

# 1 *Introduction: sources of democratic military aggression*

In wealthy democracies, the preparation for and conduct of military conflict has largely become an exercise in fiscal, rather than social, mobilization. How does this development influence when democracies choose violence as their preferred tool in international politics? When do voters have a moderating influence on foreign policy, and when do they allow or even encourage their leaders to pursue gains through military coercion, even at the risk of overstretch? Why do democracies often pursue a military doctrine ill-suited for the war at hand?

Contemporary political scientists appear optimistic that democracies pursue grand strategies enabling them to be, like George Washington, first in both war and peace. Yet confidence in democracy's superiority at international politics is a relatively recent development. One does not have to look far into the past to see that the current consensus would surprise the more pessimistic appraisals of Cold War thinkers such as Raymond Aron, George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morgenthau. Nor do the classic works of Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, and de Tocqueville agree on democracies' relative peacefulness or their ability in war.

Democracies have fought foolish wars, built massive militaries, and have shown a remarkable enthusiasm for imperialism. Democracies account for 17 of the world's 20 largest defense budgets (not counting Russia), with the United States alone responsible for 40 percent of the world's defense spending (SIPRI, 2013b). While these democracies' expenditures remain "affordable" based on the size of their economies, they represent enormous opportunity costs in terms of the provision of domestic public goods or private consumption. Democracies specialize in the acquisition of expensive offensive weaponry; seven of the ten states possessing aircraft carriers are democracies (nine if one counts Russia and Thailand), accounting for 19 (21) of the world's 22 (IISS, 2013). An increasing percentage of the world's

“small wars” are fought by democracies. Democracies’ participation in new international military interventions rose from less than 15 percent from 1960 through 1989, to 24 percent in the 1990s. From 2000 to 2009, democracies were involved in 30 of the 69 new conflicts, or 43 percent (Themnér and Wallensteen, 2012).

I seek to explain these phenomena with a systematic theory of how and when voters in a democracy will support belligerence in pursuit of international political gains. While Ben Franklin may be right about the certainty of death and taxes, grand strategy shapes how the public feels the burden of each. I focus on the distribution of costs within a democracy, arguing that the average voter will find employing the military instrument more appealing if the costs in blood are minimized and the costs in treasure can be shifted to an affluent minority. Developing a heavily capitalized military allows a democracy to arm and go to war through the mobilization of wealth rather than people. Moreover, economic inequality exacerbates the effect.

Combined, capitalization and inequality produce a form of moral hazard that shapes a democracy’s grand strategy. The theory claims that a democracy’s average voter (more specifically, the voter of median income) is as likely to choose an aggressive grand strategy as any unitary actor or despot (indeed perhaps even more so) as long as she can get someone else to pick up the tab. Other work has claimed that democracies try to fight wars cheaply. I argue that the average voter’s ability to fight wars cheaply, at least for her, implies a democratic state may fight very costly wars indeed.

In this book I offer a theory of how and when voters in a democracy will support military aggression. The more aggressive a state, the broader the range of international political ends for which it will resort to arms. On average a more aggressive state will pursue conflicts with smaller expected values – either through reduced chances of success or lower benefits from victory. Aggressiveness does not always result in war; weak states will often acquiesce when a powerful democracy issues a coercive threat. Nor does aggressiveness always imply a higher likelihood of losing a war should it break out; regardless of the stakes, against very weak opponents a democracy is likely to be victorious. Indeed, aggressive states are likely to pursue many expensive, if victorious, wars for trivial stakes.

## 1.1 Democratic militarism

In short, I develop a theory of democratic militarism. The term “militarism” commonly describes a condition in which a large portion of society supports the building of an excessively strong military, believes in its superior efficacy as a foreign policy tool, and exhibits a heightened willingness to use it. I treat militarism as a variable describing how heavily military power is weighted within a state’s portfolio of investments designed to increase security, its grand strategy. In a highly militaristic state, the use of force becomes increasingly attractive to a large cross-section of the public relative to the employment of other foreign policy tools (or doing nothing).

