Advice on Reading Theory Pieces in Political Science

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1 Introduction

This is a brief memo describing one method for getting the most out of reading a theoretical piece in a political science class. It is by no means the only way, but it works well for many professors and graduate students in the Politics department. Please note that this memo deals with theoretical and to a more limited extent policy-oriented pieces. A companion article discusses a way to approach more historically-oriented documents.

2 The Purpose of Theory in Political Science

One definition of political science is that it is the systematic study of power: how it is generated and used, how it affects the behavior, interaction, and strategies of competing political groups, and how it is given lasting effect through the establishment of institutions. We are chiefly interested in how a particular factor leads to specific political effects, and a theory in political science is one scholar's attempt to define this cause and effect relationship. When reading a theoretical piece, it is *essential* that you firmly establish what the author thinks the cause is, what the effect is, and why. How do you define the cause (X), the effect (Y), and what is the mechanism by which X leads to Y?

An example will help, and I'll reference this throughout the piece. Democratic peace theory has been called "the closest thing we have to an empiri-

cal law in the study of international relations."[1] One variant of this theory argues that democracies do not go to war with each other due to the pacifying effects of their political institutions. So, interstate war (or its absence) is the effect, while political institutions (democratic or autocratic) are the cause. The exact mechanism is as follows. Generally speaking, the public - whether in an autocracy or a democracy - pays the costs of war, either in money (taxes) or lives (troops). But democratic citizens can express their grievances in political fora and more easily hold their elected officials accountable. As a result, the leaders of two democracies tend not to attack each other, as they are both constrained by publics which would prefer not to bear the costs of war. Autocracies lack these constraining institutional effects, and so go to war more often.

Of course, it's usually not that easy to generate really good ideas and theories. Just think of your average cable news pundit or talking head. They typically engage in shoddy, sloppy thinking, and we can boil this down to two problems. First, there is the problem of confounding factors: Could other causes explain the political effects equally well, if not even better? Second, there is the problem of evidence: Does this relationship hold in other time periods or locations? Combining these two problems, is the pundit extrapolating from a single case and generalizing to a whole bunch of unrelated cases?

As political scientists, we want to (but often don't) do better, and so it behooves us to ask similar questions of any theory we encounter. Returning to our example, most democratic countries are also quite rich. So it could be that being rich is what causes countries not to go to war with each other, not democracy. (A problem of confounding factors.) Rich countries could have more to lose from war, and so two rich (and quite possibly democratic) countries do not go to war. Or it could be that the evidence for democratic peace theory has only come from Western European countries after 1945. Therefore, supporters of the theory are extrapolating from a small sample of countries in a particular time period, and one that coincides with the Cold War. (A problem of evidence and possibly a confounding factor.)

While criticism serves a purpose, we could push the debate further by considering ways to address these points. We could do this by directly addressing the challenges presented, attempting to, say, find examples of socioeconomically similar countries that nevertheless differ in political institutions. If the relationship holds, then that would support the democratic peace. Alterna-

[1] To be fair, though, many scholars dispute this claim.

tively, we could buttress the argument indirectly, chiefly through the search for theoretical implications. We ask, "What other relationships would the theory suggest would occur?" If democracies don't fight each other due to their institutions, do they fight with autocracies more often than we would expect? Do they experience higher levels of casualty aversion, and do those casualties actually have a political effect? Surprisingly enough, countries in an alliance are often MORE likely to go to war with each other. Is this only among non-democratic countries?

Finally, we want to know the wider importance of our theories. Why does this theory matter? At the very least, democratic peace theory was referenced by at least four presidents (Wilson, Roosevelt, Clinton, and Bush II) as the rationale for foreign military intervention. Knowing whether it is correct (or wrong) would be a good thing. We can also ask how our theories relate to other ideas and concepts, and whether there are other phenomena which our theory can explain. For example, does democratic peace enhance the prospects for trade among certain countries?

3 The Five Basic Questions

In sum, there are five questions you should ask about every article, book, or other piece that we read.

1. *What is the author trying to explain?*
   In cause-effect terms, what is the effect – or "dependent variable" – that the author is interested in? How is it defined? Does the definition make sense? Of what is the effect a case? What is the scope of the phenomenon?

2. *What exactly is his/her explanation?*
   What are the causes – or "independent variables" – that the author thinks are primarily responsible for creating the effect? How are they defined? Do these definitions make sense? How are causes related to effects? Is this logically coherent? Is it consistent with what we know about human behavior? What cases fit this mechanism, and which ones violate it? Does it imply other cause-effect connections that we should consider?

