

Dan Reiter, Allan C. Stam, and Alexander B. Downes, “Correspondence: Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009).

Alexander B. Downes Replies:

In my article “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” I questioned the widespread view that democracies are more militarily effective than states with other types of political regimes.¹ Focusing on the most prominent example of this view, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam’s book *Democracies at War*, I advanced two arguments.² First, Reiter and Stam’s empirical analysis of the relationship between democracy and victory inappropriately omitted draws (an undesirable war outcome) and lumped all war participants into two categories—initiators and targets—when there are really three—initiators, targets, and joiners (states that entered into wars after they started). When draws and joiners are incorporated into the analysis, democratic initiators, targets, and joiners are not significantly more likely than nondemocracies to win interstate wars. Second, focusing on the democratic selection effects argument, I suggested that under certain conditions domestic politics might actually cause democratic failure. I demonstrated, for example, that President Lyndon Johnson escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam despite believing that victory was unlikely and the costs would be high, and that this decision was caused in large part by his fear that not fighting in Vietnam would derail his domestic legislative agenda. In short, I found that democratic leaders may knowingly decide to fight losing wars to protect their domestic priorities.

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¹ Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9-51.

² Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

I thank Dan Reiter and Allan Stam for their thoughtful reply to my article, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to their critique. Reiter and Stam offer two rebuttals to my arguments. First, they contend that I did not test their “central argument,” which is that a curvilinear relationship exists between regime type and war outcomes for war initiators: democracies are most effective, followed by dictatorships, and mixed regimes are worst. Reiter and Stam suggest that “it is not surprising that a linear model applied to a curvilinear relationship failed to find statistically significant results.” Second, Reiter and Stam reject my decision to incorporate into the analysis wars that end in draws. They argue that “the relationship between initiation, regime type, and draws is more complex” than the “simplistic portrayal” I offered in my article.

I am not persuaded by either of these rebuttals. Reiter and Stam’s main argument is that democracies are significantly more likely than nondemocracies to win wars; the curvilinear hypothesis is secondary. Moreover, when properly analyzed, the data (with or without draws) reveal no significant evidence of a curvilinear association between democracy and victory. Therefore, the analysis in my article—which treated regime type linearly and found that democracies are not significantly more likely than nondemocracies to win—is valid. Finally, including draws is necessary because forward-looking, risk-averse democratic leaders should seek to avoid all undesirable war outcomes, not only outright defeats. Omitting draws thus generates a bias in favor of finding a positive relationship between democracy and victory.

A CURVILINEAR RELATIONSHIP?

In my article, I tested what I understood to be the principal finding from the literature on democracy and victory, namely, that democracies are more likely to emerge victorious in wartime than nondemocracies. Although Reiter and Stam claim in their response that their

“central argument” concerns a curvilinear relationship between regime type and victory, this contention is difficult to sustain. In the introduction to *Democracies at War*, Reiter and Stam state their thesis clearly: “Our central argument is that democracies win wars because of the offshoots of public consent and leaders’ accountability to the voters.”³ Reiter and Stam develop two arguments rooted in democracy for why democratic war initiators and targets prevail; they test these arguments against alternative explanations for democratic victory. With regard to democratic initiators, Reiter and Stam spend several pages carefully laying out their selection effects theory for why democracies are particularly likely to win wars they start, but they spend two paragraphs briefly outlining the logic for a curvilinear relationship between regime type and war outcomes.⁴ Moreover, in previous debates with their critics, Reiter and Stam have not characterized this curvilinear finding as being their main argument.⁵ Reiter and Stam are thus primarily concerned with differences between democracies and nondemocracies, and secondarily interested in variation between different kinds of nondemocracies. Hence I tested their central argument in my article and found that democracies do not have a significant advantage over nondemocracies in winning wars when all wars are included in the analysis.

Nevertheless, Reiter and Stam are correct that I did not test their curvilinear hypothesis. In their rebuttal, they offer two pieces of evidence to support this hypothesis: a cross tabulation of initiation, regime type, and war outcomes (table 1), and a probit model that employs two fractional polynomials (FPs), which are designed to detect nonlinear effects of continuous independent variables (table 2). Neither of these pieces of evidence, however, actually supports their argument. Table 1, for example, shows that democratic initiators win 65 percent of the time

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 19-25.

