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PART II

COMMITMENT AND COMPLIANCE

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Democratic States and Commitment in International Relations

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> [T]he Four Hundred . . . departed widely from the democratic system of government. . . . They also sent to Agis, the Lacedaemonian king, at Decelea, to say that they desired to make peace, and that he might reasonably be more disposed to treat now that he had them to deal with instead of the inconstant commons.
>
> —Thucydides

> Confederations are dissolved for the sake of some advantage, and in this republics abide by their agreements far better than do princes. Instances might be cited of treaties broken by princes for a very small advantage, and of treaties which have not been broken by a republic for a very great advantage.
>
> —Machiavelli

The traditional view of popular government as shifting and unreliable, which Thucydides attributes to the Athenian oligarchs, has a long and distinguished history. Machiavelli, who takes issue with this view,

I have benefited greatly in this project from the comments of the participants in the Social Science Research Council workshop on Liberalization and Foreign Policy and from the comments of three anonymous reviewers. John Ferejohn, Jeffry Frieden, Joanne Gowa, Miles Kahler, Lisa Martin, and Barry Weingast have been particularly helpful. I am indebted to Kenneth Schultz and Marissa Myers for their able research assistance. Funding was generously provided by the Center for International Security and Arms Control and by the Institute for International Studies, both at Stanford University. Doug Rivers was of considerable help in thinking about the statistical dimensions of this article. For much of the data used in this project, I am grateful to the Correlates of War Project and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. *** The epigraphs are from Thucydides [400 B.C.] 1951, 2.25.70; and Machiavelli [1530] 1970, 1.59.

attributes it to "all writers" and "all historians."[1] The significant, if still somewhat tenuous worldwide trend toward democratization of the past decade has renewed interest in the implications of democratic governance for the international behavior of states.[2] Most of that interest has focused on the relationship between democracy and conflict. *** I return here to the basic question suggested by Thucydides and Machiavelli, which asks about the ability of democratic states to make commitments in their international relations. I argue that there is both a theoretical and an empirical basis for rejecting the traditional view of "the inconstant commons."

The ability of states to make commitments is a critical dimension of the international system. Between two states, commitments run the gamut from formal defense treaties to casual assurances between diplomats. For liberal institutionalists, the ability to make commitments is central to the process of international institutionalization.[3] But commitments do not have to reflect only cooperative behavior. Even for realists, the ability to make commitments is critical to international interactions. The efficacy of deterrence threats and the functioning of alliance politics clearly hinge on the ability of actors to make credible commitments.[4]

The dominant assumption in the study of international relations has been that the ability, or the lack of ability, to make commitments is a function of the anarchic international system.[5] *** Given the importance of commitment and the traditional concern about the inconstancy of popular rule, the possibility that liberal and democratic domestic political and economic arrangements may have distinct effects on the ability of states to make credible international commitments would seem well worth investigating.

On the face of it, the challenge of signaling and maintaining commitment in political systems that require public deliberation and approval for major international actions would seem formidable. But the relationship between international commitments and domestic politics is more complex than might be assumed from a narrow focus on the idea of the inconstant commons. In this article I set out a working definition of liberal democracy and draw out of that definition several implications for the

[1] Machiavelli [1530] 1970, 1.58.
[2] Huntington 1991.
[3] Keohane 1984.
[4] Schelling 1960; 1966.
[5] Grieco 1988.

ability of states to make international commitments. As against the common perspective of democratic inconstancy, I argue that there are both normative and structural characteristics of liberal democratic states that can significantly enhance the strength of their international commitments. I then turn to a consideration of democratic alliance behavior as a preliminary empirical indicator for the distinctive nature of democratic commitments in the international system. In particular, I bring forward strong empirical evidence to show that alliances between liberal democratic states have proved more durable than either alliances between nondemocratic states or alliances between democratic and nondemocratic states.

Democracy and commitment both are complex phenomena. Many books have been written on both subjects. For the purpose of this analysis, I offer working definitions that, while inadequate as complete philosophical statements, can serve as the basis for a discussion of these phenomena within the context of international affairs.

A state makes a commitment to a course of action when it creates a subjective belief on the part of others that it will carry through with a certain course of action. Commitments may be trivial and involve doing things that are clearly in one's interest to do. The more interesting commitments are those that bind the state to take some set of actions that do not look to be in its narrow self-interest as an international actor. Thus, the commitment problem for the United States when it used nuclear deterrence to defend Europe against a Soviet attack was how to convince both the Europeans and the Soviets that in the event of a war, American leaders would be prepared to sacrifice New York in order to save Berlin or Paris.[6] In this article I will deal in particular with alliance commitments. Alliances, at their core, are a reaction to the problem of nontrivial commitment.[7] If the narrow self-interest of one alliance partner would be served by defending the other, the two would not need to formalize their commitment on paper, beyond some minimal efforts to coordinate defense policies and practices. The creation of a formal alliance is an attempt to signal to both the alliance partners and other states that a genuine commitment to some level of mutual defense exists.

