

Fearon – “Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations”

What constitutes a domestic political explanation of foreign policy?

What factors indicate a foreign policy decision was made because of domestic political factors?

The meaning of domestic political explanation varies based on the definition of systemic/structural explanations. There are two types of systemic explanations:

S1: States as unitary rational actors,

S2: States as unitary rational actors and specific characteristics of states cannot enter into explanations.

There are two corresponding types of domestic political explanations:

D1: Domestic-political interactions yield sub-optimal foreign policy.

D2: Specific characteristics of states explain variation in states' foreign policies.

Fearon examines the distinction between systemic IR theory and theories of foreign policy. He argues this is a meaningless distinction on the grounds that the explanatory variables in systemic theories are – balancing, capabilities, etc – are caused by the behavior of individual states. This is the “core sense” of a theory of foreign policy. Fearon analyzes each of Waltz's arguments in favor of such a distinction, arguing in each case that Waltz's argument hinges on a narrow definition of a theory of foreign policy and that his systemic analysis is consistent with the core sense of theories of foreign policy. In particular, he notes that many of Waltz's analogies to neoclassical economic theory are misappropriated because neoclassical theories of markets allow the consideration of firm-level characteristics.

Fearon goes on to consider the potential roles for domestic politics for theory, reviewing the existing literature in each type of explanation. The importance of domestic politics depends on which theory of foreign policy is employed. D1 explanations are confined to explaining sub-optimal foreign policy while D2 explanations consider a much larger range of domestic-level explanatory variables. Fearon contends that S1 theories allow us to combine domestic and international level of analysis. S1 theories allow the analysis of unit-level factors in the context of a broader system. He argues that S1 theories are more appropriate analogs to neoclassical economic theory than S2 theories precisely because it can accommodate simultaneous consideration of unit and system-level factors into its theoretical framework.

In developing this line of thought, Fearon identifies the need for further work to distinguish between S1 and S2 arguments. Such work would, among other things, help establish a baseline against which to assess the relative importance of domestic political factors.