

# Perceptions of Rivalry

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**ABSTRACT** Rivalry is pervasive in politics and beyond. Drawing on unique survey data, this article examines how instructors can draw on students' perceptions of rivalry to explore different aspects of the rivalry concept. The data show that different ways in which students tend to think about rivalry tend to reflect differences in scholarly conceptualizations of interstate rivalry. The data also suggest that referencing sports rivalries may be useful to introduce the concept of rivalry, drawing on parallels between sports rivalries and interstate rivalries and students' greater interest in and familiarity with sports than international affairs. This article provides an understanding of how students tend to think about rival relations to help instructors effectively lead classroom discussions on interstate rivalry.

Rivalry is ubiquitous in politics. From Athens and Sparta in premodern times to North Korea and South Korea, Iran and Israel, and India and Pakistan in present times, rivalries have populated the international landscape. Rivals tend to be particularly conflictual, engaging in repeated instances of conflict and accounting for approximately two-thirds of all interstate disputes (Diehl and Goertz 2000, 60–61) and wars (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007, 88–89). Understanding the nature and dynamics of rivalry is important given the pervasiveness of rivalry in international politics and the conflict-prone nature of rival relations.

Despite the centrality of interstate rivalry to global politics, there is disagreement concerning how “rivalry” should be conceptualized and operationalized. Is militarized conflict a necessary component of rivalry? Are rivals not only competitors but also enemies? Do countries such as Iran and North Korea qualify as rivals to the United States despite significant power asymmetries? The existence of multiple understandings of rivalry complicates introducing the concept in the classroom.

This article examines how instructors can draw on students' perceptions of rivalry to explore differences in scholarly conceptualizations of interstate rivalry. It also explores how instructors can make use of students' familiarity with sports rivalries to illustrate aspects of interstate rivalries. This study provides an understanding of the ways in which students tend to think about rival relations to better enable instructors to lead effective classroom discussions on the concept of rivalry.

In this article, first, I consider the classes for which the discussion of rivalry may be relevant. Then, drawing on unique survey data, I examine students' perceptions of interstate and sports rivalries. I explore students' identification of cases of interstate and sports rivalry as well as their perceptions of certain aspects

of rivalry, such as physical violence and psychological hostility, to determine ways in which instructors can draw on students' impressions to introduce the scholarly literature on rivalry conceptualization. I also review students' self-reported interest in and knowledge of sports in comparison to international affairs to assess whether reference to sports can be an effective way to pique students' interest in the concept of rivalry. The article concludes with a brief summary of how to introduce the ideas presented herein in the classroom.

## PERCEPTIONS OF RIVALRY

Discussing the concept of rivalry is relevant to a broad array of courses. Rivalry is central to courses on global politics (particularly courses on international security) because of the conflict-prone nature of interstate rivals. Examining specific cases of rivalry is often germane to courses on foreign policy or regional politics. A focus on rivalry can serve as a useful means through which to consider issues related to conceptualization and operationalization in research methods courses. Discussion of the rivalry concept may also be pertinent to courses on domestic politics because of the role of engagement in rivalry on issues such as the tradeoff between national security versus civil liberties and expenditures on guns versus butter.

How do we perceive our rivals? Who do we view them to be, and what are our feelings toward them? Why do we perceive them to be rivals? Do we necessarily view our rivals as being unrelentingly hostile and threatening? Public perceptions of rivalry have gone largely unexplored. To assess students' attitudes, opinions, and feelings toward rivalry phenomena, my colleagues and I created a voluntary online survey that was completed by 261 students in the spring of 2012. All undergraduate students at Lenoir-Rhyne University were invited to take the survey through e-mail (with multiple follow-up notices). As an incentive, students who completed the survey were entered into a drawing. The students who participated represented a broad range of majors. Most of those who completed the survey were

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traditional full-time students between the ages of 18 and 22. The students who participated in the survey were largely representative of the undergraduate population at Lenoir-Rhyne University.

