

## Towards a theory of external democracy promotion: a proposal for theoretical classification

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# Towards a theory of external democracy promotion: A proposal for theoretical classification

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## Abstract

A few years ago, it was a common complaint that the international dimension of democratization and, in particular, the external promotion of democracy were largely neglected by scholars of comparative politics and international relations. By now, academic research has begun to catch up with the growth of foreign and development policies explicitly aiming at the international promotion and protection of democratic regimes. Yet, what is still a largely unexplored desideratum is the challenge to theoretically grasp 'democracy promotion' as an aim and strategy of democratic foreign policies – that is, to embed the empirical research on democracy promotion in theoretical perspectives on international relations. This article sets out to contribute to filling this gap by developing a classification of competing theoretical approaches. First, research on the democratic peace – the one major research program concerned with democratic foreign policy – is used to derive potential motives behind the promotion of democracy. Then, on this basis, existing theories of international relations are modified in order to locate democracy promotion within the foreign policy of democratic states. In conclusion, the article presents four sketches of potential theoretical approaches to the external promotion of democracy.

## Keywords

foreign policy, international security, peace-building, war

## Introduction

Until a few years ago, it was a common complaint that the international dimension of democratization and, in particular, the external promotion of democracy were largely neglected by scholars of comparative politics and international relations (Carothers, 2004: 2; Schraeder, 2003: 21). By now, this has changed. Academic research has begun to catch up with the growth of foreign and development policies explicitly aiming at the international promotion and protection of democratic regimes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, what is still a largely unexplored desideratum is the challenge to theoretically grasp 'democracy promotion' as an aim and strategy of democratic foreign policies – that is, to embed

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the empirical research on democracy promotion in theoretical perspectives on international relations. In general terms, Hazel Smith (2000: 1) states that 'international democratic theory, in terms of explaining and understanding the interrelationship of democracy, democratization and the international system, does not exist'. More specifically, Burnell and Calvert (2005: 436) conclude that 'closely informed analysis of what might be called the 'high politics' of international democracy promotion seems to have lagged behind', referring, *inter alia*, to 'the place of democracy promotion in the foreign-policy process of Western governments' (see also Youngs, 2006: 8–9).

To be sure, there are explicit attempts to theorize democracy promotion. These, however, largely focus on dimensions other than the actors that drive, decide on, and implement democracy-promotion policies. Studies that have dealt with democracy promotion as one among other international dimensions of democratization (see Erdmann and Kneuer, 2009; Pridham, 1991; Whitehead, 1996) almost naturally focus on 'recipient' countries – that is, on the impact of democracy-promotion policies. In theoretical terms, they draw on theories of democratic transition and consolidation in order to conceptualize the different causal mechanisms through which external forces influence the domestic politics of regime change. Those international relations scholars who have begun to systematically analyze democracy promotion also share this focus on impact and causal mechanisms. Thus, within the discipline of international relations, democracy promotion is mostly analyzed within the paradigms of 'compliance' and 'international socialization' (see Cowles et al., 2001; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Here, again, it is the mechanisms through which different democracy-promotion policies impact on domestic political change that receive theoretical interest. In this sense, a recent edited volume that compares US and European democracy-promotion strategies (Magen et al., 2009) draws on an 'analytical framework' that completely focuses on such mechanisms (the 'logics', 'targets', and 'pathways' of influence), not on a theoretical account that might predict/explain/help understand variances and commonalities in US and European strategies over time and place (Magen and McFaul, 2009: 11–16).

In general, then, it is the impact and, in particular, the mechanisms of external democracy promotion that have received causal analytical and theoretical attention (see Erdmann and Kneuer, 2009). Work on the protagonists of external democracy-promotion policies largely remains of a descriptive nature, and even when making causal claims mostly does so without an explicit theoretical framework (see Carothers, 1999; Magen et al., 2009; Schraeder, 2003; Smith, 1994; Youngs, 2004, 2006).<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions include Peceny's (1999) *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets*, a book limited to democracy promotion during US military intervention, and Robinson's (1996) *Promoting Polyarchy*, probably the most comprehensive attempt to theorize international democracy promotion.

The present article sets out to contribute to filling this gap. It takes a first step towards theorizing democracy promotion as part of democratic foreign policy by developing a classification of competing approaches to the phenomenon. The aim is to identify the place and the significance of external democracy promotion within the foreign policy of democratic states as conceived of by different international relations theories. The article, first, identifies the potential motives behind democracy promotion: Why should democratic states care for and invest in the regime type of other countries? Here, the research on the democratic peace – the one major research program specifically concerned with democratic foreign policy – is discussed. In fact, competing explanations of the democratic peace yield a complex set of arguments in favor of and against promoting democracy. On this basis, it is, second, possible to modify existing international relations theories so that they can grasp external democracy promotion. Such modifications result in competing attempts to locate external democracy promotion within the foreign policy of democratic states. In

conclusion, the article presents four sketches of theoretical approaches that offer promising starting points for developing – and testing – a comprehensive theory of external democracy promotion.

Having said this, we deliberately take a state-centric perspective. International and nongovernmental organizations are, for sure, relevant actors in the field of democracy promotion. Yet, nation-states are crucial and arguably still the most important type of actors (see Magen and McFaul, 2009: 2–4; Schraeder, 2003: 34–40). In any case, given the differences in ‘actorness’ between states, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations in international politics, the attempt to theorize democracy promotion *in general* – that is, with an inclusive view on state, multilateral, and non-state actors – seems rather unpromising.

## **Motives behind democracy promotion: Implications of research on the democratic peace**

References to ‘the democratic peace’ abound in the political rhetoric as well as in academic work on external democracy promotion (Spanger and Wolff, 2005, 2007b). This is not by chance. According to the democratic peace proposition, established democracies should have not only a normative claim to, but also a genuine strategic interest in, extending democracy around the globe: in order to promote their own benefits (security, trade and investment), in the collective interest (international peace, mutually benefiting cooperation), and in the well-understood interests of the recipient societies (Czempiel, 1996b: 120–1; Schraeder, 2003: 31). On this very general level, then, the democratic peace proposition explains why democratic states, in their foreign (and development) policies, aim at promoting democracy.

