Do Democracies Possess the Wisdom of Crowds?
Decision Group Size, Regime Type, and Strategic Effectiveness

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Abstract
What is it about democracies – if anything – that enables them to avoid war with each other while navigating conflictual international politics in pursuit of their own interests? Recent research in *ISQ* by Brad LeVeck and Neil Narang (2017) provides an elegant new answer to this longstanding question. Drawing on "wisdom of crowds" logic – the insight that a large enough group of inexpert judges is more likely to average towards an accurate estimate of a continuous variable than a smaller group, even when the smaller group contains relevant experts – supported by experimental evidence, they suggest that democracies' strategic advantages lie in their large, diverse decision-making communities. If such crowd-wisdom equips democracies to accurately assess others' capabilities and intentions, so the argument goes, then they should be better than alternative regime types at maximizing their own interests while still avoiding the bargaining failure that is resort to war. Unfortunately, however, the politics of democratic foreign-policymaking compromise the crowd-wisdom mechanism. This response article thus elucidates key flaws in the argument that crowd-wisdom underpins democratic peace, before progressing to explain how the crowd-wisdom insight nonetheless carries important implications – irrespective of regime type – for strategic effectiveness.

*Note to Readers: This response article is accompanied by an online appendix that develops points in greater depth than was possible here, given *ISQ*'s word limit for 'discussion and debate' articles. The two documents – article and appendix – should therefore be read in conjunction with each other.

What is it about democracies – if anything – that enables them to avoid war with each other, fare relatively well in the conflicts that they *do* fight, and prudently navigate international politics to strike an appropriate balance between such war-avoidance and war-prosecution options? After all, certain prominent thinkers have maintained that democracies are bad at strategy compared to autocracies, thanks to their domestic divisions and short-term electoral cycles – a folk-wisdom that endures in punditry today.[1] Yet scholars cannot avoid the empirical regularities that democracies (a) seem to manage not to fight each other and (b) tend to prevail in their interstate wars against non-democracies (Reiter and Stam 2002).[2] Clearly, therefore, democracies cannot be the total strategic basket-cases that their detractors portray.

Recent research by Brad LeVeck and Neil Narang (2017) provides an elegant new answer to this longstanding question. Drawing on "wisdom of crowds" logic – the insight that a large enough group of inexpert judges is more likely to average-out at an accurate estimate of a continuous variable than a smaller group, even when the smaller group contains relevant experts – they suggest that democracies' strategic advantages lie in their large, diverse decision-making communities. In this, they follow Francis Galton's famous 1906 "guess the weight of the ox" experiment (LeVeck and Narang 2017, 868), in which the collective guesses of a large number of county fair-goers with no particular expertise in farming or butchery produced a mean average closer to the actual weight of the bull in question than any individual estimate from a livestock expert. Such foundational logic is supported by a series of contemporary simulation experiments to test individuals' responses to various bargaining scenarios. The applicability to democratic peace is obvious: if democracies are good at reaching accurate estimates of important international-political variables – say, power and intent – then they will fare well in crisis bargaining, reaching appropriate divisions of such variables to maximize their own advantage while stopping short of the bargaining failure that is resort to war. Such an approach also has the apparent advantage of explaining democratic peace's dyadic quality, namely its seeming existence between pairs of democracies but with no comparable reduction in conflict – or even the opposite (Caverley 2014) – in relations between democracies and non-democracies.

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[1] The nineteenth-century theorist of U.S. democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, famously argued that such states are inferior at making foreign policy (1961 [1835], 272–73). America's architect of Soviet containment, George Kennan, also believed that U.S. democracy harmed Washington's strategy-making ability (quoted in Botts 2006, 844). This is now an oft-repeated view among contemporary pundits lamenting democracies' inability to make the supposedly "long-term" strategy that they believe adversaries to possess (e.g. McKew 2017; Rudd 2017).

[2] Their foreign occupations are a different matter entirely, of course (Merom 2003; Edelstein 2008; Hazelton 2017).