⁵ See, for example, Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, “Understanding Victory: Why Political Institutions Matter,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 168-179, written in response to Michael C. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 5-47.

when draws are included, a steep drop from the 93 percent figure reported by Reiter and Stam in *Democracies at War*. The table also shows a substantial narrowing of the gap in winning percentages among the three regime types: when draws are excluded, the disparity between democracies and autocracies is 33 percentage points, and between democracies and mixed regimes it is 35 points. When all war outcomes are considered, however, these differences are cut by nearly two-thirds for mixed regimes and more than half for autocracies. Mixed regimes also prevail at a slightly higher rate than autocracies—52 versus 50 percent—contrary to the proposed curvilinear hypothesis.

Cross tabulations, however, are relatively weak tests: not only are the relationships examined bivariate, failing to control for other possible causes of war outcomes, but this particular type of cross tabulation (among three variables) does not permit an assessment of the statistical significance of the correlations. Democratic initiators appear to be somewhat more likely to win than the two types of autocratic initiators, but it is impossible to draw any firm conclusions.

In table 2 of their rebuttal, Reiter and Stam present what initially appears to be more convincing evidence for the curvilinearity hypothesis. Using my data and codings—but excluding draws as a war outcome—Reiter and Stam replace the linear regime type variables (the Polity index, ranging in this case from 1 to 21, and Polity \times initiator) with two fractional polynomials.⁶ Each of these terms is statistically significant, which Reiter and Stam claim supports the proposition that a curvilinear relationship exists between regime type and victory for war initiators.

⁶ For details on FP models, see Patrick Royston and Willi Sauerbrei, *Multivariable Model-Building: A Pragmatic Approach to Regression Analysis based on Fractional Polynomials for Modelling Continuous Covariates* (Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley, 2008).

This interpretation is incorrect. The key piece of evidence that must be examined when testing for nonlinear effects of independent variables is whether the curvilinear specification fits the data better than a linear specification.⁷ Although it is true that the FPs in Reiter and Stam's model are statistically significant, this does not mean that treating democracy as curvilinear rather than linear explains more of the variance in war outcomes. In fact, the model that includes the FPs explains slightly less of the variance. The log-likelihood of the model in Reiter and Stam's response, for example, is -63.59. The log-likelihood of the same model but with the linear variables for regime type (Polity and Polity \times initiator) instead of the FPs is -62.40.⁸ Because a smaller difference from zero indicates better model fit, the linear specification explains more of the variation in war outcomes.⁹ In other words, the FP results indicate that FPs are not needed—even when the dependent variable excludes draws—because a curvilinear specification offers no improvement over a linear one.¹⁰

Do these results hold when all war outcomes are examined (as I argued in my article should be the case) rather than wins and losses only? The answer is yes: comparing the fit of the linear versus curvilinear models run on the data that includes draws yields log-likelihood statistics of -168.46 and -169.15, respectively. Again, the linear specification outperforms the curvilinear one (the FPs in this model are also statistically insignificant).

⁷ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

⁸ The regression tables are available on my website, <http://www.duke.edu/~downes/publications.htm>.

⁹ The difference in model fit is probably not statistically significant, but the point is that the curvilinear specification does not fit the data as well as the linear one.

¹⁰ This criticism also applies to the FP results in *Democracies at War*, where the linear and curvilinear versions of democracy produce models with identical log-likelihoods. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 45, models 4 and 5. Contrary to the claim in their letter, however, the FPs used in this earlier work and in their correspondence are not the same. The formulas for the FPs in the letter are $x^{-1/2} \times \text{initiator}$ and $x^{-1/2}(\ln(x)) \times \text{initiator}$, with x consisting of Polity + 11 (email communication with Dan Reiter, June 15, 2009). The formulas in the book are $x^{-1/2}$ and $x^{-1/2}(\ln(x))$, with x consisting of (Polity \times initiator + 11)/10 (*Democracies at War*, p. 41). It is easy to see that the second formula results in war targets being included in the analysis, assigning them a value of 1.1—(Polity \times 0 + 11)/10 = 1.1—the same score that an initiator with a Polity score of zero receives. Because the FPs were constructed incorrectly to include targets, these results cannot be used as evidence to support the hypothesis of a curvilinear effect of democracy on the likelihood of victory for war initiators.