3. *Why should we buy this explanation?*
   What evidence does the author provide? What methods does s/he

use? Are there any concerns about bias? Is the evidence convincing, and why or why not? What evidence would convince you that the explanation is false or true? (Usually false is a more telling question than true.)

The next two questions are more relevant for graduate students or those looking to develop a more holistic sense of the literature (i.e. competing schools of thought, where different theories fit into these schools, what theoretical and policy issues are left unexplained.)

4. *What other explanations are out there?*
   What alternative theories are out there? Can other causes or causal mechanisms explain the phenomenon equally well? Better? Does the author assume that certain background conditions or events don't matter when they do? Does it imply other cause-effect connections that we should consider in order to determine how accurate the author's analysis is?

5. *So what?*
   How broadly can we generalize the result? What is the scope of the result, given the assumptions? What are the broader implications (on theory more broadly, additional testable hypotheses, etc.)? What are the broader implications in the real world, e.g. policy? What other research might one undertake? What don't we know still?

After going through these five questions, I like to list out additional points that I find particularly interesting or disagreements that I have with each argument.

In addition, when reading political science pieces, pay particular attention to introductions, early chapters, or any place the author clearly identifies his central argument. This will help to frame the rest of the selection. Also, pay particular attention to definitions. Sometimes slippery definitions allow a scholar to get away with sloppy arguments and causal claims. Take that as a lesson, however, to challenge the slipperiness of your own definitions or those given by your peers.[2]

[2] Another quick example comes from Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. We read about the Battle at Cajamarca, where the main puzzle is exactly how the Spanish came to be so much more powerful than the Incans. What explains why Pizarro, with a handful of men, was able to defeat, if not crush, an army many thousands of times bigger than his force? For Question 1, then, the dependent variable is the power differential between the Incans and the Spanish.

4 The Whole Point

I often hear people say that "they hate politics." This is a tragedy to me. Yes, elections can be divisive, leaders corrupt, and political bargains emotionally dissatisfying, morally unjust, and inhumane. But, as Aristotle said, politics is ultimately about our competing conceptions and pursuit of the good society. Political organization is how we have developed human rights, civil liberties, economic prosperity, and democracy. The study of politics is fundamentally driven by how we advance the ugly side of our societies towards the good.

So when we debate definitions, evidence, and methods, yes, we do accomplish a number of pedagogical goals: sharpening our thinking, producing better policy, and advancing the general sum of human knowledge, among

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Diamond's explanation for this difference–and the response for Question 2–is that it all comes back to the availability of domesticable plants and animals. Where these were available, certain societies were able to generate surplus food supplies. This in turn prompted the creation of more complex social and political forms to manage, protect, and increase these supplies, which led to the creation of metals, tools, weapons, and technology. Moreover, the concentration of livestock into a small area bred new diseases, but humans in those societies eventually developed immunities. Now, the absence of domesticable plants and animals meant that certain societies were unable to foster these advances, at least to the same degree. Lacking access to these types of plants and animals, the New World was at a great disadvantage in the development of comparable weaponry, complex social organizations, economies, and biological immunity. Spain and the Inca, according to Diamond, followed different historical trajectories due to this key difference in plants and animals. And when these societies met at Cajamarca, the Inca were decimated.

Note one key thing: Diamond's independent variable actually varies. Certain places had pigs and wheat, other places did not. Those places that did developed more complex social, political, and economic forms, which led to more advanced technology and military capabilities. Those places that didn't, did not. To see why this is important, consider the Waltz piece. He argues that anarchy impels a concern for survival among states, and this is what causes states to compete, come into conflict, and go to war with each other. But, we're not just interested in explaining why states go to war. We also want to explain why we have long stretches of peace between countries. And the problem with Waltz's anarchy-based theory is that anarchy is a constant: it's always there and it doesn't change. So how can something that doesn't change help us understand why we see both war and its opposite, peace, in the international system? Remember, *there is no causation without variation.* In other words, if one thing doesn't change, it can't cause a change in something else.

On Question 5, consider counterfactuals. Even if the Inca had had domesticable plants and animals, would that necessarily have equalized their power with the Spanish? Do Diamond's claims really hold across all societies, or are there limits? Consider the Maori of New Zealand. They lacked many of the organisms Diamond mentions, but nevertheless fought the British to a standstill.

others. But periodically remind yourself about the importance of that last "so what" question. Getting our theories right is of fundamental importance for improving the lives and livelihoods of millions, even billions, of people. And that is a critical, even grand, endeavor, and not one to be hated.

Please let me know if you have any questions, and I look forward to our discussions!