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IR 1
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Week 4 Response Paper

Where do preferences come from, how do we identify them, and how do they matter in international relations? These are the critical questions posed by the readings for this week. A variety of answers are offered for each question. The main schools of thought addressed in the readings are Marxist or neo-Marxist, rational choice, prospect theory, strategic choice, second image, and constructivist. Many of these theoretical frameworks overlap. Second image frameworks, for example, may incorporate either rational choice or prospect theory explanations of how preferences are formed at the domestic level and then aggregated. Each of these frameworks brings a different perspective on preference formation to bear on questions in international relations. In this response paper I will discuss two main points: where these different frameworks can most beneficially be combined to provide traction on assumptions regarding preferences in the international arena, and what extensions of these frameworks seem most valuable to IR theory and empirical work.

Of the articles and chapters assigned for this week, I found the following clearest and most analytically convincing: Hiscox' piece on factor mobility and cleavage formation, Kaufmann and Pape's analysis of the British anti-slavery movement, Kahler's piece on rationality in IR, and Stein's piece on when misperception matters. I also feel that these four articles, when their arguments are combined, represent the most viable approach to studying preferences in IR. The first two articles focus on issues that cross from the international realm domestic

political arena, and vice versa. They emphasize the importance of domestic politics to IR and of IR (specifically trade) to domestic politics. Hiscox' piece is something of a neo-Marxist, rational choice take on the influence of international trade on domestic preference formation. Kaufmann and Pape, on the other hand, present a norm-driven model of how domestic political cultural shifts can influence states' international actions. I found both arguments to be convincing. The critical component of these two readings for me, however, was not the discussion of what caused domestic political preferences to shift (rational choice – utility over economic payoffs, or cultural norms). Rather it was the emphasis on the feedback loop between the international and domestic political spheres.

The Kaufmann and Pape piece speaks to a number of the other readings. It bases the explanation for Britain's expensive and controversial anti-slavery campaign in cultural norms, which are sometimes characterized as fostering irrational behavior or limiting rational actions. I found, however, that this week's readings suggested that culture as a category can subsume norms, and that culture can be viewed as part of the strategic setting identified by Frieden. Norms differ radically across the globe, and even within state societies. Norms regarding international relations are shaped by history, by intellectual developments, and by changing self-interest. History provides data for extrapolation. Intellectual developments introduce new ideas about one's place in the world. And shifting self-interests, in a rational choice paradigm, adjust according to exogenous and endogenous variables such as technological advancements and regulatory reform respectively. I find therefore that the formulation of norms can be considered

consistent with a rational choice framework. It is only when we try to use norms to explain subsequent behavior that we encounter challenges to rational choice theory, argue this week's authors. I did not find an example of how norms can violate the completeness or transitivity of preferences, however, which conditions are the basic requirement for rational choice behavior in the authors' arguments. I found that the discussion of norm-driven behavior in IR in fact provided support for the framework of bounded rationality that Kahler posits will overtake traditional and rigid rational choice theory.

The Kahler and Stein articles focus their attention on the international arena exclusively, but both make more general points about strategic decision-making in social environments. These articles are more in line with standard classical IR theory in that they do not explicitly mention politics in their analysis. While rationality, misperception and contingent strategies matter greatly for political situations, these articles focus on currents of IR literature such as deterrent theory and conflict. Both of them struggle with the same assumption: that the state can be classified and operationalized as a unitary actor. They further implicitly assume that the unitary state representative can compute likelihoods and outcomes in complex strategic settings. This idea has been challenged in both theoretical and empirical literature (see Scharpf, Fritz. "Games real actors could play: The challenges of complexity" *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 3: 277.). Kahler makes a nod towards this recent empirical work that challenges pure rational choice assumptions, predicting that rather than fading into irrelevance rational choice theory will adapt itself to empirical advancements such as bounded rationality and prospect theory, but will

remain predominant. I am inclined to agree, for the same reasons that I find strategic choice to be the most constructive framework for studying political action. I would argue, however, that the limitations of rational choice theory occur at the extremes of human behavior – this is consistent with Kaufmann and Pape’s norm-driven explanation. Slavery, genocide, torture – obviously powerful states have failed to act to prevent these atrocities in other parts of the world sometimes and at other times have used ideological justifications for intervention. It seems that at these extremes of the human experience, rational choice and norm-driven behavior overlap to drive decision-making.

Several of the articles alluded to the relevance of advancements in experimental economics and behavioral psychology for IR theory. While both fields can provide us with refinements or alternatives to rational choice theory, a main argument against the importance of empirical work on preference formation to IR theory is the shakiness of the assumption that states operate as unitary actors and therefore can be assumed to undergo the same decision-making processes as individuals in laboratory settings. Critiques of rational choice, such as catastrophic risk, can themselves invalidate that assumption – there is no proven way to simulate the catastrophe of war in a laboratory setting. In addition, some of the more contemporary work in IR addressing the linkages between international and domestic politics demonstrates the problems with the assumption of states as unitary actors – for example, Raustialia’s piece from last week discussed the possibility of bringing certain domestic actors to international bargaining tables, which process would clearly violate that assumption.