Stated in this way, we should expect that democracies *in general* and *always* promote democracy, while research (and common knowledge) tells us that this is not the case (see Schraeder, 2002; Smith, 1994; Spanger and Wolff, 2007b). Yet, a closer look at the different explanations brought forward to explain the democratic peace and their implications for external democracy promotion reveals that the picture is far less clearcut. Corresponding to the concept of the ‘antinomies’ of the democratic peace (see Müller, 2004; Geis et al., 2006), the proposed causal mechanisms behind the democratic peace offer good reasons *in favor of as well as against* promoting democracy. In this way, democratic peace research can be used to derive potential motives behind democracy promotion.

### ***Utilitarian explanations***<sup>4</sup>

Following up on Immanuel Kant’s argument in his *Perpetual Peace*, utilitarian explanations of the democratic peace trace the peace-proneness of democracies back to the individual citizen. The rational citizen is generally interested in peace because war endangers his or her life and welfare. If the political system allows for the translation of this preference into foreign policy, the respective state will refrain from any offensive use of force (Czempiel, 1996a: 80) or, at least, will prove less prone to violence and war than other political regimes (Rummel, 1983: 28). Consequently, the presence, behavior, and threat of non-democratic states constitute the main causes of war. Hence, efforts to globalize the democratic regime type represent an efficient and sustainable strategy to enhance international peace and security.<sup>5</sup> Given the extensive financial resources spent on armament and war, ‘investments’ in democracy promotion promise important net benefits. Further empirical observations made in the framework of democratic peace research that point to an exceptional democratic disposition to broaden international political and economic cooperation

(Mansfield et al., 2002; Russett and Oneal, 2001) further reinforce the direct benefit promised by a democratization of one's own environment (Ikenberry, 1999).

A closer look at the cost–benefit analyses that one could expect from democratic governments reveals, however, that there are also important reasons to refrain from engaging in democracy promotion (see Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, 2006: 631–2). The fundamental problem is that promoting democracy implies promoting democratization – that is, a complex and conflict-ridden process of political change. This results *first* in a time-consistency problem: democratization – and, thus, democracy promotion – is a middle- to long-term endeavor, and (potential) rewards do not come quickly, while costs are immediate. In a rationalist framework, however, a democratic government does only aim at being re-elected (Ray, 2003; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999), and in his or her electoral decision the utilitarian citizen weighs tangible costs and benefits. To invest in the long-term project of democracy promotion becomes even less rational when, *second*, rewards are not only delayed but highly insecure. Yet, research on democratization tells us that democratization processes can have diverse outcomes, and a stable liberal democracy is only one, and perhaps a rather unlikely, result (Carothers, 2002; Schmitter, 1995). *Third*, potential rewards from successful democratization have to be weighed against the potential costs that evolve from the risks inherent in democratization. Even if democracy should in fact have all the benefits mentioned above and reliably contribute to peace and security, cooperation and welfare, this instrumental value of democracy is heavily disputed for countries undergoing a process of regime change or remaining 'stuck' in a gray zone between autocratic and democratic rule (see Goldsmith, 2008; Spanger and Wolff, 2007a). As regards intra- and interstate peace, research has even pointed to a possible conflict-enhancing effect of democratization (see Snyder, 2000; Mansfield and Snyder, 2005).

*Fourth*, a utilitarian approach to democracy promotion requires the external actor to have the capacity to achieve, with appropriate efforts, tangible results – tangible results that can be 'sold' to the domestic audience in the respective democracy-promoting country. Yet, given democratization's character as a largely internally driven process of political change, 'the net impact of external [democracy promotion and protection] upon democratization is likely to be only marginal in determining the outcome – and, hence, singularly difficult to measure and predict' (Schmitter and Brouwer, 1999: 11; see also Goldsmith, 2008: 136–44). The necessity to achieve tangible results refers, *fifth*, to the importance of relative power (Monten, 2005: 118). Having significant influence on political change from the outside with appropriate efforts depends on drastic asymmetries in relative power capabilities between 'donor' and 'recipient' countries. *Sixth*, every national decision to engage (or not) in democracy promotion encounters the well-known free-rider problem: The successful democratization of a given country is a global public good any country can benefit from (by cooperating politically and economically, by not being threatened anymore). Democracy promotion then requires either selective incentives (side payments) or close international coordination (burden-sharing) that largely inhibits free riding.

In the end, the instrumental value of democracy suggested by democratic peace research implies that a democratic state prefers for any given international 'partner', other things being equal, a democratic instead of a non- or semi-democratic regime. This, however, does not mean that utilitarian cost–benefit analyses by individual citizens or democratic governments lead to an unambiguous and invariant preference for external democracy promotion. On the contrary, democracy promotion is rational only under very specific conditions: good and relatively short-term prospects of success, low risks, high asymmetries in relative power, and selective incentives or close international coordination. If these conditions are met, democracy promoters will choose any appropriate tool – from foreign aid to military intervention – that promises a net profit.<sup>6</sup>

## Normative explanations

The 'cultural' or normative approach to the democratic peace maintains that democratically socialized citizens and leaders are accustomed to solving their conflicts in peaceful and consensus-oriented ways (Maoz and Russett, 1993; Russett and Oneal, 2001: 53–6). In democratic societies, a '*democratic norm of bounded competition*' (Dixon and Senese, 2002: 548) prevails that emphasizes mediation, negotiation and compromise. Democratic states externalize these 'liberal norms of non-violent and compromise-oriented resolution of conflict' (Risse-Kappen, 1995: 501). To be successful, the externalization of liberal-democratic norms depends on counterparts that are equally prone to cooperative behavior and peaceful conflict resolution. Hence, the more democratic the (potential) interaction partners, the better democracies can live out their democratic 'nature' by constructing international relations that are built on cooperation and mutual trust, overcome the security dilemma, and enable the maximization of economic welfare through far-reaching interdependence (Risse-Kappen, 1995: 503–6; see also Doyle, 1983: 230).

