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The Workshop

Democratic Peace, Domestic Audience Costs, and Political Communication

PHILIP B. K. POTTER and MATTHEW A. BAUM

This article addresses a gap in the literature connecting the empirical observation of a democratic peace to a theoretical mechanism based on domestic audience costs. We argue that the link between these literatures lies in the way leaders reach the ultimate source of audience costs: the public. The audience cost argument implicitly requires a free press because, without it, the public has no reliable means of obtaining information about the success or failure of a leader's foreign policy. Hence, leaders can credibly commit through audience costs only when the media is an effective and independent actor. The implication is that while leaders might gain flexibility at home by controlling the media, they do so at the cost of their capacity to persuade foreign leaders that their "hands are tied."

Keywords audience costs, democratic peace

In recent years, scholars have sought to develop theories and mechanisms to underpin the apparent empirical observation of a *democratic peace*. One prominent strand of this research focuses on the notion of *audience costs*, or the idea that democracies can signal their intentions more credibly than autocracies because they face electoral sanctions for bluffing and failure. The argument is that with the ability to signal more credibly comes better information, which in turn reduces the likelihood of conflict. There are, however, both theoretical and empirical gaps between the democratic peace and audience cost arguments. On the one hand, some scholars criticize the democratic peace as a statistical association in search of a logically compelling theory (Rosato, 2003). On the other lies the assessment that the audience cost literature is an elegant theoretical construct mostly unsupported by empirical evidence (Brody, 1994; Desch, 2002; Gowa, 1999; Ramsay, 2004; Slantchev, 2006). We argue that an important link between these literatures lies in the way that democratic leaders reach the ultimate source of audience costs: the public.

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The ability to generate audience costs depends not only on the electorate's capacity to vote a leader out of office, but also on modes of political communication that prevent the excessive manipulation of information. The free press is a defining characteristic of liberal democracies. While many autocracies have elections, legislatures, and the outward trappings of representation, few tolerate dissent from the press corps.¹ This nearly perfect coincidence of democracy and press freedom has obscured the role that the media might play in the audience cost mechanism. Thus, with rare exceptions (e.g. Slantchev, 2006; Choi & James, 2006), scholars have divorced the study of audience costs and the democratic peace from the study of political communication. Yet a free media is integral to the process of generating audience costs because, when the press are muzzled, the public has no means of reliably determining whether its leaders have bluffed or failed. In such a setting, the leaders in power, regardless of how they gained office, can control the flow of information in a way that renders hollow the threat of electoral sanction. After all, leaders have a strong incentive to spin or withhold information and therefore cannot be relied upon to divulge "bad news" themselves. Even if there are opposition politicians with an interest in exposing the failure of an incumbent leader, absent a free media their ability to communicate broadly with the public would be severely constrained since a captive media is typically a tool of those in power. In contrast, when the press is free, it becomes an independent source of information about the government's performance and the primary outlet for the views of opposition politicians.²

The implication is that democratic leaders must "tie their own hands" twice before they can credibly signal to a foreign adversary: first when they allow the independent media to develop as an institution, and second when they invoke audience costs. The latter step depends upon the former; only when the press is an effective independent actor are the actions of leaders transparent to the public, and this is an important element of why democracies can generate audience costs more effectively than autocracies.

Bearing this in mind, it is problematic that most existing scholarship on audience costs and the democratic peace share a common implicit assumption about the nature of political communication in democracies. That is, both literatures assume that the actions and statements of democratically elected leaders are somehow directly observed by or transmitted to the public. This requirement, however, is at odds with a virtual consensus in the literature on political communication within democracies, which holds that both elite messages and the independent actions of the media filter, and sometimes distort, the information that reaches the public (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006; Livingston & Bennett, 2003).

Furthermore, there is significant evidence suggesting that the public is not equally attentive to all types of political messages (Zaller, 1992; Popkin, 1993; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Sears & Freedman, 1967). This general inattention is compounded by voters' relative disinterest in and lack of knowledge about foreign policy (Holsti, 2004). However, certain scenarios and policies tend to disproportionately spark their interest and potentially generate audience costs (Baum, 2003). These findings from the political communication literature have significant implications for the audience cost and democratic peace arguments, as they suggest that the public is unlikely to consistently receive messages and unlikely to respond consistently to those messages it *does* receive.

While nothing in the audience cost argument requires the public to be rational or informed, it does implicitly assume that the public engages with foreign policy enough to be aware of bluffing and is consistent enough in its judgment regarding called bluffs to routinely punish the behavior at the ballot box. There is little in the literature on public knowledge and public opinion about foreign policy to suggest that the simple version

of this story is accurate. Rather, a significant body of work has found that the public's relationship with foreign policy as well as the degree to which leaders are responsive to public opinion varies over time and context. The implication is that while audience costs may play a significant role in the process of generating credible commitments, the process is more complex than commonly presumed and includes actors such as the media, which such scholarship typically excludes.

