Taking Party Ideology Seriously

Giorgos Charalambous, Dr

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/giorgos/27/
Taking party ideology development seriously

Giorgos Charalambous, PRIO Cyprus Centre and University of Cyprus
(giorgos.charalambous@gmail.com, charalambous.giorgos@ucy.ac.cy)

Abstract

We know a lot about the essence of the ideology factor in parties’ trajectories but remarkably little of how and why this is expressed and translated into the theoretical building blocks that rationalize it. This article takes up this forgotten issue, attempts to locate the concept of party ideology development, clarify its usefulness in the understanding of the relationship between parties and ideologies, outline an effective measurement process and, in doing so, shed light on avenues of research in the comparative study of party politics that so far remain unutilized. The main argument is that although party ideology development has evaded scholarly attention, it remains a germane concept through which we can further disentangle forms of ideological expression. Systematically integrating the development of ideology into the study of party politics can add to our corpus of knowledge about how and why parties adapt and differ between them and can have implications for democratic theory.

*Forthcoming in Rivista Italian di Scienza Politica*
Introduction

Plenty of scholarly attention has been paid in attempting to measure party ideology, but the process of how parties develop their ideology into something more issue-focused and adaptive to changed circumstances has been largely overlooked. Consequently, we know a lot about the essence of the ideology factor in parties’ trajectories; how party ideology interacts with strategic considerations. Studies incorporating focus on party ideology have explored its changing salience levels, the symmetry or asymmetry in tone among different policy areas, its use before, during and after incumbency, as well as the association between organizational dynamics and ideological continuity or change.\(^1\) However, there is little evidence of serious attempt of study of when, how and why party ideology gains depth by being expressed and translated into the theoretical building blocks that rationalize it. This is the quintessence of what I conceptualize in more detail in this article as party ideology development.

It is suggested that the study of party ideology development can offer significant insights into the ways in which parties adapt and differ. Whether and how the development of party ideologies varies over time and between different types of political parties can be crucial in helping us grapple further with the so far neglected role of the relationship between party evolution and types on the one hand and the part and production of ideas on the other, in the way parties interact with their social milieu. As I argue later, the process of party ideology development may reflect party system position, how radical specific parties or groups of parties are and how intra-

---

\(^1\) For the most prominent examples, see Strom (1990); Seliger (1976); Harmel and Janda (1994) and Harmel and Tan (2003).
party factions resolve differences in ideology. On the whole, the study of party ideology development would be a further step in the direction of treating parties both as dependent and independent variables (Berman 1997, 102). This, in turn, could help us better than the more generic category of ideology to refine our knowledge of how the internal functioning of parties affects, and is affected by, their environment. More elaborate categories of party-specific characteristics are also generally better placed to capture the peculiarities of particular polities and political systems.

Overall, it is proposed that additional attention should be paid to ideational aspects in the study of political parties, not simply as characteristics that affect parties’ overall utility function, but also as key components of processes that unfold within the party (Berman 2001). In this vein, this article joins in the efforts to bring ideas into the spotlight of party politics (e.g. Dommett 2012; Bevir 2005; Mudde 2001; Berman 1998; Gerring 2001; Inglehart 1977). The ‘ideational school’ in party politics has never gained the attention it deserves and here an attempt is made to highlight its potential and restore party ideological analysis. The dominant view is that parties are not very ideological organizations, at least not any more. Recent studies have widely documented the tendency of parties to move towards political professionalization (Farrell 1996) and cartel formation (Blyth and Katz 2006; Biezen 2004; Katz and Mair 1995). In parallel, there has been a decline in various indicators of parties’ capacities to shape strong and durable identities (Schmitter 2001, 78). As the dominant view is expressed by Freeden, ‘ideologies are rarely formulated by political parties. The function of parties in relation to ideologies is to present them in immediately consumable form and to disseminate them with optimal efficiency’
(Freeden 2003, 78–9, cited in Dommett 2012, 22). In the course of this discussion, I challenge the view that ignores the complexities of ideologies’ interaction with other motivations. A derivative claim is that party members must be ‘brought in from the cold’, at least in what concerns the study of party ideologies; the interplay between electorates and political parties is not the only concern of party leaders, even if it is the main one (e.g. see Cross and Young 2002).

