

Publications

International Relations to Comparative Politics: SOS!

by Brian C. Rathbun

The field of international relations is steadily emerging from a dark period of little progress, helped along by the increasing realization that many, if not most, phenomena of interest cannot be understood without some understanding of the internal politics of nation-states. The founders of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism treated state preferences as exogenous and, generally for reasons of convenience, black-boxed domestic politics. Over time, a second generation came to internalize what were originally intended only as simplifying assumptions.

In recent years, however, we have witnessed a proliferation of new work relaxing the assumption that states are tightly constrained by the international environment so as to make domestic politics irrelevant. Realists have rediscovered their “classical” roots and now explicitly debate the importance of domestic-level variables. Neoliberal institutionalism has merged with a promising new direction in rationalist theorizing that stresses the importance of incomplete information, sometimes called strategic choice, without any assumption about the appropriate level of analysis. This is a promising start, but it will only go so far. Given the present direction, it seems that international relations scholars, left to their own devices, will likely only replicate their previous errors at a new level of analysis. The field of international relations needs the help of comparativists. IR theorists are reaching down into comparative politics, but this should be met by a reciprocal gesture. This is tantamount to a call for the resurgence of comparative foreign policy, a field that fell largely into disrepute in recent decades for being “reductionist” and, by implication, unscientific. This was never actually the case, and since so much of international relations scholarship is Europe-centered, Europeanists have a special contribution to make.

IR scholars threaten to repeat two mistakes. First, much of the recent work in international relations incorporating domestic politics simply applies the same assumptions at the domestic level that were made by structural realism at the systemic level. Politicians, like states, seek to survive, with survival meaning in this case staying in office and maintaining power. James D. Fearon argues that states will not escalate disputes if they might lose, owing to the universal fear of damage to the governing prospects of ruling elites. Hein Goemans explains decisions to continue fighting losing wars on the basis of elite fears of losing power (and sometimes their skins). Morrow and others explain a range of phenomena premised on the assumption of higher “audience costs” in democracies. Democracies tend to win the wars they fight, because they choose only conflicts they will win. Democracies do not fight wars against one another, because they understand how costly and risky such wars will be.[1]

These are important hypotheses, but the assumption of pure office-seeking motivations proved largely unworkable in comparative politics and will likely not work in international politics, either. For instance, in the former, William Riker’s theory of a “minimum winning coalition” failed to explain coalition formation among political parties, as parties rarely cooperate with their ideological opponents, and when they try, their governments quickly fall.[2] The assumption is equivalent to treating preferences as

exogenous and universal, just as structural realism did. We cannot expect that all politicians crave power to the same degree any more than we can assume that all states equally crave power. This assumption can only be justified by an epistemological goal of generalizable theories, of developing broad understanding of what all statesmen do under the same circumstances. But ontology should drive epistemology, as Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco cautioned long ago.[3]

More appropriate would be a sophisticated understanding of politicians as both policy-seekers and office-seekers. Politicians simultaneously pursue both substantive goals and a desire to stay in power. Understanding politicians and parties as policy-seekers requires international relations scholars to pay attention to what they have for so long tried to avoid — foreign policy preferences. Andrew Moravcsik claims to have reformulated liberalism as a powerful alternative to realism on the principle of “taking preferences seriously,” but this is more an admonition than a substantive theory of what states want.[4]

The other mistake that international relations scholars are making again is focusing narrowly on constraints to the neglect of agency and politics. Structural realism is strangely apolitical. There is little of the bargaining, statesmanship, and diplomacy that put the politics in international politics. Politics in structural realism is simply the application of power. Politics is in the outcome but not in the process. More powerful states overcome weaker ones. But even stronger ones live under constraints of their international environment.

The recent international relations scholarship that incorporates domestic politics does the same, primarily by focusing almost exclusively on institutions — more specifically, regime type. Recent findings suggest that democracies have particular difficulties mobilizing for conflict and might be prone to underbalancing, while late industrializers with fragile and undeveloped democratic institutions are susceptible to dangerous logrolls and overextension. The need to mobilize public opinion in democracies often results in an inflation of threat that undermines the delicate balancing act necessary for diplomacy. The transparency of democracies allows them to send more credible signals of resolve.[5]

These again are important insights, but they will inevitably fall short if they do not incorporate the process of contestation in domestic politics among groups vying for control over the definition of foreign policy. Institutions do not go to war; politicians and states do. Institutions are simply constraints, but they are not the animating force in politics; leaders, interest groups, and the media are. Institutions undoubtedly channel and constrain those urges. And goals are likely formulated in light of what the institutional context might allow. But institutions do not constitute preferences. This new research does exactly what structural realism does — situate actors in a context of constraints that lead all to make similar choices. The only difference is that institutions are added to anarchy as structural forces. This does not truly eliminate the black-box assumption. It merely adds different colors and sizes of boxes. The box remains to be opened.