In short, audience costs are unlikely to arise mechanically in democracies, but rather will be varied and context dependent. Of course, moving the audience cost argument from elegant theory to messy empirical practice will inevitably complicate the story. Our contention is not that the audience cost argument is incorrect, but rather that mapping the model to actual politics requires that we carefully consider which institutions are required for the mechanism to function as well as when the various actors are more or less likely to play their assigned roles.

This essay reviews the literatures on the democratic peace, domestic audience costs, and political communication, synthesizing them where possible and pointing to areas ripe for additional research. We proceed in three parts. In the next section, we outline the role of media in the dissemination of foreign policy information. In the second section, we examine the likely effect of political knowledge on the audience cost mechanism. We conclude by summing up the state of scholarly knowledge in this area and identifying opportunities for future research. We find that prevailing theories of political communication support the idea that democratic leaders may be able to signal more credibly, but that the effect is likely limited, and the timing and means may be context specific.

Media and Domestic Audience Costs

A significant body of work in political science implicitly reduces the media's role to a "conveyor belt" that passively transports elite views to the public (e.g., Brody, 2001; Jentleson, 1992; Zaller, 1992), particularly those of the most powerful elites who are best able to influence policy outcomes (Bennett et al., 2006; Zaller & Chiu, 2000). The traditional view of the media as an accommodating conduit for elite messages is built upon the simplifying assumption that the media serve primarily as a linkage mechanism rather than as an independent, strategic actor in the policy-making process (Bloch & Lehman-Wilzig, 2002; Brody). The best-known variant of this perspective holds that the media "index" their coverage to elite rhetoric in Washington (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al.). Especially in foreign policy, the most powerful elites tend to be those in control of government, rather than in opposition. This implies that the media largely transmit to citizens the incumbent government's preferred framing of foreign policy.

Such a "conveyor belt" or "indexing" media would completely undermine an audience cost argument because a leader caught in failure or a bluff would have no incentive to inform the public and, therefore, would face no electoral sanction.³ Consequently, leaders would face no meaningful risk of ever having to "pay" audience costs, given a failed policy. Absent that risk, the logic of audience costs collapses.

Additional research, however, demonstrates that the media are more proactive than indexing theories suggest—making them more congruent with the audience cost hypothesis—but only in certain circumstances. For example, the political communication "gatekeeper" literature (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Patterson, 1998; White, 1950) holds that journalists shape news by determining the newsworthiness of stories, suggesting that the media have the ability to determine which elite opinions citizens hear. The potential for bias stemming from this gatekeeping process increases with the heightened prominence of

more partisan “new” media outlets (Baum & Groeling, 2008, 2010). Similarly, Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2007) argue that certain “notable conditions” may lead to some degree of press independence from official government sources, including a willingness to challenge those sources, and hence a reduced predominance of indexing.⁴

Despite these findings, the indexing hypothesis has proven durable in part because media *do* frequently transmit elite messages with largely intact frames. Most of the time the public is at a significant informational disadvantage and therefore is forced to rely on media reporting, and through it the opinions of trusted elites. Thus, the information equilibrium tends to favor leaders, and hence the media are more responsive to leaders’ preferences than to the public as consumers of information. The media do not—despite a widely held belief in the mission to inform (e.g., Patterson, 2000)—consistently act to provide the public with unfiltered information. Instead, because they are beholden to elites as sources of news, they typically provide information that furthers those leaders’ capacities to control the framing of events.

For instance, early in conflicts—and especially major conflicts (Baker & Oneal, 2001; Chapman & Reiter, 2004)—when citizens are *most* informationally disadvantaged and thus *most* inclined to support their leaders’ policies, the media are *least* likely to naysay. The public is essentially “sold” the rally message it is predisposed to “buy.” The media thereby maintain their relationships with the political elites who provide them with much of their information, while elites expect the media to repay the favor by conveying their preferred frame. This pattern is in keeping with Zaller and Chiu’s (2000) argument that due to their dependence upon authoritative sources for information—primarily the White House and executive agencies—the media are often just as likely as the general public to “rally ’round the flag”. In such settings where decision-making elites effectively hold sway over the media, it would appear difficult for leaders to effectively generate audience costs.

Entman (2003) argues that media are most able to independently influence the framing of foreign policy stories (and presumably enable the generation of audience costs) when leaders debate over what he terms contestable frames, that is, culturally ambiguous frames subject to multiple interpretations (e.g., whether the Iraq war and its aftermath constitutes liberation or occupation). In contrast, the media are least likely to exert independent influence when leaders employ culturally congruent frames, that is, frames consistent with schemas habitually employed by most citizens. An example is President Bush’s post-9/11 characterization of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda as “evil doers.” Such culturally congruent frames are extremely difficult for the media to challenge. This seemingly limits the circumstances in which leaders are likely to be able to generate audience costs to those that are already contestable. Ironically, these are presumably the circumstances under which leaders’ available policy options are relatively constrained.