### Who Are Our Rivals?

Rivalry can be distinguished from other forms of competition in part by mutual identification and recognition (Kuenne 1989, 555; Maoz and Mor 2002, 5; Thies 2001, 697–698; Thompson 1995). Rivals, as Thompson (1995, 200) argues “brand each other as such and act accordingly.” Asking students to identify who they view as rivals highlights the importance of identification to the concept of rivalry while also compelling students to consider criteria that must be met for competitors to qualify as being rivals.

The survey respondents were prompted with an open-ended question in which they were asked to identify the country they view as being the United States’ primary rival. Respondents were then prompted with a second question in which they were asked to indicate what additional countries, if any, they view as rivals to the United States. The modal country identified as a rival to the United States was China. More than half of all respondents (55.6%) identified China as the United States’ primary rival while two-thirds of all respondents (66.7%) identified China as a rival, primary or otherwise. Students likely tend to identify China as a rival to the United States because of China’s increasing economic competitiveness with the United States. Instructors can use stu-

lina State University (NCSSU). Despite a competitive imbalance—UNC has had nearly twice as many wins in head-to-head matchups with NCSSU in both men’s basketball and football—UNC and NCSSU are geographically proximate rivals.

Asking students to identify who they view as rivals not only highlights the importance of perception and branding to the establishment of a rivalry but also compels students to consider why some opponents are rivals while others are not. This requires students to think about whether certain conceptual criteria must be fulfilled for competitors to qualify as rivals. Identifying cases of rivalry can consequently serve as a basis from which to explore different aspects of rivalry conceptualization.

### Issue Competition

There is an array of issues that rivals may compete over. Some rivalries are rooted in territorial conflict (Huth 1996; Tir and Diehl 2002; Vasquez 1996). Others are driven by positional competition over influence or prestige at the apex of a regional or global power hierarchy (Thompson 1995; 2001). Still others may be rooted in ideological contention (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007) or in a combination of issues.

Although the issues that rivals compete over vary, competition over salient issues drives rival relations (Bennett 1997, 229; Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007, 25; Maoz and Mor 2002, 4; Vasquez 2009, 78–79). An inability to resolve outstanding issues can link

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After China, the three countries most frequently identified by students as rivals to the United States are the states George W. Bush referred to as constituting an “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address—Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. Instructors can draw on the identification of such states as rivals to the United States by some students but not others as a way in which to explore differences in conceptualizations of rivalry concerning the issues of competition and power parity. If competition is a necessary component of rivalry and power asymmetry prevents the establishment of competition (Vasquez 1996; 2009), then perhaps Iran, Iraq, and North Korea should not be considered to have been rivals of the United States. Alternatively, there may be mitigating factors that enable states to become rivals despite asymmetric power capabilities (see Bennett 1998; Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007; Diehl and Goertz 2000; Klein, Goertz, and Diehl 2006). For example, a relatively weak state may repeatedly engage in conflict with a stronger adversary concerning territorial issues because of dissatisfaction with the status quo, resulting in the establishment of rivalry.

Instructors can use the sports rivalry analogy to introduce the idea of asymmetric actors becoming rivals due to territorial contention. Along with identifying the United States’ rivals, respondents were prompted to report their favorite sports team at either the collegiate or professional level and to identify the team’s rivals. The second most commonly identified rivalry was the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s (UNC) rivalry with North Caro-

lina State University (NCSSU). Despite a competitive imbalance—UNC has had nearly twice as many wins in head-to-head matchups with NCSSU in both men’s basketball and football—UNC and NCSSU are geographically proximate rivals.

Asking students to identify the issues that rivals compete over highlights the centrality of salient issue competition to rival relations. In the survey, students were asked to identify what they view as the primary source of conflict (as well as the secondary source, if any) between the United States and the country they identified as the United States’ primary rival among the options of power, territory, economics, ideology, religion, and other. Power and economics were the most common responses, with 73.2% selecting power as the primary or secondary source of conflict and 65.8% selecting economics as the primary or secondary source of conflict. The selection of such issues is tied, in part, to many students identifying China as the United States’ primary rival.

