

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The calm before the storm: A punctuated equilibrium theory of international politics

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Abstract

Research has shown that policymaking in numerous domestic policies, across a multitude of polities, systematically produces a pattern of change that matches Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), characterized by many incremental and occasional dramatic changes. The field of International Relations (IR), however, has paid surprisingly little attention to PET, even though the same pattern of change is also found in international politics. This study attempts to fill this gap and explains stability and change in international politics based on PET. Specifically, we detail the dynamics behind this pattern of behavior, both at the domestic and the international level, as well as their interplay. The empirical section shows that different indicators of international politics, including troop deployments, foreign aid and international trade, follow a leptokurtic pattern of change, which characterizes Punctuated Equilibrium, and whereby changes in countries' behavior are generally incremental, representing periods of relative stability, and punctuated by large changes that dramatically overthrow existing policies. Moreover, our results indicate that policy outputs where greater friction is at play are more punctuated than those policies that cannot as easily or directly be managed. This study urges future research to further explore the dynamics of stability and change at the aggregate, international level.

KEYWORDS

foreign aid, international politics, international trade, punctuated equilibrium theory, troop deployments

INTRODUCTION

International policies are generally stable. However, every once in a while, they change dramatically. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Jones and Baumgartner (2005) advanced and developed the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) to explain the policy process in the United States (U.S.) and to shed light on how issues move up and down the policy agenda. Their work was very influential in public policy because it proposed a theoretical model that accounted for both incremental and disproportional policy changes at the domestic level. As a policy-making theory, PET shows that

institutional friction, caused by bureaucratic politics and high decision-making costs, generally impedes major policy change, resulting in incremental policy adjustments and, thus, stability over time. However, every now and then, an issue receives so much attention that it cannot be ignored, leading to a disproportionately large change meant to make up for insufficient prior policy adjustments. Such a change is mainly due to a shift in the policy image or a focusing event, like an earthquake, a hurricane, or an oil spill (Birkland, 1997).

PET has already been applied to a wide range of public policies, in the U.S. and many other—mostly Western-European—countries. The focus of most studies has been on domestic policies. So far, little scholarly effort has been made to integrate PET into mainstream international relations (IR) studies or foreign policy analysis (FPA), either from a theoretical or empirical point of view. This study, therefore, aims to show that dynamics similar to those underlying Punctuated Equilibrium (PE) in domestic policies are also at play in international politics, in particular in the way countries adjust their foreign policies at the national level over time. We argue that countries have the tendency to only slightly adjust their behavior until something major pushes them to drastically change their approach on the international scene. Such a foreign policy spark can be due to a political shock or result from a longer ongoing evolution, either at the domestic or the international level. Examples of dramatic policy changes include large-scale military interventions, the introduction of economic sanctions, or increased (humanitarian) aid flows to specific countries—all of which are usually decided at the domestic level, but may lead to major policy changes at the aggregate, international level if a critical state or a critical mass of states makes this adjustment.

This article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of PET and explain the main mechanisms of the general theory. We also detail the domestic and international dynamics that contribute to stability and those that drive larger changes in international politics. We then lay out our theoretically driven expectations regarding the evolution of different aspects of international politics, in particular troop deployments, foreign aid and international trade. Our empirical section subsequently demonstrates that the foreign policy outputs selected for our study are all characterized by a punctuated pattern of change, but that there are also significant variations between the leptokurtic distributions of the three policy areas. We conclude with a discussion on how PET contributes to our understanding of the dynamics driving stability and change in international politics, and argue that public policy and PET scholars should pay more attention to foreign policy and its dynamics, as they both shed light on why leptokurtic distributions may differ across issue areas.

Punctuated equilibrium theory: An overview

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) developed PET as an agenda-setting theory to understand policy change in the U.S. The main assumption of agenda-setting studies is that political attention is necessary for policy change but also rare because policymakers are rationally bounded (Simon, 1957) and can therefore not attend to all societal problems at once. This implies that decisionmakers are not able to constantly evaluate which issues need to be addressed first, and which existing policies have to be adjusted (and by how much). For this very reason, most policymaking is delegated to policy subsystems, i.e., groups of elected officials, career civil servants or interest groups. This delegation allows institutions to process problems in parallel and, thus, deal with a greater number of issues simultaneously.

According to Baumgartner and Jones (1993), it is precisely the politics of subsystems that generally prevents large policy changes, leading to mostly small and incremental adjustments instead of policies that are proportionate to solving the problems at hand. Indeed, policy stability does not result from a broad societal consensus, but rather from a consensus among those holding power who do not want to see their current position undermined. This process of ‘negative feedback’ is the source of policy stability, causing the system to be largely self-correcting (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Policy stability, however, does not mean that policymaking is gridlocked; on the contrary, large policy changes also occur. A process of ‘positive feedback’, whereby overwhelming attention creates the condi-

tions conducive to change, can be set in motion, for instance, if an issue's policy image (i.e., the way the issue is generally understood) changes following a focusing event. One of the most studied focusing events are the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which brought about numerous changes in various policy domains related to domestic security. The attacks drew unprecedented Presidential and Congressional attention to the issue of terrorism in the U.S. (May et al., 2008), as well as to the inadequacies of existing policies, including intelligence, aviation security, and border control. Many of the changes enacted after 9/11 were, however, already discussed before. The attacks, thus, provided a 'window of opportunity' to push those issues on the agenda (Birkland, 2004). These changes were not restricted to the U.S.: aviation security measures, for example, were also implemented in the European Union (EU) (George & Whatford, 2007), Australia (Prenzler et al., 2010), and Canada (Lyon, 2006).