The notion of contextual media framing stands in opposition to the widely held belief that the media in a democracy *should* serve as a watchdog against excesses by elected leadership (Patterson, 2000). Moreover, such a role is also implicit in the audience cost argument, which requires that the truth about foreign policy actions and outcomes eventually reach voters sufficiently intact to serve as a basis for them to act. However, the very capacity of the media to fulfill a watchdog function is subject to debate (Baum, 2003; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Hamilton, 2003). Most early work—representing the intellectual precursor of contemporary indexing theories—holds that since the media depend upon official sources to learn about newsworthy events, they essentially repeat the information that decision-making elites provide them (Cohen, 1963). An example would be reporters who spend years as White House correspondents and become captured by the institution and beholden to the administration for their high levels of access.

More recent observers have noted the media's reliance on packaged news, particularly in the form of pictures or video footage, which the White House Press Office is uniquely able to provide and thereby "spin" (Graber, 2002; Iyengar & Reeves, 1997). Others, however, counter that recent changes have made the media less dependent on elite framing. Livingston and Bennett (2003), for instance, assess whether new technology has reduced the dependence of news producers on government officials to cue and frame political content. They find that technological improvements have fueled event-driven news, but that official sources nonetheless remain a central source of information. The implications for the audience cost argument—and for democratic leadership in general—are therefore ambiguous. On the one hand, the "benefit" of wielding influence over the media comes at a cost. It is seemingly difficult for leaders to clearly signal domestic political risk to a foreign adversary when they can influence the content of information about their policies that citizens consume. On the other hand, some evidence suggests that new media technology has somewhat lessened elite influence over news content. Ironically, this loss of power—a cloud that leaders frequently bemoan—offers a potential silver lining. That is, it may enhance their capacity to send clear signals abroad, thereby perhaps improving the effectiveness of their foreign policy initiatives.

The Elite Media

Several authors have suggested that there is an important distinction between the "elite" and the "popular" media, as these two outlet types may respond differently to the forces outlined above (Baum, 2003; Paletz, 2002). This is not surprising given the sometimes-wide opinion gaps between elites and the public (Page & Barabas, 2000; Page & Bouton, 2006). This line of research expands on the possibility that the public turns to trusted elites in order to formulate opinion. However, these elites do not always have immediate access to political information either, opening the door to an additional pathway through which political communication might influence public opinion and, through it, audience costs, foreign policy, and the democratic peace. Tifft and Jones (1999) find empirical support for this argument, noting that, in many cases, elites themselves lack independent information on emerging events and hence must rely on the media as well (see also Powlick, 1995). For example, the editorial content of elite publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Affairs* shapes how leaders think about foreign policy issues—decision makers rely on these sources for factual information as well as informed opinion.

The CNN Effect

Some scholars and journalists have questioned whether recent changes to the structure and technology of the media, particularly the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle, have fundamentally altered the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the "CNN effect" (Gilboa, 2005).⁵ Central to this argument is the belief that the 24-hour news cycle is fundamentally different from previous formats because it transmits dramatic, vivid images to consumers in near-real time. Scholars were initially concerned that these changes might fundamentally alter the way in which democracies conduct foreign policy; however, the reality has not proven so stark.

In theory, the CNN effect could lessen the public's informational disadvantage and, by doing so, enhance its influence over policy. The idea is that the pressure to sustain an uninterrupted flow of news would effectively force the media to transmit more unfiltered information to the public, meaning that the media would behave in a manner more

amenable to the audience cost argument. As a result, the duration and magnitude of the public's informational disadvantage—periods during which the media primarily transmit officially framed information—would shrink as the speed and volume of news increase. Similarly, the need to fill airtime with varied content might lead media to move beyond government-framed information more quickly. With this would come a corresponding rise in the reliability of the information reaching the public and hence presumably also an increased capacity on the part of leaders to credibly signal their intentions by generating audience costs.

While theoretically compelling, it is not clear how frequently, if at all, the CNN effect actually arises. The literature notes several cases in which we might expect the CNN effect to play a role, but they do not reveal a “smoking gun” either proving or disproving the thesis. For example, Susan Moeller (1999) concludes in the case of Rwanda that the media did not function as they should have were there a consistent CNN effect. Other observers cite Operation Restore Hope in Somalia as the quintessential example of the CNN effect in action. Yet Mermin (1997) and others (Baum, 2004a; Livingston & Eachus, 1995; Robinson, 2001) found that in Somalia the media followed the flag rather than the other way around. These scholars attribute the intervention to pressure from decision-making elites, including key members of Congress and officials within the administration itself. Robinson thus points to the “illusion of a news driven media intervention” (p. 941). Gilboa (2005) presents a relatively comprehensive review of existing research in this area and finds that, despite a considerable body of theoretical and empirical work, “scholarly and professional studies of the CNN effect present mixed, contradictory, and confusing results” (p. 34), while no theory has satisfactorily specified its precise parameters or properties. Taken together, these arguments suggest that the potential for a CNN effect to enhance leaders' capacity to generate audience costs—intentionally or inadvertently—may, in reality, be illusory.

