The democratic peace theory essay sample

Is the ' Democratic Peace' thesis a convincing theory, or a statistical artefact?

The Democratic Peace theory states that democratic states are less likely to wage war against each other, and that shared democratic procedures and ideals are apt to lead to less conflict.

Origins

The origins of " democratic pacifism" can be traced back to " *Perpetual Peace* ", an essay written by philosopher Immanuel Kant (1795). Kant had suggested that democracy or a republic with elected representatives would be one of the primary factors necessary for a stable equilibrium of global peace.

The democratic peace theory in its present form is based on the ideas expressed by Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Woodrow Wilson (Mingst, 2004). Woodrow Wilson and Roosevelt, as is evident from American foreign policy during their regimes, were heavily influenced by the idea of democratic peace.

Mechanisms for Democratic Peace

Several mechanisms have been proposed as explanations of how democracy encourages peace. In the course of this paper, these mechanisms will be examined to understand whether they satisfactorily establish the link between the existence of democracy and a greater probability of peace.

The most common explanation is the *Consensus theory of democratic peace.* This theory explains that since democracies are built on consensus, and since common public opinion is, in most cases, against disruptive conflict or war, democracies are held back by the public opinion. In other words, " the institutional constraints on the decisionmaking choices of democratic leaders make it difficult for them to use force in their foreign policies and act as a brake on conflict with other democracies" (Henderson, 2002, p. 4) Also the norms of non-violence and peaceful dispute resolution, which are fundamental to the democratic process, are supposedly projected outwards, that is, they are used by the democratic nation in all its dealings with other states.

The second explanation of democratic peace claims that shared democratic procedures and ideals are apt to lead to less conflict with each other. Two democratic countries, according to this explanation, apparently share a bond due to their common respect for representation of the people, and also for peaceful conflict resolution, because of which, war between them is not very probable. Democracies are apparently less disposed to fight each other due to the " impact of their shared norms that proscribe the use of violence between them" (Henderson, 2002, p. 4). This proposed mechanism is also known as the theory of *Common Culture.*

Consensus theory of Democratic Peace

Kant argued that, since an absolute prince can order war " without the least sacrifice of the pleasures of his table, the chase, his country houses, his court functions, and the like", he will be likely to do so for light or trivial

causes that the citizenry would never find sufficient (Kofman, 1996). Therefore, in an autocracy a single person may spark off a war, and the stability of the nation depends on the temperament of the ruler. If he chooses to make war, no one has the authority to prevent him from doing so, and he can expect to be largely insulated from its effects in his everyday life (Schwartz & Skinner, 1999).

The Kantian argument for democratic peace is that democratic decision making faces procedural hurdles and the need to enlist popular support, delaying decisions on both sides when democracies are in conflict and leaving time for peaceful resolution (Schwartz & Skinner, 1999). The neo-liberal explanation is similar, and states that democracies make sure that the leaders have to listen to a multiplicity of voices, which tend to restrain decision makers and considerably lessen the chances of war.

To live in a modern democratic state, its citizens must necessarily learn the art of compromise, as must its political leaders. Shared democratic norms and culture are said to inhibit aggression (Mingst, 2004, p. 12). Democratic states also have systems for curbing extreme behaviour, and errant leaders. Such states provide outlets for individuals to voice opposing viewpoints, and structural mechanisms exist for replacing war prone or aggressive rulers. In order to remain in power, the elected representative must make sure that he/she does not alienate the public. Therefore his actions and reactions will be much more neutral and carefully considered. In the process, extreme behaviour like war is curbed or maybe eliminated altogether.

Many of the structural and institutional explanations focus on the fact that the consent of the citizenry is necessary for a democracy to initiate and sustain a war Even where emergency powers allow the executive to act without legislative approval, public acceptance, at the very least, is needed to avoid an electoral backlash (Mingst, 2004). According to Kant, in democratic states, the general public opinion will oppose war due to the costs that the mass population would be compelled to bear, hence leaders who make decisions for war will be removed and replaced with more pacifist individuals (Bharadwaj, 2002).

Nevertheless, this explanation does not cover all possible circumstances. It is not true that the general public or even the majority of the population advocates peace all the time. Sometimes there is widespread public support for a war, and the leader is actually encouraged to be aggressive. And sometimes, even when there is little or no consent, leaders have been known to manufacture it using political propaganda.

It is often the case that the political leader actually gains popular support after a war. The dwindling popularity of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and former Pakistan Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto in 1971 received a fillip at the end of the India-Pakistan conflict (Bharadwaj, 2002). Margaret Thatcher used Democratic peace to *justify* the 1982 Falklands conflict, and later to urge democratization. She was hailed as an effective leader after the war (Bharadwaj, 2002).

The consensus theory fails when we accept that there is nothing " peculiarly pacific about popular majorities" (Schwartz and Skinner, 1999). Nationalism

can often take the form of " popular" wars. In extreme cases, countries can go to war without popular support, as democracies today do have semi mobilized standing forces with executive authority to use them (Schwartz and Skinner, 1999).

The consensus theory focuses on democracies being peaceful due to internal factors. Therefore, it is implied that democracies should have peaceful relations with *all regimes* , as the peace is a result of the structure and institutions of the democracy itself and not dependant on external factors.