Alfred Vagts (1959) portrays militarism as inefficient, leading to the construction of a military and its use in ways not designed to win wars at the least cost in blood and treasure to the state. Yet a higher level of militarism is perversely also likely to lead to more military conflicts, ones that are less likely to end well for the state. At extreme levels the state pursues counterproductive policies that ultimately reduce its security.

Conventional wisdom in policy and social science regards militarism to be extremely unlikely in mature, robust democracies.<sup>1</sup> This lack of inquiry into democracies stems from defining militarism as a civil–military relations crisis, a rare but dangerous situation in which the military penetrates the very fabric of society (Van Evera, 2001), and dominates the civilian government in terms of foreign policy decision-making. Liberalism is therefore not only considered militarism’s antidote but also its antithesis (Huntington, 1957). This unnecessarily limited definition conflates militarism as an outcome with the process causing it. If a hallmark of democracy is civilian dominance of the military, “democratic militarism” becomes an oxymoron.

In the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, several books have diagnosed and examined a form of militarism specific to the United States

<sup>1</sup> Michael Sherry (1995, xi) eschews the term as “too politically charged” in favor of “militarization.” While limited to the twentieth-century United States, his subject is much broader than mine, referring to a “process by which war and national security became consuming anxieties and provided the memories, models and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life.”

(C. Johnson, 2004a; Mann, 2003). Andrew Bacevich (2005, 6) attributes the pathology to the perfect storm of

military officers intent on rehabilitating their profession; intellectuals fearing that the loss of confidence at home was paving the way for the triumph of totalitarianism abroad; religious leaders dismayed by the collapse of traditional moral standards; strategists wrestling with the implications of a humiliating defeat that has undermined their credibility; politicians on the make; purveyors of pop culture looking to make a buck.

In these recent accounts, militarism – even in a well-established democratic republic like the United States – remains an elite-driven phenomenon. Indeed the only group excluded from Bacevich's *dramatis personae* is the public. Jack Snyder describes the American public as irrational, passive, but innocent dupes, “psychologically primed” by “the September 11 attack and the easy victory over the Taliban” to support preventive war and ignore the possibilities for quagmire (Snyder, 2003, 39).

This book does not let the public off the hook, and challenges the consensus that militarism can only result from the perverse actions of a selfish elite, taking advantage of personal benefits “without taking fully into account the full range of costs likely to be incurred” (Bacevich, 2005, 206). Political economic theory suggests that voters are just as capable of such self-centered policies. In September 2011, 50 percent of poll respondents thought that, despite a decade of fighting two major land wars in Asia, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan had “made very little difference in their life” (Pew Center, 2011).<sup>2</sup> At the nadir of the American war in Iraq in March 2006, only 39 percent of a poll's respondents cited a negative (14 percent positive) effect on them personally (Gallup/CNN/USA Today, 2006).

Shielding Americans from the costs of war did not start in the new millennium. A 1967 Harris poll shows that only 44 percent of respondents felt that their personal lives had been “affected” by the Vietnam War. Among those affected, more respondents (32 percent) cited inflation than casualties (25 percent). However, responding to the question,

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, only 26 percent thought that military members and their families had “unfairly” sacrificed more than other Americans. In addition, an implausible-to-me 56 percent claimed to have a good friend or family member who served in either of the wars, and thus perhaps we should take public opinion polls with many grains of salt.

“What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally?” 31 percent said the equivalent of casualties or killing; 12 percent said lack of progress; and only 7 percent said rising cost.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is this process limited to the United States. In September 1957, at the height of French mobilization for the Algerian war, although 51 percent of French respondents named the conflict as the most important problem *for France* only 9 percent responded similarly “for you and your family personally” (Merom, 2003, 104). This was by design. By the end of 1955, France had deployed 180,000 French soldiers to Algeria, and the war cost \$137 million that year. By 1957, troop numbers, many of them conscripts, had increased by two-and-a-half times to 450,000. But spending on the war had risen by a factor of nearly *eight* (to \$1.1 billion, see Spruyt, 2005, 71). Sending conscripts was unprecedented for a French colonial war (Algeria was formally part of the metropole), but the middle class was largely spared through numerous exemptions, and the conscripts themselves largely shielded from the fighting (Merom, 2003). Indigenous recruits made up 90 percent of the units tasked with *quadrillage*, the pacification of the countryside. These *barkis* were supported by a fast-moving, largely professional, reserve force (much of it Foreign Legion), designed to move quickly to the enemy and engage with great violence (Alexander and Keiger, 2002). Even the militarily decisive campaign of 1958 known as the “Challe Plan” only involved about 35,000 (elite) soldiers (Griffin, 2010, 577). Responding to both domestic and international politics, the French developed what historian Jean-Charles Jauffret called a “two-speed army” (Porch, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

