Do Democracies Possess the Wisdom of Crowds?
Decision Group Size, Regime Type, and Strategic Effectiveness

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Online Appendix:
Exploring Domestic Political Constraints on Democratic Crowd-Wisdom

This Online Appendix provides further elaboration of the core argument outlined in the main article. It first provides five reasons why the politics of democratic policymaking compromise democracies' pursuit of foreign-policy crowd-wisdom, contrary to the argument of LeVeck and Narang (2017), culminating with a brief empirical illustration drawn from the failure of the U.S. "marketplace of ideas" to adequately interrogate the professed rationales for the Iraq War in 2003. It then progresses to lay out three reasons why experimental methods of the kind used by LeVeck and Narang fail to adequately capture such politics, which then explains why such impediments are under-represented in their causal account.

The Politics of Foreign Policy

Building on the group-size critique introduced in the main article, "wisdom of crowds" logic tells us nothing about the *politics* that surround foreign-policy decision-making, as the (wholly apolitical) "guess the weight of the ox" analogy itself belies. Such politics have many manifestations that problematize accounts of democratic crowd-wisdom in foreign policy. And these cannot be dismissed as mere intervening variables that "get in the way" of – without fundamentally undermining – a valuably parsimonious theory, because they define and constitute the very nature of democratic policymaking itself.

First, democracies may possess many *de jure* participants in the foreign-policy process, implying large-*N* crowd-wisdom, while practically possessing very few *de facto* decision-makers.[1] And such a situation can arise under the same set of formal institutions as a completely different set of political circumstances, making it hard to attribute causation to mere "democracy" versus "autocracy". Tony Blair and Theresa May, for example, both led British foreign policy within the same democratic constitutional system and through the same formal foreign-policy institutions – yet the former faced remarkably few constraints on his personal

[1] As a rash of insightful recent work demonstrates, individual leaders and their narrow coteries of advisers can disproportionately influence – or even wholly dominate – the direction of foreign policy, even in robust democratic systems (Saunders 2011; Yarhi-Milo 2014; Schuessler 2015; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015).

policy choices, while the latter's entire premiership was a hamstrung story of political constraints on her attempted foreign-policy direction. In a non-democratic context, the same can be said of China's Hu Jintao (merely the foremost voice among several influential foreign-policymakers) versus Xi Jinping (wholly dominant having curtailed the influence of his subordinates). Moreover, within "democratic" (Blair) *and* "autocratic" (Xi) contexts, powerful leaders enjoying moments of domestic-political dominance *reshaped* the institutions of state so as to face fewer constraints on their own policy preferences and judgements. Both cases therefore illustrate that specific configuration of veto players – rather than the crude "democracy"/"autocracy" distinction – exerts most causal effect on the diversity(/otherwise) of foreign-policy influencers, and therefore on the applicability(/otherwise) of "crowd-wisdom".

Second, in either system of government, there can be the appearance of numerous foreign-policy decision-makers – yet such individuals may themselves be *selected* precisely *because* of their close alignment with one or a few political masters' preferences. As such, while there may be the appearance of a "crowd" capable of generating "wisdom" through its internal debate, there is in fact little diversity of opinion; indeed, shared foreign-policy judgements are endogenous to decision-making group membership and associated "crowd" formation. Relatedly, even where there is not complete homogeneity of thought, those who aver still typically inhabit subordinate chains-of-command to one or a few national leaders (who themselves are likely to share particular common viewpoints), thereby curtailing their independence of decision. Such individuals may indeed be freer to express alternative foreign-policy views in a democratic system than in an autocratic counterpart, but they are (a) likely to face professional sanction for digressing too far from their superiors' positions and (b) are ultimately required to follow orders from a narrower sub-group anyway. Political masters may also spin, filter, or outright fabricate foreign-policy information (Schuessler 2015) – as well as possessing the option to conduct contentious aspects of foreign policy covertly, beyond cross-governmental and/or public scrutiny (Carson 2016; O'Rourke 2018) – further curtailing the scope for their subordinate functionaries and/or their selectorate to contest or diverge from the leadership's policy preferences.