I start by conceptualizing party ideology and, in turn, construct the conceptual architecture of party ideology development. I argue that parties’ development of their ideologies are largely instrumental in nature and are located in the space between policy, multi-policy and non-policy issues. To establish the limits or boundaries beyond which a concept should not be extended (Gerring 1999), I then distinguish it from other related and commonly used terms and concepts in party research, to illustrate what party ideology development is not. My aim in this section is, therefore, to provide the foundations necessary to avoid the application of party ideology development to cases lacking the essential characteristics of this concept and vice versa (Schedler 2010). Subsequently, I discuss the utility of party ideology development for theory building and hypothesis testing in party politics research, in turn summarizing its relevance to democratic theory. Before concluding, I address methodological matters that will inevitably crop up in any attempt to empirically trace the intensity of party ideology development across time and space. In all, this endeavour attempts to solve the three main definitional problems in relation to party ideology development, as identified by Sartori (1984, pp. 28–35): the broader problem (denotative definitions), membership problem (precising definitions) and
measurability problem (operational definitions which assist in the search for valid indicators).

From political ideology to party ideology

My point of departure is naturally the overarching concept—political ideology—in relation to which party ideology development is seen as a specific instance of usage. There is a parsimonious view that political ideology typically makes ‘at least tacit reference to a social system, either as an affirmation or a rejection of it’ (Jost et al. 2009, 326). Heywood (2007, 43), for example, ascribed three general attributes to the main political ideologies of the twentieth century (liberalism, conservatism, communism, social democracy, fascism):

An ideology constitutes a more or less cohesive group of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether it aims at the preservation, change or inversion of the existing system of power. Consequently, all ideologies: a) offer a description of the existing order of things, usually in the form of a worldview, b) develop an ideal type for a desirable future, that is, the vision of a good society and c) they explain the way of achieving this specific political change, that is the way from a) to b)

Similarly, from a political psychological perspective Jost et al. (2009, 309) argue that:

Specific ideologies crystallize and communicate the widely (but not unanimously) shared beliefs, opinions and values of an identifiable group, class, constituency or society ... Ideologies also endeavour to describe or interpret the world as it is—by making assertions or assumptions about human nature, historical events, present realities and future possibilities—and to envision the world as it should be, specifying acceptable means of attaining social, economic and political ideals.
Such designations attest that ideology, before turning into a normative enterprise, primarily constitutes a particular interpretation of the social and political worlds; a ‘narrative device’, emphasizing certain approaches to public life and eschewing others. These interpretations may express ideational preferences but not necessarily the stipulation of binding rules. They provide parties with a social identity that gives meaning to their existence and provides a rough guide as to what to expect and when to expect it. Marxism is especially useful for illustrating this point. Marxists often converge on the ways in which the capitalist system malfunctions and on the role and shifting nature of class conflict, but they often disagree on which is the appropriate way forward. During the early stages of the 20th century, revolutionaries disagreed on the role of the party, the significance of mass spontaneity and the exact policies on which a transit socialist state should rest upon, while keeping in line with the main tenets of Marx’s and Engel’s diagnoses of the capitalist mode of production (Sassoon 1996).

