

Gov 50.08: Foreign Policy in Small Groups

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1

Learning Objectives

- Explain how social influence can shape foreign policy decision-making in groups.
- Explain, the symptoms, antecedents, and consequences of groupthink. Give examples and identify novel examples.
- Identify and explain remedies for groupthink, connecting each to specific antecedents.
- Explain how the balance of experience between leaders and advisers can affect foreign policy decisions.
 - Specifically, explain why inexperienced leaders – and their advisers – might be more prone to psychological biases than their experienced counterparts.

2

Logistics

- Midterm next Thursday, 4/25.
 - Memo on Canvas.
- Syllabus change:
 - Keller (2005) is NOT required for next Tuesday, 4/23. I updated the syllabus on Canvas to reflect this change.

3

Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Groups

- Most of the theories that we have considered to this point involve **individual** psychology.
- But foreign policy decisions are rarely made by a leader acting alone.
 - Critics often argue that groups will "correct" for individual biases. Groups are more "rational" than individual decision-makers.
- Moreover, social psychology tells us that social influence is pervasive – other people influence how we think and how we act.
- What do we know about the interaction between leaders (heads of state) and foreign policy advisers?

4

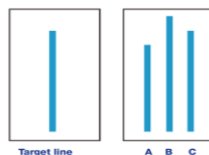
Social Influence

- "Two fundamental axioms of social psychology are that people construct their own reality and that **social influences are pervasive**" (Smith, Mackie, and Claypool p. 15).
- Groups have **social norms**, and people feel pressured to conform to them.
 - **Private conformity**: individual acceptance of a norm.
 - **Public conformity**: when people comply with norms despite privately believing something different.

5

Social Influence

- Ultra-famous example from psychology:
 - Solomon Asch (1951, 1955) & his line judgment study
 - Only 25% consistently failed to conform to the group judgment.
- We like consensus.



6

Groupthink is...

- "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when members' striving for **unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.**" (Janis, 9).
- "decision-making that is impaired by the drive to **reach consensus regardless of how** the consensus is formed" (Smith, Mackie, and Claypool 2015, p. 573).
- It applies to **small collectives directly interacting** with one another.

7

Case Study: Bay of Pigs invasion

- "On April 17, 1961, 1,400 Cuban exiles launched what became a botched invasion at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba" (JFK in history, [JFK Presidential library](#)).
- It didn't go well.



8

Case Study: Bay of Pigs invasion

- "On April 17, 1961, 1,400 Cuban exiles launched what became a botched invasion at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba" (JFK in history, [JFK Presidential library](#)).
- It didn't go well.
- "The group that deliberated on the Bay of Pigs decision included men of **considerable intellectual talent**. Like the President, all the main advisers were **shrewd thinkers**, capable of **objective, rational analysis**, and accustomed to speaking their minds. But **collectively they failed to detect the serious flaws** in the invasion plan." (Janis 1972, p. 19)

9

The Symptoms of Groupthink*

- **Overestimates of the group**
 - Illusion of invulnerability and excessive optimism.
 - Unquestioned belief in the group's morality.
- **Closed-mindedness**
 - Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings.
 - Stereotyped views of the enemy leaders as too evil to warrant negotiation or too stupid to effectively counter "our" moves.
- **Pressures toward uniformity**
 - Self-censorship
 - Shared illusion of unanimity
 - Direct pressure on members who express dissent
 - Self-appointed mindguards

*See pages 174-175 of Janis (1972).

10

Groupthink in the Bay of Pigs

- In groups of 3-4, explain how decision-making in the Bay of Pigs invasion exhibited symptoms of groupthink.



11

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12

What are the consequences of GT?

- Groupthink undermines procedural rationality.

13

Procedural Rationality: *Homo Economicus*



14

How does groupthink shape decisions?

- Groupthink undermines procedural rationality.
- How?
 - Discussion limited to only one or a few alternatives.
 - No survey of objectives to be fulfilled & values implicated by the choice.
 - Group does not examine the initially preferred policy.
 - The group does not re-examine the course of action initially preferred by the majority.
 - Members neglect courses of action initially deemed unsatisfactory.
 - Members ignore information inconsistent with their preferred policy.
 - Members spend little time considering setbacks.
- **In short:** no listing of goals, no complement of policy options, no full weighting of costs and benefits, no selection based on EU maximization... no procedural rationality.

15

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 - Members spend little time considering setbacks.
- **Shorter:** consensus based on collective optimism + collective avoidance (of information)

16

Why is this an “illusory” consensus?

- Groups do not consider all information (**consensus is not based on sound evidence**)
- Group members have similar backgrounds & views (**consensus is not a convergence of multiple viewpoints**)
- Group members publicly conform to avoid rejection (**consensus is not a reflection of true beliefs**)

17

What causes groupthink?