Policy change can also be endogenous to the political process and occur when policy entrepreneurs advocate an alternative policy image of or solution for a given issue at different policy venues. They do so in the hope that the issue is picked up and catches on to spread. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) claim that previously uninterested groups of people need to be involved to defy the status quo and, hence, the existing stability. Policy entrepreneurs on the losing side—i.e., actors who have not yet managed to make their case and push for their preferred policy solution—will, therefore, move from one venue to another (also known as 'venue shopping' [Pralle, 2003]), to gain the "attention of potential allies not currently involved in the issue" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 36).

PET has been tested empirically, mostly using the distribution approach which consists of looking at annual changes in (attention to) policies over a longer period of time, e.g., in budgeting (Breunig & Koski, 2006; Jones et al., 2009), parliamentary activities (John et al., 2016; Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2010) or media coverage (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2010). If policy changes were proportionate to changes in social inputs, the frequency distribution would look like a classic bell-shaped Normal curve (Jones et al., 2009). However, if, as Jones and Baumgartner (2005) argue, PE characterizes the political system, the frequency distribution should have a slender central peak slightly above the mean (due to the high concentration of small changes around the mean), weak shoulders (indicating less than normal medium-sized changes), and long, fat tails (representing the high number of large punctuations).¹

To explain this leptokurtic pattern of change, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) introduced the concept of 'institutional friction'. Friction is the resistance built into the political system: the higher the friction, the more political institutions will resist to new input, and the more leptokurtic outputs will be. Baumgartner et al. (2009) further developed this concept into the 'progressive friction hypothesis', arguing that friction increases when moving from input to output because of higher decision-making costs. This implies that attention from news media, for example, is less incremental than budgets, where changes in attention involve considerably more costs and, therefore, resistance (Jones et al., 2003; Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009; Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2010).

Although PET has mainly been applied to domestic politics (cf. Joly and Richter (2019, p. 46) for an overview), researchers have already relied on the PE framework to study different aspects of foreign policy and international relations, thus contributing to bridging the gap between public policy, FPA and IR theory. Indeed, Diehl and Goertz (2000) introduced the premises of PE into IR, by studying international rivalries and exploring the origins, dynamics, and termination of long-standing military disputes. Their PE model of change is characterized by rapid and steep growth, followed by a long period of stability and ended with a period of steep and rapid decline. It puts special emphasis on the initial phase of conflicts during which the dispute is either solved relatively quickly or 'locks in' (Goertz et al., 2005), leading to what Diehl and Goertz (2000) call an 'enduring conflict'. If the dispute locks in, the new equilibrium is characterized by hostile interactions which persist over time because the opposing parties are unable to resolve their differences. Goertz and Diehl (1995) argue that such a situation can only be overcome by episodic political shocks eventually terminating the rivalry. In line with this reasoning, Leventoglu and Slantchev (2007, p. 768) suggest that war, similar to enduring rivalries, can be seen as "a mutually coercive process that involves continuous fighting punctured by occasional opportunities for peace". They argue that peace is only possible at very specific junctures, even if players could theoretically negotiate to end the conflict at any point throughout the war.

PET has also shown its utility in the study of defense spending and foreign aid outputs. Analyzing American defense budgets, True (2002) compared traditional approaches to studying national security with PE, demonstrating that large changes in U.S. security policy only occur sporadically. He concluded that policymakers cannot fully control security policy as the context and policy objectives may change rapidly. Focusing on punctuations in U.S. defense spending, Sharp (2019) found that punctuations only occur after elections or a shift in war policy. Joly and Richter (2019), in turn, demonstrated that heavier aid administrations tend to produce more punctuated aid outputs, confirming the main expectations of bureaucratic politics.

Although PET is not yet widespread among FP and IR scholars, the aforementioned studies applied the theory, or certain aspects of it, to a variety of issues and in very different contexts, indicating the potential of PET in studying the dynamics of change in foreign policy and in international politics, more generally. The aim of this article is to apply PET more systematically to foreign policy and international politics. It presents a comprehensive theory of the policy dynamics at the national and aggregate, international level and provides empirical evidence from three different yet complementary issue areas. More specifically, it compares the patterns of change of both foreign policy outputs (troop deployments and foreign aid) and outcomes that are indirect consequences of foreign policies (dyadic trade volumes).

PET AS A THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

In the realm of FP and IR, PET can be seen as a “policy model of state behavior” (Diehl & Goertz, 2000, p. 139). Although “the domestic and the foreign policy sphere are not totally dissimilar” (Durant & Diehl, 1989, p. 182), foreign policy tends to be more random. This is not only due to the unpredictability of the international environment but also to the variety of national and international actors that may impact foreign policymaking. Applying PET to non-domestic issues is, therefore, not straightforward, as foreign policy and international politics are a mixture of behaviors from one or multiple senders to one or multiple receivers at two different but related levels: the national and the aggregate, international level. While foreign policy relates to policies enacted by one country to a host of countries, international politics pertain to the relations between two countries, or the policies enacted by a group of countries toward a single ‘target’ country.

The next section details the dynamics that contribute to stability and change both at the domestic and the aggregate, international level and provides new insights into why foreign policy and international politics are, just like most domestic policies, characterized by a pattern of PE. While foreign policy and international politics are often described as reactive, driven by exogenous events or facts on the ground that warrant existing policies, we show that shifts in policies can also be endogenous to the policy process, as the results of arguments over ideas and values, and of cascade-like shifts in system-level orientations. We also argue that ‘international friction’, that is, the combined resistance to change at the domestic and international level, explains processes of stability at the aggregate, international level. While stability is, thus, mainly a consequence of countermobilization and routine politics at the domestic level, and national interests and interdependence at the aggregate, international level, we detail in the next section how it is this very same interdependence that will eventually lead to rapid and dramatic change in international politics.