The definition of democracy is even more problematic. I focus in this article on the notion of "liberal democracy." Scholars, of course, continue to debate the relationship between these two terms, but my argument

[6] Schelling 1966, chap. 3.
[7] Kegley and Raymond 1990.

proceeds analytically from both concepts. Liberalism refers to a conception of the state that faces juridical limits on its powers and functions.[8] Democracy refers to a form of government in which power rests with the majority. Democracy requires governments to be able to garner majority approval of their performance in order to stay in power. At the same time, liberalism will require that minority opinions can be expressed and that rivals for power will be able to exercise their rights to try to form alternative majorities. The demands that power be limited and that it rest with the majority can be in tension.[9] In the modern world, however, liberalism and democracy have become strongly, though not perfectly interconnected. Indeed, a number of scholars argue that modern democracy in its juridical or institutional sense is a natural extension of liberalism.[10] For the purposes of this analysis, then, liberal democracies comprise states that are limited in their conduct of international affairs by constitutionally defined institutions of popular will and of juridical constraint.

At the domestic level, the survival of liberal democracy and the ability of governments to make credible commitments are inherently intertwined. The existence of liberal democracy ultimately rests on the ability of the majority to convince minorities that it will not remake institutions when its narrow self-interests might be better served by abandoning the notion of limited government. A central question of liberal democratic theory, then, is how it is that the majority commits to accept limits on its power.[11]

Similarly, scholars have long debated the implications of limited government and majority rule for external commitments. Before moving to the analytic portion of this inquiry, it is worth a brief detour to summarize some of these perspectives about the ability of liberal democratic states to make commitments in their international relations.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRATIC COMMITMENTS

The traditional views on the ability of democratic states to make international commitments can be grouped into three perspectives. The first perspective emerges from the dictate of structural realism that internal organization will be irrelevant to the external behavior of states.[12] In this view, the ability of states to make commitments will be based on the

[8] See Manning 1976, 15; and Bobbio 1990, 1.
[9] Bobbio 1990, 2.
[10] Ibid., 31. See also Rawls 1993.
[11] For some recent treatments of this vexing issue, see Hochschild 1981 and Riker 1982.
[12] On some of the limitations of the realist approach in this area, see Barnett and Levy 1991.

demands of the distribution of power in the anarchic international system. There is little room, then, for different behaviors to arise systematically from variations in domestic regimes. In the words of Kenneth Waltz: "International politics consists of like units duplicating one another's activities."[13] All states will have trouble making commitments because the system is anarchic, and the incentives for keeping or breaking commitments will be no different for democratic or nondemocratic regimes. To date, the vast majority of the literature on the nature of commitments in international relations has treated regime type as irrelevant.

Those who have addressed domestic dynamics and the impact of regime type have tended to take a second perspective that views democratic states as distinctively less capable of making strong commitments. As Machiavelli asserts, there is a long tradition of skepticism regarding the efficacy of internal democracy for external relations in general and in particular about the ability of democratic states to make external commitments. Democratic foreign policy, in this view, is dependent on the vagaries and passions of public opinion. *** Alexis de Tocqueville's oft-quoted observation that "in the control of society's foreign affairs democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others" is bolstered with his claim that a democratic government tends "to obey its feelings rather than its calculations and to abandon a long-matured plan to satisfy a momentary passion."[14] Lord Salisbury, the nineteenth-century British Prime Minister, points to the regular changes of leadership demanded by democratic publics as a significant limitation on the ability of any given leader to commit the state to a course of action: "for this reason, if no other," he argues, "Britain could not make military alliances on the continental pattern."[15]

The third perspective sees democracies as well able to enter into long-term commitments. Some holding this view make a positive argument about the characteristics of democracy that will enhance the strength of international commitments, while others attribute the strength of democratic commitments to an inability to change course rapidly. Machiavelli typifies the more negative view that the cumbersome machinery of democratic foreign policymaking will increase democratic reliability even after objective interests have changed. Immanuel Kant exemplifies the positive view, holding that states with "republican" forms of government

[13] Waltz 1979, 97.
[14] Tocqueville [1835] 1969, 2.5.13.
[15] Lowe 1967, 10.

will be united by bonds of trade and shared norms. In Kant's regime of "asocial sociability," the democratic norms of nonviolent problem solving will be operative between as well as within democratic states.[16] It is for this third perspective that I will argue here: distinctive institutions and preferences should enhance the ability of democratic states to make credible international commitments.

THE THEORETICAL BASES FOR DEMOCRATIC DISTINCTIVENESS

I make the argument for a distinctive democratic capability to make lasting international commitments in three parts. First, I look at several arguments about the basic stability of democratic foreign policy. I then argue that there are particular and distinctive values and foreign policy preferences in democratic states that can contribute to stable international commitments. Finally, I suggest that some characteristics of the internal institutions of democratic states are critical in enhancing the credibility of external commitments.

