How Do Liberal Norms Spread? The Role of Liberal Arts Colleges in Eastern European Democratization

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A revolution occurred on July 1, 1987. It was not an upheaval related to the political world, though it holds much potential for illuminating the themes to be developed in this project. When New York radio station WFAN adopted an all-sports broadcast format, what ensued initially was something far removed from a successful new business model. During its first days, WFAN’s air was filled with callers’ lop-sided trade proposals and advice for how their favorite teams could be better managed. After a few days of audience driven content, management imposed order on the audio chaos, limiting the number of fans who could access the airwaves to chime in on their pet notions for running a major league sports franchise. The relevance of this random moment in broadcast history to international politics? With few barriers to entry and low information requirements to access the platform, mass participation in the marketplace of ideas quickly disintegrates into a cacophonous, unproductive discussion on issues of actual importance to the audience. The owners of WFAN resolved their dilemma, ushering in a broadcast format that now dominates US radio. Students of international relations and foreign policy face a parallel paradox: advancement of the national interest in liberal democracies presumably requires an open and active marketplace of ideas, but without elite mediation, is liberal democratic governance compatible with effective foreign policy?

In accordance with the conference theme, I consider how liberal arts higher education may shape how societies engage questions of “justice, legitimacy and order.” By their very nature, these are highly contentious topics, which in open societies seem increasingly subject to polarized debate, fomenting frustration and worse. Broader adoption of an approach to discussion, deliberation, and decision-making may facilitate breaking log-jams at home, and resolving disputes abroad. I focus on how the approach to scholarly questions embedded in the
ethos of the liberal arts college model can inform the relationship between societal elites and the liberal character of democratic governance at home and abroad. In brief, I propose that in a higher education environment that too often favors technical skill and narrow specialization, liberal arts colleges, with their emphasis on promoting reflective engagement and integrative inquiry among diverse communities, may play an unheralded yet potentially transformative role in propagating deliberative norms for elite mediation of both the formulation and conduct of foreign policy in liberal democracies.

Consistent with the conference theme of exploring “the politicization of international relations,” this paper considers the relationship between liberal norms of international behavior, liberal arts colleges, and societal elites in liberal democracies. Though each may reflect to some degree “liberal” values, and are products of an expanding liberal international order (Sterling-Folker 2015), there are inconsistencies and paradoxes in their interaction. First and foremost, how can a prominent role for societal elites in shaping state foreign policy be consistent with democracy if their advocacy does not accord with popular preferences? Does a prominent role for elites in foreign policy fit with our sense of democracy? Second, assuming for the purposes of this project that liberal norms matter, how do these norms develop and spread? To address these questions, I first examine the role of elites in the United States generally, and foreign policy specifically. Though I only review the US case here, there is no reason to believe elites would play a lesser role in other liberal democratic states given a political culture in which Americans “are born equal” (Hartz 1995), leaving the US without a permanent elite class. Moreover, coupled with the multiple veto points in the US political system, a broad range of actors can
access the political process. I next consider liberal norms in terms of their applicability to the role of elites in democratic foreign policy. Students of the democratic peace and constructivists highlight the “logic of appropriateness” in conditioning behavior and shaping threat perception. How do these norms develop within societies and help to establish modes of deliberation? Finally, I turn to liberal arts colleges, institutions which are designed to promote an approach to inquiry consistent with liberal norms, but to which, by their very nature, only a small portion of a state’s population may be exposed. For illustrative purposes, I explore how two Eastern European liberal arts colleges may facilitate the emergence of a more liberal political order in their home countries. Overall, my goals here are modest. I seek to integrate three disparate literatures to situate subsequent investigation into the impact of liberal arts colleges on the foreign policy process of selected transitional democracies.

Elites in Democratic Societies

Despite the liberal democratic premises upon which the US and other such regimes were established, societal elites play a central role in establishing and legitimizing the state’s foreign policy. Of course, debate regarding the role of elites is an old one in political science generally and the study of foreign policy specifically. The US constitutional system is designed to minimize the “passions of the public,” the framers finding virtue in limiting popular influence on policy and accordingly created non-majoritarian institutions to check the unbridled passions of the masses (Page and Shapiro 1987). The “elitist theory of democracy” discredited the ability and willingness of most citizens to engage meaningfully in public affairs, instead trust was placed, as critic Jack Walker noted, “in the wisdom and energy of an active, responsible elite”
By contrast, the work of C. Wright Mills (1955) and others painted a pejorative picture of the role of elites in US political life, discrediting the notion that elites were impartial arbiters of the commonweal, but were instead a self-serving and self-perpetuating cadre of political oligarchs. While Walker’s colleagues focused on the lack of citizen knowledge and engagement, he lamented the failure of mid-twentieth century political science to address the sources of public apathy. Today, regardless of the levels of political participation and political knowledge among citizens, we have in contemporary civic discourse an overabundance of attention to sounding and divining public opinion.