This book argues that, if the contemporary United States serves as a poster child for democratic militarism, it is not the result of a set of uniquely American contingencies. Rather, the potential for this

<sup>3</sup> The same questions were asked in March 1968, immediately after the high US casualty rates resulting from the Tet offensive. More than half of the respondents thought that the war had affected them personally, and half of these identified inflation and taxes as the principal source. Although only 9 percent knew someone who had been killed in Vietnam, “concern” over the drafting of a son or husband rose to 37 percent. As for the war’s other “troubling aspects,” 44 percent cited US casualties, and 7 percent cited financial costs. Harris Collection, No. 1734, July 1967; Harris Collection, No. 1813, March 1968.

<sup>4</sup> To the point that elements of the professional army attempted to overthrow the Fourth Republic.

pathology exists in any system where the majority of citizens have an important influence on policy. A suboptimal, militaristic grand strategy can result from rational calculations on the part of the average voter, and no marketplace of ideas will cure it. While taking on a very different appearance than that of nineteenth-century Prussia and twentieth-century Imperial Japan, militarism remains feasible in a state where its military has little connection to society yet remains entirely dominated by the voters' civilian representatives.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in a democracy this is a prerequisite.

### *1.1.1 Small wars of choice*

While the theory presented in this book enhances our understanding of how democracies prepare for, choose, and participate in conflicts ranging in scale from World War II to the recent Libyan revolution, it primarily seeks to explain influences on democratic involvement and performance in so-called “small wars.” The venerable US Marine Corps’ “Small Wars Manual” defines these conflicts as “undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation.” As the first phrase implies, small wars do not require national mobilization, although this does not obviate the need for public support. They are fought by a powerful state against a weaker state or nonstate actor (“weak actor” for simplicity). A small war is one of choice; it may be consistent with the strong state’s grand strategy but not essential to it.<sup>6</sup> The strong state’s aims are limited or political, and success often requires the weak actor’s compliance.

Because strong states tend to enjoy overwhelming conventional military superiority, weak actors will often resort to unconventional strategies such as insurgency or terrorism. Fighting an unconventional war is a daunting task even for powerful states. Usually it demands tremendous investments in intelligence gathering and a deep understanding of a foreign culture. Success requires gaining the allegiance, or at least

<sup>5</sup> See Shaw (1991, 14).

<sup>6</sup> For reasons I lay out in the next chapter, this book does not address democracies in their own civil wars, of which there are relatively few (although Colombia and India are glaring exceptions).

acquiescence, of local noncombatants by providing personal security and economic stability. Firepower, when not used with the utmost discrimination, will likely have counterproductive effects. In general, no good substitute exists for boots on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

The principles behind a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign have remained largely consistent over at least the past half century (Gray, 2006; Thompson, 1966). Indeed, there exists a remarkable amount of agreement on how states lose small wars. Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2005) demonstrates how a conventional offensive campaign against a guerrilla warfare strategy will likely result in a win (or at least a “non-loss”) for the guerrillas.<sup>8</sup> Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson (2009) find that mechanized militaries are less effective because of attendant collateral damage, poor intelligence-gathering ability, and inability to secure the population. Given the unsuitability of a conventional, mechanized military for COIN, Arreguín-Toft seconds Eliot Cohen’s (1984) reasonable observation that a state intending to both fight small wars and deter large ones must build two different types of militaries.

