

Book Review

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War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy. By Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Matthew Baum and Philip Potter begin *War and Democratic Constraint* with the well-worn observation that democracies tend to go to war less often than nondemocracies. This always struck me as an observation without a theory, although, in all fairness, that is easy for me to say as someone who studies political communication and public opinion rather than international relations. Baum and Potter point out that one problem with the observation is that it assumes that all democracies are equivalent. Perhaps if we instead seek to understand sources of heterogeneity among democracies, then we can figure out what is going on within them that leads to fewer wars. Doing this is no easy task, but Baum and Potter succeed by using large-*N* analyses of all interstate conflicts since 1965, content analysis of hundreds of thousands of media articles, and detailed case studies, not to mention developing and extending novel theories. They show that (1) democracies clearly vary and (2) the key sources of heterogeneity stem from public access to information and elite political opposition. Specifically, when there is free media and robust political opposition, the public can learn about ongoing events. They also have alternative governing options. These dynamics then constrain leaders from going to war. In short, increases in information access and political competition lead to less war.

I have no doubt that the book makes fundamental contributions to international relations scholarship. Given my background, however, I focus on its impact for the fields of political communication and public opinion. My bottom line is that this a critically important book, and perhaps a seminal one, for scholars in the aforementioned fields. In essence, one can view the book as showing just how important competition is to ensuring democratic responsiveness. While competition and responsiveness are defining

elements of democracies, most scholars of the latter ignore the former. A small growing body of work by theorists and empirical scholars (e.g., Lisa Disch, Bryan Garsten, Larry Jacobs) highlights the importance of competition as a defining element of democracy that needs to be a part of responsiveness studies. This book shows just how important that idea is. As such, the book offers a fundamental lesson for scholars of public opinion, communication, and representation.

Of equal importance, the book opens the door to numerous areas of inquiry, as follows. First, an important part of Baum and Potter's story is that democracies have elections and this is necessary because otherwise what the public thinks may not be so important. An interesting question, then, is whether election timing matters. The authors touch on this in the appendix to chapter 5, but only in the case of the Iraq War. Related to this is the extant popularity/approval of governing elites. In a well-known 1999 *American Political Science Review* article, Baum and Sam Kernell show that since the cable era, presidents are much more likely to get on television if they have high public approval. This suggests more rhetorical access, not to mention persuasive ability, from popular governing elites. The general comment I have here is that one could build on the book by incorporating more aspects of elections and popularity. To be clear, this is not something the authors ignore, and in fact the chapter 7 discussion of Blair in the United Kingdom makes clear that electoral success emboldened Blair and also played a role in Spain. However, this could have been explored even further across cases as it may be another key variable.

Second, Baum and Potter take it as a given that the public is more anti-war than leaders. Yet, they acknowledge that there are exceptions, and they discuss some of these (e.g., the Trent Affair and Fashoda crisis). One question for future work is whether their theory can explain such exceptions. Or is the assumption of public opposition so axiomatic that the theory would not apply?

Third, public opinion is not monolithic. Are there cases of privileged minority opinions? Is there unequal respon-

siveness to opinions such that, for example, high-income people hold more sway? What about the gender gap in support for war? Does that ever matter? In short, what happens if we dig into heterogeneity in public opinion and build on their theory to take a more micro view?

In essence, Baum and Potter's theory can be thought of as one of competitive rhetoric or framing. When the government controls the frame and content of communications, it gets what it wants. When that becomes more competitive due to opposition and media access, there is a strategic rhetorical war between the opposition and the government. In chapter 6, which contains the content analysis, Baum and Potter study this. They find, for example, that there is more criticism of the government in media when there are more parties. But there is an opening here for scholars to go further and study the content of war rhetoric and how that changes. Further, ultimately are there ways that the governing parties sometimes can successfully frame and win out even with much competition? In some sense, this is again going back to my point regarding exceptions.

All of these points are clearly for future work to address. My intent is to underscore the fruitful research that can be done going forward on the micro-level dynamics of specific media coverage, public opinion reactions, and responsiveness. In this sense, the book has introduced a set of research questions about representative democracy that have been

understudied—a focus on war and representation. Scholars who employ different research models such as macro-opinion or micro-framing studies could benefit from building on Baum and Potter.

Let me end with two points. First, I began by mentioning that a goal of the book is to not treat all democracies as equal. Baum and Potter have not just revealed heterogeneity within democracies by doing so but have also isolated what democracies have that nondemocracies lack—free press and competition. The latter is often invoked, but the former not as much, and certainly the way that these variables interact had not previously been appreciated. As such, the explanation for why democracies do not go to war is clear. Second, the book is a model not only in the huge substantive contribution but also in that it displays great rigor across multiple methods. It reveals just how far one can go when bringing substantive fields and varying methods together. *War and Democratic Constraint* is a book that everyone in political science should read, and I congratulate the authors for a crowning achievement.

REFERENCE

- Baum, Matthew A., and Samuel Kernell. 1999. "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" *American Political Science Review* 93:99–114.