- Three antecedents, according to Janis:
 - Group cohesion
 - Group structure
 - High pressure/stress



18

What causes groupthink?

- Three antecedents, according to Janis:
 - **Group cohesion** (mixed)
 - **Group structure** (leadership style & norms matter)
 - **High pressure/stress** (mixed)
- Evidence?

19

Groupthink discussion

- How can leaders guard against groupthink?
- How could groupthink exacerbate individual-level biases (e.g., prospect theory, analogical reasoning, images)?

20

Remedies for groupthink

- Devil's advocate (better: real devil)
- Impartial leadership
- New norms



21

No substitute for Experience?

- "What explains why **biases** matter in certain cases rather than others, even within the same institution?" (Saunders 2017, p. S220).
- Under what conditions will leaders a) misperceive and b) fail to mitigate a policy's potential risks?
- Can experienced advisers compensate for an inexperienced leader?

22

No substitute for Experience?

- How does Saunders define **experience**?
- How can experience mitigate biased risk assessment & preparation?

23

No substitute for Experience?

- Saunders relies on the politics of **principal-agent** problems.
- An agent makes decisions that affect (or on behalf of) a principal.
- Here, **advisers** are appointed by the **president**.
- Ideally, the president will choose advisers whose interests align perfectly with his. But goals do not always align – advisers (agents) have interests, too.

24

No substitute for Experience?

- How can a leader's experience affect their ability to effectively manage advisers?
- Three mechanisms can amplify or mitigate biases:
 - **Monitoring** (overconfidence)
 - **Delegation** (availability, overconfidence)
 - **Diversity in Decision-making** (homogeneous views, ambiguity aversion)
- **Bottom line:** Advisers have more power under an inexperienced president. With no accountability, they act more independently, magnifying their existing biases rather than guarding against them.

25

Hypotheses

- An inexperienced principal leads to less effective explicit and implicit monitoring of advisers.
 - (Did advisers think that they were going to be held accountable for their risky plans?)
- An inexperienced principal is likely to make delegation more credible, increasing perceived and actual levels of power and overconfidence among advisers.
 - (Did advisers think that they had the power to make plans & control information?)
- An inexperienced principal may decrease incentives for advisers to invest in information, or lead to information gathering on agent-defined alternatives.
 - (Did advisers rely on heuristics, look for evidence that would confirm their preferences, and discount disconfirming evidence?)

26

Hypotheses

- An inexperienced principal is more likely to marginalize potentially divergent viewpoints.
 - (Did the principal include a devil's advocate or genuine minority viewpoint in discussions?)
- Advisers are more likely to present inexperienced principals that are framed with high degrees of precision.
 - (Did the advisers imply that a particular plan was certain to work, or did they present data on uncertainty?)

27

Evidence

- George H.W. Bush vs. George W. Bush
 - Per Table 1, "Controlled Risk" vs. "Excess Risk"
- What makes this comparison useful for testing the theory?
- What evidence does Saunders provide to assess her hypotheses?



28

Discussion

- Saunders concludes that Pres. George W. Bush and his team underestimated the cost of a "light footprint" invasion due to his inexperience. How does this analysis complement or compete with Dueffer & Dyson's analysis of misperceptions in the 2003 Iraq War?
- What can Saunders' theory tell us about other leaders or non-democratic states? Is the theory generalizable?
- Saunders focuses only on variance in the principal's experience in this analysis. What would we expect from an **inexperienced** leader with **inexperienced** advisers? Why?
- How can leaders maximize procedural rationality when they make foreign policy decisions? Consider individual and group-level factors.

29

Thursday Reading: Stats!

- Gallagher & Allen use a statistical method called "heteroskedastic probit."
- You don't need to know what this means.
- Often, quantitative models are trying to predict the **average** outcome.
 - E.g., does one president use force more often compared to other presidents, on average?
- This is what their "standard probit" models are evaluating. How often does a president use force when given the opportunity.
- Positive (negative) numbers in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that when a given president has higher scores on this trait, he will be more (less) likely to use force.

30

Thursday Reading: Stats!

- Gallagher & Allen use a statistical method called "heteroskedastic probit."
- You don't need to know what this means.
- Often, quantitative models are trying to predict the **average** outcome.
- But sometimes, scholars are interested in other parameters – like variance.
 - Instead of asking whether a president is more war-prone on average, models can be designed to predict the variability in their strategies.
 - E.g., some presidents might switch more often between extremes – using extreme force one day and then choosing cooperation the next.
 - The "variance equation" in Table 5 is designed to predict this outcome. Higher numbers mean that presidents with more of that trait are less consistent in their approach to foreign policy.

31

Fin.

Next time: Two perspectives on personality research

32