The normative explanation, on the one hand, simply reinforces the utilitarian argument in favor of democracy promotion: Obviously, established democracies should be interested in enlarging the community of democratic states. On the other hand, democracy promotion is about spreading universally conceived values. Democracy promotion is then embedded in the democratic culture as the morally right thing to do, a liberal mission (Sørensen, 2006: 259; see also Smith, 1994). In addition, this implies that democratic governments and societies have a 'natural' normative affinity to democratic (opposition) forces and movements in other countries – a moral impetus that suggests supporting them against oppressive governments.

Again, such an inference of a clearcut orientation in favor of promoting democracy can be contrasted by two arguments that equally draw on liberal-democratic norms but render the external interference in processes of political change intrinsically problematic. The fundamental problem here is that the promotion of democracy, even if it avoids any use of force, is by definition an open intervention in the political regime of another state.<sup>7</sup> This clashes, *first*, with the norm of self-determination, a basic principle in democratic thinking. The respect for self-determination and every society's right to an autonomous process of political evolution suggests a policy of restraint and non-intervention (see Doyle, 2009: 352–4; Rawls, 1999: 62; Sørensen, 2006: 258–9). Any active engagement in the internal political affairs of other states – which can never be neutral – violates, then, a fundamental liberal-democratic norm. Accordingly, in the US tradition of 'exemplarism', the aim was to spread the (US) model of democracy around the world, not by using an activist foreign policy, but through the force of its example (Monten, 2005: 113).

*Second*, a comprehensive strategy of promoting democracy does not fit neatly into the general international attitude attributed to democracy by normative approaches to the democratic peace. In a world that is not only made up of democracies, a democratic foreign policy that aims at establishing mutual trust and maintaining international peace has to build international relations of cooperation and partnership also with all those states whose representatives are not or not sufficiently (from one's own perspective) democratically legitimized (Czempiel, 1996a: 97–8). A strategy that aims at disempowering the counterpart, supports oppositional groups against the 'partner' government, and/or makes cooperation conditional on self-defined political standards systematically produces conflict and mutual distrust. Democracy promotion, then, reinforces processes of international exclusion and in-group/out-group dynamics that, instead of contributing to peace and collective welfare, increase the risk of war (see Hermann and Kegley, 1995; Kahl, 1999).<sup>8</sup>

In the end, although democratic norms – or the culture or identity of liberal-democratic states – may suggest the aim of global democratization, an activist policy of promoting democracy seems



appropriate in two cases only. When, first, a 'partner' government (which is already more or less democratically elected) shares the aim of 'deepening' or 'consolidating' democracy, the normative contradictions mentioned simply dissolve. When, second, the dominant interpretation of liberal norms prevailing in a specific democratic country follows an activist reading of liberalism, the normative dilemmas are dealt with in a way that clearly favors democracy promotion. If, on the contrary, a democracy's foreign policy is shaped by strong norms of restraint, non-intervention, and/or exemplarism, the country will refrain from actively promoting democracy.<sup>9</sup> As regards the tools used for promoting democracy, the more the spreading of democracy is seen as a legitimate liberal mission, the more interventionist and coercive instruments seem appropriate – and vice versa (see Schraeder, 2003, 26–7).

### **Including democracy promotion in international relations theories: Competing approaches**

As seen, the attempt to draw implications from democratic peace research for the foreign policy of democratic states yields a complex set of arguments in favor of and against promoting democracy. On the basis of these potential motives for democracy promotion, it is now possible to modify existing theories of international relations so that they can grasp external democracy promotion. Utilitarian democratic peace arguments can be included in rationalist perspectives on international relations – yielding a conception of democracy promotion as an instrument in support of either security/power interests (modified realism) or economic benefits (commercial liberalism). Normative explanations of the democratic peace, on the other hand, fit well within reflective perspectives that emphasize the importance of either the domestic cultural setting (actor-centered constructivism) or the international normative order (sociological institutionalism).<sup>10</sup>

These four, either rationalist or reflective, approaches leave out, in particular, two important international relations theories:<sup>11</sup> a basic liberal perspective that emphasizes the variable distribution of domestic preferences in a given society without assuming that it is always certain domestic interests that prevail (republican liberalism), and a neo-Marxist or globalist approach that is most prominently represented by neo-Gramscian international political economy. These two theories are treated as hybrid approaches, as they are either indeterminate as to the distinction between rationalist and reflective approaches (republican liberalism) or combine both perspectives (neo-Gramscian international political economy).

#### ***Rationalist approaches: Democracy promotion as an instrument***

When attempting to construct a (neo)realist approach to democracy promotion, it is most promising to draw on the variant of realism that Gideon Rose (1998) has termed 'neoclassical' (see also Wohlforth, 2008: 35–6). Neoclassical realism maintains that systemic pressures and, specifically, 'relative material power capabilities' are the main factors that shape foreign policy, but admits that this impact 'is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level' (Rose, 1998: 146). This paves the way for an 'emphasis on perceptions and ideas' (Harnisch, 2003: 323): As it is 'actual political leaders and elites' that make foreign policy choices, it is 'their perceptions' that matter (Rose, 1998: 147). Such a realist approach is potentially open to accept the democratic peace proposition: 'Inasmuch as the spread of liberal democracy creates shared values, common interests, and, most important, greater transparency of state motivations, it should lower threat perceptions and increase cooperation among states'

(Schweller, 2000: 43). If decisionmakers buy into this argument and, thus, accept the empirical finding of the democratic peace, democracy promotion becomes an important tool even from the perspective of narrow security-oriented national interests.<sup>12</sup> From such a 'security-based approach' (Peceny, 1999: 3), promoting democracy can be seen as a major national interest (see also Youngs, 2004: 7–14; Smith, 1994). Yet, the fact that the positive impact on national security is long-term only implies that in particular situations where the goal of democracy promotion clashes with directly tangible security interests, the latter prevail (Carothers, 1999: 16; Smith, 1994). If democracy promotion is conceived of as an instrument, such 'opportunistic' behavior is perfectly in line with a modified realist perspective on democracy promotion (Schweller, 2000). Democracy is promoted as long as it is seen, by decisionmakers, as improving a country's geostrategic situation in the long term, without having immediate negative effects on national security and the relative power position. Such cost–benefit calculations depend on the particular democracy-promoting 'donor' country, as well as on the individual 'recipient' country, and vary over time.

