Feeling the Democratic Peace:
What country feeling thermometer data can teach us about the drivers of
American and Western European foreign policy

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In *Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant (1795) argued that democracies do not view each other as threatening, so rarely go to war. The flip-side of democratic amity, David Hume (1742) had pointed out, was an “imprudent vehemence” or enmity towards dictatorships, promoting conflict across regime types.

Today, “democratic peace” (DP) theory (e.g. Doyle 1983; Maoz and Russett 1993; Moravcsik 1997) has become one of the most widely accepted theories of international relations (IR). In 1972 Dean Babst first reported a correlation between democracy and peace, and researchers in the late 1970s and 1980s debated whether the correlation was spurious or not (e.g. Chan 1984). Scholarship in the 1990s then began to address structural and normative causes of the democratic peace. Structural approaches focused on drivers like the political accountability built into democracies with their voting systems (e.g. Huth and Allee, 2002), how the enhanced signaling of resolve by democracies decreases the likelihood of miscommunication and conflict (“audience costs”; e.g. Fearon, 1994; Gelpi & Griesdorf, 2001), and the role of the separation of powers in allowing democratic opposition to the use of force to inhibit the initiation or escalation of conflict (Maoz and Russett, 1993). Other DP scholars focused on norm externalization: how democratic norms of compromise and non-violent conflict resolution are projected from the domestic to the international arena (Gaubatz, 1996). Democracies cooperate because they share a willingness to compromise; when they interact with non-democracies, however, such norms are no longer assumed to apply (Braumoeller, 1997).

DP theory has not gone without challenge, however. These challenges take two broad forms: 1) friendly counterarguments that fall under the “Kantian tripod” of international institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic politics, and 2) hostile counterarguments from outside of Liberal Theory. The primary friendly counterargument is that of a “commercial or capitalist peace” (e.g. Polachek 1980; Gartzke 2007). It argues that the relationship between democratic politics and peace is spurious: the actual driver is greater trade among democracies, which contributes to increased economic interdependence. This interdependence is seen to make the costs of war too high. A major hostile counterargument
comes from IR Realists (e.g. Farber & Gowa 1995; Rosato 2003), who argue that it is alliances among democratic states, not their democratic nature, that causes peace among them. In such Realist views, it is the balance of power among states in a system that determines decisions of war and peace; regime type has little to do with it.

This paper utilizes 2014 country feeling thermometer data gathered by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) and YouGov as dependent measures to explore the underlying drivers of amity and enmity among democratic citizens. Specifically, why do the American, British, French, and German publics consistently like some countries, and dislike others? Utilizing Freedom House and other quantitative measures of political freedom, economic interdependence and trade, military strength, and latent power, it utilizes multivariate regression analysis to pit the Democratic Peace against major rival explanations like the commercial/capitalist peace and Realist power balancing.

Why feeling thermometer data? First, as Jarod Hayes (2011: 783) notes in a review of the DP literature, “the role of the public requires far more attention.” Much recent work in the DP has focused on the views of democratic leaders, such as how Roosevelt viewed Hitler (Farnham 2003), or how Tony Blair and Bill Clinton viewed Serbia in the context of the Kosovo conflict (Schafer and Walker 2006). In such work, what matters is elite judgements about friends and foes. But in democracies, the “electoral connection” ensures that politicians pay careful attention to public opinion when they make their foreign policies (Aldrich et al. 2006). For instance, an early longitudinal analysis of US survey data revealed that changes on public opinion on international events regularly preceded eventual changes in US foreign policy (Page and Shapiro, 1983). Given that a basic requirement of a causal argument is that the cause precedes the effect, this finding strongly suggests that public opinion is a major driver of elite foreign policy decision-making in democracies like the US. American politicians, furthermore, are Americans too. Politicians do not just respond to their constituents in a self-interested manner; they also represent them in the sense of sharing their feelings, attitudes, and policy preferences (Knecht 2010: 5). Nationally representative feeling thermometer data therefore provides a powerful window into patterns of amity and enmity in how democratic citizens (both the public and their responsive elite representatives) feel about foreign countries.

Second, while feeling thermometer data may be more indirect than existing dependent measures in the DP literature like the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data from the correlates of war (COW) project, it does not suffer from the coding issues that plague the MID (e.g. Downes & Sescher 2012; Reiter, Stam, & Horowitz 2016). Furthermore, unlike a
binary dependent "variable" of war or no war that barely varies, the 2014 feeling thermometer data used here is a dependent variable that truly varies, on 11 and 101 point scales. Greater variation reduces measurement error.

Third and finally, to our knowledge, feeling thermometer data has not yet been used in studies of the DP. It therefore provides a new window to test rival explanations for why democracies go to war more often with some kinds of countries than others.