Foreign policymaking at the domestic level

Foreign policy stability

Foreign policymaking tends to be characterized by mostly small, incremental changes instead of policies that are proportionate to solving the problem. As Welch (2005, p. 7) argues, “[t]he state [...] goes about its business today more or less the same way it went about its business yesterday, unless it has some very

compelling reason to do something dramatically different”. What are the reasons behind this absence of proportionate ‘finetuning’ in foreign policymaking? In this subsection, we notably demonstrate that negative feedback at the domestic level is driven by three factors that are closely interlinked: the concentration of foreign policymaking at the top of the executive, institutional inertia, and societal support for existing, familiar institutions and policies.

First, foreign policymaking is highly concentrated at the top of the executive where foreign policy attitudes are rather stable over time (Durant & Diehl, 1989; Russett, 1990), with little media coverage, low public interest, and scarce parliamentary scrutiny. There are, consequently, less policy venues where policy entrepreneurs can advocate alternative policy images which, in turn, decreases the likelihood of the status quo being changed. Given that the executive is rationally bounded too, it will take time to realize change in the environment, to analyze the consequences of this change and to make the necessary policy adjustments. Similar to policymaking in domestic policies, it is therefore common practice within the FP community to stick to past choices.

This tendency is reinforced by the institutional environment in which foreign policy decisions are taken. While few people are directly involved in high level decision-making, they operate in a setting that affects “what they know, how they frame foreign policy problems, and what they believe about their options” (Welch, 2005, p. 31). Indeed, bureaucratic politics and routinizing, which are *inter alia* characterized by informal and formal rules of procedures, norms and memories, do not only matter in the domestic realm (Wildavsky, 1975), but also in foreign policy (Allison, 1971; Durant & Diehl, 1989). Given the stability that standard operating procedures (SOP) provide, there is much more inertia in the institutional setting than there is in the international environment which, in part, explains why incremental change is the norm in the foreign policy realm (Colgan et al., 2012; Diehl & Goertz, 2000; Goertz & Diehl, 1995; Sharp, 2019; True, 2002).

Furthermore, the general public tends to reinforce this tendency for stability by passively supporting already existing—and consequently familiar—institutions, policies and beliefs (Neuman, 1986; Risse-Kappen, 1991; Rosati, 1994). While interest groups, the media and public opinion are generally less involved in setting the foreign policy agenda, their support (or lack of contestation) provides legitimacy for national decision-makers’ policy choices. This is particularly true for troop deployments but also holds for trade agreements, for example. As Rosati (1994, p. 225) argues, “the patterns of stratification that exist in the structures and beliefs throughout society and the state tend to favor the status quo and continuity over the political forces in support of change”.

To sum up, negative feedback at the domestic level is driven by three interlinked factors: the concentration of foreign policymaking at the top of the executive, institutional inertia, and society passively supporting familiar institutions and policies. Those factors, which come in addition to the arguments advanced by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) regarding subsystems and negative feedback, lead to countermobilization and foreign policy stability at the domestic level. Foreign policymaking is, consequently, most of the time hardly different from policymaking in the realm of domestic policies, such as education and health: it is relatively stable but can also change dramatically.

Foreign policy change

Indeed, as Krasner (1976) argues, policies are usually pursued until a crisis shows that they are no longer feasible, i.e., foreign policy change results from disparities between initially planned policy objectives and actual policy outcomes (Weick & Quinn, 1999). While small disparities are mostly met with incremental changes, we argue in this subsection that large foreign policy shifts are mainly due to a change in the policy image or a shift in the way an issue is understood which, in turn, can be caused by political shocks or through a combination of policy entrepreneurship and venue shopping.

Positive feedback at the domestic level can firstly be driven by endogenous or exogenous political shocks. Endogenous shocks are usually associated with a change in regime or administration. Given that foreign policy communities are more closed and hierarchical than other policy communities, the execu-

tive may also use constitutional provisions or control the information stream to circumvent resistance from the bureaucracy and introduce foreign policy change. Policy change may also result from exogenous shocks, like focusing events, which have the power to propel foreign policy issues to the forefront of the political agenda. Such events do not necessarily lead to a change, but can create the need for foreign policy action, in particular if it turns out that the current foreign policy approach failed and needs to be revised (Brockner & James, 2008). Indeed, once the government's foreign policy is called into question, the legitimacy of the status quo is weakened and new policy options have to be assessed (Goertz, 2003; Rosati, 1994). If the situation shifts to a crisis situation (which is more likely to be of interest for the general public and the media), foreign policy will capture the attention of the top executive and enable to overturn “even staunchly defended executive branch policies” (Schraeder, 1994, p. 113).

Policy images may also shift in the absence of shocks. In those cases, change is driven by policy entrepreneurs at the domestic (Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom, 1997; Roberts, 1992; Sheingate, 2003) or international level (Durant & Diehl, 1989). While venue shopping is rather limited at the domestic level, given the heavy concentration of foreign policymaking at the top of the executive, governments face a wider range of international actors. Those actors—including officials from other governments—may have a different understanding of a given issue and try to lobby for another policy image. Given that governments are increasingly interdependent, foreign policy images at the domestic level may also shift to an alternative image if international policy entrepreneurs manage to impact the perceptions of the top of the executive.

To sum up, positive feedback at the domestic level is usually due to a change in the way an issue is understood which, in turn, may be caused by political shocks or policy entrepreneurship and venue shopping. Table 1 summarizes the mechanisms of stability and change at the domestic and the aggregate, international level, to which we turn next.

Policymaking at the aggregate, international, level

Stability at the aggregate, international, level

International politics are mostly characterized by incremental change (Ikenberry, 2001; Norrlof, 2010; Skidmore, 1994), with states moving from ‘legacies’ that do not only determine who has a say on the international scene, but also which policy measures are legitimate (or not). In this subsection, we demonstrate that this path dependency has two interrelated reasons, echoing—to a certain extent—the causes for incremental foreign policy change at the national level: power politics on one hand, and interdependence and international regimes, on the other, both favoring the status quo.