Third, notwithstanding the selection effects discussed in the previous paragraph, foreign-policy elites typically hold certain shared ideas and assumptions about the world that reflect and produce a variety of groupthink. In the United States, for example, the foreign-policy "Blob" – as a former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor, Ben Rhodes, pejoratively described it – of

"revolving-door" officials and think-tankers maintains the wisdom of sustaining U.S. hegemony as a matter beyond meaningful debate, despite the array of plausible alternatives (Porter 2018a). In the United Kingdom, similarly, foreign-policy elites remain committed to the notion of an outsized British "role" in the world, despite such desires for continued influence dragging the country into an array of costly entanglements (McCourt 2014). Embedded, internalized assumptions – the "logic of habit" (Hopf 2010) – turn contestable propositions about the international system and the sources of security within it into presumed "common-senses" (Porter 2018a). The upshot can be that a "crowd" that is expected to deliver policy "wisdom" through its diversity of opinion does not in fact feature meaningful *diversity* of opinion, thanks to its own socialization effects.[2] And the opposite (but just as problematic) alternative, meanwhile, is the ascent of a new set of foreign-policy ideas selected not through debate on their merits as competing causal claims on the foundations of international security – so again, a failure of the crowd-wisdom mechanism – but simply for partisan-political differentiation from what went before (i.e. one monolithic, unquestionable "common sense" is swapped for another).

Fourth, moving down from policy elites to the larger national "crowd" who select them, the electorate themselves can hold certain ideas about foreign policy (Goldstein and Keohane 1993) – prudent or otherwise – particularly under the stimuli of high-stakes international bargaining. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this; on the contrary, a diverse array of public opinions over national strategic direction is the very basis of the crowd-wisdom logic. But again, politics – and influential political ideas, in particular – carry the potential to "short-circuit" public debate such that instead of the large-*N* electorate delivering a prudent estimation of relative power and intent, public "animal spirits" drive demands for an under- or over-active response (e.g. nationalist belligerence).[3] And linking this point to its predecessors, elites'

[2] As seminal work has shown, meanwhile, the bureaucratic agencies that plan and implement national strategy can limit the scope of strategic debate to their own priorities (Allison and Halperin 1972). Applied to the "crowd wisdom" thesis, such bureaucratic politics may stifle effective contestation over the selection of optimal policies (i.e. ensure too *little* diversity of thought for strategic "wisdom" to emerge from the salient policymaking "crowd") and/or impede the agreement of coherent strategy with other agencies of differing priorities (i.e. generate too *much* diversity of thought for a "wise" foreign policy to be implemented, as per the veto-players critique of the main article). Building on such approaches, meanwhile, contemporary work by Keren Yarhi-Milo (2014) shows that a particular category of bureaucratic organ – the intelligence agency – plays a particular role in assessing (and thus filtering) the signals of the international system; such signals are then filtered again, by leaders' cognitive biases, providing further scope for the curtailment of the "crowd wisdom" mechanism in even vibrant, well-functioning democracies.

[3] On nationalist identity as a source of shared political sentiment – sentiment with the potential to "short-circuit" the "crowd wisdom" mechanism – see Anderson (2006). On the formation of modern nation-states as political machines

contestation for the support of the populace can all-too-easily result in the mobilization *of* and/or pandering *to* imprudent public ideas by political leaders (Snyder 2000), with deleterious consequences for crowd "wisdom".[4]

Fifth, in terms of the "transmission belt" that communicates public and elite sentiment in democracies *and* autocracies alike – albeit in quite different ways between *and* within varieties of these two different stylized regime-types – the media shapes the information flows from which both citizens and policymakers infer each other's preferences, and indeed, receive the power/intent signals of the international system. Contemporary social media may have changed the media landscape, but it still provides a variety of transmission belt (and hardly one conducive to the transmission of reason, evidence, or nuance). Insofar as the media cannot explain the full universe of potential strategic choices and outcomes in their full complexity, meanwhile – or, indeed, may have certain information presented to them by the executive to shape the case for a preferred policy direction (Schuessler 2015) – so too the "crowd-wisdom" mechanism has the potential to be subverted away from its theoretical mode of optimal operation by politics: not only *despite* the functioning of democracy, but *because* of it.

Bringing these insights together to consider an iconic recent example, America's march to Iraq in 2003, Chaim Kaufmann (2004) demonstrates – in a piece remarkably uncited by LeVeck and Narang – that the variables summarized above can combine to produce catastrophic foreign-policy miscalculations, even in vigorously argumentative democracies. The "marketplace of ideas" is part of the micro-foundations of "crowd-wisdom" logic, insofar as (a) numerous plus (b) diverse assessments go towards producing collective accuracy (LeVeck and Narang 2017, 868) – and yet in 2003, the U.S. "marketplace" of strategic ideas failed disastrously.[5]

That this was a democracy-versus-autocracy conflict dyad is not at issue, because crowd-wisdom logic's domestic operation is merely *mon*adic: while it may only be forecast to produce stable peace *between* democracies (i.e. if *both* halves of the dyad make accurate capability/intent

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for the furtherance of their inhabitants' survival prospects – nation-states around which nationalist sentiments subsequently formed – see Tilly (1993). On the relationship between nationalism, realpolitikal statecraft, and the questionable strategic "wisdom" of liberal polities, see Mearsheimer (2018, 3). On the contemporary upsurge in nationalist populism in key Western powers, to the potential detriment of their foreign-policy moderation, see Mead (2017).

