward one another, which resembles the DPT (Peceny et al. 2012)
 - > Support for argument that it is *cultural similarity, not democracy* which makes war less likely. (Omelicheva and Carter 2019). That wouldn’t completely erode DPT’s value, since it still points us toward the importance of *perception* of identity and threat. But it does not make it a distinctive liberal contribution to IR anymore.
 - > Example: Turkey invasion in Cyprus in 1974 when **both were democratic but were culturally different**.
- > **Reverse causation: Peace causes democracy**
 - > Poe and Tate 1994: Empirical analysis found that participation in interstate wars is negatively correlated with a measure of the percentage of the adult population who vote and with respect for human rights

- i.e. higher levels of external threat push states to reduce individual liberties, including political competition
- › “New Wars” Challenge to the DPT.
 - › The nature of conflict is not limited to interstate wars, but comprises intra-state wars, cyber wars, humanitarian intervention etc. as well. DPT is not able to explain all of these wars.
 - Thus, on the sub-state and individual level, the DPT remains silent (it is a national level theory after all).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE DPT: DEMOCRATIZATION

- › **DPT informs many foreign policy decisions:** Clinton openly stated his belief in democratic peace, which informed his 1995 intervention in Haiti and the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe; Bush argued that democratizing Iraq would help stabilize the Middle East.
 - › Flipside of this belief in the DPT: Non-democracies are then perceived as increasingly more threatening as they stand in the way of the enlargement of the existing zone of peace and are an ongoing threat to it (Hobson 2011)
 - › Makes coercive democratization – the expansion of the ‘*zone of peace*’ – more compelling.
- › However, **democratizing states can become even *more war prone and violent*** than those which did not undergo this change, because new social groups and classes are brought onto the political stage, which creates weak central authority and generates instability (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995) Compared to states that remain or become autocracies, **states that make the transition from autocracy to democratization are more than twice as likely to be in a way during the decade after democratization.**
 - › Reasons why new democracies get into wars: New social groups and classes are brought onto the political stage, which creates **weak central authority and generates instability**; new elites find it necessary to resort to nationalism as they compete for domestic power in the new democratic political arena. Basic problem of democratizing states is that they **lack the stabilizing institutions of mature democracies.**
 - › In countries with free elections but without proper accountability mechanisms politicians have incentives to pursue policies that make war more likely, as this will increase their domestic electoral support and there are fewer constraints on their actions.
- › **Democracy mustn’t be imposed from the outside** – it has to be demand- not supply-induced. The primary requirement is that there exists a strong desire among a people to build democratic institutions, along with a minimum of material and cultural preconditions (Mueller 2012)
 - › BUT, note here that **supporters of the DPT do not necessarily have to support democratization efforts** – the interventionist conclusion derived from the DPT depends on the additional premise that external actors can make non-democratic states into democracies at acceptable costs (Owen 2005)
- › Layne (1994) cautions against making promotions of democracy an aim of US foreign policy – if there is no empirical support for the democratic “zone of peace”, it would be a mistake to try to create a democratic world, but rather raise risks of war.

EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

- › Can externally imposed democratisation be successful?
 - › Examples of successful democratization: Germany, Japan post 1945. Though major wars and years of occupation were required to bring about these changes (Brown et al 1996)
 - › Examples of (arguably) unsuccessful democratization: Afghanistan, Iraq

- › UK government has changed its democratization policy in response to the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, it used to support the idea of external democratization but has now changed its **goal to stabilization** without mentioning democracy at all anymore, instead focusing on long-term stability.

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