Mathew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, War and Democratic Constraint. How the Public Influences Foreign Policy

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While Democratic Peace Theory has been quite influential during the last three decades, the Iraq War in 2003 has at least cast some doubts on the inherently peaceful nature of democracies. How can democratic leaders engage in wars without strictly defensive motivations? This question is quite manifest in the contributions of Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter. Both chapters dedicated to a case study (chapters 5 and chapter 7) refer to the Iraq war in order to understand why democracies may behave 'aggressively'. What is stimulating in their framing of the puzzle is that Baum and Potter admit that democracies are not unitary but very heterogeneous actors. Indeed they detect significant institutional differences among them which have been widely ignored in the Democratic Peace literature. Overall Baum and Potter try to capture why in some democracies leaders are seemingly constrained by public opinion, while in others, they are more insulated from it. The key chapter three analyses why some democracies are more or less constrained by institutions regarding the initiation of conflicts. The fourth chapter analyses the probability of reciprocity by target states and makes the hypothesis that strong political parties and high levels of public media access will improve a state's 'moral' credibility. Chapter 5 examines the coalition’s construction and the decision to contribute troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Chapter 6 discusses the hypothesis that democratic multiparty systems tend to engender political coverage that is more diverse while chapter 7 introduces a more detailed case study.

The work illustrates very well and in a rigorous manner how comparative research work on war is conducted in American political science studies. The comparison is linked to the ambition to establish law-like regularities in international politics. The first problem with this approach has to do with the identification and operationalisation of the dependent variable, for example, conflict initiation. The study explores the period from 1965 to 2006. The unit of analysis is the dyad or pair of states, including great Powers that are separated by no more than twelve miles of water, such as the Bering Strait. The dependent variable is the initiation of a military conflict by a state in a given year. Furthermore, they take from the International Crisis Behavior Project (ICB) a second dependent variable, coded one if state A initiates an international crisis against state B in a given year. It is useful to recall the definition of the ICB project: “Which entity triggered an international crisis, i.e., initiated
the act(s) which was (were) perceived by the earliest crisis actor in the cluster as involving a threat to basic values, a heightened probability of military hostilities and finite time for response?" This variable is important because the term initiation clearly indicates some aggression. If we apply the definition to special cases, we can quickly realise how complex it is to determine who exactly initiated a crisis. Take the July 1914 crisis. Historians still do not agree whether it was initiated by Serbia (or the Black Hand by the assassination), Austria-Hungary (by asking Germany for support) or Germany (by giving such support to Austria-Hungary). The difficulty is that the number of observations for the dependent variable is incredibly high (more than 923,534 observations for the dyad years). How can we be confident about the empirical basis of the initiator qualification even if we refer to conventional data such as the Correlates of War dataset?

The authors' problematic is very stimulating. The authors propose to open the black box of democracies and to analyse what roles the media, political parties, and the electoral system play in the democracy’s decision to join or avoid the war. The key argument is that democracies can be distinguished between those where opposition is weak – that is, a lack of transmission and availability of information – and those with an opposition, including an independent media and publicly available information. This problematic is important because it opens the avenue to a more sociological theory of war initiation reflecting the social properties of the actors. The hypothesis is very plausible. Democratic regimes with a strong opposition and media will face strong audience costs if they engage in a war by misleading their public. It is possible to interpret in such a way the political defeat of the USA in Vietnam (1973) or Israel in Lebanon (1982). The only problem again is how to operationalise political opposition, media access and press freedom. Here again the authors chose some indicators to quantify their hypothesis such as the number of televisions or radios per one thousand people, the global press freedom data set or again the effective number of parliamentary parties. While the statistical analysis is conducted in a very rigorous and sophisticated manner (with additional control variables, datasets, and so on), it is possible to doubt the pertinence of the proxy-choices. Is it true that democracies with two main parties are less inclined to opposition to governmental policies than countries such as West Germany? Is it true that the number of televisions can tell us something about the quality of information flows (see the Italy of Berlusconi)? The authors admit that “All that said, as is always the case with time-series, cross-sectional analyses, the evidence …represents the proverbial view from thirty thousand feet”. (p. 77) In order to ensure that the correlation is not artificial, the authors present more detailed case studies in the end of the book in asking themselves about the Iraq coalition. They tend to explain the opposition between Germany and the United Kingdom, Spain and Poland to the Iraqi engagement in referring to the existence of strong opposition and media in Germany. The argument can be discussed for at least two reasons. First, Germany’s non-engagement seems more due to a military culture of restraint than to informational transparency. Second, even in the British case, audience costs were quite high as shown by the later fate of ’Blairism’ but the political will or Blair’s conviction of rectitude to realise a new order were probably stronger than a purely electoral strategy.

1 See dataset International Crisis Behaviour  www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/data/ICB1-2010-final.pdf
Overall Matthew Baum and Philip Potter present us with a very thoughtful study about war initiation which can be the start for a true sociology of democratic institutions and their impact on war and peace.