First, international politics are characterized by power politics, whereby bargaining power is largely determined by the economic and military capacities of states. There are certain implicit assumptions regarding the hierarchy of states in international politics—from great to middle and small powers—which shape government relations and thereby reinforce policy stability over time. Specifically, powerful countries are able to leverage their position to create policies and institutions in ways that allow them to maintain or strengthen their position in the international arena (Ikenberry, 2001; Norrlof, 2010), much like subsystems at the domestic level. Skidmore (1994, p. 50), for example, shows that hegemonic powers

TABLE 1 Stability and change at the domestic and international level

	Domestic level	International level
Sources of stability	<i>Bureaucratic (status quo) politics</i> • Countermobilization • Routine politics (SOPs)	<i>Power (status quo) politics</i> • National interests & status quo politics • Interdependence, regimes & costs of change
Drivers of change	<i>Change in policy image</i> • Political shocks • Policy entrepreneurship & venue shopping	<i>Change in policy image</i> • Political shocks • Norm diffusion & coalition-building

have the resources to maintain their independence, security and prosperity, without necessarily adjusting to changes in the international environment, contrary to middle-level powers that have no choice but to adapt or suffer the consequences of inaction. Countries that are in positions of power and benefit most from existing arrangements—be they institutional or policy-related—will resist most to suggestions of change that threaten their position and interests.

Second, greater interdependence between countries caused, in part, by globalization is an important inhibitor to policy change at the aggregate, international level. Advances in transportation and communication technologies have led to an exponential increase in the intensity and variety of exchanges at the global level, including large flows of people, products, services and information. Such flows came along with a greater risk of vulnerability or contagion (e.g., in case of economic downturns) and generated demands for international norms to meet certain quality and security standards. For precisely this reason, international institutions and regimes have thrived over time, increasing from 2906 in 1981 to 4916 regimes in 2003 (Drezner, 2007, p. 44).

Those regimes range from informal to more institutionalized organizations. The more institutionalized they are, the more likely it is that internal decision-making rules require consensus, unanimity voting, or some form of majority decision, thereby incentivizing the alignment of member countries' interests. Common rules and norms, however, produce foreign policy outputs that follow a PE pattern, with many incremental and occasional, disproportionate changes (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Lundgren et al., 2018). This also holds true for institutional change at the aggregate, international level (Colgan et al., 2012; Krasner, 1984). Europeanization, for example, has harmonized national legislations among EU member states, creating a zone of shared laws and norms.

To sum up, dynamics similar to countermobilization and routine politics at the domestic level are also at play at the aggregate, international level. Powerful countries will thus mobilize to resist shifts that threaten the status quo. In addition, countries are increasingly interdependent which, in turn, has led to the establishment of international regimes having a regulating function that increases the cost of change at the international level. Consequently, policy change at the international level tends to be incremental rather than proportionate to the demands emanating from the international society.

Change at the aggregate, international, level

Similar to the domestic level, policy choices at the international level will not change unless the policy image starts shifting. Before a group of states decides whether and how to deal with a specific international problem or external pressure, consensus has to be reached about the scope of the policy response (Haas, 1992) and preferences need to be translated into common action. Given the complexity of such a move, change at the aggregate, international level occurs only sporadically and often requires a political shock or a focusing event, generating intense dissatisfaction with existing practices. As we will see in this subsection, change in the policy image can be the consequence of an endogenous process, resulting from new arguments and solutions overruling old ideas and values, just as much as it can follow an exogenous shock. Last but not least, we show that norm diffusion through diplomacy and coalition-building may also affect how an issue is understood and addressed at the aggregate, international level.

While a convergence of national interests leads to status quo politics at the international level, heterogeneous preferences may challenge this stability. As Colgan et al. (2012) emphasize, however, “much depends on who is dissatisfied”: if a powerful actor or a sufficiently large group of states wants to see a change in the collective foreign policy approach—e.g., the implementation of economic sanctions—change is much more likely to occur. Policy advocates in favor of such a change will consequently try to convince a critical mass by engaging in bilateral or multilateral discussions. Similar to venue shopping at the domestic level, these advocates will push for an alternative policy course at the international level. In this case, policy advocates can still be interest groups and lobbyists, but also diplomats from different

countries. They can facilitate large changes by building a coalition around their alternative policy image, thus changing the dominant understanding of the policy problem at the aggregate, international level.

In addition to such endogenous shifts, policy advocates may also seize exogenous political shocks. Focusing events can indeed have a disruptive impact on international politics because they are able to attract political, public and media attention at once, generating tremendous pressure on decision-makers to act, as they often highlight failing policies (Birkland, 1997, 2004). Similar to dynamics at the domestic level, focusing events provide an opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to advance alternative policy images and associated policies at the international level. Examples of such political shocks that have altered the foreign policies of a wide range of countries abound (see for example the end of the Cold War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, or the terrorist attack of 9/11 mentioned above).

The last driver of change at the international level is norm diffusion. Much like the politics of subsystems, the dynamics that prevent large global changes—namely interconnectedness—are also the ones that can generate rapid, disproportionate change. This means that the regimes usually preventing their members from diverging from agreed-upon rules and procedures are also the perfect vehicles for generating widespread change at the aggregate, international level. While substantial changes to those norms will initially encounter a lot of resistance, this opposition can be overcome over time, e.g., through convincing, bargaining, and bribing.