‘Ought to be’ situations are, however, the keystone logic of ideologies. Inevitably, common assessments of the past and the present lead to similar preferences for the future, if not also prescriptions for the appropriate way forward that have enough common denominators between them to be differentiated from other ideological traditions. This is the premise for categorizing parties into party families—cross-country groupings of parties, predominantly based on their ideology and, by extension, their cleavage roots (Mair and Mudde 1998). Although considerable fragmentation may exist within given party families, their ‘members’ still share certain norms and mindsets concerning the desired outcomes of a variety of issues and
of general political practice. In a recent test of this line of thinking, Camia and Caramani (2012) presented evidence for high and constant long-term ideological cohesiveness—on what they call the social and cultural left-right axis—at the elite and the electorate level within party families. Several decades after the first studies of party families emerged, distinguishing between parties on the basis of their ideological orientations remains one of the most frequent acts in comparative political analysis.

For parties, political ideology entails philosophies and ideational conventions, which serve as the foundations for party identity formation and the framing of party political action (Dommett 2012, 37). The tradition of espousing one general political ideology, ‘can limit the range of actions deemed to be feasible by party members and supporters, making any attempt to move beyond the precepts of a particular political ideology potentially damaging to the party’s identity (and thus support base) … parties do not start with a blank canvas …’ (ibid., 37). First, political ideologies exist and then, parties possess them through the aggregation of the ideologies of the individuals who establish the party. When party ideologies change, again, the role that individuals play can be vital—for instance, through agitation, factional struggle or innovative thinking (ibid., 4; see also Gerring 1999). Overall, there is no specific or novel approach to the ideology of parties as distinct from the more general features of ideologies whose formation and dissemination is located in other types of social and institutional formations or the minds of individuals.
Parties differ from other carriers of political ideologies in that their ideology is publicly and consistently projected in one way or another. In this vein, parties find themselves in a constant state of trying to address existing and potential audiences, and this is the reason why they have more to gain and more incentive (and are thus more likely than other societal formations or units) to rationalize their ideological statements and develop the system of ideas they project. For the elaboration of each of the three dimensions of political ideologies—describing the status quo, developing a desirable future and designing the transition from the former to the latter—a theoretical logic is needed that necessarily moves beyond policy formulation even though it may indicate various policy proposals. It is the process driving the formulation of such a theoretical logic within parties that I turn to in the following section.

**Definition of party ideology development: Its main attributes**

Putting together the main, aforementioned features of party ideology and ensuring that party ideology is not approached as a discrete category of ideological construction, a more nuanced understanding of its development can emerge. Party ideology development is defined here as an activity that is driven or instigated by party leadership practice and carried out by individuals operating as partisans, of developing an ideology on a specific issue or policy, in the attempt to present evidence and/or arguments in support of them. The development of party ideologies by partisans thus entails both generic and specific functions. It refers to the elaboration (explanation, justification) and updating of ideologies in one or more of three ways:
(1) In terms of a specific policy projected by the party as faulty or ideal. For example, a party may touch upon the issue of Value Added Tax (VAT) and argue in favour of its decrease through party ideology development of the distinction between direct and indirect taxation in relation to social class structure. Alternatively, they may argue in favour of redistributive policies through a historical review of their impact on class harmony. It may also be the case that policies are supported indirectly, for example, a pro-environment attitude through the teachings of post-materialism, civil rights through the central place of freedom in capitalist democracy, higher pensions through the ethicality of social justice, or more democratic decision-making policies within the party organization through the rebuttal of certain organizational practices’ efficiency (e.g. democratic centralism).

(2) In terms of a multi-policy issue, where various aspects of domestic policy-making are under the umbrella of a more generalized theme, such as globalization, European integration, democratization or industrial development. A party could theorize about the significance of these phenomena in relation to various policy sectors and their interaction, or juxtapose successful or unsuccessful cases of multiple policy-making, at the same time connecting with the words of an ‘ideological father’ in order to support an ongoing practice. The literature on European integration and political parties is demonstrative of the fact that parties often have to deal with an issue that incorporates multiple policy dimensions (Kopecky and Mudde 2002).
(3) In terms of a non-policy matter, such as a historical review of post-materialism, the importance of ethics or conservative lifestyles, the ‘empirical’ analysis of political phenomena so as to vindicate a specific worldview, or the revision of doctrines that were espoused until a certain point (e.g. Marxism). While indirectly related to policies, developing non-policy matters does not aim or result in the explanation, justification or proposition of particular policies; rather, it is intended as an analysis of the theoretical core of the ideas and experiences underpinning them.