These tests demonstrate that the relationship between democracy and victory for initiators is not curvilinear, as Reiter and Stam have suggested, but rather is best treated as linear, as I did in my article. The argument that my results are insignificant because I neglected a curvilinear relationship is thus without foundation. Moreover, as I demonstrated in my article, when democracy is treated as linear, democratic initiators, targets, and joiners are not significantly more likely to prevail in war.

THE CONTENTIOUS DRAWS

Reiter and Stam also claim that my decision to incorporate draws into the analysis is misguided because democracies' proclivity to settle for draws changes as wars continue. Democracies rarely accept draws in a war's early stages, but by the fifth year the probability that they do so reaches 0.7.¹¹ Reiter and Stam suggest that selection effects cause democratic leaders to choose "wars that are short, low-casualty, and victorious," but "when they guess wrong...and the war does not end quickly," democracies "seek a draw in order to exit sooner rather than later."¹²

This explanation faces two difficulties. First, as I pointed out in my article, democratic leaders do not simply guess wrong: sometimes they knowingly select their countries into wars that are likely to be costly and inconclusive, which defies the selection effects logic. In 1965, for example, President Johnson and his top advisers clearly understood that conditions in South Vietnam were grim, and that escalation—either attacking Hanoi or sending large numbers of U.S. ground forces to the South—stood little chance of reversing the situation, but they still decided to do both. Reiter and Stam support this view in *Democracies at War*, writing that when Johnson was making his fateful decisions to escalate, "the outlook for the conflict was not

¹¹ Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

promising even at this early stage” and “the American leadership did not in 1965 foresee an imminent victory.”¹³ In short, democratic leaders sometimes choose to go to war knowing that a costly and indecisive result—such as a draw—may ensue. Excluding these cases biases democratic selection arguments toward finding a statistical relationship between democracy and victory.

Second, given Reiter and Stam’s argument that democratic leaders aim to stay in office but face an increased likelihood of removal if they settle a war on less-than-victorious terms, it is unclear why they would ever settle for draws. Democratic leaders need to deliver policy success to remain in power, but draws are typically perceived as failures, meaning that leaders who preside over them do so at their peril. Logically, therefore, democratic leaders should try to avoid draws just as they do defeats; and if stuck in a quagmire, they should be reluctant to accept a draw and instead “gamble for resurrection” in the hope that they can somehow obtain victory.¹⁴ Reiter and Stam, however, attribute the propensity to gamble to autocratic leaders, who they claim “choose to risk outright defeat in hopes of victory.” Yet Reiter and Stam also state that authoritarian rulers are relatively immune from being removed from office by their constituents, and thus have little to fear from settling a war short of victory.¹⁵ According to this logic, autocrats have no incentive to gamble on decisive victory because they can repress domestic protest against the war’s outcome, whereas democrats are fairly certain to be removed for failing to win. In short, the logic of Reiter and Stam’s argument contradicts their empirical result.¹⁶

¹³ Quotations are from *ibid.*, pp. 173-174. For further evidence, see also *ibid.*, pp. 13, 174.

¹⁴ For this argument, see George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, “Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem Goes to War,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May 1994), pp. 362-380.

¹⁵ Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 168.

¹⁶ For an argument that mixed regimes rather than democracies gamble for resurrection, see H.E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The aim of my article was to foster further debate and inquiry on the determinants of military effectiveness by demonstrating that the effect of democracy was more equivocal than previously believed, in some circumstances contributing to poor outcomes. It was not my aim to debunk democracy as an independent variable in general, only to question its explanatory power in this specific empirical domain. Indeed, although material power surely plays a role, I endorse Stephen Biddle's argument that the causes of states' military effectiveness are predominantly nonmaterial and found primarily at the domestic level.¹⁷ I suggested a pair of mechanisms whereby domestic politics can cause democracies to choose poorly, but other scholars are exploring how state-level variables other than regime type affect how states perform in wartime.¹⁸ I hope that my article and this exchange contribute to this growing literature.

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¹⁷ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ For exemplary citations, see Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" p. 51 n. 128.