Collaborative Research: The Democratic Peace – An Experimental Approach
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OBJECTIVES AND INTELLECTUAL MERIT: Countless studies have found that democracies almost never fight against other democracies, but scholars continue to debate why this pattern exists. Some argue that the democratic peace is a spurious result of omitted variables such as shared interests. Others believe that democracy causes peace but disagree about the mechanisms generating this relationship. Previous attempts to resolve these debates have faced three serious obstacles: endogeneity, collinearity, and over-aggregation. As a consequence, it has been difficult to isolate the conditions under which democracy contributes to peace, and to understand the mechanisms behind its causal power.

The PIs propose to overcome these three obstacles by conducting micro-level experiments. Existing theories of the democratic peace have testable but unexplored implications about the preferences and beliefs of individual citizens and elites. The PIs will conduct a series of survey experiments in which U.S. citizens, including the subset of citizens who most resemble political elites, read about foreign policy scenarios. The PIs will vary several aspects of the situation, including whether the potential adversary is a democracy. Respondents will then indicate whether they would use military force against the adversary. The experiments will provide micro-level evidence about how democracy affects preferences about war, while avoiding problems of endogeneity and collinearity that have hampered previous research. The PIs also propose to study why individuals react differently when the target is a democracy rather than an autocracy. Democracy could promote peace by changing perceptions about the threat the opponent poses, the expected cost of war, the likelihood of success, and the morality of using violence. The PIs will analyze these and other perceptions, in order to shed light on causal mechanisms.

The PIs have demonstrated the promise of their experimental approach by successfully completing two large-scale pilot studies in the U.K. and the U.S. They now propose new experiments to test whether the effect of democracy depends on the kinds of issues countries are contesting; to identify which institutional and normative features of democracy contribute to peace; to study how contextual variables such as religion, geography, and shared interests moderate the democratic peace; to estimate each link in the causal chain between democracy and peace; and to investigate how democracy affects support not only for war, but also for nonmilitary policy options. The experiments will yield new data and insights about one of the most fundamental questions in international relations.

BROADER IMPACTS: For decades, U.S. and foreign leaders have cited the democratic peace when analyzing foreign affairs and justifying democratic enlargement. This topic is even more critical today, given the tremendous pressure for democracy in the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. By clarifying the circumstances under which democracy fosters peace, and by identifying the mechanisms through which it operates, this project could help leaders forecast the effects of democratization and the likelihood of war. Moreover, by indicating which institutional features of democracy contribute to peace, the research could inform the design of new democracies. Finally, studying how democracy affects not only war but also economic and diplomatic relations will result in new and general knowledge about the sources of international cooperation.

This research will also have broader impacts for scholars. At a theoretical level, the project revisits competing theories of the democratic peace and exposes their underappreciated implications for individual preferences and beliefs. It also refines those theories by predicting the effect of democracy in various issue areas and contexts, and by highlighting the role of morality as a possible cause of peace. At an empirical level, the PIs will collect and disseminate a trove of new data, including both numeric responses and open-ended text. The project also has methodological payoffs: the PIs will disseminate experimental templates that should prove useful for studying other questions where measurement and endogeneity problems are pervasive, or where scholars wish to parse competing causal mechanisms. Finally, the project will involve graduate and undergraduate students in research, train them in cutting-edge experimental methods, and build a research and learning network between Stanford and Cornell.