Let me deal separately with what I mean by elaboration and updating. As already noted, to elaborate in a normative manner is equivalent to elaborating with the ultimate purpose of generating either support or opposition to the object(s) of elaboration. The goal is to provide information that doesn’t simply problematize a matter, but also tries to persuade and/or mobilize, depending on whether the target group is members, voters or both. First of all, by rendering social situations meaningful, parties make it possible for citizens to act within them (Geertz 1964, 218–219). Elaborating in the case of party ideology development will include a propensity for explaining the reasons behind either support or rejection, and through this, justifying the choice that is projected as the right one to follow. In spite of normative thinking being the central guidepost of party ideology development, proposed remedies to given problems stem, more often than not, from a diagnosis of the past and the present, which, in and by themselves, will require an empirical analysis of social and political affairs, however superficial or compact.
Concomitantly, in all three of the above mentioned attributes of party ideology development, a temporal component is inherent. In the face of new structural developments affecting the ‘system’ as a whole, or aspects of it, often the ideology in question, or a previously formulated ideological stance, must also adjust. When this is the case, party ideology development may take the form of updating value-based analyses in light of new events, phenomena or advancements. In the history of political ideologies, new developments (industrialization, globalization, European integration, revolutions, the collapse of regimes and so on) have often led to an outpour of new ideas about what is right, what is wrong and how to achieve the former and avoid the latter.

For example, in the mid-19th century, conservative thought in the southern United States constantly produced new ideas, as it was faced with free labour, the abolition of slavery and rapid industrialization (Huntington 1957). Similarly, for the social democrats, the 1980s and beyond was a crucial period of revitalizing left-wing values and reforming their programmes in view of the changes induced by global economic integration, Europeanization and the increasing popularity of environmental values (Callaghan 2000). Throughout time, as Freeden put it, ‘political discourse and the production and dissemination of ideologies, were certainly broadening out, with the major ideological families becoming more internally complex and variable due to the more diverse input upon which they could draw’ (Freeden 2001, 1).
A question still remains. Why must we define party ideology development as an activity irreducibly driven or instigated by the party leadership? Again, reference to the ideologies of parties, on which party ideology development is based, is pertinent. Party ideology is a collective trait, decided upon by party leaders, either in a centralized or a decentralized way. The term ‘leadership’ does not translate into a specific number of individuals (see Scarrow 2005). Whether the effective leadership is viewed as a small circle of individuals, or the whole party body, always depending on how centralized a party actually is, the fact of the matter is that ideologies are shaped, adjusted or changed collectively by the main political actors active within the party, as they are binding on all partisans. The existence of a decision-making apparatus through which individual intentions are aggregated and an agreed approach on party ideological development formulated, makes it possible to categorize this process as collectively driven and binding (Scott 2000). Hence party ideology development will ensue when the party collectively decides, either pluralistically or not, that its ideology needs to be elaborated or updated.

Figure 1 illustrates the defining attributes of party ideology development. To summarize, the definition of party ideology development put forward here has three key components that in turn mark its boundaries: a) it is driven or instigated by party leadership practice and involves partisans; b) it comprises the elaboration and/or updating of policy, non-policy or multi-policy issues that are generated from one or more of the three main dimensions of an ideology (substitutable between them and non-causally necessary), that is, the description of the status quo from the past or the