Empirical investigation of US public opinion found evidence that average citizens had minimal knowledge of political issues, with some early investigators promoting the idea that owing to these cognitive inadequacies, the less public participation in politics the better (Berelson, et al 1954). Students of the public opinion foreign policy link continued in this vein, with the so-called Almond-Lippmann consensus advocating distance between popular, uninformed passions on foreign policy and the determination of the US national interest (Holsti 1992). Either because of this lack of knowledge, or owing to the pernicious determination to keep the public removed from issues of state, leaders often lack enthusiasm for a “democratic” foreign policy even in governments professing to be guided by the will of the people. Following the experience of the Vietnam War, combined with more sophisticated analytic techniques, the pendulum of normative preference backed by empirical support swung toward less reliance on elites and greater acceptance of the public’s voice on foreign policy. Many observers now question the ability of late 20th century American elites to perform a productive part as did their
predecessors during the height of the Cold War (Destler, Gelb, and Lake 1984). Still, elites serve a central, though of late an undervalued role in the foreign policy processes of liberal democracies. As the radio metaphor used to open this paper suggests, elites ought to perform a gatekeeping and moderating function in navigating society toward the achievement of common ends.

Early scholarship on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy suggested a “two-step flow” model of communication which placed elites at the fulcrum of the relationship between citizens and policy in a democracy (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). According to this model, the vast majority of citizens do not respond directly to what they read or hear from the news media. Rather, the attentive public, or what they called “opinion leaders,” process media messages and disseminate their interpretation of the content to the mass audience. Increasingly, there is the perception that this mediating stage in public discourse has either been by-passed or no longer serves a similar vetting function as was once the case. Some critics chide elite opinion for being often out-of-step with the preferences of the public (Kull and Destler 1999; Page 2004; Mueller 2014; Stokes 2014). This discordance, given the way events have played out, is presented as evidence for why the public ought to be heeded instead (Mueller 2014). In contrast, many decision makers and other elites subscribe to the “realist theory of leadership” (Jacobs and Shapiro 1999), where elites lead the public to support the goals articulated by officials. Recent research finds that elites have cognitive advantages in foreign policy compared to ordinary citizens (Hafner-Burton, et al 2013), providing empirical encouragement for those preferencing elite influence over foreign policy. Regardless of these
differences, the relationship between public and elites, including who even counts as an elite, remains unsettled (Drezner 2011). Further, the stratification of the media environment, the ubiquity of expressions of public opinion through polls, sometimes of dubious utility (Ornstein and Abramowitz 2016), and the polarization of political discourse, mark an erosion in the shepherding role formerly played by elites, and the consequent coarsening of discourse.

Elites in liberal democratic societies present an unresolvable paradox. The greater their role in foreign policy, the less reflective of popular preferences it is likely to be. But promotion of a liberal international order may require a set of policies and investments unlikely to garner public support. This is certainly apparent in the United States, where the constitutional system itself provides many opportunities for opposition to policy initiatives to be registered. Accordingly, leaders sometimes resort to threat inflation (Kaufmann 2004), deception (Schuessler 2015), or sophisticated marketing strategies (Katz forthcoming) to persuade the public to endorse what might have first seemed an unpopular foreign policy choice. At the same time, the ubiquity of public opinion polling presents instantaneous, constant barometer readings of what the public supports or rejects.

How public opinion itself is framed has become an essential component of the foreign policy formulation process (Entman 2004). It is here that elite mediation is crucial. If the public voice has been elevated as a product of the fascination with “horse race coverage,” while owing to a variety of factors the reliability of polling comes into question, an elite focus on core liberal
norms of deliberation and participation can help temper the passionate, the uninformed, and of course, the illiberal contributions to the marketplace of ideas.