**Measures**

**Dependent**

**Warmth towards foreign countries.** Feeling thermometer scores for the United States (CCGA, 2014) and three major Western European countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, OU YouGov 2014) were used to measure feelings towards foreign countries. The response anchors for both surveys were "very cold, unfavorable" and "very warm, favorable" (French: "très froid, défavorable" and "très chaleureux, favorable"; German: "sehr kalt, negativ" and "sehr warm, positiv") on 11 and 101 point scales respectively. Both were converted to 0° to 100° scales to allow for comparison.

The Chicago Council for Global Affairs (CCGA) survey was conducted online by GfK Custom Research in Palo Alto, California from May 6 to 29, 2014. It consists of a representative national sample of 2,108 US adult citizens. The margin of sampling error for the full US sample is +/− 2.5. The OU survey was conducted online by the survey research company YouGov, also based in Palo Alto, California, from April 16 to May 5, 2014. It consists of parallel nationally representative samples of 3,000 British, French, and German (1K each) adult citizens. The margin of error for the YouGov sample is ±3.8%.

Figures 1 and 2 are bar charts presenting the mean scores for each foreign country included in the feeling thermometers, for the Western European and American samples respectively. They are presented in a left to right ascending cold to warm sequence that captures our central puzzle: Why do the democratic citizens of Western Europe and the United States feel cooler towards some countries (e.g. North Korea, Pakistan, Russia) and warmer towards others (e.g. Germany, Britain, France)?

The mean feelings displayed in figures 1 and 2 are remarkably consistent across time. The Chicago Council has been using a feeling thermometer in its U.S. surveys for decades, and individual country means do not vary much. For instance, in eleven surveys between 1978 and 2010, mean American feelings towards Japan hovered between 52° and 61°, while
in ten surveys over the same period American feelings towards Israel hovered between 53° and 59°. The cool to warm sequence of enmity to amity is also remarkably stable. Given how little Americans (and Western Europeans) know about the world, what best explains this consistency in mean national feelings towards specific foreign countries, and their sequence?

**Independent**

**Democracy index.** 2014 Freedom House scores were used to measure how politically free or democratic each country was in 2014. Because many countries claim to be democratic (e.g. the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”) and perform that claim through sham elections, Freedom House evaluates each country on a lengthy list of political rights and civil liberties separately to ensure that their measure is multifaceted and robust. For Freedom House, “political rights” captures electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of government, while “civil liberties” covers the freedoms of expression and belief (religion), associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights.\(^1\) We averaged their political rights and civil liberties scores together to create a single measure of the level of democracy in each country. Each were then reverse coded so that a higher score on the 1-7 scale is more democratic.

**Latent power index.** Following Lebow and Valentino (2009: 406), latent state power is operationalized by multiplying a state’s gross domestic product (GDP) and population in 2014. In their view, the combination of the absolute size of a country’s economy and its population is “the most objective representation of latent material capabilities.” This is what matters for Realists, as both military personnel and spending can be rapidly increased in wartime. GDP is the total value in US dollars of all goods and services produced within a country for a given year.\(^2\) The population measure used was from the World Bank, and represents the total number of persons living within a country, irrespective of citizenship or legal status.\(^3\)

**Military power indexes.** Both overall *military spending* as a percentage of GDP and total *military personnel* are used as raw measures of military power. Military expenditures as a percentage of GDP includes all defense related spending in each year, including pay for active duty soldiers, reserves, and civilian employees.\(^4\) Military personnel is the total number

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of active duty personnel in the armed forces of a given state. This includes regular troops as well as those in training, such as reserves or paramilitary forces, who could replace regular troops in the line of duty.³

**Bilateral trade index.** The bilateral trade index was operationalized as the balance of a focal country’s (e.g., the US) imports from and exports to the target country (e.g., China). For the US, the US trade balance with each target country was sourced from the US Census Bureau.⁶ For the UK, France, and Germany, the trade balance with each target country was sourced from the International Trade Center.⁷ Positive numbers indicate a trade surplus, negative numbers a trade deficit. The unit is Millions of US dollars.

**Results**

We performed country-level analyses of aggregate national data (e.g., the national mean rating of feelings towards foreign countries). Aggregate data may be more reliable than individual data, because averaging individual responses smooths out the noise related to individual idiosyncrasy (Fielding & Gilbert, 2006: 13). Analyses of aggregate data thus do not require the large sample sizes that individual level data do. Analyzing national aggregate data can also reveal macro-level or collective phenomena that is not reducible to characteristics at the individual level (Na, Grossmann, Varnum, Kitayama, Gonzalez, & Nisbett, 2010).