Political Communication and the Democratic Peace

There are several specific ways in which political communication within democracies may actually make them more prone to international conflict. Some scholars have argued that the domestic debates and disagreements that routinely precede any major decision in a democracy create “noise” that causes autocratic leaders to either misjudge the democratic leader's or public's resolve regarding the eventual decision or delay their recognition that a decision has been made at all (Finel & Lord, 1999). Democratic leaders tend to assume that their policy processes and decisions are perfectly transparent to other states, but this is often not the case. It can be difficult, especially for nondemocracies, to distinguish electoral rhetoric and the media coverage that surrounds it from actual shifts in policy. Furthermore, autocratic leaders often lack reliable information about the intentions of democratic societies and are confused by the processes through which they arrive at foreign policy decisions. Interestingly, this media-based mechanism seems likely to promote conflict between democracies and autocracies but would likely not hold sway in democratic dyads given that these states would be more likely to understand the nuances of one another's policy-making systems. This suggests a secondary mechanism that could bolster the logic of the democratic peace.

Others have suggested a link between the democratic peace and press freedom but hypothesized an entirely different mechanism. Van Belle (1997) argues that when a democracy faces a nondemocracy, the democratically elected leader is at an advantage because the independent media provides him or her with the dominant source of “legitimate”

information. This leader can then use the power of his or her office to alter news content in a way that may be politically beneficial. In contrast, democratic leaders and their publics perceive news from a nondemocracy as propaganda and therefore discount it. However, when two democracies reach a point of potential conflict, their independent media outlets accept one another as potentially valid sources of information, denying both leaders the ability to dominate the “legitimate” news and hence any undue influence over its content.

Other scholars (Slantchev, 2006; Choi & James, 2006) emphasize the role of a free press in providing reliable information to citizens rather than to elites. Slantchev, for instance, argues that because a free press can function as a relatively unbiased, and hence credible, information source, it can facilitate public monitoring of leaders’ foreign policy activities. This should facilitate the creation of audience costs in at least some instances.

Imposing Audience Costs Consistently

In a literal sense, voters are the “audience” in a democracy.⁶ Consequently, any action by a democratically elected leader with the potential to negatively impact public opinion can generate audience costs. However, the opposite is also true; policies that generate favorable public opinion could produce “audience benefits” by removing constraints on a leader’s behavior. While this two-way relationship is widely acknowledged in the literature on public opinion and foreign policy, it has yet to systematically inform our understanding of how the audience cost mechanism would function in a democracy. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence suggesting that the public’s attention to matters of foreign policy is at best intermittent and generally quite low. As a result, under some circumstances democratically elected leaders can conduct foreign policy unencumbered by public scrutiny and any accompanying democratic constraints. Presumably, when they do so their signals are no more credible than those of autocracies. In short, audience costs and the constraints they impose on foreign policy behavior vary with the nature of the foreign policy engagement and political circumstances at home.

With respect to the latter factor, while the audience cost argument does not require that the public be consistent and knowledgeable in an absolute sense, understanding the ebb and flow of public information and attention does tell us when these costs are or are not likely to arise. The literature on this question tells us that there are issue areas in which leaders typically cannot avoid attracting public attention and others where they are hard pressed to do so despite their best efforts. Similarly, variability in the public’s knowledge of and enthusiasm for international affairs raises the possibility that many if not most of the foreign policy activities in which a leader engages will most likely not be subject to substantial or sustained public scrutiny, and will certainly not rise to the level where they become determinative at the ballot box.

Does the Public Know Enough to Impose Audience Costs?

The audience cost argument does not necessarily require the public to have sophisticated views about (or knowledge of) foreign policy. Instead, all that is needed is that people respond negatively and consistently when informed that their government has backed down. This process rests in part on the public’s capacity to gather and retain information, and to then use that information to formulate coherent opinions about the performance of their leaders. However, research suggests that the public is not well equipped to accomplish these tasks. This literature has converged upon two key points: (a) citizens are typically at a

significant informational disadvantage vis-à-vis decision-making elites, and (b) they compensate by employing heuristics that allow them to make reasoned judgments based on relatively small amounts of information.

Scholars have long questioned the average voter's capacity to hold consistent opinions or even gather and process political information (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). These deficiencies appear particularly acute in the realm of foreign affairs (Almond, 1950; Berinsky, 2007; Canes-Wrone, 2006; Converse; Erskine, 1963; Holsti, 2004; Lippmann, 1955; Page & Bouton, 2006; Sobel, 1983). Again, an uninformed or inattentive public cannot independently evaluate a leader's claims, and therefore cannot serve as the source of audience costs.

Concern over this issue is as old as American democracy. Federalists such as Madison and Hamilton doubted the public's ability to contribute to political decision making, especially in the realm of foreign policy (Sheehan, 2004; Smith, 2007). Obviously, such a low opinion of the public's capacities leaves little place for a role as an effective constraint on the actions of democratically elected leaders.

These relatively pessimistic views stand in contrast to a long-standing liberal tradition—epitomized by the work of Kant, Rousseau, Bentham, and Mill and more recently in the vast literature on the democratic peace (e.g., Doyle, 1986; Russett & Oneal, 2001). This body of research tends to treat the involvement of citizens in foreign policy as an important component of peaceful international relations and relies on a logic similar to that underpinning the audience cost argument—a voting public with a standing preference for peace effectively constrains the foreign policy actions of democratically elected leaders.

