

Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space*

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Abstract: A wave of recent research challenges the role of regime type in international relations. One striking takeaway is that democratic and autocratic leaders can often achieve similar levels of domestic constraint, which in many issue areas results in similar international outcomes—leading many to question traditional views of democracies as distinctive in their international relations. In this review essay, we use recent contributions in the field to build what we call a “malleable constraints” framework, in which all governments have an institutionally-defined default level of domestic audience constraint that is generally higher in democracies, but leaders maintain some agency within these institutions and can strategically increase their exposure to or insulation from this constraint. Using this framework, we argue that regime type is still a crucial differentiator in international affairs even if, as recent studies suggest, democratic and autocratic leaders can sometimes be similarly constrained by domestic audiences and thus achieve similar international outcomes. This framework helps reconcile many competing claims in recent scholarship, including the puzzle of why autocracies do not strategically increase domestic audience constraint more often. Just because democracies can escape audience constraint and autocracies can, for example, tie their hands via audience costs, does not mean that they can do so with equal ease, frequency, or risk.

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Books Reviewed:

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

Courtenay R. Conrad and Emily Hencken Ritter, *Contentious Compliance: Dissent and Repression under International Human Rights Law* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tingley, *Sailing the Water's Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, 2016)

Megumi Naoi, *Building Legislative Coalitions for Free Trade in Asia: Globalization as Legislation* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Jessica L.P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Cornell University Press, 2014)

Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Across several generations of scholarship in international relations (IR), whether a country was a democracy or not stood as the dominant way to understand the role of domestic politics in international affairs. Many scholars concluded that accountability to domestic audiences made democracies' international behavior distinctive from that of autocracies, whose leaders enjoyed a much freer hand.¹ Overall, much of the foundational literature on domestic politics in IR—going back to Kant—assumed that democratic leaders were more constrained than autocrats when conducting foreign policy.²

But recent research in IR challenges this view of regime type. The most direct challenges arise from more nuanced studies of domestic institutions themselves, both within democracies and long-neglected authoritarian regimes.³ Additionally, a wave of scholarship has renewed the study of leaders and individuals as distinct domestic actors in international relations.⁴ Finally, there has been increased attention to international-level factors that shape how regime type matters in IR over time.⁵

One striking takeaway from this research is that democratic and autocratic leaders can often achieve similar levels of domestic constraint, which in many issue areas results in similar international outcomes, and can do so through mechanisms traditionally associated with the opposite regime type. For example, recent scholarship on authoritarian regimes in IR highlights how authoritarian leaders can be constrained by domestic audiences or even mass publics, while scholarship on democracies in IR now emphasizes how leaders can escape domestic audience

¹ Fearon 1994; Lake 1992; Lipson 2003; Milner 1997; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2002; Martin 2000; Putnam 1988; Russett 1993; Russett and Oneal 2001; Schultz 2001a.

² Kant 1795.

³ E.g., Weeks 2008, Weeks 2014; Weiss 2014; Baum and Potter 2015.

⁴ Among others, see Byman and Pollack 2001; Debs and Goemans 2010; Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Saunders 2011; Colgan 2013; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015.

⁵ Conrad and Ritter 2019; Gunitsky 2017; see also Hyde 2011; Oatley 2011.

constraint.⁶ Recent works also directly challenge a consensus in much post-Cold War scholarship on domestic politics and international relations: that democracies are distinctive in their foreign policy, and on average achieve distinct international outcomes. One manifestation of democratic distinctiveness is a “democratic advantage” across multiple areas of international politics, including war initiation, war fighting, coercive diplomacy, finance, free trade, economic growth, credible commitments, foreign investment, and human rights.⁷ Across a variety of important issue areas in IR, recent research can leave the impression that the line between democracies and autocracies is blurry, and some scholars have used these and related findings to question the continuing relevance of regime type to international behavior.

What should scholars conclude from all this? If regime types can achieve similar international outcomes, is it that regime type does not matter, that domestic institutions vary within regime type, that different regime types reach similar outcomes via different processes, or that leaders aim to escape or encourage domestic constraints by strategically adopting features of another regime type? Despite the individual and collective progress made by the reviewed works, we are left with a basic puzzle: if authoritarian regimes are able to achieve advantageous international outcomes—such as generating audience costs, winning wars, or making credible commitments—by activating domestic constraints, then why don’t they do it more often? Similarly, if democratic leaders can escape domestic audience constraints, how large and durable is the democratic advantage? In short, does regime type still matter in IR?

⁶ Books selected for review are exemplars: Baum and Potter 2015; Milner and Tingley 2015; Naoi 2015; Weeks 2014; Weiss 2014.

⁷ See, e.g., Lake 1992; Fearon 1994; Milner 1997; Martin 2000; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000; Schultz 2001a; Reiter and Stam 2002; Baum and Lake 2003; Lake and Baum 2001; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Schultz and Weingast 2003; Milner and Kubota 2005; Davenport 2007; Jensen 2008; Beaulieu, Cox, and Saiegh 2012.

In this review essay, our answer, which stands in contrast to several of the works we review, is that regime type is still a crucial differentiator in international affairs even if, as recent studies suggest, democratic and autocratic leaders can sometimes be similarly constrained by domestic audiences and thus achieve similar international outcomes. For clarity, this essay focuses on one component of regime type that has been particularly salient in IR—the degree to which domestic audiences constrain leader action.⁸ Regime type—or, more specifically, domestic political institutions that govern the interactions between leaders, elites, and the mass public—provide all governments with a default level of domestic audience constraint that is generally higher in democracies, but leaders maintain some agency within these institutions and can deliberately increase their exposure to or insulation from this constraint. Thus we argue that there are both structural, institutionally-based and strategic, leader-driven determinants of domestic audience constraint. Few scholars examine both sources, but we argue that both are essentially to fully understand domestic audience constraints across many issue areas in IR.

Inspired by books we review, we propose a new theoretical framework, which we call a “malleable constraints” approach, aimed at recapturing regime type in IR. Our approach emphasizes not only variation in the default levels of constraint across the regime type spectrum (domestic structure), but also the boundaries set by those institutions, within which leaders can move strategically (leader agency), as well as the ways in which the international environment can influence both dimensions (international pressure). Institutions define default levels of audience constraint that are typically greater for democracies than autocracies, and which may or may not be internationally advantageous in specific settings. Within these boundaries, leaders have what we call “agency space,” within which they can voluntarily incur “agency costs” to become more

⁸ This concept is broader than “audience costs,” and is discussed in detail below.

exposed to or insulated from domestic audience constraints. Agency space allows for the possibility that autocrats can become temporarily more constrained and democrats less constrained without changing regime type, and shifts the focus to how agency costs manifest, and how risks associated with utilizing agency space vary across the regime type spectrum. We speculate that the risk of triggering institutional or regime change in the process of trying to adjust constraints is higher for autocracies, because democracies retain an advantage in institutional plasticity and in flexibility for leaders to adjust the size, composition or information levels of their audience.

This framework reconciles many competing claims in recent scholarship, including the puzzle of why autocracies can but only rarely generate constraint. Just because democracies can escape audience constraint and autocracies can, for example, tie their hands via audience costs, does not mean that they can do so with equal ease, frequency, or risk. Regime type shapes not only the potential constraints imposed on leaders by domestic audiences for particular international actions, but also the costs for taking advantage of agency space within the boundaries set by domestic political institutions.

We develop this argument in three steps. First, we discuss the place of the reviewed books in the evolution of scholarship on regime type in international relations, categorizing them according to their focus on structural or strategic sources of constraint. Next, building on collective insights from the books, we introduce our framework for understanding the interaction between structural and strategic sources of constraint. We illustrate using the reviewed books and other recent work from several ongoing research agendas that should be in greater dialogue with one another—particularly research on democracies and autocracies in international relations, two concentrated areas of recent research that have had surprisingly little interaction, and the

interaction of both sets of research with international-level factors. We conclude by discussing the implications of our argument for the study of regime type and international relations.

Domestic Politics and International Relations: Beyond the Democracy “Dummy”

For decades, a dominant view of domestic politics in international relations was that they were largely irrelevant. One of Kenneth Waltz’ critiques of “reductionist” domestic-level explanations was that they could not explain how dissimilar states behave similarly under the pressures of the international environment.⁹ Although scholarship on domestic institutions and international relations began long before Waltz, his perspective, as well as the end of the Cold War, spurred an “institutionalist” response as scholars opened up the black box of the state with gusto and identified distinctive international behavior by democracies.