The diffusion of a new norm is described as a three-stage process: emergence, acceptance, and internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The similarities with the dynamics of domestic policy change described by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) are striking. In the first stage, ‘norm entrepreneurs’ try to convince others that the new norm is more suitable than the existing one, based on a “redefined understanding” of common interests (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 898). To move toward the next stage, the norm needs to convince a critical mass and be broadly accepted. Finnemore & Sikkink (1998, p. 901) argue that this critical mass can be a significant number of states or involve what they call a “critical state [...] without which the achievement of the substantive norm goal is compromised” (see also Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990; Thies, 2001). Once enough (critical) states internalized the new norm, it comes to define ‘appropriate’ international state behavior. The key to foreign policy change at the aggregate, international level, therefore, is to build a coalition, including powerful actors or a critical mass. Such coalition-building can imply traditional diplomacy or a redistribution of power (e.g., bribes or threats). Once this coalition tips the balance, the same interdependence that usually prevents countries from diverting their foreign policies will now make them comply with the proposed changes.

To sum up, positive feedback at the international level is usually put in motion after a change in the way an issue and its solution are understood. This change may be caused by a political shock or by norm diffusion through diplomacy and coalition-building, whereby appropriate state behavior is redefined. Before decisions can be made and enacted at the international level, resistance at both the domestic level (i.e., inside each country) and at the international level (i.e., between countries or within coalitions) needs to be overcome. This is what we call international friction, whereby changes in attention to issues become harder as decision-making costs increase and as policy change becomes more consequential. Hence, we expect policies and behavior at the aggregate, international level to be highly punctuated, as we can expect a lot of resistance to global change from a wide range of stakeholders at various levels. While friction generally prevents large policy changes, positive feedback can overthrow such resistance, resulting in disproportionately large changes to correct for the lack of prior policy adjustments.

EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND DATA

To demonstrate that international politics display a pattern of PE, we analyze stability and change at the domestic and the aggregate, international level. More specifically, we examine the patterns of annual change in three different but very complementary areas of foreign policy that serve as good indicators of international relations in general—increased cooperation or conflict. Specifically, we look at U.S. and EU troop deployments, as well as foreign and humanitarian aid and trade policies for 23 OECD members.

As we indicated earlier, we selected different aspects of international politics, including foreign policy outputs (foreign aid and troop deployments) and outcomes that are indirect consequences of foreign policies (dyadic trade volumes). The goal of this research design is to test PET not only across foreign policy issues but also across the policy process (input-process-output), as friction—i.e., the resistance to change—increases as we move down the policy stream.

Given the differences that exist between troop deployments, foreign and humanitarian aid and trade policies—be it in terms of decisional costs, number of veto players or their impact—we expect those policies to display slightly different patterns in their distribution of change. More specifically, our hypothesis is that policies that are more controllable and less contingent on the volatility of the international environment are also more punctuated and, thus, have distributions with a more marked central peak, weaker shoulders and fatter tails. Put differently, we expect the punctuatedness of foreign policy issues to depend on the degree to which they are subjected to international friction.

Hence, troop deployments, which include a large share of soldiers being permanently stationed at overseas bases, should be more plannable and less reactive to or dependent on the external environment. We expect this to be particularly true for American deployments, as compared to European ones, given that the U.S. has an exceptional global presence in military terms. Official development aid (ODA), to the contrary, should be slightly less plannable and controllable than troop deployments, even though donor countries are able to earmark aid streams to some degree. With respect to ODA, we hypothesize that country program-mable aid (CPA), that part of ODA which is subjected to multi-year planning at the country/regional level, is more punctuated than humanitarian aid (HUMA), which is provided in response to humanitarian emergencies and therefore more volatile. This implies that we expect the distribution of HUMA to have a lower concentration of incremental changes, but a higher concentration of medium-sized and large changes. Finally, as the least manageable policy domain, we expect that trade is less punctuated than troop deployments and ODA because governments cannot directly influence their trade volumes, that is, international friction is—comparatively speaking—rather low in this foreign policy area.

Based on these hypotheses, we test for leptokurtic distributional patterns, analyzing data on deployments, aid and trade policies from 1995–2015. To do so, we mainly rely on Jones and Baumgartner's (2005), Baumgartner et al. (2009) distribution approach. We use the L-kurtosis (LK), that is, the fourth moment of a distribution, because it is normalized and less vulnerable to outliers than the classic kurtosis measure (Breunig, 2006; Walgrave & Vlieghehart, 2010). The LK score shows how peaked a distribution is and therefore allows us to measure the general resistance to change within a policy domain or political system. As Breunig and Jones (2011, p. 107) highlight, “the standard Gaussian distribution has an approximate L-kurtosis score of 0.123”, that is, 0.123 is the threshold for defining a leptokurtic distribution.

Troop deployments

We first look at troop deployments of the U.S. and 26 EU member states (excluding Malta and Cyprus due to their exceptionally low annual deployments, but including the United Kingdom [UK] which left the EU in February 2020). For the U.S., we used data from Tim Kane (2016), detailing the yearly number of American troops stationed in each country between 1950–2015. Data for EU member states, in turn, are based on The Military Balance, published by the International Institute for Security Studies, and aggregated at the country-year level from 1995–2017.

Foreign aid

For data on ODA, we used the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) which provides aid flows from donor to developing countries, including HUMA and CPA. Our data are aggregated at the yearly level which means that the unit of analysis is the yearly dyadic allocation of a specific donor to a specific recipient country. We used constant prices to correct for inflation, and focused on aid volumes between 1995–2015 (except for

CPA given that data are only available since 2000). We examined the 23 countries that have been members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) since 2012 to provide for longer time series.

International trade

Data on international trade were obtained through the Correlates of War (COW) project which provides dyadic trade volumes between countries (Barbieri & Keshk, 2016). For ease of comparison with the ODA data, we focused on trade volumes from the same sample, that is, 23 long-standing DAC member countries, over the same period of time, that is, 1995–2015.