More recent scholarship tends to characterize public opinion as a relatively stable and consistent counterweight that leaders must at least consider when formulating policy (Page & Bouton, 2006). An implication of this revisionist view is that citizens may actually be capable of rationally imposing audience costs on leaders. This evolution began with a significant reconceptualization—stemming from work in the cognitive sciences—of our understanding of *whether* and *how* citizens gather, retain, and retrieve information, as well as the degree to which leaders are responsive to public preferences. For instance, research has shown that citizens may be able to make reasoned decisions even with relatively little information by employing informational shortcuts (Popkin, 1993; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991), most notably by relying on the opinions of trusted political elites (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Larson, 2000).⁷ Additional experimental research (Tomz, 2007), in turn, suggests that audience costs build as a crisis escalates, implying that citizens (especially politically attentive ones) respond rationally to events, and that they *do* care about their nation's international reputation and are hence motivated to punish failure in foreign policy.

Despite its apparent theoretical importance, social scientists have struggled to clearly identify the public's *actual* role in foreign policy. Clearly, an active role is the *sine qua non* of an audience cost framework—without it democratic leaders would remain effectively unchecked. The prevailing scholarly consensus on this issue has changed over time as well. Early research generally held that public opinion was volatile and lacked a coherent structure (Almond, 1950; Lippmann & Merz, 1920), or that elites essentially dictated public opinion (Lipset, 1966; Verba et al., 1967). Over time, a rebuttal emerged from scholars who argued that the “noise” in the views of relatively uninformed individuals effectively cancels out when aggregated, while more informed and sophisticated members of the electorate provide a coherent “signal” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Page & Shapiro, 1992). As a result, even if the average individual knows relatively little about foreign policy, the

public can, in the aggregate, act efficiently and rationally. Despite this, the general view in the academy was that, in most scenarios, elites excluded the public from the foreign policy process (Holsti & Rosenau, 1984; Mueller, 1973). Notably, none of these ideas easily cohere with the notion that the public can systematically impose electoral audience costs on democratic leaders.

Aldrich et al. (2006) assess the overall scholarly consensus about the role of public opinion in foreign policy. They find wide acceptance for the idea that the public develops and holds coherent views on foreign policy, that citizens apply these attitudes in their electoral decisions, and that politicians respond by considering the electoral implications of their activities overseas. This consensus seemingly rebuts the critique that the public could not sanction leaders for failure or bluffing if it cannot hold consistent opinions about foreign policy effectiveness or act on such views in the voting booth. It does not, however, follow that audience costs are likely to work as simply and consistently as many theorists suggest, as there is considerable evidence that the public's knowledge of and engagement in foreign policy is, as previously noted, inconsistent over time and circumstance.

Most scholars draw a distinction between public opinion on foreign policy in general and public opinion in the context of international conflicts or crises. Clearly, the latter is more relevant to the audience cost argument as it relates to the democratic peace. While the public may not normally be closely attuned to the details of international politics, crises—especially military conflicts—typically attract disproportionate public attention. Several scholars have made the point that public opinion has played an important role in a number of recent American foreign policy crises,⁸ but nonetheless it is seemingly difficult to characterize public opinion in a crisis setting as consistent and rational enough to underpin an audience cost argument. For example, there seems to be an important disjunction between short- and long-term opinion dynamics. In the short term, the public often rallies behind presidential foreign policy initiatives regardless of their content, giving the president considerable influence over public opinion in the early stages of a conflict (Brody, 2001; Mueller, 1973). In the longer term, however, a separate body of research (Baum, 2004b; Canes-Wrone, 2006; Sobel, 2001) suggests that public opinion can constrain foreign policy, but only in relatively specific ways and under limited circumstances.

Short-Term Opinion and the Rally-'Round-the-Flag Phenomenon

Political observers have long noted that, at least initially, the American public typically responds positively to military engagements abroad, and a voluminous literature has investigated the validity and magnitude of this “rally-'round-the-flag” phenomenon. Lee (1977) noted that “the average man's reaction [to engagement abroad] will include a feeling of patriotism in supporting presidential actions” (p. 253). Most subsequent empirical research confirms the existence of a short-term rally effect under at least some circumstances (though there is less agreement regarding the typical magnitude and duration of such rallies; James & Oneal, 1991; Oneal & Bryan, 1995). However, a minority of scholars counter that rallies tend to be infrequent and ephemeral, and hence rarely of political consequence (Oneal, Lian, & Joyner, 1996; Stoll, 1984). If such an effect exists, it would seem to suggest that democracies have even less incentive to withdraw or disengage from a potential fight given the likely boost in public opinion that would accompany engagement. In particular, a consistent rally effect would imply that democracies should be relatively prone to conflicts that leaders believe they can complete quickly and successfully, or that immediately precede elections.