Commercial liberalism parallels this realist argument but replaces security with economic interests (see Moravcsik, 1997: 528–30; Doyle, 2008: 60–1).<sup>13</sup> Such economically conceived state interests can be understood either in terms of maximizing 'aggregate welfare gains' or as resulting from domestic distributional conflict – that is, in terms of the 'economic benefits for powerful private actors' (Moravcsik, 1997: 528–9). In this general sense, traditional (materialist) Marxist approaches and mainstream (rationalist) international political economy can be subsumed under such a commercial liberalism.<sup>14</sup> In any case, it is economic cost–benefit calculations that determine foreign policy. Given the benefits in terms of economic cooperation and interdependence that democratic peace research suggests (see 'Utilitarian Explanations', above), promoting democracy may well be conceived of as an important part of a general strategy to maximize (national and/or particular) commercial benefits (Ikenberry, 1999). Again, however, democracy promotion is only one possible instrument in the toolbox of democratic foreign policies. Its relevance for concrete foreign policy decisions, thus, depends on case-specific cost–benefit calculations.

### *Reflective approaches: Democracy promotion as a norm*

In a very general sense, reflective approaches to international relations abandon rationalist assumptions in that they assume that 'actors and structures in international politics cannot be properly understood independent from social context and that, consequently, aims and corresponding preferences are socially constructed' (Harnisch, 2003: 329). Given the variety of constructivist, post-positivist, and post-structuralist approaches to international relations, there are multiple reflective perspectives on foreign policy as well (see Checkel, 2008; Harnisch, 2003: 329–40). Yet, given our interest in democracy promotion, we deliberately focus on democratic norms and their impact on, or relevance for, democratic foreign policy. Although empirically both dimensions operate simultaneously and mutually shape each other, for the sake of conceptual clarity it makes sense to analytically distinguish between the roles of *national* and *international* norms (Boekle et al., 1999: 9–13). The former has its place in actor-centered constructivism, the latter in sociological institutionalism.<sup>15</sup>

An important argument in normative explanations of the democratic peace is that democracies tend to externalize their norms of domestic behavior (see 'Normative Explanations', above). Democratic foreign policies are, thus, seen as shaped by the intrastate normative setting. This perfectly fits an actor-centered constructivism that emphasizes national self-images, roles and identities, and foreign policy cultures (Harnisch, 2003: 340). Here, the embeddedness in a particular



sociocultural context is crucial for the emergence, articulation, and change of national preferences; for the perception and interpretation of the world outside; and for the translation of such preferences and perceptions into foreign policy decisions. Such context has been conceptualized in terms of ‘national role conceptions’ (Holsti, 1970), national identities (Jepperson et al., 1996), or, more general, political culture (Duffield, 1999). Foreign policy cultures, for example, encompass the universe of ideas that guide a society’s cognition and agency as related to foreign behavior: ‘They are reflected in enduring practices or *policy styles* which are consolidated in the country’s foreign-policy institutions’ (Harnisch, 2003: 331–2). The foreign policy culture or role conception of a given state combines the self-image of the respective society (identity) and the external expectations of other actors (see Holsti, 1970: 243, 246; Kirste and Maull, 1996: 289).

Within the framework of actor-centered constructivism, external democracy promotion can be seen as a moral mission embedded in the foreign policy culture of a (particular) democratic state that is based on a universalist understanding of liberal-democratic norms (Spanger and Wolff, 2007b). In this sense, Peceny points to the well-known argument ‘that America’s liberalism fundamentally shapes its efforts to promote democracy abroad’: ‘In this approach, U.S. policymakers adopt pro-liberalization policies because they are compelled to do so by a universally shared cultural bias in favor of democracy’ (Peceny, 1999: 3). Examples include the notion of ‘America’s Mission’ (Smith, 1994) or the reference to the US tradition of ‘vindicationism’ (Monten, 2005).<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding such empirical specifications, political culture here determines whether (and to what extent) a country promotes democracy. In addition, it defines the specific model of democracy that is to be promulgated, as well as the appropriate aims and means of democracy promotion. As a consequence, variance in democracy-promotion policies is to be expected between countries, as these are characterized by different cultures, identities, or roles – but across time and different ‘recipient countries’ a given ‘donor’ country should exhibit significant common features according to the place and form of democracy promotion within the respective political culture. As a shorthand, democracy promotion here can be conceived of as a domestic norm – or, more precisely, a collection of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891). In any case, as the democratic-norm complex is seen as embedded in a national society’s culture, it not only has causal effect on democracy-promotion policies in the sense of regulative norms – that is, norms that ‘order and constrain behavior’; it also operates as a constitutive norm because it is part and parcel of the self-conception (and thus the constitution) of the collective actor itself (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891; see Wendt, 1999: 165).

While actor-centered constructivism focuses on the domestic sociocultural context of foreign policy, an analogous argument can be made with a view to the impact of ‘international cultural environments’ on foreign policy (Jepperson et al., 1996: 34). Following Katzenstein (1996), this approach can be called sociological institutionalism. Following the English School’s notion of an international ‘society’, ‘in which states, as a condition of their participation in the system adhere to shared norms and rules’, the international environment is seen as composed not only of formal institutions and regimes: there is also a ‘world political culture’ that ‘includes elements like rules of sovereignty and international law, norms for the proper enactment of sovereign statehood, standardized social and political technologies ... and a transnational political discourse’ (Jepperson et al., 1996: 45, 34). International norms, in this sense, define collectively shared expectations of appropriate behavior – following the constructivist notion of a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen, 1998). In the case of drastic violations of primary international norms, the risk of ‘being classified as acting outside the bounds of ‘civilized’ international society’ (Price and Tannenwald, 1996: 145) can constitute a barrier against ‘inappropriate’ behavior that operates quite reliably. However, in general, the connection between such international norms and foreign policy ‘is one in

which norms create permissive [and constraining] conditions for action but do not determine action' (Finnemore, 1996: 158; see also Price and Tannenwald, 1996: 145; Kowert and Legro, 1996: 463).