For aid and trade volumes, we removed units smaller or equal to zero from the analysis, as is customary with budget data, to discount series of zeroes representing non-existing policy programs which would artificially suggest stability. We chose not to exclude figures below a higher threshold, as we are examining budgetary data at a very high level of specificity. Moreover, applying such a threshold would remove numerous meaningful observations when examining HUMA, which is given in response to crises and is not meant to be structural, but reactive. While this increases the LK scores and reduces comparability with prior research on domestic budgets, it strengthens comparability between policy domains in this study by not applying a threshold that would be arbitrary and have a different impact on each policy domain and/or country. We do exclude troop deployments below 100, as this generally pertains to administrative or supporting personnel, rather than a ‘real’ military presence, and because data for European countries have been aggregated. Last but not least, we use data for the U.S. in most of our figures to allow for a visual comparison of the different distributions.

DATA ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

This section illustrates that several aspects of international politics, including troop deployments and ODA, as well as (dyadic) trade relations between countries, follow a pattern whereby periods of stability are followed by large punctuations, again followed by stability. We demonstrate that annual changes in those three foreign policy domains display a leptokurtic distribution, supporting our claim that relations between countries follow a pattern of PE. We also show that there are significant differences in how punctuated troop deployments, foreign aid and international trade are, ranging from classic distributions that public policy scholars tend to find in budget change studies in the realm of domestic policies, to leptokurtic distributions with central peaks that are much less well-defined and have rather large tails. This, in turn, suggests, as we will explain in more detail in this section, that the dynamics of stability and change vary across foreign policy issues, depending on the issue at hand.

Troop deployments

Figure 1 shows that the annual changes in U.S. troops stationed abroad follow a leptokurtic distribution, highly concentrated around the mean (the ‘slender peak’), with exceptionally high extreme values (‘fat tails’) and less middle range values (‘weak shoulders’) than a normal distribution would have, as displayed by the overlaying normal curve. This pattern, which policy scholars regularly find in studies on budget change, is indicative of high stability and occasional, large changes, in line with what we expect U.S. defense policy to look like: stable numbers of troops at military bases around the world and intermittent large or massive deployments toward war zones or crisis situations. While our data provide evidence for the U.S.’s shifting foreign policy priorities around the world, we should keep in mind that the U.S. has an exceptional, structural, global military presence, with approximately 800 bases in about 80 countries, compared to the UK, France and Russia, for example, who are estimated to each have 10–20 overseas bases (Vine, 2017). *N* refers to the number of observations which, in this case, includes the number of observations of percent changes, but excludes those observations where there were less than 100 troops.

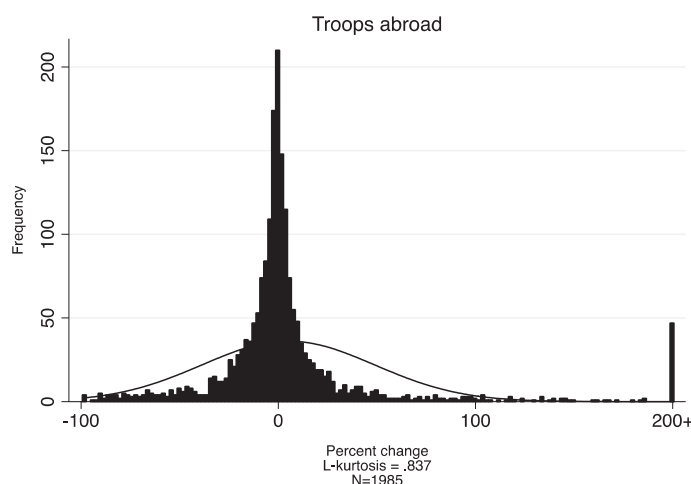


FIGURE 1 Distribution of the annual percent change in total U.S. troops stationed abroad (1950–2015).

Hence, the clear leptokurtic pattern might be unique to American defense policy and therefore less applicable to other countries—contrary to our observations on aid allocations and trade policy below.

By pooling annual troop deployments from current and former EU member states, we examine if this truly is the case, or if European troop deployments follow a similar PE pattern. Given that the U.S. is the only country with a truly global military presence, it makes more sense to look at aggregated figures for European countries. Hence, Figure 2 displays the pattern of change among troops deployed by 26 EU member states—including the UK, which left the EU in 2020—between 1995–2017. Because we are dealing with annually aggregated multi-country data, we cannot straightforwardly compare these data with the U.S. data. We do, however, observe a similar pattern of relative stability, alternated by large increases. The differences in both distributions (i.e., the more prominent central peak for the U.S.) nevertheless indicate a more structural and stable presence, with more frequent disproportionate changes, in U.S. troop deployments.

Aid policies

Compared to troop deployments, ODA is more plannable and controllable, as donor countries can decide how much, through which channels and to whom development aid will be allocated. Even when allocated through multilateral institutions, like the UN, donor countries are able to determine the purpose of aid streams by earmarking aid. Figure 3 shows the distribution of annual percent changes in total American aid volumes over the period 1995–2015. It shows a clear leptokurtic distribution, with a much less well-defined central peak, suggesting much more moderate adjustments in aid packages, and a particularly huge right tail, indicating large aid dumps.

This leptokurtic pattern in foreign aid—evidence of general stability, alternated by numerous disproportionate changes—is not specific to the U.S. We also find this pattern among 23 DAC donors, with an average LK score for ODA of 0.753. Table 2 compares CPA and HUMA, two extremes within the foreign aid spectrum. As expected, CPA—which corresponds to the structural part of bilateral aid—has significantly higher LK scores than the more volatile HUMA ($p < 0.001$). This suggests that CPA has more incremental changes (cf. the pronounced central peak) and more disproportionately large changes (cf. the fat tails).