LeVeck and Narang's experimental methodology and its findings have under-explored implications for strategy and policy. At the same time, however, they tell us little about the peacefulness or otherwise of democracies, the core question of international relations (IR) at stake in their article.[3] The purpose of this response is therefore both complementary and critical: to extend the reach of the crowd-wisdom logic and their associated experimental evidence to broader questions of national strategy (the second part), while also demonstrating that such logics are of only limited applicability to democracies' specific foreign-policymaking processes (the first part).

Crowd Wisdom, Veto Players, and Decision Group Size

LeVeck and Narang deploy "wisdom of crowds" logic – that with enough participants, errors of over-/under-estimation will average out, such that collective estimates trend towards accuracy – to argue for democracies' superior ability to assess potential adversaries' capabilities and intentions. This, they reason, may account for democracies' superior ability to avoid the bargaining failure that is war, insofar as democracy is a system of government associated with just such a large, diverse community of policy contributors – at least in comparison, so the logic goes, to the relatively small groups of individuals that dominate autocratic decision-making.

Their purported causal mechanism (LeVeck and Narang 2017, 868–69), however, introduces an intervening variable that compromises this very logic. A representative democracy's millions of voters – the "crowd" that contains the potential for suitably large-N judgement-averaging – only themselves get to elect a handful of foreign-policy leaders, who subsequently appoint subordinate foreign-policy functionaries. Once such leaders are in place, the "crowd-wisdom" logic is compromised: a small group of democratically *el*ected leaders can be just as prone to inaccurate under- or over-estimation of external signals as a comparably sized group of autocratically *sel*ected leaders (depending on the precise configuration of either regime). Elected leaders may subsequently be sanctioned at the ballot-box, of course, but that is necessarily an *ex post* outcome, i.e. once they have made certain (un)successful foreign-policy decisions (and the risk of such *future* sanction, while motivational, does nothing causally to improve individuals' *present* judgement). The same is also true for autocrats, moreover, who

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[3] As Hayes (2011) observes, the challenge now for democratic peace theorists is to develop and accurately specify the empirical regularity's underlying causal mechanisms – and theory can only do that if it accurately represents the *politics* of democratic foreign-policymaking (which the "crowd-wisdom" heuristic does not).

may be sanctioned or deposed by their selectorates in the aftermath of foreign-policy failure (especially unsuccessful war). Indeed, since there is no such thing as a "direct (foreign-policy) democracy", we are always talking about *some* form of representative-delegative system. Democracies *may* have a larger number of more diverse policymakers, of course, but this relationship is not necessary – and as discussed in the attached Appendix, there can be all kinds of ways in which the politics of democratic foreign policy dramatically shrink the number of *de facto* influential decision-makers in the foreign-policy process. The Online Appendix therefore explores the various ways in which democratic politics may compromise crowd-wisdom in foreign policy, as well as the inadequacies of experimental methods in capturing such politics.

Among prominent cases manifested (unluckily for them) since the original conduct of LeVeck and Narang's research, Britain's recent experiment with diplomatic alignment-by-plebiscite – itself not quite the same as "direct foreign-policy democracy", given that the simple "yes"/"no" Brexit choice was then handed back to elected representatives and their appointed officials to be manifested as policy – illustrates that even a large "crowd" may not be well placed to make the sorts of choices that characterize much international bargaining. For whereas "guess the weight of the ox" provides a continuous variable with a correct answer achievable through large-*N* averaging, many of the most crucial questions of international politics – war or peace, compliance or defection, "Leave" or "Remain", etc – are binary variables without such discoverably "correct" answers. And though it may be a cheap idiosyncratic shot against a generalized argument, the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States casts *prima facie* doubt on the argument that democracies' large electoral and policymaking "crowds" will produce foreign-policy decision-making well placed to accurately assess others' signals.