Four features characterized this post-Cold War wave of scholarship on regime type in IR. First, much of the first-generation implicitly assumed a simple and often dichotomous relationship between regime type and domestic audience constraint, with regime type serving as a proxy for whether a leader was exposed to or insulated from domestic audiences. Yet the upshot—even when first-generation scholars used continuous measures of democracy—was often a blunt distinction between democracies and autocracies, i.e., a real or proverbial “democracy dummy.”¹⁰

Second, and relatedly, arguments about distinctiveness of democracies usually focused on their greater degree of domestic institutional constraint. Such arguments suggested, either implicitly or explicitly, that autocracies were much less constrained (if at all), and therefore had

⁹ Waltz 1979, chs. 2, 4.

¹⁰ As summarized in Gourevitch 2002. See, for example, Maoz and Russett 1993; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2000. For exceptions see, e.g., Milner 1997; Leblang and Chan 2003; Roeder 1993; Shirk 1993.

more flexibility in international affairs.¹¹ One important manifestation of democratic distinctiveness arguments (but by no means the only one) is the idea that greater domestic constraint leads to a “democratic advantage,” for example in crisis bargaining and war.¹² IPE has been centrally concerned with explaining variation in openness to the international economy.¹³ By this openness yardstick, scholars concluded that democracies are distinctive, and sometimes have an advantage, in maintaining sovereign credit, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), liberalizing international trade, and respecting central bank independence.¹⁴ Many arguments rely on democratic institutions or the preferences of democratic audiences as constraining forces: for example, Schultz and Weingast argue that the “democratic advantage” in sovereign borrowing stems from democratic mechanisms to sanction leaders who default, whereas non-democratic leaders have more “discretion” to default “unilaterally.”¹⁵ Democracies have similarly been seen as more likely to respect liberal norms, comply with international treaties, and respect human rights.¹⁶ Of course, scholars have also suggested that democracies can suffer disadvantages, for example in so-called “small wars,” either because the public will not support the effort to win, or because it is shielded from the costs of war, sometimes leading to aggression, poor strategy, or prolonged war.¹⁷

¹¹ Gourevitch 2002, 318.

¹² Schultz and Weingast 2003. On coercive diplomacy, see Fearon 1994, 582.; Schultz 2001a. On war selection and warfighting, see Lake 1992; Reiter and Stam 2002; Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995.

¹³ Lake 2009.

¹⁴ On sovereign credit, see Schultz and Weingast 2003; Beaulieu, Cox, and Saiegh 2012. On trade, see Milner and Kubota 2005; Milner and Mukherjee 2009. On FDI, see Busse and Hefeker 2007; Li and Resnick 2003; Jensen 2008. On central bank independence, see Broz 2002.

¹⁵ Schultz and Weingast 2003, 12.

¹⁶ E.g., Slaughter 1995; Martin 2000.

¹⁷ See Mack 1975; Caverley 2014; Kreps 2018. For a discussion, see Lyall 2010, 169–170.

Third, first-generation scholarship contemplated some strategic manipulation of audience constraint, but focused primarily on the democratic side of the spectrum.¹⁸ In the context of coercive diplomacy, the concept of “audience costs” was an important special case of this kind of strategic manipulation of domestic constraint, with leaders attempting to tie their hands by increasing domestic constraint. IPE scholars often considered the opposite: insulation of policymaking from domestic audiences, for example through delegation of trade policy to the executive or bureaucracy.¹⁹

A final feature of first-generation regime type scholarship is that with some exceptions, many tended to treat the system level as background structure, ignoring interactions between the international level and regime type.²⁰ Even in IPE, which often focuses on institutions or domestic cleavages defined in relation to the international economy,²¹ some have argued that the preference aggregation approach of “open economy politics” (OEP) examines individuals and institutions at the expense of systemic factors.²²

The more recent, second generation of research on domestic politics and IR, has challenged the sharp dividing line between democracies and autocracies, although thus far there has been little dialogue between those working on the autocratic and democratic sides of the spectrum. A particularly important development is that rather than treating autocracies as a residual category for all non-democracies, this research disaggregates institutions and constraints within regime types, showing gradations of constraint between types of authoritarian regimes and among

¹⁸ Early critics noted leaders’ incentives and ability to influence levels of audience constraint: see, e.g., Gowa 2000, 21.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Goldstein 1993; Lohmann and O’Halloran 1994. For a discussion, see Naoi 2015, 8–9. Of course, see Putnam 1988.

²⁰ Such interactions include the regime type of great powers influencing the international level or the role of international level factors on regime type. Note that some liberal scholars in this generation (e.g., Moravcsik 1997; Russett and Oneal 2001) integrate system and unit-level factors.

²¹ Rogowski 1989.

²² See Oatley 2011; Farrell and Newman 2014; Chaudoin, Milner, and Pang 2015; Drezner and McNamara 2013.

democracies. As a result, a slew of new findings suggests not only that there are important differences within and between the traditional categories of democracy and autocracy, but also show that under some conditions, democracies and certain authoritarian regimes can achieve similar international outcomes via similar levels of constraint.²³ These second-generation scholars therefore return to some of the insights of Waltz’s neorealism—namely, the similarity of outcomes across dissimilar units—but use a more nuanced form of “reductionism.”

At the same time, some recent research advocates for greater attention to how international-level factors can moderate the effect of regime type, but in far richer ways than the sparse characterization of Waltz, or even his neoliberal institutionalist critics.²⁴ Recent scholarship on international organizations, for example, has examined how domestic accountability structures can be influenced by international actors, which can lead to both real and superficial changes in areas like election quality or respect for human rights.²⁵ Similarly, recent IPE scholarship underscores that international factors like global capital liquidity, pressure from the IMF on domestic spending choices, or the diffusion of practices like BITs can change how regime type matters.²⁶

These second-generation studies map broadly into five categories. First, some studies show that autocracies can sometimes achieve similar levels of domestic audience constraint, and ultimately, similar international outcomes to those typically attributed to democracies. Work in this vein emphasizes domestic constraint and accountability in authoritarian regimes. The Autocracies in IR (AIR) category is exemplified by Weeks’ *Dictators at War and Peace* and Weiss’ *Powerful Patriots*, which explore authoritarian crisis and conflict behavior. Within the

²³ E.g. Steinberg and Malhotra 2014; Baum and Potter 2015; Weeks 2008; Weeks 2014; Weiss 2014; Downes and Sechser 2012.

²⁴ Keohane 1984.

²⁵ Hyde 2011; Hafner-Burton 2013; Lupu 2015; Vreeland 2008.

²⁶ See, respectively, Ballard-Rosa, Mosley, and Wellhausen Forthcoming; Nooruddin and Simmons 2006; Tobin and Busch 2010.

Democracies in IR (DIR) category, some studies show that democracies' domestic constraints vary or are more limited, and that some democracies or democratic leaders can gain flexibility by evading or maneuvering around audience constraints. This second category is exemplified by Baum and Potter's *War and Democratic Constraint*, which disaggregates types of democracies by their media access and party structures, and shows that some behave quite similarly to autocracies. Milner and Tingley's *Sailing the Water's Edge*, which argues that US presidents sometimes choose foreign policy instruments to avoid domestic constraints, also fits in this category, as does Naoi's argument in *Building Legislative Coalitions for Free Trade in Asia* that, contrary to arguments that democratic leaders are beholden to protectionist interest groups, they instead can build pro-liberalization coalitions through regular legislative politics and side-payments to legislators who might otherwise push for protectionism.²⁷ Other studies go further, arguing that democratic constraint regularly leads to undesirable international outcomes.²⁸

In the third category of scholarship, international level variables influence regime type and/or incentives to use domestic politics for foreign advantage. We label this category SIR after Peter Gourevitch's seminal 1978 article, "The Second-Image Reversed." Within recent SIR scholarship, Gunitsky's *Aftershocks*, for example, shows how "hegemonic shocks" can lead states to adopt particular regime characteristics, or face coercion to do so, in ways that can moderate democratic distinctiveness at the system level. Conrad and Ritter's *Contentious Compliance* examines how international law changes leaders' calculus—across regime type—about whether to repress or otherwise insulate from domestic audiences.

²⁷ On protectionist interest groups and trade policy, see Grossman and Helpman 1994; Rogowski 1989; Milner 1997. Naoi's emphasis on side-payments to promote liberalization suggests a more malleable set of domestic audience constraints than prior trade literature. Additionally, see Saunders 2015; Guisinger 2017; Kreps 2018.

²⁸ Lipsy 2018; Downes 2009; Bastiaens and Rudra 2018.