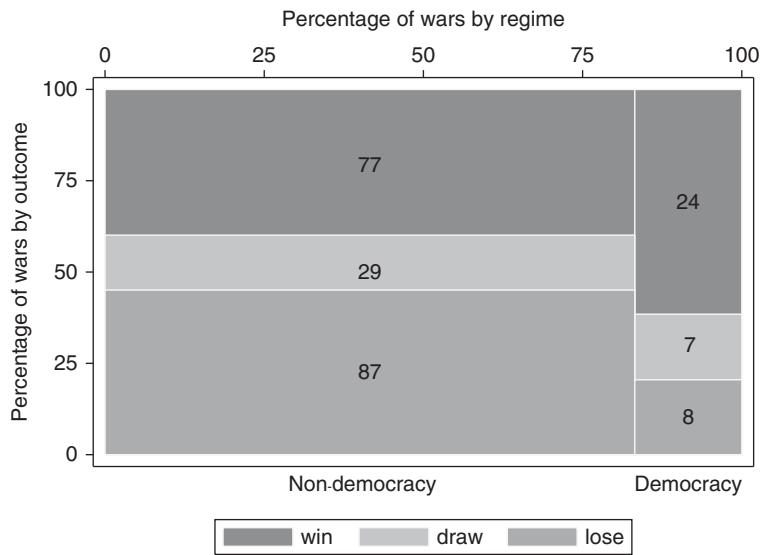
Other authors who study counterinsurgency observe that the strong state’s regime type makes little difference in the outcome of such conflicts (Mack, 1975; Lyall, 2010), but this finding clashes with the quite strong track record of democracies in conventional wars (Reiter and Stam, 2002).<sup>9</sup> The mosaic plots in Figures 1.1a and 1.1b use two data sets to compare performance in major wars (battle deaths exceeding 1,000) to outcomes of conflicts where a state fights an insurgency outside of the state’s territory.<sup>10</sup> Whereas democracies win 62 percent of larger, generally conventional, interstate wars, they only win 47 percent of the counterinsurgencies (non-democracies win 40 and 58 percent respectively). As shown in Figure 1.1b, democracies are no more likely than non-democracies to win, and considerably more likely

<sup>7</sup> Friedman (2011) sheds a skeptical light on the traditional 20:1,000 ratio of counterinsurgents to population, but does show, unsurprisingly, that more troops increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

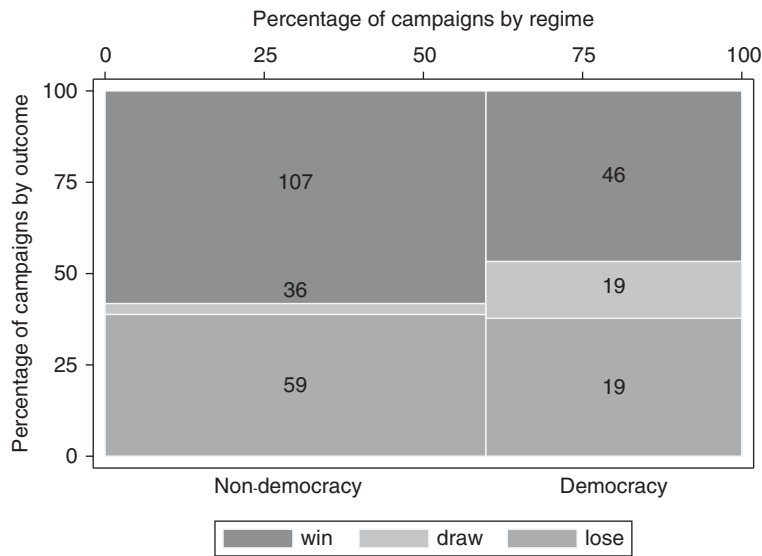
<sup>8</sup> Arreguín-Toft admits to having little to say on how these choices are made, although the book acknowledges that these are likely to be a function of anticipated costs.

<sup>9</sup> See Desch (2002) and Downes (2009) for empirical challenges to the democratic victory hypotheses.

<sup>10</sup> Figure 1.1a’s data are from a source skeptical of democracies’ performance in these wars (Downes, 2009). Other sources claim democracies win as much as 93 percent of such conflicts (Reiter and Stam, 2002).