There is however enough empirical evidence for the militant democracy and separate peace theories, both of which contradict this implication of the consensus theory of democratic peace. It has been established that the probability of a democracy and an autocracy going to war against each other is very high. This finding is inconsistent with the consensus theory. If peace were actually a result of internal norms of non-violence and structural constraints, then democracies would be less likely to go to war with any kind of regime, not just other democracies.

A problem of definition

The assumption of cultural homogeneity used in some explanations of the democratic peace, though common in international relations theory (Berdal, 1998, p. 91), fails miserably in the real world. The Democratic peace thesis fails in the real world as it does not take into account different interpretations of its core concepts across cultures.

Let us for example, consider the Saudi Arabian form of democracy. Their understanding of ' vote' is radically different from that of Western states. There, women do not have the right to vote, and are not likely to in the near future. Therefore, democracy there is not the traditional liberal democracy which the proponents of democratic peace take for granted. It is obvious that in the absence of female votes, the decisions of the democratic state do not reflect true consensus among its people, indeed, half of its population does not have a say in the administration. Consensus is the bedrock of the democratic peace thesis; it is the rationale behind Democratic pacifism. If, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, there is no consensus, the theory collapses. Similarly, many theocratic nations might regard a holy book as their ' constitution' . Countries like Malaysia and China view the western concept of democracy as being far from comprehensive (Bharadwaj, 2002).

Thus, the democratic peace theory, overall, lacks intellectual clarity (Bharadwaj, 2002). In the absence of any global consensus on the definition of democracy, it is difficult to define or substantiate an idea like democratic peace. It seems that the democratic peace thesis can only overcome these shortcomings if Francis Fukuyama's predictions turn out to be true and there is universalisation of the western form of liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Contribution of other factors to the ' illusion of democratic peace'

Recent research has questioned the existence of a link between democracy and higher probabilities of peace while highlighting other factors which might have been responsible for peace. Henderson uses similar data and statistical

techniques as found in the research supporting the Democratic peace thesis. He reaches two conclusions based on this data. Firstly, that politico-economic factors contributed greatly to the peace which is attributed to the existence of pacifying democracies. Secondly, that foreign policy which aims at increasing peace by imposing democracy has not been effective in the past and instead, in some cases, has increased the chances of conflict. Henderson's model shows that political similarity, geographic distance and economic interdependence are more significant variables where peace is concerned, and that democratic peace is a statistical artefact (Henderson, 2002).

Given that a democratic peace is dependant on several other factors, the use of this theory in foreign policy can lead to unpredictable results. Democratization does not necessarily contribute to peace everywhere. A relevant example would be the use of the democratic peace theory to justify the 2003 Iraq War, when the other reasons such as hidden WMD's failed to convince the world. Geographical compactness of the democratic bloc is a prerequisite for the pacifying effects of the democratic peace to apply (Schenieder, 2003). If America claims that democratic peace works, it should be extended from the north Atlantic core area to surrounding countries first. Leapfrogging is undesirable and illogical. A democratic state surrounded by autocratic and other non democratic regimes has been shown to be significantly more prone to war.

Conclusion

The political homogenisation advocated by the proponents of democratic peace is likely to have unpredictable and possibly disastrous consequences. Democratic peace has been hailed as the closest international relations theory has approached to an empirical law. It is however, still too early for nations to use it as the ideology directing their foreign policies. The consequences of imposing democracy, on different cultures, under different geopolitical conditions, and in places with low economic development have not been, and indeed cannot be calculated. No one denies the contributions of democracy to peace, but to assert that it can end all conflict is a premature claim.

What the Western World, especially America, is doing now is analogous to the phenomenon of the " White Man's Burden". Despite obvious shortcomings in the methodology and several exceptions to the theory[1], democracy is now being forwarded by international leaders as a necessary and sufficient condition for peace (Bush, 2004). A careful review of the entire premise of democratic peace is required taking into consideration other, more manageable, variables which might bring about peace without the chaos that generally accompanies a regime change.

Bibliography

Berdal, D. J. (1998), *Culture in World Politics.* New York, Millennium Publishing Group.

Bharadwaj, A. (2002), Man, State and the myth of Democratic Peace *. Strategic Analysis*, XXVI (2) Apr-Jun.

Henderson, E. A. (2002), *Democracy and War: The End of an Illusion* . Lynne Rienner Publishers

Kofman, E. (1996) Globalization and governance: the paradoxes of adjusting in sub Saharan Africa. Young, G. ed. In *Globalization: Theory and Practice* . London, Cassell.

Kant, I. (1795) *Perpetual Peace.* [Internet], Available from:

[Accessed 26 April 2007]

Mingst, K. A. (2004) *Essentials of international Relations.* London, WW Norton and Company Ltd.

Schenieder, G. (2003) *Globalization and Armed Conflict.* London, Rownman and Littlefield Publishers.

Schwartz, T. and Skinner, K. (1999), The Myth of Democratic Pacifism *. The Wall Street Journal* . January

The White House, 2004, *President and Prime Minister Blair discussed Iraq, Middle East.* [Internet], Available from: [Accessed 26 April 2007]

[1] See Schwartz and Skinner, 1999 for some notable exceptions