Numerous scholars have sought to both confirm and determine the magnitude of the rally effect. Baker and Oneal (2001) find no significant evidence of a generalized rally effect across 193 U.S. militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) between 1933 and 1992. They do, however, observe rallies where the United States either initiates a dispute or behaves in an openly revisionist manner. They also find a significant rally effect in full-blown wars and MIDs featured prominently in the *New York Times*. They conclude that the size of a rally depends upon how a dispute is presented, the presence of bipartisan support, and White House spin. This finding confirms and builds upon the previously raised point about the importance of public attentiveness, as well as the independent role of the media in both generating and responding to that attentiveness. If a dispute is not high profile and news of it does not reach the public, it can generate neither a rally effect nor audience costs.

Chapman and Reiter (2004) also argue that the rally effect is more nuanced than a simple reaction to the use of force abroad. They find that UN backing significantly increased the size of rallies following MIDs between 1945 and 2001. This suggests the public is capable of maintaining long-standing policy preferences, including a preference for multilateralism. Their findings also show how the public employs simple heuristics when assessing the wisdom of a foreign policy—in this case the meaningful signal of an endorsement by the typically cautious Security Council.⁹

A consistent rally effect implies a “knee jerk” public reaction to the use of force abroad. How can we reconcile this with the view that public opinion is the source of potential audience costs for democratically elected leaders? The likely answer, reinforced by an emerging body of research, is that rallies, or the absence thereof, may emerge from the interaction between preexisting individual preferences and the information environment. It is well established (e.g., Brody, 2001; Lee, 1977; Mueller, 1973) that rallies tend to recede in the presence of salient information contradicting the administration’s preferred message, or of significant elite debate on the merits of a policy. Individuals typically look to elites from their own party, whom they consider most credible due to an assumption of shared preferences, when determining whether to support the president (Groeling & Baum, 2008; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Rahn, 1993). If these elites begin to question the wisdom of a foreign engagement, public opinion tends to follow. Notably, these elites would presumably rely on a free media to widely disseminate their messages. Seen in this light, the rally effect begins to mirror the dynamics of the audience cost argument. Evidence suggesting that a foreign adventure is contrary to the public’s preferences will suppress a rally. Indeed, it may produce sufficient negative sentiment to generate audience costs. The audience cost literature is arguably somewhat narrow because it assumes that voter preferences are limited to a taste for success and honesty (or at least that leaders not get caught bluffing), but the insight is essentially the same.

This suggests that in the face of a significant informational disadvantage, the public uses elite positions—and particularly those of fellow partisan elites—as a critical cognitive shortcut. While there are likely biases inherent in such a shortcut that systematically influence the audience cost argument (Groeling & Baum, 2008), this indicates that the public could use such heuristics to impose costs in a rational and relatively consistent way. However, this also means that citizens may base their decisions concerning whether or not to support the president on faulty assumptions regarding elite opinion. In short, the public need not be perfectly informed, perfectly attentive, or even perfectly rational in order for the audience cost argument to function as a basis for the democratic peace. But we should not expect such costs to be imposed with complete consistency or predictability.

Longer Term Opinion and Casualty Aversion

Public opinion about foreign engagement appears to take a different course in the longer term. With the passage of time, the information asymmetries between leaders and the public tend to recede (Baum & Potter, 2008), and the public's capacity to respond coherently to events within a conflict consequently improves. However, despite this apparent improvement, long-term opinion continues to be constrained and contextual.

Research into long-term opinion about conflict has primarily explored the response of democratic publics to casualties, and the findings in this area have important implications for any argument about audience costs and the democratic peace. Much of this literature holds that democracies are generally casualty adverse; that is, public opinion turns against a conflict as casualties rise. Mueller (1973), for example, famously argues that public tolerance for casualties follows a roughly logarithmic function where relatively few casualties might significantly reduce public support early in a conflict, but that tolerance might increase as a conflict matures. Recent variants of Mueller's hypothesis suggest that it is not the raw number of casualties that determines the public's tolerance, but instead either their *proximity* (Gartner, 2008), *rate* (Slantchev, 2004), *trend* (Gartner, 2008), or *framing* (Boettcher & Cobb, 2006).

Mueller's casualty aversion hypothesis underpins important elements of research on the differences between democratic and autocratic performance in wars. For instance, some scholars suggest that because politicians must be sensitive to public opinion on casualties and other costs of war, they are systematically more cautious than their autocratic counterparts in initiating military conflicts and less credible in their threats to use force in high-risk situations (Filson & Werner, 2004). The empirical effect appears to be that—whether because they *self-select* into conflicts they are likely to win (Reiter & Stam, 1998) or are *selected* into such conflicts by risk-acceptant adversaries (Filson & Werner)—democracies are more likely than autocratic nations to win the wars they do fight, at least when these conflicts are relatively short in duration (Bennett & Stam, 1998).