The Stability of Foreign Policy in Liberal Democratic States

The central argument of those who question the ability of democratic states to make credible commitments in the international system focuses on the putative instability of democratic policy choices. It is, therefore, with those arguments that I will begin in setting out the case for strong democratic commitments. *** I briefly assess foreign policy stability here in terms of the stability of public preferences, the stability of democratic leadership, and the stability of foreign policy institutions. In each case I begin with a look at the traditional view of democratic instability and then turn to a positive argument for the stability of the international commitments of democratic states.

The Stability of Public Preferences

Gabriel Almond sets the tone for the view of fickle democratic foreign policymaking in his classic analysis of the American public and foreign policy: "An overtly interventionist and 'responsible' United States hides a covertly isolationist longing, . . . an overtly tolerant America is at the same time barely stifling intolerance reactions, . . . an idealistic America is muttering *soto voce* cynicisms, . . . a surface optimism in America

[16] Kant [1795] 1991. For a more recent proponent of this position, see Dixon 1994. See also Maoz and Russett 1993.

conceals a dread of the future."[17] This image has been further bolstered by the public opinion work that emphasizes the weakness of political conceptions in the general public.[18] If democratic publics are fickle, and if democratic foreign policies are especially sensitive to public preferences, then we might expect democratic foreign policies to be highly unpredictable.[19]

While the image of changeability is a strong one, it is not one we should accept too hastily. The most significant of recent work in this area has argued that democratic states actually are quite stable in their domestic preference orderings.[20] In assessing the stability of democratic policy, it is well to remember Waltz's warning that when evaluating the abilities of democratic states in the foreign policy arena, it is important to consider those abilities relative to the abilities of nondemocratic states.[21] That democratic states flip and flop between isolationism and interventionism may be true, but this does not mean that other states have stable preferences simply because they are headed by a single despot.[22] Machiavelli makes such a comparative argument in rejecting the view of the masses as fickle – a view that he ascribes to Titus Livy and "all other historians":

> I claim, then, that for the failing for which writers blame the masses, any body of men one cares to select may be blamed, and especially princes. . . . The nature of the masses, then, is no more reprehensible than is the nature of princes, for all do wrong and to the same extent when there is nothing to prevent them doing wrong. Of this there are plenty of examples besides those given, both among the Roman emperors and among other tyrants and princes; and in them we find a degree of inconstancy and changeability in behaviour such as is never found in the masses.[23]

In the more contemporary setting, we can consider the frequent criticisms of the response of democratic states to the rise of Nazi Germany. If analysts wish to draw strong lessons from the vacillation of the democracies in the interwar years, then it is only fair to point to the dramatic shifts in German–Soviet relations in that period as well.[24]

[17] Almond 1950, 67.
[18] Converse 1964.
[19] On the fickleness of democratic publics and their influence on foreign policies, see Monroe 1979; and Page and Shapiro 1983.
[20] See Shapiro and Page 1988; and Russett 1990, 92–95.
[21] Waltz 1967, 17.
[22] For two different approaches to democracies' tendency to waver between isolationism and interventionism, see Hartz 1955; and Klingberg 1952.
[23] Machiavelli [1530] 1970, 1.58.
[24] On the behavior of democracies in the interwar years, see, for example, Taylor 1961, xi.

The democratic states were uncertain about how to interpret their obligations to Czechoslovakia. They did, however, finally pursue their treaty obligations with Poland in quite certain terms. Meanwhile, the Germans and Soviets were experimenting with dramatic shifts in their positions toward one another. Ultimately, of course, the Nazi–Soviet pact proved worthless. The democratic states, on the other hand, maintained the basic shape of their commitments to one another despite very high international and domestic costs.

Contrary to the pessimism of many analysts, foreign policy issues do seem to have played an important role in American electoral politics.[25] This role has not led to either the extremes of chaos or paralysis that the critics of democratic foreign policy have predicted. The policy views of the public in aggregate have been reasonably stable and well-connected to the exigencies of external events.[26] When we look at the issue of policy stability from an empirical angle, the reality seems to be that democracies can maintain stable equilibrium policies.[27]

* * *

The Stability of Democratic Leadership

A central fact of the constraints on government power in the modern liberal democracies has been limitations on the tenure of government leaders. *** Regular leadership change is an important element in thinking about the relationship between democracy and commitment. Henry Bienen and Nicholas Van de Walle have shown that the leaders of democratic states do tend to have shorter tenures than the leaders of nondemocratic states.[28] Those who would enter into commitments with democracies must face the possibility that a new leader will be less inclined to honor previous commitments. The United States faces the prospect of major leadership change every four years. In parliamentary systems, the government could fall at any time. Some kinds of agreements surely will survive across governments, but it is plausible that the myriad small understandings that condition relations between states might be threatened by a new administration. ***

The simple fact that leadership change is more frequent is not, however, necessarily a negative factor for commitment. Again, a comparative

[25] Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989.
[26] See Page and Shapiro 1991; Holsti 1992; and Nincic 1992.
[27] See Russett 1990; and Page and Shapiro 1991.
[28] Bienen and Van de Walle 1991.