Weighing against the superior ability of large groups to average towards accurate answers, meanwhile, is a substantial drawback of larger groups: the diminishing ability to take and implement decisions. After all, it is no good accurately perceiving signals if, in the process, one also loses the political latitude to act upon them. LeVeck and Narang's causal story therefore captures the upside of group size (additional crowd-wisdom) without the downside (additional veto players). In practice, such veto players may include the legislature (and/or key legislators), the judiciary, other influential members of the executive branch (e.g. independently powerful cabinet ministers), bureaucratic departments and/or their senior officials, (s)electoral coalition constituents (labor unions, industrial interests, media gatekeepers, ethnic/religious groups, etc),

or any other actor with the political leverage to impede or expedite policy. The really interesting question then becomes, what is the *optimal* size and constitution of a foreign-policy decision-making community, such that external signals are accurately enough assessed by a large enough "crowd" without other "crowd-related" constraints – such as the decision-making sclerosis of too many veto players (Tsebelis 2000) – becoming debilitating? The implication is that rather than ever-larger group size delivering ever-greater crowd-wisdom, ever-better capability/intention assessments, and thus ever-higher foreign-policy performance, there are in fact trade-offs to be made, as depicted in figure 1. Moreover, this question goes beyond the crude democracy/autocracy distinction. It may be that two-party coalitional parliamentary democracies *and* plural-politburo autocracies can do about as well as each other, say, while single-constituency democrats *and* autocrats are similarly flawed. It may also account for early "democracies" – nineteenth-century Britain or the United States, say, before universal suffrage – having adequate decision-making group sizes to achieve the advantages of democracies' power- and intent-estimation advantages, while still being deeply flawed by any meaningful contemporary definition of "democracy" (a real problem for claiming a specifically *democratic* peace).

Figure 1. *The Up- and Downsides of Numerous Participants in Foreign Policy*
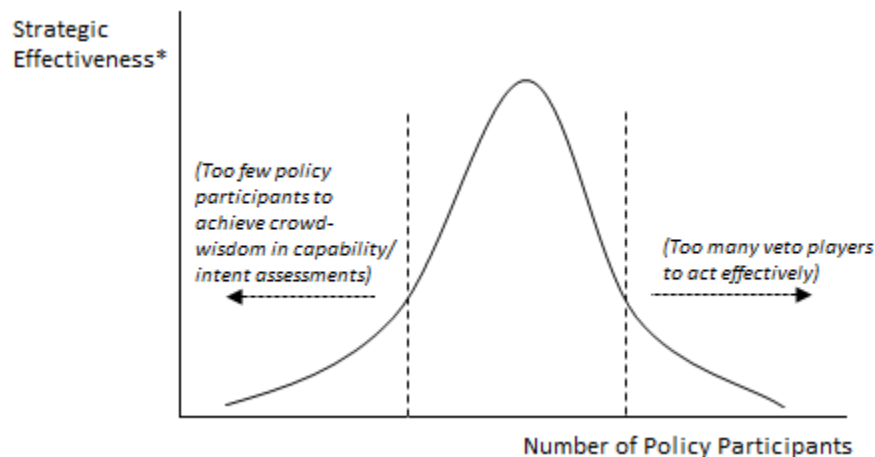
Note: Where "strategic effectiveness" is some function of (a) the ability to accurately *assess* others' capability/intent signals and (b) the ability to then *act* appropriately in the face of such signals.

Extending the Logic: Group Size and Strategic Efficacy

Despite limitations in addressing the specific peacefulness or otherwise of regime types, LeVeck and Narang's findings have significant implications – many of them under-explored – for the

general successfulness (or otherwise) of foreign policy. For while crowd-wisdom may tell us little about the democratic peace specifically, it tells us much about the conduciveness (or otherwise) of group sizes and structures to effective strategic decision-making.

