

Political Science 501, Baumgartner
Short paper topics/discussion points
Week 12: The “Democratic Peace”

Readings: Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets*

Here are three questions that are worth thinking about in terms of dissertation projects. Gowa’s project provides some good food for thought related to what would make a project an excellent dissertation topic:

- First, let’s start with a review of the structure of the book. Note how short it is. There are only 4 chapters in which evidence is presented. The other chapters are introductory and concluding discussions (ch. 1, ch. 7) or theoretical / conceptual set-ups (chapter 2). Thinking purely in terms of the empirical side, how much work did the author have to do, practically speaking? That is, in terms of a dissertation project, could the datasets and the empirical set-up have been prepared for this project in six months? Where did Gowa get her data and how difficult was it to gather, in terms of time and effort? Review the empirical scope of the project in some detail.
- Second, let’s look at the conceptual side. Did Gowa develop the theory? What did she develop, conceptually? That is, what is the contribution of the book in terms of theory? Is it largely reactive and critical, or is she developing a new perspective from scratch?
- Third, let’s consider the impact. Will / does the book have a big impact? Note that some of the answer to this question has to do with factors beyond the issue of the quality of the research presented. The best done research project done in an area where no one else cares about the results, or where no other scholars are working, may have less impact than a simpler and more reactive or even derivative piece done in an area where lots of scholars are working simultaneously.

Beyond those questions, let’s go into some detail on issues of congruence, or the linkages between the concepts and the measures used in a particular research project or in an entire literature. At the conceptual level, what are the main arguments concerning the “democratic peace?” What are Gowa’s critiques of those, as laid out in Chapter 2?

In the empirical chapters she goes into some detail concerning whether one should discuss full blown wars or lower-level militarized disputes short of war. Theoretically, what is more appropriate, all disputes, or only wars?

Variance is your friend, as you should be well aware. Sometimes you don’t have enough variance. For example, how many wars are there in the post-World War Two period between democracies? Is this a whiz-bang finding demonstrating the truth of the democratic peace hypothesis, or a troubling research problem?

You would think that with 306,770 units of analysis (p. 77), multi-collinearity would not be a problem. Nonetheless, there is serious discussion of two potentially spurious factors here (spurious because these factors correlate highly with joint-democracy): The Cold-war era international structure, and alliance behavior in general.

One of Gowa’s main findings is that the democratic peace holds quite nicely indeed for the post-World War Two era. She confirms the hypothesis strongly for that period, but shows that it does not hold for earlier periods. From that should we best conclude that the conclusions should be limited only to the post-war period, that the theory is in fact not true since it does not hold for all time, or what? Could one simply say that the theory is upheld for the last 50 years of history, and that the recent past is a better predictor of the future than the 19th century? Why are her findings concerning the pre-World War One period enough to debunk this argument, or are they?

We saw last week with Putnam, and indeed in several of the studies on voting and turnout two weeks ago that the best projects find ways to test hypotheses drawn from the same theoretical expectations at many different levels of analysis. Projects such as Putnam’s cannot be said to rely only on a single finding or even a single research design, but rather include a variety of partial tests of the theory from many different research design approaches. How does Gowa do on this score? Do all the tests emanate basically from the same research design, or does she develop multiple approaches to a related set of hypotheses?