(a) Interstate wars, 1816–1990 (Source: Downes, 2009)



(b) Third-party interventions against insurgencies, 1808–2002 (Source: Lyall and Wilson, 2009)

Figure 1.1 Comparing conflict outcomes by regime



to “draw,” against an insurgency. Given the large body of research claiming that democracies deliberately pick unfair fights and tend to win, this is a puzzle.

While arguing that regime type does not affect overall performance against insurgencies, Lyall (2010) also notes that democratic counterinsurgency efforts are more likely to be wars of choice abroad and tend to employ heavily capitalized militaries. Controlling for these and other factors, democracy has little independent effect on war outcome. But if democracies are more likely to select challenging third-party conflicts, and are more likely to use a capital-intensive doctrine while doing so, then regime type may well play a role. The underlying causes of these tendencies remain unexplained.

Finally, this book points out an under-appreciated aspect of small wars: whether or not democracies win more often than non-democracies misses a very important point. Britain used airpower in 1920 to crush the forces of the so-called “Mad Mullah,” a figure so ridiculous to Western eyes that he became a punchline in P. G. Wodehouse’s novel *The Swoop!* But the resulting British Somaliland protectorate provided few security benefits to Britain, draining the Colonial Office budget to boot (Samatar, 1989). At any given moment for any given war winning beats losing. However, spending blood, treasure, or both to win a war that provides few benefits should not be considered a policy success. But in most empirical work, as the Peninsular War officer and historian William Napier once wrote, “success in war, like charity in religion, covers a multitude of sins.” Therefore, in addition to explaining failed campaigns, this book explores when democracies are likely to pursue costly victories for trivial gains.

### 1.1.2 *Why focus on democracies?*

A remarkable consensus exists within political science (and indeed outside of it) that, when democracy “works,” a moderate, effective foreign policy results.<sup>11</sup> The many studies uncovering such findings as democratic peace and democratic victory suggest mechanisms unique to this type of government. Nonetheless enough empirical anomalies exist to justify reexamining democratic foreign policy in order to improve our

<sup>11</sup> As I show, even many branches of realism agree on this point, exceptions being Mearsheimer (2001), Desch (2002), and Downes (2009).

understanding of how and why democracies pursue coercion and go to war. Although unconvinced that it is their extraordinary and enlightened foreign policy that distinguishes them from other regime types, I, like much of the field, examine democracies separately.

I also focus on democracies for the same reason Willie Sutton robbed banks: that's where the international politics is. Their number has increased considerably since the end of the Cold War. More importantly, most of the international system's powerful states are democratic, including 18 of the world's 20 largest national economies.<sup>12</sup> Three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and two of the four rising "BRIC" powers (Brazil and India) are robust democracies. Democracies have built the world's most powerful militaries and possess the bulk of its offensive and power projection capability. Because of their relative wealth and power, democracies have more opportunities to use their militaries to advance their interests abroad. Even small differences in how democracies conduct themselves internationally relative to other regime types will have important effects on international politics.

### *1.1.3 Cost internalization and democratic exceptionalism*

I use the term "democratic exceptionalism" to describe the large body of research claiming that democracies conduct their security policies differently than do all other regime types. This book challenges and adds to the huge body of work claiming democracies pursue more effective grand strategies compared to other regime types due to the role of the voter, a school of thought inspired by and providing one explanation for the absence of wars between democracies (Doyle, 1986).<sup>13</sup> This book is not about a dyadic peace: democratic, capitalist, or otherwise; and few scholars claim democracies to be innately more

<sup>12</sup> Over half of the world's 20 most populous countries are also democracies.

<sup>13</sup> Other posited mechanisms for the democratic peace exist, such as the norm-based arguments (Maoz and Russett, 1993; Owen, 1994; Farnham, 2003; Hayes, forthcoming), and institutional arguments such as the role of democratic transparency (Schultz, 2001; Schultz and Weingast, 2003; Lipson, 2003). Indeed experimental evidence suggests that norms do a better job of explaining democracies' friendly relations than cost-benefit analyses (Tomz and Weeks, forthcoming). However, these explanations have rarely been extended to the other aspects of democratic foreign policy behavior that both cost internalization theories and this book seek to explain. Nonetheless, even these arguments rest on the electorate weighing the merits of the case and