The consequence for democracy promotion is evident. Jepperson et al. (1996: 47–8) themselves highlighted the 'spread of democratic ideologies and market models' as 'obvious examples, along with the underlying consolidation of regional and even global ideologies of citizenship and human rights'. Assuming, in line with McFaul (2005), that not only democracy and (political) human rights but also their external promotion has become an international norm, this would imply inter- and transnational expectations regarding which states would have to legitimate their external behavior as appropriate – that is, as contributing to, or at least not contradicting, the aim of promoting and protecting democracy around the world (or in a given region). Democracy promotion, then, can be conceived of as a regulative norm established on the international level. From this perspective, variance in democracy-promotion policies follows, first, from the fact that international norms do not determine, but only enable and constrain, foreign policy. In addition, even if democracy and democracy promotion are generally established as regional or global norms, the precise meaning of democracy is always contested and the question what, in a given situation, might promote, protect, hinder, or undermine democracy is at times difficult to answer. Thus, ample margins remain for the usual 'national interests' and particular national values and norms to shape foreign policy decisions. Second, the level of institutionalization of democratic international norms varies across regions and international organizations, leaving different states (and different pairs of states) with different (common) international environments (see Hawkins, 2008: 392–4). However, within one and the same international environment, we should expect basic similarities in democracy-promotion policies across different 'donor' and 'recipient' countries.

### *Hybrid approaches to democracy promotion*

The variant of liberal theory Moravcsik terms 'republican' liberalism relates most directly to democratic peace research. Key variables of republican liberalism include, on the one hand, the distribution of 'social preferences' and, on the other, 'the mode of domestic political representation' that determines which preferences 'are institutionally privileged' (Moravcsik, 1997: 530). The foreign policy of democratic states, then, is shaped by three factors: the distribution of social preferences in a given society; the capacity of social groups to articulate these preferences; and the specific shape of political institutions that influence different groups' success in securing political representation. This said, the substance of democratic foreign policies remains fundamentally indeterminate, because the 'precise policy of governments depends on which domestic groups are represented' (Moravcsik, 1997: 530). The relevance of democracy promotion for a given state, then, depends on the question to what extent strong NGOs, interest groups and/or public opinion call (or not) for a democratic orientation of foreign and development policies. Obviously, it is impossible to draw general conclusions for democracy promotion. If public opinion and/or influential social groups see the expansion of democracy – in general or in a specific country – as an important (normative) goal the respective state should pursue, then democracy promotion ends up being an important goal. If people are led by the conviction that promoting democracy enhances peace and/or welfare, democracy will be promoted as an instrument. And, if people do not care about the political situation in other countries, or think that democracy is a political regime that can only grow from within, there will be no effort at promoting democracy at all. This said, as long as we do not define individuals and social groups as behaving according either to an entirely rationalist or to a reflectivist logic, republican liberalism is indeterminate also with regard to this basic distinction.

Neo-Gramscian international political economy (Cox, 1996), if modified along the lines proposed by William Robinson (1996), offers a second hybrid approach to democracy promotion (see Cavell, 2002; Geis and Wolff, 2007). According to Robinson (1996: 4), US democracy promotion 'can only be understood as part of a broader process of the exercise of hegemony within and between countries in the context of transnationalization'. Promoting what Robinson calls 'polyarchy' or 'low-intensity democracy' aims 'not only at mitigating the social and political tensions produced by elite-based and undemocratic status quos, but also at suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratization of social life in the twenty-first-century international order' (Robinson, 1996: 6). The underlying observation guiding policymakers (and the transnational elite driving them) reads: Under conditions of a globalizing economy, a 'rearrangement of political systems in the peripheral and semi-peripheral zones of the "world system"' is required that includes limited democratic reforms 'so as to secure the underlying objective of maintaining essentially undemocratic societies inserted into an unjust international system' (Robinson, 1996: 6). Following the Gramscian concept of hegemony as 'consensual domination', the promotion of 'low-intensity democracy', in terms of ideology, makes use of the 'universal aspiration' to and the 'mass appeal' of democracy (Robinson, 1996: 16). In terms of political inclusion, it makes use of democracy's 'mechanisms for intra-elite compromise and accommodation and for hegemonic incorporation of popular majorities' (Robinson, 2000: 312).

That said, democracy-promotion policies follow 'the view that "democracy" is the most effective means of assuring stability, the former seen as but a mechanism for the latter' (Robinson, 1996: 66). Yet, such a simple instrumentalist perspective (in line with the rationalist approaches discussed above) does not capture the neo-Gramscian modification of materialist international political economy. In order for it to be effective as an instrument of hegemonic (i.e. consensual) domination, the people in the 'recipient' countries have to believe in polyarchy-as-democracy, while at the international level democracy promotion needs at least a certain amount of credibility in order to work. Neither requirement is compatible, theoretically, with a purely rationalist perspective or, empirically, with a merely opportunistic treatment of democracy promotion as an instrument that can be dropped any time it contradicts 'real' interests (see Geis and Wolff, 2007; Guilhot, 2005). Democracy-promotion policies need to appear to be serious, at least to some extent – otherwise the ideological capacity to filter out 'as illegitimate demands that actually call into question the social order itself' (Robinson, 1996: 30) will be lost. This reflective dimension of neo-Gramscian thought implies that democracy and democracy promotion have to have some relevance as regulative norms.

### *Locating external democracy promotion in democratic foreign policies*

The result of this attempt to modify theories of international relations so that they can grasp democracy promotion is summarized in Table I. In general, we identify seven different ways in which the external promotion of democracy can be located within the framework of democratic foreign policies. Yet, as will be argued below, only four approaches offer promising starting points for developing a comprehensive theory of democracy promotion.