This essay focuses on the first three categories, but we note the contributions of two other relevant categories. A fourth cluster of studies explain similarity in policy choices or international outcomes using state characteristics that cut across regime type, such as civil-military relations.²⁹ Fifth are studies that question the importance of regime type on primarily empirical grounds, such as the posited democratic advantage in generating audience costs,³⁰ or the democratic disadvantage in counterinsurgency wars.³¹

Structural and Strategic Sources of Domestic Audience Constraint

Across the AIR, DIR, and SIR literatures, second-generation scholarship finds greater variation in constraint, within and across types, than first-generation scholarship. Our concept of domestic audience constraint follows many scholars who have used a broad concept of “domestic audiences,” which indicates actors or groups who can observe a government or leader’s actions and have the potential to impose constraints across a range of issue areas. This concept is broader than the usage associated with “audience costs,” in two ways.³² First, it is inclusive of many different types of domestic actors. As Fearon highlighted, “[r]elevant domestic audiences have included kings, rival ministers, opposition politicians, Senate committees, politburos, and, since the mid-nineteenth-century, mass publics informed by mass media...”³³ Second, domestic audience constraint applies to a more general set of issues than the narrower meaning of “audience costs,” i.e., backing down from a threat in crisis bargaining and coercive diplomacy. For example, in *Dictators at War and Peace*, Weeks uses a broader concept of “audience” to explore autocratic

²⁹ Narang and Talmadge 2017. For examples in IPE see Gray 2013; Steinberg 2015.

³⁰ Snyder and Borghard 2011; Downes and Sechser 2012.

³¹ Lyall 2010.

³² Fearon 1994.

³³ *Ibid.*, 581.

elite constraints across several aspects of war.³⁴ Our use of “domestic audience” echoes E.E. Schattschneider’s argument that the outcome of a political conflict depends on “the *extent* to which the audience becomes involved in it,” and thus politicians seek to manage audience participation.³⁵ Additionally, our framework for domestic audience constraint is relevant to arguments about how different regimes respond to domestic audiences when making foreign policy, as well as arguments about whether different regime types tend to achieve different international outcomes, one example of which is a “democratic advantage” on a given issue.

Theoretically and empirically, second-generation research on both autocracies and democracies delves deeply into various parts of a basic accountability chain necessary for domestic audience constraint in any regime type. Accountability requires that a leader face a domestic audience, and that the members of this audience have the power to impose costs on leaders, preferences that may deviate from those of the leader, information to judge what their leaders are doing, and enough concern about the issue to be politically relevant.³⁶ Audience constraint can occur *ex ante*, through the costs of adjusting policy to suit an audience in ways that move a leader further from her ideal point or may degrade a policy’s effectiveness, or *ex post*, through accountability and possibly punishment for a leader’s decisions.

We argue that much second-generation scholarship explores one of two distinct sources of constraint: structural or strategic, as illustrated in Table 1.³⁷ Structural sources of constraint are relatively durable domestic institutional forces that set a default level and range of constraint associated with a given regime type. Strategic sources of constraint include actions leaders take,

³⁴ For example, see Schattschneider 1983; Putnam 1988, 434; Weeks 2014, 14–15; Weeks 2008, 37–41.

³⁵ Schattschneider 1983, 2–3 emphasis in original.

³⁶ The latter two concepts are often bundled into the concept of “salience,” see Guisinger 2009.

³⁷ On the “agent-structure problem,” see Wendt 1987.

within this institutionally-defined range, to strategically alter the size, composition, information, or political activation of relevant domestic audiences.

The books we review in this essay, put in dialogue with one another, show that steps along the chain of accountability can be affected by both structural and strategic factors. For example, audience size and composition are important elements of constraint, and can range from the extremely constricted, in personalist regimes, to very large and heterogeneous, in consolidated democracies.³⁸ Audience size and composition depend in part on the structure of domestic institutions, but leaders can also work strategically to change the coalition, or to exclude or circumvent segments of an existing audience. Similarly, as Baum and Potter argue, structural factors like the number of opposition parties and the diversity and robustness of a free press affect how well-informed an audience is about its leader's international behavior and deviation from its preferences. But leaders within a single country can strategically tighten or loosen information flow, which can, in turn, affect audience information levels, or even effective audience size, if participants are cut out of the loop or are rationally ignorant.³⁹

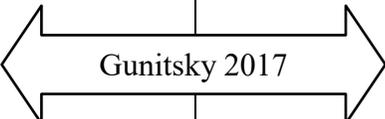
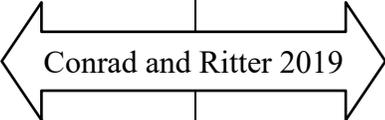
Table 1 organizes the books we review, according to their focus on democracies, autocracies, or the international level (in the arrows); and along the structural vs. strategic sources of constraint. On the AIR side of Table 1, although both Weeks and Weiss focus on ways in which autocratic leaders can be constrained by domestic audiences, they differ on the structural/strategic dimension. Weeks explores how structural variation across autocratic audience constraints in authoritarian regimes shapes conflict behavior. She argues that two dimensions—the degree to which authority is centralized or personalist, and whether ruling elites are civilian or military—shape both the preferences and power of domestic audiences that can constrain authoritarian

³⁸ Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003.

³⁹ Slantchev 2006; Downes 2009; Berinsky 2009; Saunders 2015.

leaders. In contrast, Weiss looks at variation in audience constraint over time within a single authoritarian regime—China—where ruling elites selectively allow nationalist, anti-foreign protests to proceed. These protests, which run the risk of getting out of hand and threatening the regime, can increase the credibility of Chinese threats in in China’s disputes with other countries, such as Japan and the United States.

Table 1: Categorizing Reviewed Books

	Autocracies: (AIR)		Democracies (DIR)
Structural	Weeks 2014		Baum and Potter 2015
Strategic	Weiss 2014		Naoi 2015 Milner & Tingley 2015

On the DIR side of Table 1, the upper right quadrant includes studies that structurally disaggregate democratic constraints, exemplified by Baum and Potter’s book, which arrays democracies according to the number of parties and access to media.⁴⁰ The lower right includes arguments about how democratic leaders within single countries can strategically manage their domestic audience constraint to achieve preferred policies. This quadrant includes Naoi’s argument about how some Asian leaders use side payments to legislators to smooth the path of trade liberalization by evading protectionist audience constraints, keeping trade in the legislative arena rather than insulated as in prior work on protectionism. Also in this quadrant, Milner and Tingley’s book argues that US presidents strategically choose foreign policy tools based on the distributional and ideological nature of the issue or policy instrument. One implication is that

⁴⁰ See also Leblang and Chan 2003.

presidents may seek to militarize policy, since its military tools are less distributional and ideological and thus carry lower domestic audience constraint.

The SIR category, depicted in arrows, also suggests a strategic/structural divide. Gunitsky's book examines long-term structural changes that shift international incentives for states to adopt particular institutional forms (like democracy) affect the audiences that constrain leaders.⁴¹ But as Conrad and Ritter argue, international institutions like international human rights treaties can alter whether leaders have strategic incentives to engage in human rights abuses as a way to become more insulated from domestic pressure.⁴²

These books and related work provide more nuanced accounts of how domestic audience constraints vary within regime type. But particularly when they make comparisons across regime type, many suggest similarities in constraint between democracies and autocracies. For example, Weeks states that "surprisingly, many autocratic leaders face a realistic possibility of punishment by a civilian domestic audience; they confront many of the same domestic pressures as democratic leaders, only in a different guise."⁴³ Weiss concludes, "If antforeign protests are credible signals in international bargaining, then it is not necessarily the case that democracies have the advantage in utilizing domestic politics as diplomatic leverage. If both regime types utilize public opinion to reveal information and communicate credibly, other factors must explain the democratic peace."⁴⁴ Baum and Potter argue that "[w]ith information comes democratic constraint. Without it, democracies are in some important regards functionally equivalent to autocracies."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Gunitsky 2017.

⁴² See also Hyde (2011) on international incentives to "fake" democracy.

⁴³ Weeks 2014, 1.

⁴⁴ Weiss 2014, 41.

⁴⁵ Baum and Potter 2015, 2.

But as our framework below makes clear, observed similarities in domestic constraints or similarity in international outcomes may come via different paths and by paying very different costs. Indeed, the authors quoted above each trace how democratic or autocratic leaders incur domestic costs associated with their international policy choices. These costs can sometimes be hard to observe, but are crucial for assessing whether regime type still matters. Additionally, the important findings of second-generation scholarship leave unresolved puzzles. Although the second generation clearly shows that that autocrats can generate constraint, scholars have made strides in studying how autocracies invest in repression, and while the record is imperfect, democracies tend to respect human rights more.⁴⁶ Autocracies regularly forgo international benefits to maintain their existing levels of repression, as when Myanmar refused humanitarian aid following Cyclone Nargis or when Robert Mugabe elected to continue repressive tactics and election manipulation in Zimbabwe even at the cost of significant reductions in Western foreign aid and expulsion from international organizations. Why do autocracies not take advantage of constraints more regularly? Is it possible to reconcile the findings of the first and second generations?