One way of correcting some of these problems is by drawing on the party politics literature. A surprising lack of attention has been paid to partisan politics, even among those who are integrating domestic political variables into their analyses. In most advanced democracies, domestic politics means party politics. And parties are the logical place to start in any exploration of the role of ideas in domestic

politics, as they are the representatives of particular visions of what society should look like. In particular, the party cleavage literature provides a way to develop a comprehensive theory of partisan preferences in international security that defines what it means to be on the right and the left in foreign policy. In *Partisan Interventions*, I hypothesize that if parties do in fact draw on their ideologies for help in defining their foreign policies, then their domestic and foreign policies should spring from common values.^[6] Because of the values of equality and liberty that inspire both their domestic and foreign policy agendas, leftist parties, compared with their rightist counterparts, are less inclined to believe in the efficacy of force, are more willing to rely on multilateral cooperation to realize their goals, and have a broader conception of the national interest that includes the promotion of human rights abroad. I illustrate this through an analysis of the party politics in Britain, France, and Germany over peace enforcement in Bosnia and Kosovo and the creation of a European Union capacity for undertaking humanitarian operations.

This analysis not only allows for more than an inductive reading or ad hoc postulation of foreign policy preferences but also facilitates an exploration of the role of ideas that avoids tautology. It provides more than just an observation that, for instance, leftist parties are strong promoters of human rights. Such a statement might be empirically accurate, but it is not a theoretical one until we can trace the origins of the phenomena. And we can measure commitment to human rights, the causal variable, independently of behavior by taking a look at domestic political platforms. Deducing partisan foreign policy preferences from broader, historically grounded ideological cleavages is also likely to be more effective than treating preferences as exogenous and making sweeping assumptions that all politicians are simply office-seekers.

Although I aim to articulate a general theory of left-right differences over foreign policy in democracies, this does not mean that there is no room for the variables unique to particular countries that area study specialists have such a firm grasp of. These variables can be combined with broader, more generalizable frameworks of political contestation over foreign policy to make for more interesting arguments. For instance, the issue of peace enforcement — the use of the military to impose peace, often in cases of gross violations of human rights — forces leftist parties to choose between anti-militarism and their commitment to preventing and ending humanitarian crises. A country's historical experience with the military determines how the left resolves that value conflict. In countries where coercive foreign policy means are seen to have in the past helped realize inclusive goals, leftist parties generally regard the military as an instrument that can (but will not necessarily) serve their version of the national interest. In all the countries in my study, the key touchstone, at least initially, was the Second World War. In places that have had such a "positive" experience with the use of force, such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, the leftists generally support peace enforcement. In countries in which force has in the past served only as a vehicle for narrower, exclusive purposes, leftists by and large consider anti-militarism to be an end in itself and inconsistent with promoting human rights. For the losing countries — Germany, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, Italy — the Second World War created a visceral connection between war, destruction, and crimes against humanity. In these instances of a "negative" experience with the use of force, leftist parties oppose all interventions, humanitarian or otherwise, at least initially.

A focus on theories of partisan conflict drawn from comparative politics also allows those who are interested in ideas to transcend their association in international relations circles with cosmopolitanism and utopianism. I find that while rightist parties do not consider the promotion of human rights to be in the national interest, these operations can be used instrumentally to realize other non-humanitarian purposes. In Germany, for example, the Christian Democratic government's projection of armed forces beyond the country's borders was done in service of a broader goal of normalization. The rightist government sought to accustom its population to a more active military role, as well as force a resolution of the constitutionality of such operations by the Constitutional Court. In France, participation in peace operations provided a way in which the Gaullists could continue their strategy of grandeur and retain influence in a post-Cold War world. Both of these countries were led by ideas, even if they were strategically driven and guided by a narrow definition of self-interest.

The result of these two findings is that the same issue is often framed differently across countries, even if the left (or right) are similar. Whereas in Britain the partisan battle over intervention in Bosnia was fought primarily between a left committed to human rights in the Balkans and a right that questioned the national interest involved, the debate in Germany was framed between a hawkish right and a dovish left over the issue of whether force was an appropriate means for resolving the civil wars.

Institutions are important to the story of peace enforcement, but only in so far as they enable or inhibit parties from advocating and implementing their positions. Whether these opposing ideological positions are translated into policy depends on the exposure of the executive branch to partisan political pressures, a function of institutional design. Parliamentary systems facilitate partisan foreign policy, while presidential systems, such as in France, inhibit it and allow more room for individuals to exercise personal prerogatives that may or may not reflect the broader interests of the party. François Mitterrand could buck the interventionist impulses of the French Socialist Party, but in Britain, John Major could not ignore the isolationist cries of his Tory backbenchers. These findings indicate that international relations theorists must go beyond a narrow focus on regime type and institutions and probe the insights of comparative politics more deeply. This course of action might prove difficult for those who are predominantly trained in international relations, as it requires a more in-depth understanding of domestic politics, so comparative politics scholars more familiar with relevant literatures should be encouraged to move into questions of foreign policy.

In the end, the recipe for more successful international relations theory is simple: more comparison and more politics. While it is only just one way of doing so, incorporating political parties helps do both. Comparison implies difference, rather than an exogenous postulation of uniform preferences, whether at the domestic or the systemic level. Politics means contestation and attention to the rough-and-tumble process of policymaking, rather than an antiseptic focus on formal institutions. International relations scholars might be on the right track in comparison to previous periods, but they need some more help from comparativists.

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Notes

1 James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577–592; Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alastair Smith, "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 791–807.

2 Robert Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest* (Chicago: Markham, 1970).

3 Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco, "Clocks, Clouds, and the Study of Politics," *World Politics* 29, no. 4 (1977): 489–522.

4 Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–553.

5 Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Kenneth A. Schultz, "Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (1999): 233–266.

6 Brian C. Rathbun, *Partisan Interventions: European Party Politics and Peace Enforcement in the Balkans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).