What is the relationship between elites and liberal norms? Whether ameliorating or insidious, elites have a function in the foreign policies of liberal democracies that merits investigation. Certainly, evidence of elites’ effect could be marshaled on behalf of either side in this debate. I would like to build a normative case here, that paradoxically, a smoothly functioning liberal democratic society requires an engaged and effectual elite. The primary value that must inform governance within a liberal democratic state revolves around the rule of law and respect for minority rights, or the practice of bounded competition. It seems to me that these are liberal norms of participation. In their critique of the sorry state of US foreign policy discussion thirty years ago, Destler, Gelb and Lake (1985) called for a new Professional Elite with a willingness to hear other voices and accommodate mainstream, dissenting views. These, in contrast, denote liberal norms of deliberation. Societal elites are both subject to and enforcers of the constraining (regulative) power of norms, while at the same time, serving to spread normative standards through the populace. In following Destler, Gelb, and Lake’s (1984) criteria, a new elite would very much embody the approach to deliberation promoted in liberal arts colleges.

Liberal Norms

The study of norms features most prominently in research on the Democratic peace and constructivist explanations of change. Without litigating the former debate, among other issues,
scholars differ over whether and how norms affect the interaction of democratic states (Dixon 1994; Rousseau 2005; Tomz and Weeks 2013; Rosato 2003). Constructivist analysis contributes to the normative claim, by linking threat perception to identity (Farnham 2003).

Assuming that norms do shape behavior, how does normative change occur? One avenue promoted in the constructivist literature highlights norm entrepreneurs, cross-national activists who introduce new ideas that gradually persuade elites and ultimately convert society (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Florini 1996). Domestic actors may also arise and use political leverage to alter state policy (Kaufmann and Pape 1999). A society’s adoption of new norms may be the end result of a mechanism “whereby international norms become salient domestically” (Cortell and Davis 1996, 453). Or, just as individuals may change long-held assumptions after receiving a “persuasive communication,” experience in war may generate significant changes in societal norms that guide state behavior (Khong 1992). Neta Crawford (1993, 56) identifies four mechanisms for normative change, with entrepreneurs playing a prominent part in marketing “the expansion of norms” and helping advance “the logical extension of arguments about what it means to be human and who belongs to the community of humans with full rights.” A key feature of liberalism, of course, is the idea that all individuals are equal.

Similarly, Farrell (2005, 13) emphasizes “the ability of norm entrepreneurs to interpret events, frame the discourse, and construct a new consensus.” Florini recognizes that the success of normative change requires an understanding of norm evolution as “a two-level game,” suggesting an examination of domestic politics as a factor in the ability of entrepreneurs to
implement change (1996, 379). Recent work responsive to this call by Marijke Breuning (2013) finds that entrepreneurs are more effective as gatekeepers when they are able to build coalitions and frame their message in a fashion that garners public support. One way in which entrepreneurs can more readily persuade a population is by appealing to group identity and the importance of adhering to collective norms. Antsee (2012) links the social psychology of group identity with norms, pointing out the relationship between the self-perception of members and expectations of appropriate behavior. Thus, there is a connection between the liberal emphasis on the individual, and the shared identity among those considering themselves to be liberal that group members follow social norms regarding the rights of the individual. What then is the role of elites in enforcing or promoting liberal group identity?

Nussbaum (2010) contends that in order for democracy to function effectively, individuals must be able to view others empathetically, warning that without this quality, the fabric of liberal society cannot be sustained. She turns to developmental psychology for a solution to prevailing social ills that she believes stem from an educational environment increasingly devoid of those aspects crucial to helping individuals “imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (19). She advocates reform of the educational system to encourage the acquisition of empathy, in her view the missing ingredient responsible for so much discord. Though liberal arts colleges are not her focus, high on her agenda for providing citizens with the skill set needed for democracy to function are items at the core of the liberal arts approach: critical thinking, active learning, and reflection.
Liberal Arts Colleges and the Liberal Ideal

Those of us who teach at liberal arts colleges are quite familiar with the refrain that we promote active learning, careful deliberation, and civil, reasoned discourse. The effectiveness of liberal arts education overall is not my concern here. Rather, I explore the connection between the focus of liberal arts education and the practice of foreign policy formulation. I am interested specifically in how liberal norms identified in research on the democratic peace develop, and desire to lay the groundwork here for exploring subsequently how liberal arts colleges may help inculcate these norms, both of participation and deliberation, in transitional democracies. By promoting a practice of open and reasoned consideration, the liberal arts college may serve as the conduit through which societal elites emerge who can best function to effectuate and propagate the norms identified with democratic peace.