Malleable Constraints and Agency Space: Accountability Across Regime Type

This section develops our “malleable constraints” framework which integrates the durable structural differences between democracies and autocracies with the shorter-term malleability of audience constraints. As discussed, we assume that accountability requires that a leader face a domestic audience, and that the members of this audience have the power to impose costs on leaders, preferences that may deviate from those of the leader, information to judge what their

⁴⁶ On repression, see Greitens 2016; Gunitzky 2015; on democracies, see Davenport 2007.

leaders are doing, and enough concern about the issue to be politically relevant. Changes across this chain affect accountability.

We argue that democratic distinctiveness may not only stem from higher default levels of audience constraints in democracies, but also from greater flexibility and lower risks to take advantage of the range for strategic action defined by institutions—a range we term “agency space.” Thus, similarity in constraints or outcomes across regime types may sometimes be due to short-term leader agency, and is not necessarily evidence that regime type does not matter. The framework thus helps reconcile first-and second-generation scholarship.

Integrating Second Generation Insights

As a heuristic, Figure 1 depicts the progress and limitations of second-generation scholarship, and serves as a jumping-off point for our “malleable constraints” approach. The figure shows the overall degree of domestic audience constraint (i.e., exposure to or insulation from domestic audiences) on the y -axis, as a function of institutional or structural arrangements at each point on the regime type spectrum, represented on the x -axis. The endpoints of the x -axis can be thought of as full autocracy on the far left, and full democracy, on the far right. The end-points of the y -axis represent an executive who is fully exposed to a domestic audience (e.g., with extreme values across the accountability chain), or fully insulated (e.g., a leader who is completely immune from any domestic audience constraint).

The dotted line shows how these institutional arrangements define the default level of domestic audience constraint, which, as in the first generation, is higher for democracies, but as the second generation has shown, can result in more variation in levels of domestic constraint within the broader regime type categories (i.e., along the x -axis). The two surrounding lines represent boundaries of agency space for a given regime type; these boundaries are also a function

of domestic political institutions. Thus, for any default position on the dotted line there is a range of agency space defined by the maximum potential audience exposure (top line) and insulation (bottom line) beyond which leaders cannot move without changing regime type. For simplicity, the lines have the same slope. Democracies are characterized by higher default levels of constraint and relatively more agency space in the “exposure” range (where $y > 0$). Autocracies are characterized by relatively more agency space in the “insulation” range (where $y < 0$).

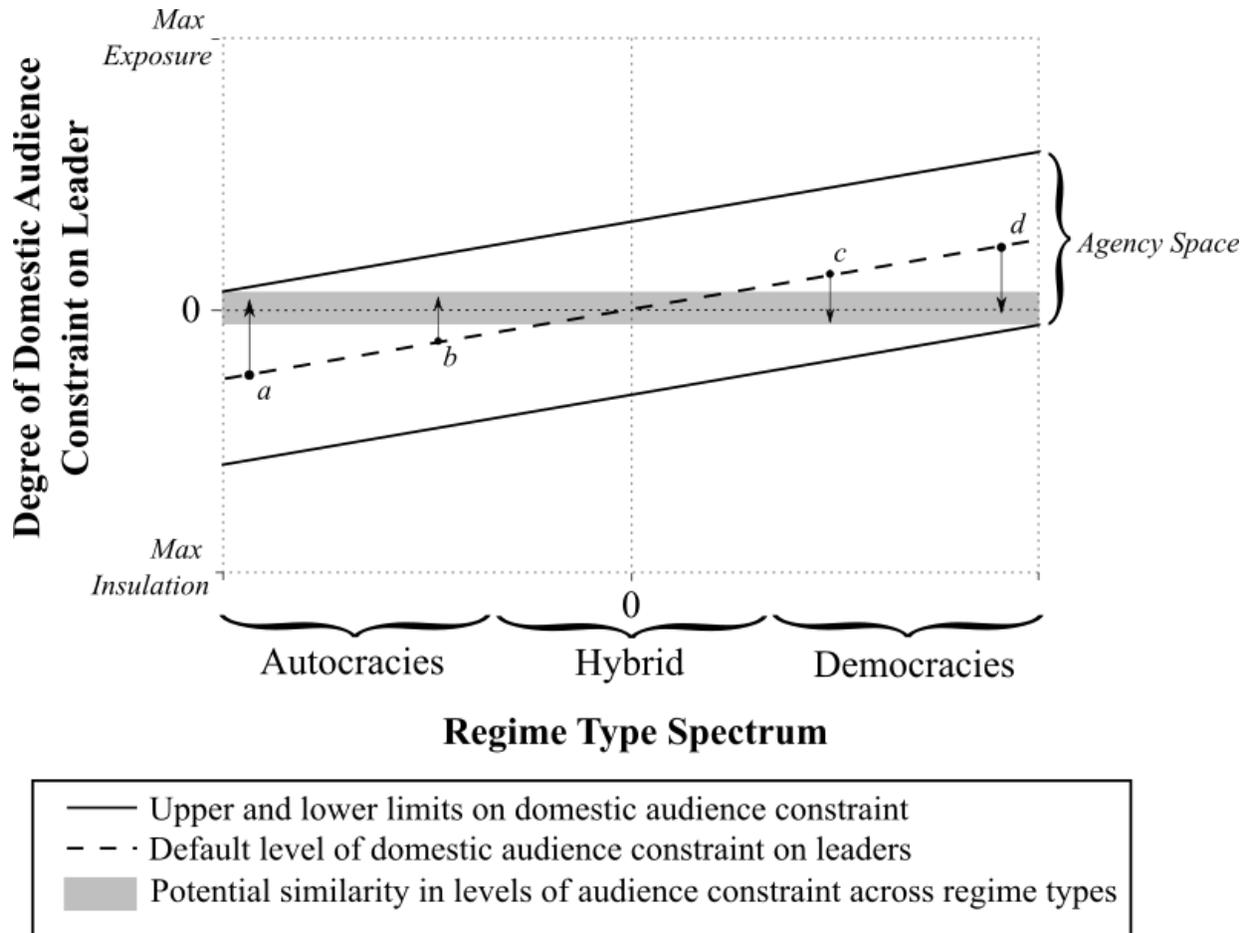
To understand how a leader is constrained by domestic audiences at a given point in time, one needs to know three things: (1) which country, i.e., the particular set of relatively fixed and non-malleable set of institutions along the x -axis that define the default level of constraint (the dotted line) and the limits on agency space (the solid lines); (2) whether the leader has decided to adjust those constraints strategically, i.e., move up or down (the vectors); and (3) what the costs/risks of vertical movement entail (not depicted graphically but discussed below). Some leaders may rarely move from their default constraints, remaining on or near the dotted line. Others may move up or down, increasing or decreasing domestic audience constraints and paying some agency cost, all without changing regime type. Moving beyond the top or bottom lines triggers institutional change.

Figure 1 highlights several contributions of second-generation scholarship. The regime type disaggregation that has been a hallmark of this work can be illustrated through comparisons of different points along the x -axis. On the left side of the x -axis are authoritarian regimes. Personalist dictatorships are on the far left (*a*); “constrained” authoritarian regimes, where, as Weeks argues, elites can exert accountability over leaders, are to the right within the authoritarian category (*b*).⁴⁷ In the center, hybrid regime types combine some institutional features of both

⁴⁷ See also Shirk 1993; Roeder 1993; Gandhi 2010.

democracy and autocracy.⁴⁸ On the right side, comparisons between forms of democracies—such as differences in party or media structures, per Baum and Potter, or the representativeness of the electoral system—can be represented by moving along the x -axis (c and d).

Figure 1: Strategic and Structural Sources of Audience Constraint



Notes: The y-axis maps one dimension of regime type onto the regime type spectrum (x-axis). In order to incorporate a range of second-generation scholarship, Figure 1 is agnostic about whether regime type is categorical or continuous. The most autocratic countries are on the far left; the most democratic countries are on the far right. For each point on the x-axis (or each category or regime subtype), there are upper and lower bounds on y-axis movement. Leader agency is reflected by vertical movement within this “agency space.” For a given regime type, the cost is greater the further a leader moves from the default level of constraint.

⁴⁸ Levitsky and Way 2010.