Nevertheless, the LK scores for HUMA are also very high which indicates that this type of aid contains as well an almost structural aspect. Indeed, temporarily allocating resources and providing relief rarely solves the underlying causes of humanitarian disasters, that is, there is often a need for structural, political follow-up solutions. Famine due to drought or conflict, a high concentration of refugees, floods or any other man-made or natural disaster, tend to occur in the same regions or countries. Hence, our

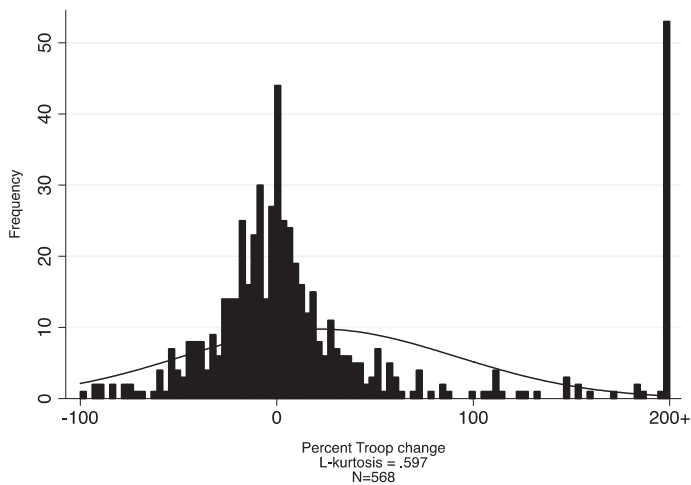


FIGURE 2 Distribution of the annual percent change in military deployments in 26 European countries (1995–2017).

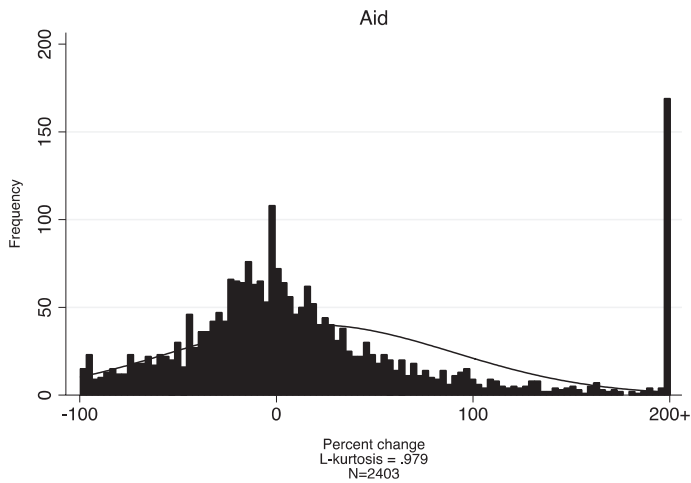


FIGURE 3 Distribution of the annual percent change in total aid volumes between the U.S. and its aid recipients (1995–2015).

results indicate that HUMA has, in many cases, almost transformed into a structural part of development assistance to specific recipient countries.

International trade

Contrary to troop deployments and foreign aid, trade is something governments have considerably less influence over. Although governments may create an environment that facilitates export and investment policies to increase their trade levels with a wide variety of partners, trade is also highly dependent on external factors, like local demand and the international economy. Those two factors are completely beyond the control of governments. This is fully reflected in Figure 4 which depicts the distribution of annual changes in total U.S. bilateral (dyadic) trade volumes and, once again, shows a clear leptokurtic pattern. As compared to ODA and troop deployments, however, the central peak confirms the high number of incremental changes (cf. the high concentration around the central peak). The weak shoulders,

TABLE 2 LK scores for the annual percent change distributions of humanitarian assistance (HUMA) and country programmable aid (CPA) for 23 OECD countries (2000–2015)

Country	LK HUMA	LK CPA
Australia	0.778	0.600
Austria	0.692	0.992
Belgium	0.732	0.930
Canada	0.815	0.998
Denmark	0.917	0.997
Finland	0.770	0.756
France	0.702	0.589
Germany	0.686	1.000
Greece	0.823	0.689
Ireland	0.724	0.869
Italy	0.676	0.779
Japan	0.750	0.688
Korea	0.695	0.837
Luxemburg	0.520	0.992
Netherlands	0.734	1.000
New Zealand	0.638	0.791
Norway	0.739	0.986
Portugal	0.781	0.882
Spain	0.686	0.949
Sweden	0.564	0.996
Switzerland	0.648	0.860
United Kingdom	0.871	0.982
United States	0.879	0.822
Average	0.731	0.868

Note: Zeroes and negative numbers were removed.

on the other hand, indicate that there are not that many moderate changes, and the fat tails confirm that there are quite a few more radical, disproportionate changes.

The leptokurtic pattern in annual changes is once again not specific to the U.S., but applies to all OECD countries included in our study. Table 3 displays the LK scores for annual changes in total dyadic trade volumes, and compares them to the countries' LK scores for annual changes in total ODA. First, we observe that changes in trade have high LK scores, indicating a pattern of PE. Second, the comparison between trade and ODA clearly shows that ODA has significantly higher LK scores ($p < 0.001$). This is fully in line with our expectations above, given the planned character of aid and the less manageable nature of trade.