While the end result might be the same, this seems to imply a countervailing force to the supposed enhanced signaling ability that should accompany the capacity to generate audience costs. Systematic casualty aversion within democracies could create a credible commitment problem if other states recognize that democratic citizens will not bear the loss of lives, perhaps offsetting the advantages derived from any ability to generate audience costs. But the literature also uncovers specific features of a conflict that can mitigate casualty aversion, meaning that there are situations in which democracies will tolerate losses—thereby perhaps enhancing their credibility in those sorts of conflicts. For example, Larson (1996) treats public support for a conflict (and therefore the tolerance for casualties) as a relatively simple cost-benefit calculation. He sees support as an essentially rational function of the benefits of intervention, the probability of success, the likely costs, and the cues provided by leaders and trusted elites. Schultz (1999) does not directly speak to the issue of casualty adversity, but does model the situation in which democracies experience higher costs of war and then compares that to what happens if, instead, they have higher audience costs. He finds support for the audience cost argument.

There are several notable critiques of the casualty aversion hypothesis. For instance, Berinsky (2007) extends the aforementioned work on what the public does and does not know about foreign policy, arguing that not only are typical individuals ill informed about foreign policy in “normal” times, but their relative ignorance persists even in wartime. Hence, they cannot factor very much factual knowledge about a conflict—such as casualty levels—into their opinions. Instead, he argues that citizens respond primarily to cues from

trusted elites regarding the wisdom of a given foreign policy action (see also Baum & Groeling, 2010). Casualty levels, rates, proximity, and trends, in turn, may or may not significantly influence elite rhetoric.

Jentleson (1992; see also Jentleson & Britton, 1998) argues that the critical factor accounting for variations in public support for war is not the cost in blood or treasure, but rather the nature of the mission itself, that is, the “principal policy objective.” He argues that the public will support conflicts involving traditional military tasks (such as using force to coerce an adversary engaged in aggressive action against the United States or its allies) even at a significant cost in lives, while only supporting more aggressive or less traditional missions (such as efforts to depose foreign leaders or humanitarian interventions) if the costs remain low. Larson (2000) supports Jentleson’s main point that the public’s response to casualties is contextual. However, similar to Brody’s (2001) “elite debate” explanation for short-term opinion rallies, Larson’s emphasizes the degree of elite consensus surrounding a particular conflict: If consensus is high, public support will remain high in the face of casualties; otherwise, public support may collapse in response to even a few deaths.

Echoing Chapman and Reiter (2004), Kull and Ramsey (2001) argue that the public will support a conflict even in the face of casualties if other countries support their nation’s policy toward the conflict. Gelpi and Feaver (2004), in turn, argue that public tolerance depends on expectations regarding the probability of success. Evidence from other studies supports this conclusion, both with respect to the war in Iraq (Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2006) and more broadly (Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2009).

If the public’s tolerance for casualties appears to be based on factors such as elite consensus, multilateral support, and traditional missions—all of which are clear informational cues indicating that a mission is likely to be worthwhile—then the inverse circumstance is equally suggestive. That is, popular support tends to be more fragile when the public has less experience with the mission and requires more knowledge to assess it. In such cases, the public may react quickly and negatively to the informational cues produced by elite discord while being especially responsive to the higher informational content of “local” casualties (Gartner, 2008). In short, the public’s informational disadvantage makes it especially susceptible to the framing of information by elites. However, if this disadvantage wanes, as is likely during a protracted conflict, tolerance for elites’ preferred framing begins to break down and the public is able to assert itself in the foreign policy arena (Baum & Potter, 2008).

Lessons from the political communication literature concerning the public’s preferences in media coverage explain why the public may sporadically take an interest in foreign policy and why the news media periodically report on it. For example, casualties may both attract people’s attention to foreign policy and turn them sharply against it. The media tend to frame casualties in terms of local losses, flag-draped caskets, and grieving American families. In short, casualties transform a foreign engagement into a domestic issue, making foreign crises seem close to home in general and to local communities in particular (Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989). The media can then use this public attention as a tool to draw the public’s focus to broader issues about a foreign conflict that, before the localization of casualties, may not have attracted much interest, thereby priming the public to assess whether an engagement is worth the cost.

While these alternative arguments about trends in public opinion do not necessarily supplant the audience cost argument, they certainly indicate that the public’s electoral response to conflict is driven by more than a simple response to failure or bluffing. Indeed, this literature seems to suggest that the primary mechanism does not involve electoral punishment for failure *per se*, but rather for contravening long-standing preferences.

Going Public

Leaders are unlikely to remain passive bystanders in this process of opinion formation. While the audience cost literature assumes public attention to foreign policy—down to the nuances of bluffing—in reality, leaders have considerable leeway in deciding when and how to engage their citizenry. Such decisions inherently involve choices about when to attempt to invoke audience costs in order to signal credibility, and when to seek to fly under the public's radar, so as to maximize flexibility.

There is a considerable body of work on this question of when leaders do and do not try to draw public attention to their policies. For instance, Canes-Wrone (2006) argues that presidents typically appeal to public opinion on issues the public is likely to support, but do so primarily when they believe such policies will improve societal welfare. Work in political communication also finds that democracies can manipulate when they are and are not generating audience costs by choosing whether or not to “go public” (Kernell, 2006). For example, Domke, Graham, Coe, Lockett John, and Coopman (2006) explore the role of public appeals in passage of the Patriot Act and argue that political elites' capacity to manipulate the media messages that reach the public is greatest in times of national crisis or upheaval. This finding indicates that leaders can influence the information reaching the public at precisely the moment at which the public might use that information to sanction. In doing so, they reduce audience costs and, presumably, any improved signaling capacity that accompanies them.