There have been large gains in AIR scholarship in developing structural arguments about how domestic audiences constrain the international behavior of different types of autocratic leaders, in essence comparing different points along the x-axis within the broader “autocracy” category. Scholars of conflict have been at the forefront of this effort (perhaps because of an empirical democratic bias in many IPE issues),⁴⁹ although IPE is now tackling variation in types of institutionalized authoritarian constraints. Drawing on trends in comparative politics,⁵⁰ a common finding across several issue areas is that single-party, civilian dictatorships often achieve similar outcomes to democracies, because civilian dictatorships face a domestic audience with a clear and relatively fixed ability to impose constraints.⁵¹ Many arguments rest on audience size and leader and audience preferences, given an autocratic leader’s need to assuage or avoid punishment by party elites.⁵² Further along the accountability chain, several scholars have examined information and transparency in autocracies. Some suggest that autocracies with a relatively large circle of elites that could threaten the leader have more incentives to disclose information about their policies to keep those elites on board, and that institutions like legislatures and parties within authoritarian regimes help facilitate transparency and alleviate monitoring and commitment problems.⁵³ On the IR side, party structure and other institutional audience features can differentiate democracies in the international arena.⁵⁴

In addition, although regime type provides all leaders a default level of constraint, they can strategically generate more or less audience constraint in the short term if they are willing to bear

⁴⁹ Lall 2016.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Levitsky and Way 2010; Gandhi 2010; Svobik 2012; Slater 2013. Weeks’ argument builds on Geddes 1999.

⁵¹ Aside from Weeks 2014, see also, for example, Steinberg and Malhotra 2014; Mattes and Rodríguez 2014; Peceny and Butler 2004; Hankla and Kuthy 2013. See also Gandhi 2010, for example; see also Vreeland 2008.

⁵² Weeks 2014, 17. See also Croco and Weeks 2016; Debs and Goemans 2010.

⁵³ Boix and Svobik 2013. See also Peceny and Butler 2004; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018, 283 (although their argument is also strategic and the decision to disclose is endogenous).

⁵⁴ In addition to Baum and Potter’s book, see also Auerswald and Saideman 2014; Caverley 2014.

the costs. Such strategic movements reflect another contribution of second-generation scholarship: deeper understanding of strategic sources of constraint, not only in democracies, but also in autocracies. In Figure 1, more negative values on the y -axis indicate that a leader is more insulated from domestic audiences. Downward movement from the default could, for example, reflect democratic leaders keeping information hidden or secret from relevant domestic audiences.⁵⁵ Actions in the range $y > 0$ are traditionally associated with democracies, like allowing public protests, opposition party criticism, or going public to activate domestic audiences. Within the range of agency space associated with $y < 0$, insulating actions include suppressing information, intimidation of political opponents, and surveillance.

Scholars in both IR and comparative politics increasingly see tools like information disclosure or even the expansion of political participation as tools of authoritarian control or resilience, complicating traditional views of such behaviors as characterizing a specific regime type.⁵⁶ Autocrats can increase their exposure to domestic audiences (y -axis movement in Figure 1), as in Weiss' argument that China strategically allows nationalist protest to try to tie its own hands in international bargaining. Such exposure changes not only the size of the audience, but also its distribution of preferences by allowing more hawkish voices to participate, and the degree to which the relevant audience is well-informed. Autocrats can also strategically use emigration policy to select a more loyal population.⁵⁷ Among democracies, second-generation DIR scholarship inverts prior contributions in security and IPE. The security literature has recently emphasized how democratic leaders can insulate themselves and take advantage of their room for

⁵⁵ Brown and Marcum 2011; Saunders 2015; Schuessler 2015.

⁵⁶ Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018, chap. 10.

⁵⁷ Miller and Peters 2018, 7–8.

maneuver,⁵⁸ while the IPE literature is grappling with popular resistance and backlash to insulating institutions as well as how politicians address or even try to activate anger at these institutions.⁵⁹ Both trends help scholars understand “regular” politics of international relations in new ways, in part by recognizing the room for maneuver in what we describe as agency space. Naoi’s book is one example, illustrating how trade policy in Asia is made through open, everyday legislative politics as long as side payments can grease the wheels in favor of liberalization, allowing leaders to evade protectionist domestic constraints. Similarly, audience costs in the coercive diplomacy setting can be understood as one manifestation of a larger phenomenon of democratic leaders taking advantage of agency space, deliberately increasing or decreasing their exposure to domestic audiences for international gain.

The vectors in Figure 1 illustrate four cases of strategic movement within agency space in which leaders pay a cost and/or bear risk to move up or down. Leaders of more autocratic countries, like personalist dictatorships (*a*) have further to travel to reach the same level of constraint than more constrained autocracies (*b*), a difference implied by Weeks’ argument, with Weiss’ argument encapsulated by *b*’s vertical movement. Likewise, per Baum and Potter, democracies with fewer parties and media access (*c*) are less constrained than those with more parties and robust media (*d*), who would, by implication, have to do more to insulate from relevant domestic audiences (i.e., move downward). Agency costs can manifest *ex ante* or *ex post*. Some leaders may face small *ex ante* agency costs (for example, personalist dictators who face no institutional checks on loosening constraints or changing policy), but large *ex post* risks and potential costs (e.g., the much larger risk of a coup once a personalist dictator temporarily increases the circle of decision-making).

⁵⁸ Saunders 2015; Kreps, Saunders, and Schultz 2018; Kreps 2018; Carson 2018; Mattes and Rodríguez 2014. There are, of course, exceptions, such as newer bottom-up approaches to security questions (e.g., Kertzer 2016; Tomz and Weeks 2013).

⁵⁹ Simmons 2014; Guisinger 2017; Voeten 2019.

Although the vectors are useful in depicting agency costs—for example, for a given regime type, agency costs are larger for moving further from the default level of constraint—the costs may manifest very differently across regimes, and thus Figure 1 does not fully depict these costs and risks, a topic we discuss below.

Comparing Across Regime Type: Similar Constraint via Dissimilar Mechanisms

This discussion illustrates an important overarching contribution of second-generation scholarship: the chain of accountability for international choices is relevant across the full regime-type spectrum, even for the most authoritarian states. This point may seem obvious to those who are familiar with this research, but it is easy to forget how much these findings—exemplified in the books we review—have shifted views about regime type. As Gourevitch summarized the conventional wisdom in 2002, first generation scholarship concluded that “[p]ublic accountability in a democracy limits the range of likely behaviors that happen in an autocracy, where the rulers have fewer immediate constraints...[authoritarian] leaders have substantial discretion, despite the constraints of a selectorate. They can shift institutions and their selectorate with greater ease than in a democracy, which leaves a more fluid game.”⁶⁰

Figure 1 also captures another feature of much second-generation scholarship: the possibility that leaders of different regime types can experience similar levels of domestic audience constraint, which can, in turn, lead to similar international outcomes, as illustrated by the grey shaded zone: the solid lines indicate limits on y-axis movement such that the maximum amount of exposure available to the most autocratic regime and the maximum amount of audience insulation available to the most democratic regime define an area of overlap accessible to all

⁶⁰ Gourevitch 2002, 318.

leaders. It is important to note that second-generation scholarship suggests that all leaders can reach at least some level of domestic audience constraint that is also accessible to leaders of the opposite regime type. Domestic constraint is reachable even for personalist dictators, who are highly insulated from domestic audiences by default, as shown on the far left side of Figure 1. For example, in her study of dictatorships and military effectiveness, Talmadge shows that in the face of extreme external threat, even personalists like Saddam Hussein can loosen their coup-proofing constraints, become more exposed to domestic audiences (analogous to vector (*a*)), and improve military practices dramatically.⁶¹

Thus overall, Figure 1 makes clear the nature of the second generation's progress: not only in comparisons between different points on the *x*-axis (structural sources of constraint), but also in vertical movement (strategic sources of constraint), both of which can lead to temporary similarity in constraint across regime type, and in turn, similar international outcomes. When we make more specific comparisons between regime types that are not at the extremes, there are larger zones of potential overlap (larger grey zone), as in Figure 2.1 where "constrained" autocracies have access to more democracy-like exposure, or Figure 2.2 where an electoral democracy, for example, has the option to activate more autocracy-like insulation.