Drawing on the sports rivalry analogy can facilitate exploring the variety of issues over which rivals may contend. Some students identified geographically proximate territorial sports rivalries on the survey, such as the previously mentioned UNC-NCSSU rivalry. Of all survey respondents, 64.1% reported that their favorite sports team is located fairly close, very close, or extremely close to their favorite team’s primary rival. Others identified rivalries rooted in competition for positional supremacy. Students who identified the NFL Carolina Panthers as their favorite sports team identified the teams that the Panthers compete with for division titles as rivals (the Atlanta Falcons, New Orleans Saints, and Tampa Bay Buccaneers). Two-thirds of all respondents (66.7%) reported that their favorite team competes with their primary

rival fairly often or very often for either divisional or league supremacy.

Asking students to identify the issues that drive some of the more complex rivalries may compel students to think about how multiple issues may interact in the context of rivalry. The Duke University-University of North Carolina rivalry was the most commonly identified rivalry in the survey. The rivalry is one of the fiercest in college basketball due to territorial proximity as well as contention over establishing league supremacy (Vitale 2005). Consideration of such rivalries highlights the often multifaceted nature of competition in the context of rivalry (see Dreyer 2010).

### Physical Violence

There is scholarly disagreement about whether states must engage in repeated instances of militarized conflict to be considered rivals. Some scholars argue that engagement in such conflict is what distinguishes cases of interstate rivalry from friendlier forms of competition (Diehl and Goertz 2000; Klein, Goertz, and Diehl 2006; Maoz and Mor 2002). Some rivals, such as Egypt and Israel, India and Pakistan, and Israel and Syria, have engaged in numerous militarized disputes and several wars. Others argue that sustained competition can at times lead to rivalry in the absence of militarized conflict (Hensel 1999; Levy 1999; Mitchell and Thies 2011). During the seventeenth century the British and Dutch (Levy 1999) and more recently, during the 1970s and 1980s, Japan and the United States (Hensel 1999) arguably engaged in economic rivalry despite low levels of militarized threat.

Instructors can ask students whether militarized conflict between the United States and the United States' primary rival seems likely to occur in the near future to explore the relationship between militarization and rivalry. Nearly half of all survey respondents (45.6%) indicated that they view war between the United

national relations than in sports. Of the 173 dyads Thompson has identified as being strategic rivals, 85.5% have engaged in at least one militarized dispute and nearly half (45.7%) have gone to war (Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2007, 90–91). Conversely, only 4.0% of all survey respondents reported ever being in a physical altercation with a player or fan of their favorite sports team's primary rival. Drawing students' attention to differences between sports and interstate rivalries can illustrate that there is variation in the relevance of certain criteria across different contexts of rivalry.

### Psychological Hostility

At times, rivalries can be plagued by mutual suspicion, mistrust, and animosity (Maoz and Mor 1998, 129; 2002, 5; Vasquez 1996; 2009). Rather than being guided by rational cost-benefit analysis, rivals may privilege inflicting harm on one's rival over the pursuit of positive goals. Hostility may intensify as stakes take on symbolic value and multiple issues meld into an overarching "us versus them" mentality (Vasquez 2009, 79–80).

Alternatively, rivalry may be rooted in the relatively cool and calculated pursuit of one's objectives (Brummert 1999; Levy 1999). States may become rivals as a result of conflicting goals leading to engagement in sustained competition. In the absence of escalation and war, psychological animosity may not develop. For example, despite having relatively friendly relations, Mitchell and Thies (2011) identify Canada and the United States as issue rivals because of an inability to resolve conflicting maritime (and other) claims.

Asking students to evaluate their attitudes and feelings toward their rivals can compel them to consider the extent to which rivalry tends to be rooted in psychological hostility. On the survey, students were prompted to place the country that they identified as

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States and the United States' primary rival in the near future as being either not very likely or not at all likely. Some students consequently identify states as rivals even if they believe there is a low probability of militarized escalation.