**Zero-Order Correlations**

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

As illustrated in Table 1, the target country’s Freedom House (row 1) score was both positively and substantially (all $r > .66$) associated (all $ps < .001$) with each national sample’s mean warmth towards that country. This provides strong initial support for the DP.

The target country’s military spending (row 3) was negatively associated ($ps$ between .05 and .01) with each democracy’s warmth towards that country, but there were no zero-order associations between warmth and the size of its military (row 4), or its latent power (row 2). This provides weak, mixed evidence for the Realist counterargument.

The bilateral trade balance (row 5) was only significant for the German sample. It was not significant for the British, French, and American samples, largely undermining the capitalist peace counterargument.

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⁶ [https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html](https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html)
Predicting Warmth towards Foreign Countries

Zero-order correlations cannot distinguish between true and spurious associations. To test our competing Democratic, Capitalist, and Realist hypotheses, we ran a series of hierarchical multiple regressions in which the predictive power of Freedom House scores was pit against that of the other country indexes. Initial country level regressions revealed similar patterns across the UK, France, and Germany samples, so their data was aggregated together and called “Western Europe” for the analyses reported below.

We first explored the hostile Realist challenge to the Democratic Peace, pitting all three Realist variables – latent power, military spending, and military personnel – against Freedom House scores. As illustrated in Table 2, the target country’s Freedom House score was a unique positive predictor of both Western European and American feelings towards that country, even after controlling for the three Realist indexes (Table 2, Model 2).

In the Western European data reported first, none of the three Realist variables was a statistically significant unique predictor of feeling thermometer scores. Together, they did account for 9% of variance in feelings towards foreign countries beyond the 50% predicted by the Freedom House score, but this represents nearly six times less explanatory power.

In the American data, latent power was a significant predictor of feeling thermometer scores, but at just $p < .05$. Furthermore, all three Realist variables together added just 5% variance to the 73% that the Freedom House scores accounted for. In other words, political freedom accounted for 15 times as much variance in American feelings towards foreign countries than all three Realist variables together did.

We then tested the friendly Capitalist/Commercial Peace challenge to the DP, pitting bilateral trade balances against Freedom House scores. As illustrated in Table 3, only the Freedom House score and not the trade figures were a unique positive predictor of both Western European and American warmth towards that country. In the Western European and American data, Freedom House scores accounted for a substantial 50% and 73% of the variance in country warmth scores respectively.

Discussion

These results strongly support DP theory against Realist approaches that emphasize power (whether operationalized in latent economic and demographic terms, or with more proximate military measures) as the key driver of foreign policy attitudes. They also strongly
support the DP against the friendly Liberal Capitalist/Commercial peace counterargument: the effect of democracy on attitudes is not spurious; trade and economic self-interest do not trump politics in shaping American feelings towards foreign countries.

Our “winning” independent variable, Freedom House scores, is a relatively objective measure of political freedom in each country assessed by experts based on objective criteria. But political psychologists are united in the Kantian view that all humans perceive and act in response to a subjective world of their own making—not some “objective” world that exists independent of our subjectivity. So how does a relatively objective measure appear to capture so well the subjective perceptions of democratic publics?

This question is particularly vexing given that the typical American, like most people around the world, is not very knowledgeable about foreign countries. The average score on the eight international politics questions in Pew’s November 2011 News IQ survey was just 60%. For instance, just 57% of Americans could correctly identify Israel on a simplified map of the Middle East—and Israel may be one of the most widely covered foreign countries in the U.S. media.

Yet Americans, both individually and collectively, maintain remarkably coherent and consistent feelings towards foreign countries. At the individual level, feelings towards American friends like Great Britain and Japan correlate at a very substantial $r = .56$ in the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ 2010 survey, while feelings towards former and latent foes like China and Russia also correlate substantially, at $r = .53$. Feelings towards Great Britain and China do not correlate highly (just $r = .23$), however. Individual Americans seem to know the difference between their friends and foes (Castano, Bonacossa, & Gries, 2016).

At the group level, furthermore, longitudinal surveys reveal that mean American feelings towards specific foreign countries remain remarkably consistent across time, with the greatest warmth towards friends like Great Britain and Japan, and the greatest coolness towards foes like China and Russia.

How is this possible? How can Americans maintain such coherent and consistent attitudes towards foreign countries about which they know so little? In a word: ideology. In the absence of much knowledge about the world, gut feelings towards foreign countries serve as a vital mediator between Liberal ideological predispositions on the one hand, and specific foreign policy preferences on the other.

Psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (2011: 97, 99) suggests that we frequently answer complex questions by substituting simpler ones: “Heuristic questions provide an off-the-shelf answer to . . . difficult . . . target questions.” As an example,
Kahneman suggests that a difficult question like “How should financial advisors who prey on the elderly be punished?” is answered by substituting an easier question about feelings, “How much anger do I feel when I think of financial predators?” Psychologist Paul Slovic calls this type of heuristic an “affect heuristic,” a mental shortcut by which people let their gut likes and dislikes determine their beliefs and preferences (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, and MacGregor 2002). Political scientists Henry Brady and Paul Sniderman (1991) similarly call this judgmental shortcut the “likability heuristic.”

Following Kahneman and Slovic, and Brady and Sniderman, Peter Gries (2014: 43-44) has argued that when asked difficult foreign policy questions like “Should the U.S. pursue a friendlier or tougher foreign policy towards North Korea?” Americans resort to the simpler affect heuristic, “How do I feel about North Korea?” Our ideologies then become a major source of our gut feelings towards North Korea. Furthermore, just as the “halo effect” has been shown to lead people to overgeneralize from limited initial information to broader judgments about other people’s overall characters, we likely use similar mental shortcuts with foreign countries, making guesses about unknown domains based upon what we do know. For instance, Americans may not be able to locate North Korea on a map, but if they know that North Korea is a communist country, gut feelings about communism, driven by their preexisting Liberal ideologies, may exert a “halo effect” on their overall feelings towards North Korea, subsequently shaping their foreign policy preferences towards North Korea through the “affect heuristic.”

Our results strongly suggest that the North Korean case Gries explored is no exception: in democracies like the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, Liberal ideologies appear to powerfully shape gut feelings towards foreign countries, which in turn shape both public and elite foreign policy preferences. Liberalism, in short, powerfully shapes decisions about war and peace.

**Future Directions**

Figures 3 and 4 display the strong relationship between political freedom and mean national feelings towards foreign countries in Western Europe and the US respectively. The two figures raise several questions for possible future research.

First, at the macro level, why is the correlation stronger in the American ($R^2$ linear = .73) than the Western European ($R^2$ linear = .50) case? American Liberalism may be more ideologically extreme than Western European Liberalism. Libertarianism was born in the American southwest, and has found fertile soil across the US—but not in Europe. Or it could
be that the impact of ideology on Western European feelings towards foreign countries is tempered by greater contact or the direct experience of two 20th century world wars.

Second, at the micro level, countries that deviate substantially from the fit lines in the two figures beg explanation. For instance, do countries like Britain, Canada, and Australia do so much better than their levels of democracy would predict due to their largely “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (WASP) status? Does race shape feelings towards foreign countries? And do countries like North Korea and Pakistan do so much worse than their levels of (non)democracy would predict because of their ongoing depiction in the news media as aggressive and threatening states?

Third, given their overall similarity, what accounts for the differences that do exist between American and Western European feelings towards specific countries? For instance, on average Americans (59°) felt a whopping 25° warmer towards Israel than Western Europeans (34°) did in 2014. Why? It could be that American conservatives are pulling the American average up. Averages can be deceiving when they hide differences among subpopulations. Ideology, it turns out, systematically and substantially divides conservative and liberal Americans in their feelings toward Israel, with the Christian right viewing the Holy Land much more positively than the secular left (Gries, 2015).
Table 1

Zero-Order Correlations between Country-Level Warmth and a Target Nation’s Political and Socio-Economic Conditions, by Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>UK feeling</th>
<th>France feeling</th>
<th>Germany feeling</th>
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<td>-.03</td>
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<td>-.54**</td>
<td>-.51*</td>
<td>-.48*</td>
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<td>-.14</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.56**</td>
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*Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. Latent power = GDP * population

Table 2  
*The Realist Challenge: Hierarchical Regression Pitting Democracy vs. Power-Related Indexes to Predict Warmth towards Foreign Countries*

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*Note.* Western European feeling ratings were averaged across UK, France, and Germany.  
* $p < .05$.  ** $p < .01$.  *** $p < .001$.  

Table 3

*The Capitalist Peace Challenge: Hierarchical Regression Pitting Democracy against Trade Balance to Predict Warmth towards Foreign Countries*

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*Note.* For European data, trade balance was the average balance of a country’s trade with UK, France, and Germany.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Western European Feelings towards Foreign Countries, 2014.

Note. In ascending order. “Western Europe” averages the 3,000 respondents from the UK, France, and Germany.

Figure 2. American Feelings towards Foreign Countries, 2014.

Note. In ascending order.

Figure 3. Scatterplot of the relationship between a country’s freedom house score and Western European warmth towards that country.

Note. “Western Europe” is an average of the UK, France, and Germany samples.

Figure 4. Scatterplot of the relationship between a country’s freedom house score and American warmth towards that country.

References


Kant, Immanuel. 1795. *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*.