First, LeVeck and Narang's logic and supporting experiments imply that states are better at making "realist" foreign policy – i.e. accurately assessing external signals and payoffs, thereby allowing the prudent discharge of *realpolitik* – under certain "liberal" conditions, i.e. where domestic-political decision-making structures are arrayed in certain ways. "Liberal" here is not synonymous with "democratic"; it simply means some optimal decision-making group size, large and diverse enough to accurately interpret signals (i.e. sufficient crowd-wisdom) yet small and cohesive enough to still take decisions (i.e. not too many veto players). Nonetheless, it still demonstrates the centrality of domestic constitutional, institutional, and societal variables to prudent statecraft. In that sense, it has bearing on IR's perennial "–isms" debate.

Second, beyond "democracy-vs-autocracy", what their experiments really show us are conditions for foreign-policymaking effectiveness under *either* regime type (and all of those regime types' sub-variants). Specifically, a vocal, independently-minded community of foreign policymakers of some optimal size is best placed to accurately assess the capabilities and intentions of others, avoiding the bargaining failure of war, while still retaining sufficient freedom of political action to actually take decisions (i.e. before the weight of veto players becomes too great). Those conditions may well correlate somewhat with the presence of democracy, but that is neither a necessary nor a sufficient finding for anything of much interest. Rather, we can assume that both autocratic *and* democratic leaders like to receive acquiescence to their foreign-policy preferences, just as both autocratic subjects *and* democratic citizens like to hear emotional appeals calibrated to their preferences; after all, humans – be they powerful policymakers or merely their less powerful (s)electorates – derive utility from cognitive affirmation (Stein 2017). Yet looking beyond such short-term comfort to long-term strategic success – always difficult, given the discounting of future gains[4] – national security (for publics) and associated positive legacy (for leaders) is more likely to be secured by creating the institutional and intellectual conditions for meaningful contestation over external signals, free from the threat of professional or personal sanction for voicing such contrarian assessments. That

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[4] For exploration of discount rates' utility in explaining states' varying short- versus long-term preferences for cooperation/confrontation, see Milner (1992).

is therefore an important prescriptive policy conclusion to be drawn from LeVeck and Narang's experiments, albeit not one conditional on the unhelpful binary of democracy versus autocracy.

Conclusion

The "wisdom of crowds" – while a powerful insight – does not in fact do much to support democratic peace theory. It is certainly an operative mechanism within suitably-sized groups, as LeVeck and Narang's experimental evidence demonstrates. But it simply does not apply well to the dynamics and surrounding politics of democratic foreign-policymaking. For while the democratic peace is a dyadic outcome, crowd-wisdom (or otherwise) is a monadic effect. And there are too many intra-state variables – including the flaws of representative democratic institutions (and the decision-makers they deliver), the countervailing burden of veto players, and the imprudent collective ideas of both elites and voters – for democracies to possess a necessary and decisive advantage in this domain. Just as autocracies cannot be credited with some inherent diabolical genius for long-term planning, therefore, so too democracies cannot claim automatic superiority in the generation of crowd-wisdom. Insofar as a genuine inter-democratic peace may exist, therefore, we are back to some combination of intersubjective recognition (e.g. Hayes 2011), norms (e.g. Mitchell 2012), and democracies' superior ability to make binding commitments to one another (e.g. Lipson 2005), along with all the over-determining co-variables (the U.S. alliance network, U.S. power preponderance, extended nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, regional organizations, etc). If democratic institutions and culture are weakening in the face of various contemporary pressures (e.g. neoliberal capitalism), meanwhile, and correspondingly becoming more prone to bellicosity in their international bargaining, then the long-term future of the "peace" may itself be in doubt (Hobson 2017).

At the same time, however, crowd-wisdom *is* a powerful insight – and one that LeVeck and Narang's experimental evidence shows to be operative. As such, while it may not represent a "smoking gun" causal logic for democratic peace, it nonetheless represents an important contribution to comparative analyses of strategic effectiveness. In particular, the generation of crowd-wisdom in the assessment of others' capabilities and intentions – when weighed against the encumbrance of additional veto players producing policy inertia and ultimately deadlock – suggests that there is some optimal size and thought-diversity of strategy-making groups. That

will be a finding of interest to policymakers and concerned citizens in democracies and non-democracies alike.

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