From a purely materialist perspective, democracy promotion, as it appears in contemporary foreign and development policy discourse, has merely a rhetorical character without any importance for 'real' foreign policy (Type 1): Although we might wonder why political actors speak about something they all know has no significance at all, talk is seen as cheap here, and no theoretical approach to democracy promotion is needed if we are to understand foreign policy and international relations. Therefore, such a purely materialist perspective (as, for example, in structural

**Table I.** Locating external democracy promotion (EDP) in democratic foreign policies

| No. | Type              | Role/Relevance of EDP   | Theoretical Approach  |
|-----|-------------------|---|---|
| 1   | Rhetoric          | EDP is employed rhetorically only, without implications for foreign policy.   | (No theoretical approach needed)  |
| 2   | Instrument        | EDP is one instrument among others that is applied to the extent that it contributes to the 'real' aims that guide foreign policy.                    | Materialist theory of democracy promotion (theoretical background: modified neoclassical realism; economic liberalism; utilitarian democratic peace approaches) |
| 3   | Secondary aim     | EDP constitutes an aim that guides foreign policy, but loses significance when competing with other (primary) aims.                                   | (Combination of theoretical approaches)   |
| 4   | Primary aim       | EDP constitutes an aim that guides foreign policy, on a par with other foreign policy preferences.  | (Combination of theoretical approaches)   |
| 5   | Regulative norm   | EDP defines the range of appropriate behavior – that is, foreign policy has to be framed as contributing to (at least, not contradicting) EDP.        | Normative theory of democracy promotion (theoretical background: sociological institutionalism; normative democratic peace approaches)                          |
| 6   | Constitutive norm | EDP constitutes part and parcel of the foreign policy identity, culture, or role model that shapes the very definition of preferences and strategies. | Cultural theory of democracy promotion (theoretical background: actor-centered constructivism; normative democratic peace approaches)                           |
| 7   | Hegemonic project | EDP constitutes part and parcel of a global hegemonic project that uses EDP instrumentally, but rests upon its normative credibility.                 | Critical theory of democracy promotion (theoretical background: neo-Gramscian international political economy)  |

versions of realism or Marxism) was not discussed in this article and needs no further refinement as far as the analysis of democracy promotion is concerned. It represents the null hypothesis according to which the whole endeavor proposed in this article is a futile exercise.

A neoclassical realism that takes the democratic peace proposition into account conceptualizes democracy promotion as an instrument (Type 2) – just like an equally modified commercial liberalism and, correspondingly, utilitarian approaches to the democratic peace. Here, democracy promotion is conceived of as one instrument among others that is applied to the extent that it contributes to the 'real' aims (the famous 'national interests') that guide foreign policy (see Burnell, 2000b: 46). In other words, democracy is promoted or not according to opportunistic cost–benefit calculations, as outlined earlier in the section entitled 'Utilitarian Explanations'. This would be the starting point for a materialist theory of democracy promotion.

Type 3 treats democracy promotion as a secondary aim that guides foreign policy, but that loses significance when competing with other (primary) aims. This corresponds to what Carothers (1999: 16) has called the 'semi-realist approach to democracy promotion', as well as to Schraeder's

distinction between the ‘normative goal of democracy’ and the ‘central foreign policy interests’ that ultimately dominate normative considerations (Schraeder, 2003: 41, 33; see endnote 3). One step further, democracy promotion may be even seen as a primary aim, on a par with other foreign political interests (Type 4). This is perhaps what McFaul (2005: 158) has in mind when he subsumes ‘democracy promotion’ under ‘strategic objectives’. Both conceptions of democracy promotion as primary or secondary aims are, however, difficult to conceptualize in theoretical terms. Promoting democracy might become strategic (in McFaul’s sense) or an important yet secondary goal (as with Carothers and Schraeder) when it is seen by foreign policymakers as an instrument that more or less heavily and regularly contributes to important (strategic) aims – but then we end up with Type 2. Alternatively, democracy may in fact be promoted with a view to its intrinsic value when either the domestic audience policymakers respond to or policymakers themselves believe in democracy – in both cases, however, democracy promotion operates as a regulative norm (Type 5).<sup>17</sup> When Carothers or Schraeder call democracy promotion an important yet secondary goal, they usually subsume both Type 2 and Type 5 under one heading: Democratic governments promote democracy both because they believe in its instrumental value and, at the same time, because they hold it normatively appropriate to do (or at least say) so. This is a plausible interpretation of the empirical evidence, but for the sake of conceptual clarity it is probably better to first analytically differentiate both roles of democracy promotion.<sup>18</sup> Hence, Types 3 and 4 can either be subsumed under Types 2 or 5, or they represent different combinations of the instrumental and normative perspectives. In both cases, they are not self-contained theoretical approaches.

Democracy promotion as a regulative norm (Type 5) directly follows from normative explanations of the democratic peace and sociological institutionalism. Here, democracy and democracy promotion as national (democratic peace) or international (sociological institutionalism) norms regulate foreign policy in the sense that they constitute parts of the normative setting that defines appropriate behavior (and its limits): Foreign policymakers either intrinsically promote democracy as the appropriate thing to do or have to take and frame their decisions as contributing to (or, at least, not contradicting) the aim of democracy promotion. In both cases, it is norms that shape democracy-promotion policies – the sketch of a normative theory of democracy promotion.

Type 6, democracy promotion as a constitutive norm, represents a special case of actor-centered constructivism<sup>19</sup> where international democracy promotion becomes part and parcel of the collective identity, the political culture, or the role model of a particular democratic state. In general, democracy promotion here also operates as a regulative norm (as policies are taken, or at least framed, as appropriate according to the aim of promoting democracy), but its importance goes further in shaping the very definition of preferences and strategies. In any case, according to such a cultural theory of democracy promotion, democratic foreign policies have to be analyzed as resulting from country-specific cultural dispositions.

The neo-Gramesian approach, as seen, starts with an instrumental approach (Type 2), but in the end democracy and democracy promotion, here, have to be seen as a regulative norm as well (Type 5). The adaptation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony to international relations provides such a critical theory of democracy promotion with a distinct hybrid and yet theoretically coherent shape.