But the figures make clear that just because leaders can temporarily reach a similar level of constraint does not mean that regime type is irrelevant. The structural and strategic determinants of audience constraint may vary with issues, occur under only some circumstances, or be limited for certain regime types. Talmadge's argument illustrates the point that even personalist dictators can increase audience constraint, but only to a limited extent (as indicated by the upper bound at point (*a*)), at potentially high *ex post* costs. As a result, personalists like Saddam Hussein are only

⁶¹ Talmadge 2015.

willing to loosen coup-proofing constraints on their militaries when the enemy is at the “palace gates,” i.e., the danger from external enemies trumps internal threats from coups.⁶² Once Saddam reluctantly eased domestic constraints on the military, Iraq’s army achieved significant gains, such as the ability to conduct complex, combined-arms operations, in part by becoming more exposed to domestic audience constraint.⁶³ This strategic movement did not make Iraq more democratic, nor did Iraq achieve the level of military effectiveness of democracies like the United States or Israel (since as shown in Figure 1, personalists can only access limited space in the “exposure” zone). Analogously, democratic leaders do not automatically change regime type when they withhold or suppress information, or even take more extreme measures like the suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War, anti-communist purges during the Cold War, or post-9/11 infringements on civil liberties. Instead, democratic leaders willing to pay the associated agency costs can temporarily reach a level of audience constraint that is more insulated than their default constraint, and approaches the *most* exposed a dictator can ever reasonably achieve.

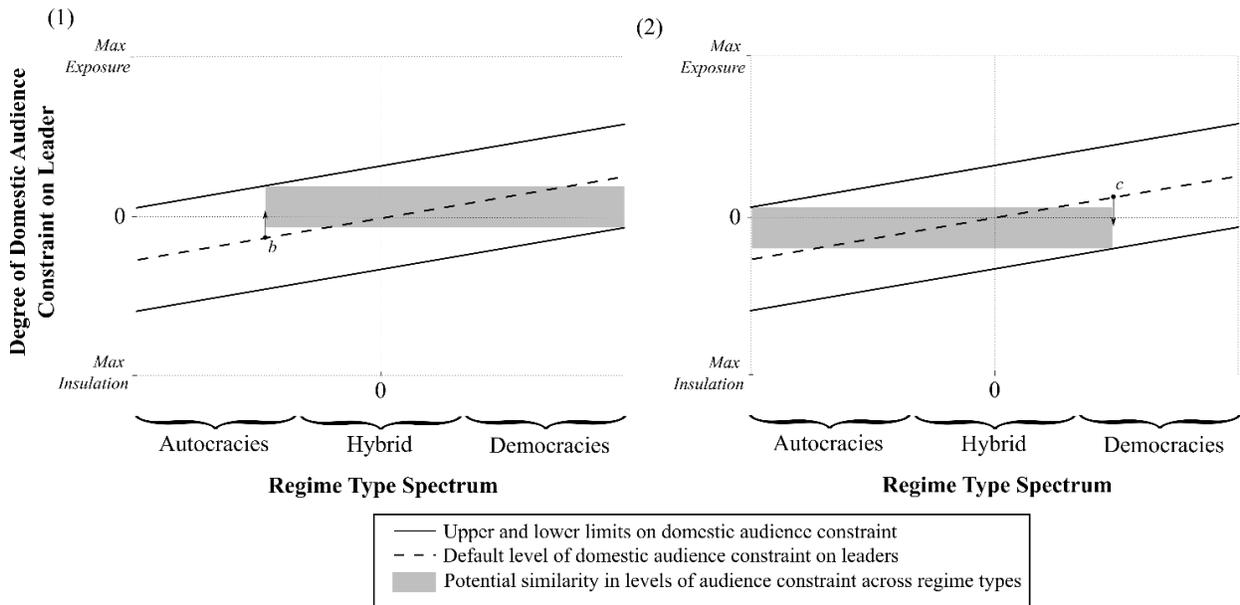
Overall, our malleable constraints framework departs from first generation literature, which tended to assume that democracies were more constrained than autocracies, or saw autocratic constraints as smaller and relatively fixed.⁶⁴ But it also departs from the implication of second generation arguments that similarity in international outcomes undermines the democratic advantage or diminishes the relevance of regime type in IR.

⁶² Ibid., 24.

⁶³ Ibid., 221–222; 227–228.

⁶⁴ Roeder 1993; Shirk 1993.

Figure 2: Regime-Type Specific Comparisons



Alternative Sources of Democratic Distinctiveness and an Agenda for Future Research

Although Figure 1 provides important context for understanding the continued importance of regime type, especially the greater agency space in the exposure zone, we contend that several other features of democracies and autocracies, not shown on Figure 1 and not yet fully developed or integrated in the literature, are necessary to fully understand regime type in IR, and represent productive avenues for future research. Crucial to our revisionist view of democratic distinctiveness is the flexibility afforded to democratic leaders to utilize agency space. We posit that this flexibility can stem from at least three sources: the nature of agency costs, the resilience or “plasticity” of domestic institutions and the larger set of options democratic leaders have to alter audience features, and international pressure. Our discussion of these sources suggests avenues for future research. Some of our conjectures may lead to countervailing predictions or require further research to explore how they affect international outcomes, as noted below. Overall, we highlight

the continued distinctiveness of democracy, and urge caution in concluding that autocratic leaders can regularly or easily achieve democracy-like levels of audience constraint.

The Nature of Agency Costs

First, we have already noted that second-generation scholarship either explicitly or implicitly describes the differing costs that regimes pay to approximate similar levels of audience constraint. It is not only the magnitude of agency costs but, critically, how these costs manifest, that determine when and whether leaders are likely to utilize agency space. Such costs can take the form of *ex ante* costs leaders pay to take advantage of agency space (for example, in the form of strategically relaxing censorship or rules against assembly), or *ex post* costs and risks of doing so (for example, in the form of increased risk of removal from office).

There are fundamental differences in the nature of costs that autocratic and democratic leaders pay: *ex post*, the highest risk to a democrat is that she is voted out of office. The highest risk to an autocrat is that she is tortured and killed.⁶⁵ Although scholars of authoritarian regimes and conflict disagree about whether fear of violent removal is central to autocrats' decisions for war,⁶⁶ the nature of *ex post* costs autocrats pay is clearly different. In the IPE realm, Ballard-Rosa argues that autocratic leaders have an "urban bias" because they fear the threat of protest from their concentrated urban populations, sometimes leading autocrats to default on sovereign loans rather than risk such protest.⁶⁷ Similarly, while Miller and Peters argue that control emigration can benefit autocrats, allowing emigration to democracies carries the risk that migrants will bring democratic ideas home.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ On manner of exit, see Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009; Chiozza and Goemans 2011.

⁶⁶ Compare Debs and Goemans 2010, 435; Svobik 2012, 13–17. vs. Weeks 2014, 9–10.

⁶⁷ Ballard-Rosa 2016.

⁶⁸ Miller and Peters 2018, 2.

The likelihood of paying these costs also differs across regimes, for both structural and strategic reasons. Personalists, for example, coup-proof precisely to keep the probability of violent removal low.⁶⁹ *Ex ante* costs are low for autocrats who want to increase their exposure to domestic audiences, but they may struggle to make those constraints credible given potentially violent removal or the risk of more lasting changes in domestic political institutions. As Weiss notes, it is the risk of instability stemming from nationalist protests that can enhance credibility, so regimes like China must push the limits of agency space to tie hands credibly.

Technological change may be an important and productive area of future research on how agency costs manifest.⁷⁰ From research on human rights, internal security, and the role of technology in authoritarian regimes, we already know more about how authoritarian leaders engage in preventive repression and information control.⁷¹ But these developments suggest that the *ex ante* costs of repression may be low for regimes with a robust repressive apparatus, and lower still when technology reduces the marginal cost of preventive repression.⁷² These factors may have complex effects on authoritarian regimes' international behavior: technologies that help countries maintain domestic control may allow leaders to turn their attention to international

⁶⁹ See, e.g. Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Krcmaric 2018; Debs and Goemans 2010.

⁷⁰ Tufekci 2017.

⁷¹ E.g. Greitens 2016; Gunitsky 2015.

⁷² Tufekci 2017, chap. 9; Rød and Weidmann 2015.

disputes,⁷³ but they may also make it more difficult to generate credible strategic increases in authoritarian audience constraint.