Baum (2004b) makes the additional point that audience costs are politically risky; after all, leaders who invoke them risk having to “pay,” should their policy fail. Consequently, leaders are only likely to seek audience costs in foreign policy crises when they believe the national security stakes involved are particularly high—that is, when success is vital to the national interest—or alternatively if they are highly confident of success and thus relatively unconcerned with the political cost of failure. Of course, if national interests are clearly at stake, or a leader's state enjoys a significant preponderance of power, then it is unclear why she or he would need the additional heft of audience costs to provide credibility—these factors on their own would appear sufficient.

Democratic leaders' estimates of the political risks associated with audience costs likely also vary with the level of public support that they enjoy. When democratically elected leaders are popular, they tend to command a great deal of deference from the press (Baum & Potter, 2008). Popularity also represents a political cushion, presumably softening the political blow a leader must absorb if a risky foreign policy gambit fails. This suggests that when leaders are popular and therefore most able to “go public” and act aggressively abroad, they are also less likely to incur meaningful audience costs for bluffing or backing down.

Conclusion

Taken together, the literatures on political communication, audience costs, and the democratic peace point to a single core insight that is central to our argument. That is, the role of audience costs in the foreign policy behavior of democracies is considerably more complex than current work in this area suggests. Public opinion is not a simple and detached assessment of the performance of leaders in the foreign policy arena. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon moderated by public attentiveness, circumstance, elite framing, and the actions of the media. Currently, the audience cost argument is a theoretically rich construct with limited empirical support. Transforming it into an

empirically productive framework requires recognizing and incorporating these potential complications.

There is an essential paradox in the role of the free media in the foreign policy of democracies. Leaders “gain” political benefits at home by controlling the framing of their policies. Yet, the greater their capacity to control the domestic political debate, the less their capacity to persuade foreign leaders that their “hands are tied.” So their success at home in this regard compromises their capacity to send credible signals abroad. This means, obviously, that they are less able to generate audience costs. On the other hand, to the extent that they lose control of the press, this ironically enhances their capacity to generate audience costs and hence the credibility of their signals abroad. The bottom line is that factors that “help” domestically can “hurt” internationally, and vice versa.¹⁰ Only by combining the theoretical insights of the political communication and audience costs literatures does this paradox become clear. Recognizing it and its implications seems essential to developing a successful research program aimed at empirically testing the core theoretical predictions of domestic audience cost theory.

Notes

1. The correlation between the widely used Polity IV measure of relative democracy and the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index is 0.77. No country with a Polity score less than 5 in 2003 (on the -10 to $+10$ DEMOC-AUTO scale, where $+10$ is “most” democratic) scored higher than 81st in the world in press freedom. That country was Cambodia.

2. Slantchev (2006) argues that for the press to serve in this capacity, it must also be nonstrategic (i.e., nonpartisan). Here we simply assert that independence from government influence is a baseline requirement.

3. Autocratic control of the media would, however, adhere much more closely to Jentleson’s conception of the “conveyor belt.” Because he controls the conveyor belt, the autocrat could withhold or spin news of failure or concessions to an adversary, and the ability to generate audience costs would be nonexistent.

4. However, it is difficult to precisely define and measure the circumstances likely to give rise to such notable conditions, and even more difficult to determine *ex ante* which events are likely to give rise to them. After all, they are presumably “notable” in part because of their infrequency. (Otherwise, *indexing* would be the notable departure.)

5. The term “CNN effect” emerged before competing 24-hour news networks (e.g., Fox, MSNBC) appeared. Recent studies use it as shorthand to refer to a wide array of news outlets.

6. In principal-agent theory (Arrow, 1985; Rees, 1985a, 1985b), leaders are the agents and citizens the principals. The latter are analogous to the audience in audience cost theories.

7. Popkin (1993) terms this process “low information rationality.”

8. For instance, some research suggests public opinion influenced U.S. foreign policy toward Nicaragua (Sobel, 1993), Somalia (Klarevas, 2002), and Iraq (Larson & Savych, 2005).

9. Further demonstrating the importance of perceived common interests in determining individual responses to the use of force, Baum (2002), in a study of major U.S. uses of force between 1953 and 1998, finds stark differences in individuals’ rally responses depending on their party affiliations and the partisan configuration of government.

10. In some respects, this insight parallels the notion of varying “win sets” in Putnam’s (1988) “two-level games” framework. Putnam argued that any agreement that increases a leader’s flexibility at home inherently reduces that leader’s capacity to extract concessions from a negotiating partner abroad. The reason, as with audience costs, is that leaders who enjoy relative freedom of maneuver at home cannot persuade their negotiating partners abroad that their hands are tied.

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