## Conclusion

How can democracy promotion be theorized as part of democratic foreign policy? The present article has, first, identified potential motives behind democracy promotion by drawing on the research program of the democratic peace. Through the incorporation of insights from the

democratic peace into major international relations theories, the latter could, then, be modified in order to develop competing approaches to democracy promotion. The result is four such approaches that can serve as starting points for developing – and testing – a comprehensive theory of external democracy promotion.

A *materialist theory of democracy promotion* can draw on rationalist approaches, modified by results reported by democratic peace research. Promoting democracy is seen as one instrument among others; it will be applied if and only if it is assumed to serve ‘real’ – that is, material – national interests. A *normative theory of democracy promotion* rests upon normative explanations of the democratic peace and sociological institutionalism and conceives of democracy promotion as a national or international norm that regulates foreign policy. Democratic states promote democracy to the extent that they follow a corresponding logic of appropriateness established by the respective norm. A *cultural theory of democracy promotion* corresponds to the perspective of actor-centered constructivism. Democracy is promoted to the extent that active democracy promotion as a constitutive norm is a part of the collective identity or political culture of the respective country. A *critical theory of democracy promotion*, based on neo-Gramscian reasoning, treats the promotion of democracy as part of a hegemonic project wherein democracy promotion is an important instrument – but an instrument that requires democracy’s (and democracy promotion’s) normative significance in order to be effective.

A major debate in democracy-promotion research concerns different strategies and instruments (see Magen and McFaul, 2009: 11–16; Schraeder, 2003: 26–7). The four approaches, here, yield different expectations as to the choice of tools. According to the *materialist* perspective, it is cost–benefit calculations that determine whether diplomatic means, foreign aid, economic sanctions, military intervention, or a combination of different instruments is chosen (see Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, 2006). In the framework of the *normative* theory, it is the extent to which democracy is established as a universal norm or right that determines which degree of coerciveness in democracy promotion and, hence, which tools are deemed appropriate (see Fox and Roth, 2000). The *cultural* theory, for its part, traces the choice of tools back to the political culture of a given country: The more democracy promotion is seen as part of a liberal mission, the more coercive instruments will be applied; the more democracy is seen as something that has to grow from within society, the more low-key tools (if any) are preferred (see Spanger and Wolff, 2007b: 275–80). From the *critical* perspective, cost–benefit calculations – as in the materialist version – are modified by the need to uphold the ideational hegemony of low-intensity democracy as consensual domination. Hence we should expect a preference for non-coercive tools aiming at cooperation with local elites and cooptation of subaltern groups; coercive means are generally not chosen to promote democracy – military interventions that may be justified in terms of democracy promotion will always be driven by the dominant interest to uphold the capitalist social/world order (see Robinson, 2000).

Obviously, each one of these theoretical sketches requires much more refinement in terms of theoretical foundation, conceptual clarity, and empirical propositions. This should include incorporating systematic propositions regarding the interaction with (different types of) ‘recipient’ countries.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, although the four approaches cut across the range of existing international relations theories, we would not dare to assume that there could not be plausible alternative perspectives to be constructed.<sup>21</sup> In any case, a theoretical classification – like the one proposed in this article – is a starting point only. Theories of external democracy promotion are only useful to the extent that they help us understand and/or explain the actual practices in the respective political field. In general terms, the systematization proposed might pave the way for theoretically guided



comparative case studies on the politics of international democracy promotion. This obviously can include theory-testing via quantitative large-*N*, qualitative small-*n*, or middle-range (e.g. Qualitative Comparative Analysis) studies. However, the rather low level of theory development suggests that heuristic case studies – to ‘inductively identify new variables, hypotheses, causal mechanisms, and causal paths’ – or plausibility probes – as ‘preliminary studies on relatively untested theories and hypotheses’ – could be more appropriate (George and Bennett, 2005: 75). Certainly, while the present article contributes to filling the theoretical gap outlined at the outset, it offers no more than a first step.

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## Notes

1. Besides early (and continuously growing) work on US democracy promotion (see Carothers, 1999; Cavell, 2002; Cox et al., 2000; Peceny, 1999; Robinson, 1996; Smith, 1994) and the role of external factors and actors in the democratization processes in Southern Europe and Latin America (see Lowenthal, 1991; Pridham, 1991; Farer, 1996; Whitehead, 1996), there are now case studies on a whole range of ‘donors’ and ‘recipient countries’ (see Hawkins, 2008; Legler et al., 2007; Newman and Rich, 2004; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006; Youngs, 2004), quantitative large-*N* studies especially on the impact of democracy-promotion policies (see Finkel et al., 2007; Knack, 2004; Scott and Steele, 2005), edited volumes with a comparative focus on different ‘donor’ and ‘recipient countries’ (see Burnell, 2000a; Erdmann and Kneuer, 2009; Hanisch, 1996; Jünemann and Knodt, 2007; Magen et al., 2009; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Schraeder, 2002; Teixeira, 2008; Youngs, 2006), analyses of the ideas, ideologies, and ideologues behind democracy promotion (see Guilhot, 2005; Smith, 2007), and innumerable policy-oriented papers.
2. This continues earlier work on the socialization of human rights norms (Risse et al., 1999).
3. In this sense, Carothers’ ‘semi-realist approach to democracy promotion’ does not refer to a theoretical approach, but describes the empirically observed approach to democracy promotion that characterizes US foreign policy. The latter is called ‘semi-realist’ because democracy promotion ‘remains at most one of several main U.S. interests, sometimes compatible with and sometimes contrary to economic or security interests. When contrary, it is usually overridden’ (Carothers, 1999: 16). In synthesizing the results of a comparative research project, Schraeder concludes that different democracy-promoting countries are guided by different ‘central foreign policy interests’; when ‘the normative goal of democracy’ clashes with these other foreign policy interests, it is ‘typically compromised’ (Schraeder, 2003: 33, 41). Yet, there is no attempt either to theorize this (perhaps secondary) role of democracy promotion or to offer a theoretical account that encompasses both the variable ‘foreign policy interests’ and the ‘normative goal’ (as well as the articulation between interests and norms). In a similar vein, Magen and McFaul (2009: 20–4) set out to explain similarities and differences in ‘American’ and ‘European’ democracy-promotion policies by referring, largely *ad hoc*, to three main factors: the ‘historical contexts and main formative experiences’, ‘the fundamentally different types of polities’, and the ‘type and degree of power’.
4. In this article, we are not interested in the different explanatory approaches of the democratic peace as such. Thus, we will differentiate neither between the different explanations that ultimately argue within a rationalist framework nor between those within the ‘normative camp’. The former include not only the explanation that focuses on the ‘traditional’ utilitarian argument drawn from Kant, but also institutionalist approaches such as that proposed by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999). The latter include, first, monadic