Plasticity of Democratic Institutions and Audience Flexibility

Second, we suggest that democratic leaders can take advantage of agency space more readily than authoritarian governments, and can do so more frequently without altering their institutions, because democratic institutions are more structurally plastic—they can withstand challenges—and allow for greater flexibility in managing domestic audiences. This greater plasticity of democratic institutions helps us resolve the puzzle of why, if autocrats can use audience exposure, they do not do so more often. Moving too far, too frequently, may generate unintended institutional change, i.e. unwanted *x*-axis movement—much like a rubber band that is stretched too many times and ultimately snaps. As Weiss notes in the Chinese context, “...the management of nationalist protests may be a tactical asset in the short run but a strategic liability in the long run. Domestically, the government may find it increasingly difficult to preserve domestic stability as the cycle of nationalist mobilization repeats.”⁷⁴

There are several reasons democratic institutions have greater plasticity or flexibility. Democracies include mechanisms for peaceful and periodic transitions in power. Democratic leaders who increase their exposure risk losing an election, but authoritarian regimes tend to have more brittle power transitions where the regime itself is at risk.⁷⁵ Democratic institutions are also more plastic in the sense that they can accommodate leaders who try to challenge or alter constraints—that is, they can bend the rules without breaking them.⁷⁶ A related but separate source

⁷³ See, e.g., Fravel 2008.

⁷⁴ Weiss 2014, 6.

⁷⁵ Boix and Svobik 2013; Chiozza and Goemans 2011.

⁷⁶ On bending institutional rules, see Binder 2018; Shepsle 2017.

of flexibility is that democracies have more coalition-building options within a given set of institutions than their autocratic counterparts. As recent research has shown, autocratic leaders make significant tradeoffs to ensure their tools of autocratic control can address their central threats.⁷⁷ But having made these tradeoffs, any shift could destabilize these arrangements—autocrats cannot simply turn to alternative audiences without serious risk. In contrast, democratic leaders may have more potential coalitions available and can strategically alter domestic audience constraints—from both elite and public audiences—at lower risk.

This difference applies to both leadership turnover and to the foreign policies of incumbent leaders. With peaceful transitions and the absence of violence in politics, democratic institutions can accommodate a new leader with a different coalition; indeed Mattes, Leeds, and Matsumura find that democracies see more changes in the societal sources of leader support, and that such changes can occur even “without irregular leader transitions or large institutional changes.”⁷⁸ For incumbents, autocratic leaders may find fewer options to alter audience constraint at acceptable risk, while a democratic leader seeking to alter foreign policy could activate preference cleavages or public opinion on a particular issue, or alternatively, craft a coalition that insulates or diffuses the issue politically. Recent survey experiments illuminate how democratic leaders can navigate or activate heterogeneous public audiences.⁷⁹ Rather than engaging public opinion for its own sake as a hand-tying mechanism, several recent studies have shown that democratic leaders can take advantage of preference cleavages by activating or avoiding segments of the public, increasing their room for maneuver.⁸⁰ In the security realm, research on secrecy shows how democratic

⁷⁷ Greitens 2016; Svobik 2012.

⁷⁸ Mattes, Leeds, and Matsumura 2016, 259.

⁷⁹ Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Rathbun et al. 2016. See also Stein 2015. On trade, see Mansfield, Mutz, and Silver 2015; Guisinger 2017. On education, see Rho and Tomz 2017. Generally see Hafner-Burton et al. 2017.

⁸⁰ On war, see, e.g. Stein 2015. On trade, see Guisinger 2017. Of course, activating existing preferences contributed to President Trump’s victory (Musgrave 2019).

leaders can also avoid traditional audience costs or engage in “secret wars” to insulate themselves from hawkish publics.⁸¹ On trade policy, Guisinger shows that for decades U.S. politicians took advantage of democratic trends in trade preferences to dampen protectionism’s political impact.⁸²

Democratic leaders may also have greater flexibility to manage audience information and issue salience. Although democracies allow freer flow of information (with important structural variation, as Baum and Potter detail), they also have opportunities to take advantage of variation in how much audiences know and care about an issue. For example, Guisinger finds that citizens largely do not know how their elected representatives vote on trade and rank it relatively low in importance, undermining an important link in the accountability chain.⁸³ In India, there is wide variation in domestic issue salience, yielding what Narang and Staniland call different “accountability environments.”⁸⁴ Saunders argues that leaders strategically manage the cues that reach the public in the first place by bargaining with elite cue-givers or managing information within elite circles, effectively reducing the size of the selectorate in democracies.⁸⁵ Similarly, Milner and Tingley suggest that security policies are easier to insulate from domestic constraints than distributional, economic ones that may be more immediate to segments of the domestic audience. All these strategies can increase democratic leaders’ room for maneuver when making foreign policy. In contrast, autocratic leaders bear greater risk when they manipulate information: for example, Hollyer et al. argue that autocracies risk mass protest and thus regime instability when they disclose information. Some autocratic leaders may find it useful to manipulate this risk by

⁸¹ See, respectively, Brown and Marcum 2011; Carson 2018.

⁸² Guisinger 2017.

⁸³ Guisinger 2009.

⁸⁴ Narang and Staniland 2018.

⁸⁵ Saunders 2015. See also Kreps, Saunders, and Schultz 2018.

using the threat of mass protest to unify elites—but for our purposes, it is the difference in risk that is crucial.⁸⁶

If our conjecture democracies have greater institutional plasticity and greater flexibility to manage audience composition and information audience flexibility than autocracies is right, it is still an open question whether these features translate into an international-level democratic advantage or disadvantage on a given issue. For example, in terms of credibility, if democracies can seek alternative coalitions or untie their hands, the democratic advantage in audience constraints may be smaller or less durable than prior research suggested, even if the default level of democratic constraint is higher. The prospect of periodic leadership turnover in democracies may also have countervailing effects on some international outcomes: for example, President Trump’s attacks on free trade or security agreements, reflecting his nativist coalition, undermine US commitments. But other countries may be willing to wait for the next election and a return to a more internationalist coalition, in essence betting they can ride out the attacks.⁸⁷ Large-scale shifts in societal preferences—like the increased anti-war sentiment after the Vietnam and Iraq Wars—may also reduce democratic leaders’ potential flexibility in audience composition of democratic leaders, if their preferences diverge from those of the society.

International Pressure

We also argue that international pressure can shape the way leaders manage domestic constraints, and that most second-generation DIR and AIR arguments would benefit from more consideration of how international conditions (SIR) shape the way leaders engage with domestic

⁸⁶ Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.

⁸⁷ Indeed, Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009 find that in contrast to autocracies, democracies’ alliance commitments are not affected by changes in societal coalitions. Voeten notes that populist leaders often fail to follow through on their attacks on international courts (Voeten 2019).

audiences.⁸⁸ Of course, the notion that international factors can influence domestic politics is not new.⁸⁹ Yet recent literature, including the SIR books reviewed, suggests an important role for international factors, which we argue can shape the boundaries of agency space, leaders' incentives to take advantage of agency space, and the nature of agency costs. For simplicity, Figure 1 depicted a snapshot of domestic audience constraints without varying international pressure.

In a given issue area, one way in which international factors shape the role of regime type is by changing the boundaries of agency space. Such shifts can expand agency space, compress it to zero for some or all leaders, or moderate or enhance regime type differences. Gunitsky's book underscores that the pro-democracy bent of the post-Cold War era is only one manifestation of how international dimensions can systematically alter domestic political institutions. As he argues, backing by great powers, or even simply incentives to emulate their institutional form, makes particular domestic political forms more attractive globally.⁹⁰ His book reminds us that the recent international emphasis on democracy and democratization is just that—a recent emphasis.

In addition to shifting the boundaries of agency space, these types of international or system level trends also change incentives for leaders to take advantage of agency space. When the international environment is pro-democracy, as in the 1990s, agency space in the “exposure zone” may grow. But leaders may also have greater incentive to utilize that zone of exposure and a disincentive to move “down” if repressive strategies are penalized by international actors. Such processes can even involve non-democratic leaders superficially adopting some formal trappings

⁸⁸An exception is Grietens' consideration of how severe external threats can unify what would otherwise be a fragmented elite (2016, 31).

⁸⁹E.g., Gourevitch 1978, 822; Putnam 1988.

