

**Laitin, David D. *Nations, States, and Violence.***

Caroline L. Payne

Volume 28, winter 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs28br14>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Payne, C. L. (2008). Compte rendu de [Laitin, David D. *Nations, States, and Violence.*] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 28, 0–0.

What criticism might be leveled at this work? First with respect to hypothesis presentation, one can make a case for a clearer specification of the expectations given the author's theoretical position. The approach taken by Davenport, where all hypotheses found in the literature are presented, is common, but I prefer the more focused option of presenting one's own hypotheses and letting the literature review identify alternatives. Second I believe Davenport missed an opportunity to make another contribution. He invests considerable attention to the state's behavior and how the state conditions dissident response. This begs an important question: are certain groups more likely to be targeted in democracies? For example, are minority groups or groups with violent goals the most likely targets? Further attention to the way dissidents groups are composed and organized, and how this affects state-dissident interaction is a logical next step.

These minor concerns aside, Davenport's book represents a leap forward in our understanding of how democracy relates to state repression. It contextualizes our conception of the domestic democratic peace by identifying the limitations of the hypothesis. As such it will be an important entry on graduate syllabi and should generate a good deal of work that will refine, attempt to refute, and extend the notion of a domestic democratic peace.

**Joseph K. Young** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Southern Illinois University.

Laitin, David D. *Nations, States, and Violence*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

David D. Laitin's latest book is a must-read for scholars interested in a succinct evaluation of the status of ethnicity and nationalism, as well as their connection to civil conflict — or more accurately, the lack of a connection. For those unfamiliar with the literature, *Nations, States, and Violence* provides a useful account of the relationship between national identities and the oft-associated hatred and aggression. Discussions of the complex relationship between nations and states, as well as the liberal democratic approach proposed by Laitin as the solution to problems posed by heterogeneity, provide much for the seasoned scholar to chew on. Theory and evidence are brilliantly intermingled with rich historical examples drawn primarily from the author's invaluable fieldwork.

Laitin packs numerous complex issues into a very small space and as such leaves the reader expecting and wanting more. Though the potential implications of this work are numerous, the author's purpose is primarily three-fold. First Laitin establishes the absence of a relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and civil war. (p. 15) Conventional wisdom and the data conflict: while combatant

accounts, our view of ethnicity, and biased samples suggest the root cause of violence is ethnic, complete data tell a different story. In actuality, conflicts based on ethnicity are the exception; rather, a weak, incompetent state is largely responsible. Aggregate statistical analyses support these conclusions. Perhaps even more interesting is the individual-level analysis briefly discussed. Laitin uses survey data collected with Jerry Hough on former Soviet republics to establish that there is no relationship between ethnic hatred and the onset of civil violence. (pp. 16-18) Given the fact that many civil war theories are based on heterogeneity working through a process of hatred, this more nuanced evidence tapping into individual feelings concerning ethnic others is extremely relevant for the contemporary debate.

Second, Laitin builds on this conceptualization of the nation as a construct, challenging the prevailing view. Utilizing a “tipping game,” Laitin proxies national identity with language choice and concludes that this identity is a *choice* achieved through group coordination and is based on utility-maximization. Because national identities are a product of interdependent individual choices, nations may, and in fact do, change. Nation-states now considered homogenous, such as France, once comprised many national groups. This evidence suggests the nation does not make the state, and actually the state, at times, creates the nation. The ability of nations to coordinate and reformulate themselves is further proof that conflict in heterogeneous states is the exception.

Finally Laitin offers the liberal democratic approach as a solution to nationalist revivals across the globe. While there are costs associated with heterogeneity (though not conflict), they are far less than the costs of eliminating flourishing nationalist diversity. By treating national identity as a consumption item, a choice made free of government intervention, Laitin argues homogenous nationalist groups may peacefully and productively coexist within the contemporary state. This solution is presented as a means by which diversity can be embraced while avoiding slow economic growth and inefficient public goods.

Laitin addresses many challenging issues and by and large does them justice; of course, there are some additional matters the reader would benefit from a mind such as his engaging. Most generally, it would be advantageous to see Laitin’s overall conclusions placed in the context of the five mechanisms presented as linking nationalism to violence (irredentism; secession; irredentism combined with secession; sons-of-the-soil; and pogroms and communal warfare). For example, in those exceptional cases of violence, if Laitin were to categorize civil wars based on these mechanisms, would ethnic heterogeneity or ethnic hatred affect the onset of one type of civil war differently than the onset of another type? Additionally, as Laitin himself acknowledges (p. 134), because economic conditions and civil war are related, it is possible the effect of heterogeneity works through poverty. Therefore, the argument linking ethnic heterogeneity and lower economic growth certainly warrants further exploration; it is

plausible to expect a mediating effect that cannot be detected in one-stage models. This would have important implications for poor heterogeneous states and their adoption of Laitin's proposed liberal democratic approach.

Despite these suggestions, Laitin's latest work is nothing short of enthralling. It would prove a sufficient introduction on the topic for undergraduates, as well as an enticing work for any graduate student or established scholar to engage. Though the book is full of riveting material, I expect the last chapter, "Managing the Multinational State," will generate the most debate and serve as the launching point for many future research projects. The notion of a liberal democratic approach to ethnic heterogeneity should prove the topic of many conversations and academic endeavors, as its implications are both abundant and vital.

**Caroline L. Payne** is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Louisiana State University.

Miller, Benjamin. *States, Nations, and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

This book seeks to address two related empirical questions about interstate conflict: to account for transitions between war and peace in different regions across time, and to explain variations in the level of regional peace that exists in different regions in a particular time period. (p. 369) Benjamin Miller's explanation crosses the typical levels-of-analysis divide in international relations in its suggestion that both regional and international factors play a crucial role. On its face, Miller's argument appears straightforward and parsimonious as he points to only two explanatory variables: great power involvement and state-to-nation congruence. However, as explained below, the causal mechanisms of his argument are more complicated than first admitted.

Miller proposes that the state-to-nation congruence in a given region shapes its risk of conflict. Moreover, whether regional outcomes are "hot" or "cold" depends on domestic and regional factors (i.e., the strength of the state and the extent of the imbalance between states and nations), international factors, and the type of great power involvement, respectively. Miller claims his approach unifies realist and liberal approaches: great power involvement is considered a structural (i.e., realist) force, while the state-to-nation balance is regarded as a domestic (i.e., liberal) factor. (pp. 21-23) The state-to-nation balance, which can be either internal or external, is an important factor in determining whether first, strong states are status quo enforcing when congruent or revision seeking when incongruent, and second, weak states are frontier states (i.e., prone