explanations that emphasize the peaceful ‘culture’ that characterizes democracy as such and, second, dyadic arguments that reject the claim that democracies are generally peaceful but attribute the inter-democratic peace to specific interaction dynamics in democratic pairs of states (see Risse-Kappen, 1995; Müller and Wolff, 2006).

5. The same holds for the rational-choice explanation of the separate democratic peace: If it is democratic leaders only who ‘prefer to negotiate when they do not anticipate military success’ (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999: 799) – because, given their interest in re-election, they cannot risk defeat – it would be in the best interest of the world’s democracies to democratize all of the various non-democratic regimes that may, at any time, prematurely and irrationally rush into war.
6. For example, Schraeder (2003: 26) distinguishes – ‘in order from the least to most coercive’ – the following ‘interventionist tools’: classical diplomacy, foreign aid, political conditionalities, economic sanctions, covert intervention, paramilitary intervention, and military intervention.
7. To be sure, the different tools in democracy promotion differ dramatically in their degree of coerciveness (see footnote 6, above). Yet, even pure democracy assistance – that is, foreign aid oriented at promoting democracy – constitutes a non-neutral measure that deliberately tries to shape the domestic political development of another country.
8. The result is what Beate Jahn (2005: 202–4) has called a ‘specifically liberal security dilemma’: On the one hand, liberal democracies see their external environment as ‘populated by non-liberal and aggressive states’, while, on the other, non-democracies have to fear liberal intervention because they are not accepted as legitimate (sovereign) states.
9. Recently, a series of scholars have argued that liberal norms are fundamentally ambivalent and can give rise either to a rather cautious/passive or to an activist/interventionist foreign policy. Thus, Müller (2004) distinguishes between ‘militant’ and ‘pacifist’ democracies, Sørensen (2006) identifies a ‘liberalism of restraint’ and a ‘liberalism of imposition’, and Montén (2005) discusses the US traditions of ‘exemplarism’ and ‘vindicationism’.
10. The distinction between rationalist and reflective approaches draws on Keohane (1988).
11. Of course, the selection of these six approaches is to a certain degree arbitrary – as is every selection of ‘the’ major theories of international relations. Yet, we claim that they represent a reasonable attempt to cover the range of potential perspectives on democracy promotion that can be developed out of what are usually considered grand international relations theories.
12. Whether such a modified ‘neoclassical’ realism should still be called realist is certainly open to question (Smith, 2000: 10). Yet, what is important for this article is not the realist label but the attempt to construe a security-based approach to democracy promotion – which we, as a matter of convenience, agree to call ‘realist’.
13. Moravcsik has proposed three variants of liberalism as cornerstones of one coherent liberal theory. Yet, it remains unclear how concrete foreign policy decisions might be explained by reference to such a threefold liberalist approach (Harnisch, 2003: 326–7). Therefore, we will assign Moravcsik’s three variants of liberal theory to three different approaches to foreign policy, adopting his categories ‘commercial’ and ‘republican’ liberalism, and subsuming ‘ideational’ liberalism under what we will dub actor-centered constructivism. Ideational liberalism’s emphasis on a ‘configuration of domestic social identities and values as a basic determinant of state preferences’ (Moravcsik, 1997: 525) obviously departs from a rationalist perspective.
14. As Moravcsik (1997: 522n23) argues, the main assumptions of Marxism – ‘the centrality of domestic economic interests, the importance of transnational interdependence, the state as a representative of dominant social forces – are quite compatible with this restatement of liberalism’. The same holds true for mainstream international political economy (see Frieden and Martin, 2002).
15. The term actor-centered constructivism is taken from Harnisch (2003), the term sociological institutionalism borrowed from Katzenstein (1996).
16. Drawing on the work of H. W. Brands, Montén distinguishes two US traditions in foreign policy: According to exemplarism, the USA ‘exerts influence on the world through the force of its example’, while ‘an activist foreign policy may even corrupt liberal practices at home, undermining the potency of the U.S. model’; vindicationism, in contrast, ‘argues that the United States must move beyond example and undertake active measures to spread its universal political values and institutions’ (Montén, 2005: 113).

17. In the case of democracy promotion as a constitutional norm (Type 6), as we will see, the differentiation between 'normative' or secondary goals and primary 'interests' is difficult to uphold.
18. Burnell (2000b: 45) explicitly argues that 'competing broad-gauge theories claiming to explain the rise of democracy assistance' should not be seen as 'mutually exclusive'. Again, while certainly no single theory will ever explain everything, it might be a useful starting point to conceptualize distinct theoretical approaches. In addition, a combination of different theories itself has to be properly conceptualized in theoretical terms, too.
19. In general, depending on the respective political culture, actor-centered constructivism is compatible with any of the types. The same indeterminacy holds for republican liberalism, as it (at least in the version proposed in this article) depends on the (variable) preferences of individual citizens and interest groups.
20. For example, the materialist theory would suggest that a democratic state refrains from promoting democracy when interacting with a cooperative non-democratic state and skips democracy-promotion policies when they significantly harm bilateral cooperation (and thus imply costs), whereas normative and cultural theories predict that the aim of promoting democracy has always at least some relevance.
21. Although regularly refraining from making causal claims, such an alternative could possibly include a post-structuralist/postmodern approach to democracy promotion, for example along the line of David Campbell's (1992) work on US foreign policy. We owe this idea to Milja Kurki.

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