⁹⁰Gunitsky 2017, Ch 1. Note that to generate international pressure, great powers need not explicitly impose domestic institutions (Owen 2002).

of democracy and avoiding more overt authoritarian strategies for managing domestic audiences.⁹¹ “Pseudo-democratic” states may allow opposition party challenges, liberalize laws regarding women’s rights, permit critical reporting of the government, or tolerate increases in anti-government protest.⁹² These, we argue, can be strategic uses of agency space to gain international benefits rather than genuine reforms. Crucially, leaders who use this strategy risk unintended *x*-axis change. It is important to note that international-level effects may sometimes be countervailing: for example, the rise of China may increase the attractiveness of autocratic institutions for other states, as Gunitsky implies. But increased financial integration may lead authoritarian elites to diversify their assets and reduce their opposition to democratization, as suggested by Freeman and Quinn.⁹³

It is important to note that while great powers can deliberately exert international pressure on domestic political institutions, changes in incentives to use agency space and/or the boundaries on agency space can also follow from external trends or shocks to the system. For example, macroeconomic trends in investment and capital flows can also condition the extent to which regime type differences matter. Ballard-Rosa, Mosley, and Wellhausen find that when global capital liquidity is high, investors will tolerate the higher risks associated with authoritarian regimes, reducing the “democratic advantage” in sovereign debt.⁹⁴ Similarly, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks resulted in foreign policy changes in which the U.S. prioritized allies in the

⁹¹ E.g., Donno 2013; Hyde 2011. For a discussion of the various ways in which autocrats can be more constrained by international pressure, see Escriba-Folch and Wright 2015. In contrast, Carnegie argues that institutions like the WTO can facilitate cooperation between countries of different regime types, but potentially at the expense of leverage on other issues (Carnegie 2015). Of course, studies also document that international law and institutions can have positive effects on democratic institutions and human rights, e.g., Conrad and Ritter 2019; Keohane, Macedo, and Moravcsik 2009; Lupu 2015; Simmons 2009; von Stein 2015.

⁹² Bush 2011; Hyde 2011; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Gunitsky 2017; Marinov and Goemans 2014.

⁹³ Freeman and Quinn 2012.

⁹⁴ Ballard-Rosa, Mosley, and Wellhausen Forthcoming.

war on terror, turning a blind eye to repression that they would have condemned or penalized in the 1990s.⁹⁵

International factors also condition AIR/DIR comparisons by influencing how agency costs manifest, though this is least developed in the SIR literature. The international diffusion of specific strategies, technologies, or practices can make some domestic behaviors more internationally acceptable or desirable. More generally, as in Conrad and Ritter's *Contentious Compliance*, research on human rights and transnational activism suggests that treaties or pressure at the international level can activate domestic mechanisms that change the nature of costs leaders would pay to continue their prior policies.⁹⁶ In terms of international institutions and IPE, an interesting avenue for future research is to explore whether democracies can better absorb the costs of breaking or renegotiating international agreements. For example, as ISDS and BITs have become more politically controversial in an era of backlash against globalization, both democracies and autocracies have worked around the problem, sometimes breaking agreements but protecting investment.⁹⁷ If autocracies gained greater benefit from these agreements in the first place—as substitutes for the credibility of democratic institutions—perhaps the same international outcome carries very different costs for autocrats.⁹⁸

These three factors often work together. Consider the rise of China and a concurrent decrease in US support for democracy. Even if China does not seek to promote autocracy,⁹⁹ the rise of an authoritarian great power may provide alternative international benefits or more permissive conditions for autocrats, may increase the amount of repressive agency space, or

⁹⁵ Chaudhry 2016; Whitaker 2007; Regilme 2018; Golder and Williams 2006.

⁹⁶ Keck and Sikkink 1998; Lupu 2015; Hafner-Burton 2013; Simmons 2009; Conrad and Ritter 2019.

⁹⁷ Peinhardt and Wellhausen 2016; Voeten 2019.

⁹⁸ Arias, Hollyer, and Rosendorff 2018.

⁹⁹ Weiss 2019.

decrease the costs for utilizing agency space. Autocrats may also see fewer benefits to signing international agreements that could constrain their ability to manage domestic audiences.¹⁰⁰ China already lends to the developing world with fewer conditions than Western lenders.¹⁰¹ In parallel, the 2017 Trump-led US shift away from supporting democratic allies and towards supporting authoritarian adversaries has emboldened formerly pseudo-democratic leaders to behave more overtly authoritarian, though the lasting effects of this change are not yet clear.

Conclusion: Regime Type is Here to Stay

Our framework—and the books and related work that inspired it—lead us to conclude that regime type is still a crucial concept in IR, and that the overarching picture from second-generation scholarship has reaffirmed, rather than rejected, its importance. The pendulum that swung toward domestic politics and particularly the distinctiveness of democracies after the Cold War has not swung back as far as some suggest. Regime type provides important structural constraints and bounds on state leaders and the degree to which political elites can strategically manipulate those constraints. Such manipulation may have important payoffs in particular issue areas, but crucially, it can also backfire. The costs and risks associated with strategic manipulation of domestic audiences suggest many avenues for future research.

Beyond this research agenda, our review yields several important takeaways about the direction of research on regime type and international relations. First, while scholarship on what we call structural and strategic sources of leader-audience accountability is not new, few scholars address both. The connection between them is important because it affects how much leaders can temporarily increase or decrease accountability before triggering more lasting institutional

¹⁰⁰ For example, autocracies may sign BITs at higher rates because they have more to gain from using international agreements as substitutes for strong domestic property rights (Arias, Hollyer, and Rosendorff 2018).

¹⁰¹ Kaplan 2016.

changes, and is essential to comparing across regime type. It also influences the degree to which autocrats and democrats can move strategically against type, as when autocrats increase constraints and democrats increase insulation from domestic accountability. Even if an authoritarian state can sometimes generate democracy-like outcomes in the international arena, there is a ceiling on how constrained its leaders can be without risking instability or regime change.

Second, our focus on the strategic sources of audience constraint highlights the limits of what better measures can do for understanding how regime type affects international behavior, despite improved measurement of both democracy and autocracy.¹⁰² The potential for states to behave in ways that lead to similar outcomes, and the difficulty in measuring it, underscores that new and better measures of political institutions are not enough to assess a “democratic advantage” on a given IR dependent variable. Leader incentives to emulate features of other regime types— incentives which themselves depend on international-level factors—may bias measures and represent a thorny problem for cross-national empirical work. Additionally, state leaders may seek to confound not only direct measures of regime type, but also data on economic performance, for both domestic and international audiences.¹⁰³ As new insights from comparative authoritarianism move into IPE, this problem may be even more challenging because bias in self-reported indicators may be systematically related to regime type in ways that are difficult to document.

Third, what of the democratic advantage? Our current reading is that the tone of research on autocracies in IR is often too optimistic, while the tone of research on democracies is sometimes too gloomy. Even when autocrats decide to pay costs and reach a level of audience constraint accessible to democrats, it may not be a particularly large shift in international policy. For example, Vreeland argues that multiparty autocracies—which in our framework, have a higher default level

¹⁰² Geddes 1999; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2009; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Lindberg et al. 2014.

¹⁰³ Wallace 2016; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.

of constraint than other autocracies—join institutions like the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) precisely because it is a “relatively cheap concession,” to interest groups that have some voice in domestic politics, and given the preferences of Western powers and NGOs, might bring some international benefits.¹⁰⁴ But these autocratic CAT joiners continue to torture post-ratification.

Likewise, some recent research on how democracies fare in the international arena can seem overly pessimistic. Some pessimism is natural given that many findings point either to similar outcomes across regime type or a smaller democratic advantage. And the news is not all good for democracies. For example, Bastiaens and Rudra show that democracies are less well-equipped to deal with the “revenue shock” resulting from a loss of trade taxes under globalization.¹⁰⁵ As we discuss above, democratic distinctiveness does not always translate into democratic advantage, or even preferable foreign policy choices. But other assessments would benefit from more clarity on how the costs democratic leaders pay to take advantage of agency space manifest, and especially how democratic institutions provide leaders with flexibility to take advantage of agency space in different ways, or for democratic institutions to withstand repeated attempts to manipulate constraint.¹⁰⁶

Finally, the system-level effects on domestic institutions—including the “hegemonic shocks” highlighted by Gunitsky, which directly affect the costs and benefits of certain domestic institutions; the international pressure that incentivized states to adopt democratic forms; and the international market forces like capital abundance or scarcity that change the degree to which regime type matters—suggest that domestic politics and international politics remain

¹⁰⁴ Vreeland 2008, 66, 77. See also Simmons 2009, 77–78.

¹⁰⁵ Bastiaens and Rudra 2018.

¹⁰⁶ The original audience cost literature did address many of these issues, focusing on hand-tying rhetoric as a costly signal or follow-through on imposing audience costs. See Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001b.

inseparable.¹⁰⁷ Democracy may no longer pay quite so much as it did in the post-Cold War era of U.S. hegemony. But if this era ushers in more similarity in international behavior across regime type, we should not conclude that that similarity in domestic accountability necessarily reflects reduced salience of domestic politics. The works reviewed here remind us that regime type will remain a rich area of scholarship in IR for the foreseeable future. Overall, this essay paints a picture of democratic flexibility, with democratic leaders taking advantage of agency space more readily or with fewer risks—with foreign policy outcomes that are sometimes, though not always, beneficial.

¹⁰⁷ Hyde 2011.

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