What exactly is a liberal arts college anyway, and where are they found? In the introduction to his edited volume of documents regarding liberal arts, Kimball (2010) notes the disputed origin of the term. Reaching back to ancient Greece, the tradition may be identified with Plato, Isocrates, or Aristotle. In the contemporary period, it is in the United States that liberal arts colleges have achieved their greatest prominence. Based on data from Carnegie, about 3% of American students attend liberal arts colleges. In contrast, using fairly generous definitions, van der Wende (2011) counts far fewer than 1% of Europeans are enrolled in similar institutions on the continent.
As Kimball notes, liberal arts colleges focus on “training the good citizen to lead society” (Kimball 1986, 37). In the mid-twentieth century, Harold Taylor, then President of Sarah Lawrence, argued: “Liberal education is the intellectual and cultural instrument through which the basic ideas of liberalism are transmitted and developed” (Kimball 1986, 5).

Contemporary educational leaders are certainly cognizant of the role of liberal arts institutions in cementing democratic practice. For example, the European Consortium of Liberal Arts and Sciences states as its mission “to cultivate and nurture programs which....allow students to acquire the leadership skills that are vital not only to the global workplace but to the exercise of democratic civic responsibilities within an increasingly diverse European Union.” Crucial to the liberal arts environment is the promotion of an educational process “that fosters mutual respect and understanding.”

In the United States today, there is much ferment – and angst among liberal arts college faculty – that this model of higher education no longer serves adequately the employment prospects of 21st century students. If the premises of a liberal arts education are threatened in the US, it is certainly conceivable that in locations where these types of institutions are less common, isolated liberal arts colleges like those in Eastern Europe will be particularly vulnerable. As noted in the Table below, at present there are only a handful of liberal arts colleges in Eastern Europe.
Two of these Eastern European liberal arts colleges illustrate the connection between elite function and liberal norms. In 1991, shortly after the collapse of the iron curtain, The American University in Bulgaria was established under private American auspices. As noted in the school’s January 2011 Fifth Year Interim Report, the original mission of AUBG was “to prepare a new generation of leadership for Bulgaria as the country emerged from the long period of Soviet domination and embarked on transition to market economy and democratic governance” (AUBG 2011, 2). Unlike schools of higher education dedicated to technical preparation for a particular career path, AUBG stresses its goal of preparing students “for democratic and ethical leadership.”

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More recently, the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts, founded in 2006, also ascribes to the liberal arts philosophy. BISLA’s Rector, Samuel Abrahám’s explicitly connects the nature of liberal arts education with the liberal deliberative norms referenced above: “In such an intimate environment, a teacher can model a discussion as well as inspire and listen attentively to students.” The notion of intellectual dialogue, of a healthy, respectful give-and-take over ideas is reflected in BISLA’s mission statement, which considers possession of these skills “the precondition for becoming a responsible citizen of their community, be it local or global.”

Given the small size of liberal arts colleges, the reach of these two schools is certainly limited. What this rather cursory review of their approach to higher education shows is the practical relevance of the link between societal elites, liberal deliberative norms, and what these institutions offer. Future research will assess the progress of AUBG and BISLA at affecting their home society’s values and political life, and trace the effectiveness of the liberal arts college model at promoting deliberative norms.

**Conclusion**

I do not see liberal arts education as a panacea. Exposing greater numbers of students to liberal arts education will not end political polarization in the United States, or spread the norms of liberal democracy far and wide. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the notion that exposure to deliberative norms as part of the educational process may produce future leaders who can practice well the art of dialogue and reasoned disagreement. At the same time, there is
nothing shameful about being intentional about the purpose of educating future leaders. Liberal arts colleges need to be committed to both the principle and outcome of diversity, so that the “new elite” does not mirror the narrow demographic slice of society disparaged by Mills and other elite theorists.

Let me be clear, I am not advocating a return to a bygone era when elites ruled and public opinion followed. We ought not strive to make operative among leaders again the immortal words of Bernard Cohen’s (1973, 62) pithy State Department official: “‘To hell with public opinion.... We should lead, and not follow.’” Instead, social scientists and elites more broadly ought to take account of Sarah Igo’s (2008) observations about attention to polling during the mid-20th century, when observers and the wider society became obsessed with learning what the average American thought. Polling results ought not substitute for discussion and debate over issues. Policy elites need to embrace the role to which their expertise and training entitles them, using their skills with liberal deliberative norms to enlighten and persuade, elevating the conversation in the marketplace of ideas above what a random caller from Queens might think about the latest rumor.
Works Cited


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