[4] Policymakers must play a "two-level game", in short, between navigating their state's external environment while satisfying – or at least assuaging – their domestic constituents (Putnam 1988), and if such constituents demand certain kinds of responses, then that may deleteriously curtail policymakers' range of options (and a large number of electors may then become actively inimical to foreign-policy "wisdom").

[5] Similarly-democratic Britain's ideational "marketplace" fared no better (Porter 2018b).

calculations), the question of whether crowd-wisdom can accurately discern others' capabilities and intentions to then choose the utility-maximizing bargaining position resides *within* each state.[6] And 2003's Iraq decision saw the international system's most powerful democracy fail spectacularly in its own pursuit of "wise" capability/intent estimations – despite a huge "crowd" of citizens, a large "crowd" of policymakers, and a tradition of vibrant political argument within and among these crowds.[7] Indeed, Kaufmann's "marketplace of ideas" analogy shows the limitations of crowd-wisdom once collective emotions, beliefs, and *political* preferences of all kinds are introduced. For while multi-participant markets can be good at revealing simple kinds of information – how much an ox weighs, say, or how much said ox should retail for once made into beef steaks – they become much less reliable when seeking to resolve complex uncertainties, of the kinds that foreign policy involves (complete with public and elite emotional "animal spirits", collective-action failures, cognitive biases and heuristics, moral hazard, information scarcity, and identity all distorting participants' judgements).

Experimental Methods and Political Contexts

Following from the previous point, not only does democratic foreign-policymaking involve lots of messy politics, but experimental methods also struggle to capture such politics. That, in turn, means that the theoretical limitations of applying crowd-wisdom logic to democratic foreign-policymaking go underplayed. LeVeck and Narang (2017, 876–77) attempt to justify the

[6] For a similar contention that democratic peace logics make claims of a dyadic relationship out of monadic variables, see Rosato (2005, 467–68). Without going so far as to argue that *all* possible democratic peace logics commit this dyadic/monadic elision, crowd-wisdom's professed effects clearly lie at the monadic level.

[7] The Iraq debacle also serves to counter one potential rejoinder to this response article's critique – namely, that the notion of democracies enjoying particular "wisdom" in foreign policy made more sense prior to the current Trump/Brexit age of eroding democratic moderation – since the Iraq intervention was undertaken by several vibrant democracies (the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Australia, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, and more) *before* Western populism's post-2015 Anglo-American escalation. Indeed, looking to the previous century, the Vietnam War was also a completely foreseeable U.S. foreign-policy disaster (and remained so for well over a decade, despite democratic contestation over its merit), while even the Nazis took power in Germany through fair(ish) elections – so the idea that there has *ever* been some golden period of democratically-induced foreign-policy "wisdom" looks circumspect. Democracy's institutions certainly *have* been under perilous strain in the Western countries from which its modern form arose, with obvious manifestations since 2016 – and with potentially negative consequences for democratic peace (Hobson 2017) – but to argue that there was some past period of "normal" democratic politics in which democracies' foreign-policymaking was superior would descend into tautological circularity (it would amount to a claim that democracies make good foreign policy under conditions in which they make good foreign policy). This all said, however, it is easy to understand how the notion of democracies enjoying a particular foreign-policy "crowd wisdom" made for a more plausible initial hypothesis when LeVeck and Narang started their research project (pre-2017) than it looks today, given unfortunate political developments since then.

limitations of experimental methods, of course – but such rebuttals center on defending the value of a simple ultimatum game as shedding light on the real world, rather than justifying the absence of politics in the framing.

Such a critique has several specific manifestations. First, experimental subjects cannot hold the realistic shared beliefs about politics and policy of an electorate, ruling coalition, or security bureaucracy – or rather, the *only* such beliefs they *can* plausibly hold are those of their own "real world". Yet such shared beliefs are crucial to bounding the range of possible "crowd-wisdom". Second, experiments cannot replicate the real-world stakes of foreign-policy decisions for the subject individuals, up to and including national or communal survival. Yet again, such security pressures are crucial in bounding policymakers' perceptions and preferences. Third, and relatedly, experiments cannot accurately replicate the emotions, beliefs, and "animal spirits" of crowds under high-stakes national security crises, which are key to explaining group under- or over-reaction to ambiguous information.

In short, therefore, LeVeck and Narang's experimental evidence is certainly informative – as discussed in the "Extending the Logic" section of the main response article – but it tells us only a little about democratic foreign-policymaking. And if it tells us little about democratic policymaking, then it can similarly tell us little about democratic peace, given that the "dyadic peace" result rests on "monadic policy" micro-foundations (each side must *choose* non-aggression – an in*tra*state decision – for there to be no in*ter*state war).

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