Reference to the United States' relations with China can lead to consideration of the possibility of non-militarized rivalry rooted in economic competition. Of those who view China as the United States' principal rival, 72.9% view economics as the primary issue of contention, and 87.6% view economics as either the primary or secondary issue of contention. More than two-thirds of all respondents (68.4%) who view China as the United States principal rival view war between China and the United States in the near future as being not very likely or not at all likely. Many students consequently view China as a non-militarized economic rival of the United States.

Drawing on the sports rivalry analogy serves not only to highlight similarities between sports rivalries and interstate rivalries but also to delineate differences. Although some states may engage in non-militarized economic rivalry, in general, physical violence tends to be more common and destructive in the context of inter-

the United States' primary rival as well as the sports team that they identified as their favorite team's primary rival on a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 to 100 with higher numbers indicating feelings of warmth and favorability and lower numbers indicating feelings of coolness and unfavorability. Although some students indicated feelings of extreme unfavorability, most respondents indicated feelings of moderate unfavorability to tempered favorability. The average feeling thermometer rating for the country that respondents viewed as the United States primary rival was 44.6 while the average feeling thermometer rating for the team that respondents viewed as their favorite team's rival was 33.9. Class discussion of attitudes and feelings toward rivals can reveal a wide range of variation in the extent to which rivalries are rooted in feelings of animosity.

### Sports and International Affairs

Introducing the concept of interstate rivalry through reference to sports rivalry is likely to only be effective if students have a familiarity with sports. The survey data suggest students tend to have more of an interest in and knowledge of sports than international

politics. Whereas 42.9% of all respondents indicated that they are either very or extremely interested in sports, only 26.1% of all respondents indicated that they are similarly interested in international affairs. Of all respondents, 33.6% reported that they are very or extremely knowledgeable about sports while only 11.1% reported the same in relation to international affairs.

Students who completed the survey also expressed significantly less favorability toward their favorite sports team's rival than toward the state they view as being the United States' primary rival. As previously mentioned, students placed their favorite sports team's primary rival at an average feeling thermometer rating of 33.9 and the country that they identified as the primary rival to the United States at an average thermometer rating of 44.6. This statistically significant difference in favorability ratings indicates a greater emotional investment in sports rivalries than interstate rivalries.<sup>1</sup>

Not all students in every classroom may be interested in and familiar with sports. Referencing aspects of rivalry in additional areas of life such as in the context of interpersonal sibling or peer rivalries can potentially be a way to interest non-sports-oriented students in the concept of rivalry. Drawing analogies to sports and other social contexts can serve not only to increase students' interest in political concepts but also to increase students' awareness of the broader relevance of concepts discussed in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

Rivalry is a salient feature of social and political life. Individuals, sports teams, and states often engage in rivalry. Students' perceptions of rivalry can provide the basis from which to explore scholarly disagreements concerning rivalry conceptualization. Furthermore, discussion of sports rivalry can serve as an effective means through which to introduce political rivalry because of students' familiarity with sports rivalries and the parallels that can be drawn between sports and interstate rivalries.

Several ways for exploring the concept of rivalry in the classroom have been presented in this article. Asking students who they consider to be the main rivals of the United States or their favorite sports teams can compel them to think about why certain competitors may or may not be rivals. Questioning students concerning different aspects of contentious relations can lead them to consider the extent to which certain criteria are important to rivalry conceptualization. Such classroom discussions can reveal variation in ways in which students think about the rivalry concept that mirror differences in scholarly conceptualizations of rivalry.

Scholars have made significant strides in recent years in increasing our understanding of the causes of rivalry initiation, escalation, and termination (see Diehl and Goertz 2012; Valeriano 2012). Understanding the complexities of interstate rivalry requires going beyond consideration of issues related to rivalry conceptualization and the sports rivalry metaphor. Discussing the concept of rivalry nonetheless forms a basis from which students can further explore the nature of rival relations.

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## NOTE

1. The difference of means is significant at the .001 level.

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