DISCUSSION

In their attempts to explain stability and change at the international level, traditional IR theories have tended to concentrate on the behavior of states—particularly Great Powers—focusing mainly on explaining conflict or cooperation. By concentrating on the relationships between countries and specific aspects of their behavior in international politics, those theories have been rather limited in their explanatory potential of foreign policy stability and change. While realists and liberals contributed to our understanding of the dynamics at the systemic level, decision-making and FPA theories made important advances in unraveling the processes

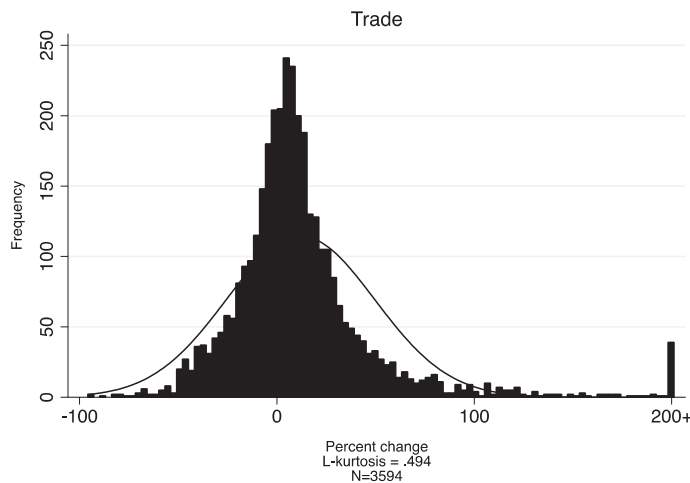


FIGURE 4 Distribution of the annual percent change in total trade volumes between the U.S. and its trade partners (1995–2015).

that drive different types of decisions at the national and international level. Research, however, has so far failed to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework that accounts for stability and change at the individual country level while linking those processes to the dynamics at the aggregate, international level. The aim of this article was precisely to show how those two levels interact and enhance stability and change, based on PET, thereby contributing to, rather than replacing, the IR toolbox.

Based on prior theoretical and empirical scholarship, we showed that international friction—that is, the combined resistance to change at the domestic and international level—explains processes of stability at the aggregate, international level. Stability is hereby a consequence of countermobilization and routine politics at the domestic level and national interests and interdependence at the international level. We argued that interdependence is key to understanding the high cost of change at the aggregate, international level, especially in international policy communities where well-established norms and rules apply. We then contended that it is, however, this very same interdependence that will eventually also lead to rapid and dramatic change in international politics. This happens once a critical state or a critical mass of states is supporting the change, in norms for example, and once it becomes too costly for all other countries to further resist that pressure. Additionally, we insisted on the fact that change is not only an exogenous process whereby political shocks draw attention to failing policies and put alternative images and solutions on the fast-track, thus speeding up the entire process of change. Our theoretical section detailed and emphasized how change at the international level can also be the consequence of an endogenous process whereby new, alternative arguments show that existing policies produce subpar outcomes and, thus, come to overrule prevailing ideas and values in international politics.

The empirical section looked at different indicators and aspects of international politics. If foreign policy was proportionate to shifts in the international environment, we would expect indicators to change in a normally distributed way. Our evidence, however, points toward a general pattern of PE whereby periods of stasis are alternated by disproportionate policy changes, and is thus in line with the results of Diehl and Goertz (2000) and Colgan et al. (2012). In addition, we concluded that this leptokurtic pattern of change characterizes a wide variety of foreign policies and, hence, different aspects of international relations. Indeed, we found the PE pattern both for foreign policy outputs (troop deployments and foreign aid) and for outcomes that are indirect consequences of foreign policies (dyadic trade volumes). Moreover, our empirical results suggest that policy outputs, where greater friction is at play, display more punctuated policies than those where outcomes cannot that easily or directly be managed.

Overall, this study provides ample theoretical explanations and empirical evidence for the drivers of change and stability at the aggregate, international level. We demonstrated that different aspects of

TABLE 3 LK scores for the annual percent change distributions of trade and foreign aid for 23 OECD countries (1995–2015)

Country	LK trade	LK ODA
Australia	0.515	0.765
Austria	0.522	0.774
Belgium	0.599	0.832
Canada	0.673	0.596
Denmark	0.361	0.813
Finland	0.649	0.630
France	0.351	0.818
Germany	0.378	0.719
Greece	0.604	0.498
Ireland	0.587	0.631
Italy	0.468	0.833
Japan	0.282	0.768
Korea	0.316	0.861
Luxemburg	0.773	0.576
The Netherlands	0.396	0.795
New Zealand	0.694	0.556
Norway	0.887	0.785
Portugal	0.700	0.716
Spain	0.612	0.903
Sweden	0.396	0.792
Switzerland	0.354	0.790
United Kingdom	0.424	0.884
United States	0.494	0.979
Average	0.523	0.753

Note: Zeroes and negative numbers have been removed.

foreign policy neatly fit the pattern of PE and showed, based on a vast body of evidence, that PET holds across countries, policy areas and over time. PET, including the LK measure, provides great potential for comparative research in IR, allowing us to analyze different issues across political systems and over time, both at the national and the international level. PET can, thus, teach us a great deal about our institutions, and how they affect our policies, rules and norms, as recent research on political systems also suggests (Fagan, 2022; Jones et al., 2019). At the very same time, the analysis of stability and change in foreign policy provides great insights for PET and public policy scholars. It notably sheds light on the variations within the class of generally leptokurtic distributions, and highlights that the latter depend on international friction and the extent to which policies and policy outcomes can be managed. Our research, thus, not only revives but also adds to a discussion on policy punctuations among public policy scholars (John & Bevan, 2012), focusing specifically on *how* and *why* leptokurtic distributions and punctuations vary across policy issues.

Future research should not only further explore the similarities and differences among leptokurtic distributions, but also analyze in more detail the dynamics of stability and change at the aggregate, international level. While quantitative scholarship could focus on the different degrees of punctuatedness and examine more closely the factors that produce small or larger changes (e.g., institutional characteristics; issue attributes, including the degree to which governments can plan and manage different aspects of foreign policy), qualitative researchers should aim to further unravel the interactions between different

policy levels and the role of specific actors and venues in promoting and blocking alternative policy images and solutions. Specifically, under which circumstances can critical states deter a critical mass of countries in adopting and promoting new norms?

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ENDNOTE

¹ For an example of such a leptokurtic distribution, see Figures 1-4 in the empirical section below.

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