

Agents vs. Structures in International Relations

Instructions:

Prior to handing out these questions, ask the students whether they think we can understand something like war better by studying 1) structural conditions (e.g. balance of power, high costs of war (e.g. nuclear capability), or regime type) or by studying 2) agency (e.g. leaders' personalities/backgrounds, diversionary motives). This will give you a general sense of where students fall on the agent-structure dimension.

Next you will hand out the 5 survey questions. Mix versions 1 & 2 (with the version identifiers removed) so that every other student in your class receives version A. Students select the option which is closest to their viewpoint for why a president made a foreign policy decision. The "A" options are designed to capture more structural conditions for why leaders make decisions, while the "B" options focus more on the agent's personal/domestic motives for making decisions. Before discussing results, ask the students to report how many A's they have in general (from 5 to 0); this will give you a sense for where the class falls on the agent-structure dimension. My class (fall 2018) leaned heavily in a structural direction with 23 of 29 choosing 3-5 A's.

The exercises are designed to take a similar FP decision made by two presidents (one Democrat, one Republican). You can see how much agreement your class has in terms of what drives FP decisions by different US parties. My class (fall 2018) had a lot of agreement on question 2 (most chose b), question 3 (most chose a), and question 5 (most chose a), but they differed more on questions 1 & 4. Please send me ideas for additional questions! Thanks! Sara Mitchell

Version 1

For each of the following questions, choose the option that is closest to your viewpoint.

1. Why did President George W. Bush use drones frequently to target terrorist group leaders?
 - a. Drones minimize the audience costs that President Bush would face if soldiers died in missions to eliminate terrorist threats.
 - b. President Bush believed that drones were an effective tool for fighting Al Qaeda and its affiliate groups.

2. Why did President Barack Obama's administration in 2014 attempt to tamp down the number of Central American families seeking asylum in the US by keeping families in detention and processing and deporting them as quickly as possible?
 - a. Central American asylum seekers were viewed as a security threat to the United States and the policy was designed to deter future asylum seekers.
 - b. President Obama's party was facing midterm elections in 2014 and he sought to improve the party's chances by adopting a tougher immigration policy.

3. Why did President George W. Bush support the Iraq War that began in 2003?
 - a. Iraq was in violation of UNSC resolutions and its development of weapons of mass destruction posed a threat to peace in the Middle East.
 - b. President Bush was motivated to respond to a family rivalry with Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein, who tried to assassinate his father (George H.W. Bush) in 1993, an attack that almost killed his wife Laura.

4. Why did President Donald Trump criticize the Canadian government's tariffs on an ultra-filtered class of milk, which reduced US milk exports to Canada?
 - a. President Trump argued that the price reductions violated dairy rules in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).
 - b. President Trump's party was facing midterm elections in 2018 and he sought to improve the party's chances in dairy producing states.

5. Why did President Barack Obama increase US military presence in the Asian region by creating new alliances and building up US military bases and naval forces?
 - a. China's increased territorial aggression in the South China sea and its Belt and Road economic expansion pose long term threats to US security.
 - b. President Obama sought to create a regional economic agreement (TPP) and used the military commitments as leverage.

Version 2

For each of the following questions, choose the option that is closest to your viewpoint.

1. Why did President Barack Obama use drones frequently to target terrorist group leaders?
 - a. Drones minimize the audience costs that President Obama would face if soldiers died in missions to eliminate terrorist threats.
 - b. President Obama believed that drones were an effective tool for fighting Al Qaeda and its affiliate groups.

2. Why did President Donald Trump's administration in 2018 attempt to tamp down the number of Central American families seeking asylum in the US by keeping families in detention and processing and deporting them as quickly as possible?
 - a. Central American asylum seekers were viewed as a security threat to the United States and the policy was designed to deter future asylum seekers.
 - b. President Trump's party was facing midterm elections in 2018 and he sought to improve the party's chances by adopting a tougher immigration policy.

3. Why did President Bill Clinton authorize aerial bombings of Iraq in 1998?
 - a. Iraq was in violation of UNSC resolutions and its development of weapons of mass destruction posed a threat to peace in the Middle East.
 - b. President Clinton faced declining approval in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and sought to divert the public's attention.

4. Why did President Barack Obama criticize the Canadian government's tariffs on an ultra-filtered class of milk, which reduced US milk exports to Canada?
 - a. President Obama argued that the price reductions violated dairy rules in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).
 - b. President Obama's party was facing midterm elections in 2014 and he sought to improve the party's chances in dairy producing states.

5. Why did President Donald Trump increase US military presence in the Asian region by adding a 3rd aircraft carrier group and increase marine expeditionary forces?
 - a. China's increased territorial aggression in the South China sea and its Belt and Road economic expansion pose long term threats to US security.
 - b. President Trump sought to deter North Korea from further developments of nuclear weapons and increase military presence as a brinkmanship move.