---

2 See, for example, the classifications by Panebianco (1988) and Ware (1987).
present, the ideal future for the party and the method of moving forward from the
former to the latter; c) it aims at, and is thus moved by, the intention to persuade
(members and/or voters) and/or mobilize (members). Political ideology is thus the
overarching concept within which party ideology development unfolds. As Finlayson
(2007: 550-551) explains, there is good reason to distinguish conceptually between the
processes of belief-formation and those of argument-formation in support of these
beliefs: ‘to believe something is to accept the (many kinds of) reasons that can be
presented for so believing it; to present and explain a belief to others is to present the
arguments that are part and parcel of the belief’.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Differentiating from other semantically neighbouring concepts

To state the obvious, some of the defining attributes of party ideology development
could also be important attributes of other related concepts. Indeed, they are in the
case of ‘policies’, ‘political justification’ and ‘ideological propaganda’. The
differentiation of the concept of party ideology development from other semantically
neighbouring concepts is an essential endeavour for avoiding conceptual stretching.
Such an endeavour can only be based on the delineation of the empirical boundaries
of the concept and more specifically: i) the subject undertaking the activity (party
leadership and partisans); ii) the content of the activity (elaboration and/or updating of
party ideology), iii) the motives—or better, target groups—underlying the activity
(persuading/mobilizing voters/members) (see Schedler 2010). In what follows I
sketch the boundaries of party ideology development vis à vis those of other similar concepts and practices, on the basis of the above three dimensions. Let us deal with each of these other concepts and their relation to party ideology development separately.

**Policies/policy pledges**

Ideology is not the same as policy. While policy is situated in the party’s collective domain and is thus, ultimately, a product of the party and not its individual members, it can only tell us ‘what parties do’ rather than reveal the various aspects of a party’s domain of identification, ‘what parties are’ (Mair and Mudde 1998). A communist party, which officially professes Marxism-Leninism, may consider a seemingly right-wing policy, such as maintaining low company tax levels, useful in given circumstances (as the Cypriot AKEL did in 2011 when heading the government for the first time), and an extreme right-wing party that is officially xenophobic may choose to support membership in the European Union, where immigration control is not as strict as the party would ideally like (like in the case of Alleanza Nazionale in Italy or Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij in the Netherlands).

This, however, does not preclude the presence of policy positions in party ideology development. The formulation of a proposal for policy-making may logically be either brief or analytical. It may include theoretical analysis of a policy’s (or more than one policy’s) normative significance, examples where this policy has been implemented and succeeded or failed, reasons why the policy is the best alternative in a given reality, or all of the above. In such cases, policies are the epicentre of party ideology
development, or the latter is a means to rally consent to certain policies. But on other occasions, policies can be stipulated without much effort to juxtapose, compare or illustrate and in that case, a policy tells us little about the logic of a party’s identity and involves minimal, or no party ideology development. During elections, parties have a tendency to avoid the former activity and do the latter in an attempt to convey to voters the possible outcomes of their ideological intentions in brief and tangible terms. For this reason, policies presented in electoral programmes will take the form of pledges.

One may be familiar, for example, with New Labour’s manifesto for the landslide election of 1997, which claimed inspiration from a ‘Third Way’. Although many pages long, this manifesto illustrates well the centrality of policy pledges in election campaigns. The manifesto contains the expression ‘we will’ and its variations (such as, ‘we propose’) more than four hundred times. In that manifesto, even new policies masterminded by the party, such as the windfall levy on the excess profits of the privatized utilities, were very briefly summarized (New Labour 1997).

*Political justification*

Party ideology development is not political justification. The latter is associated with partisanship, mostly in the context of partisan fora, whereby individual party members and officials debate various aspects of social organization (White and Yipi 2011). The archetypical example is that of party congresses in their procedural stage where speakers address their fellow partisans. But they can include party branch meetings,
assemblies, protests, partisan websites and blogs (ibid.). Their purpose can range from civic education to conferring legitimacy to the party leadership, to information and arguments that could potentially inform party policy and public action. Admittedly, political justification will normally be based on party ideology development. Debates within each party, or party family, are more likely to have some previously formulated ideological stance and theoretical arguments as their background, or starting points, rather than begin from scratch. Or, political justification may feed into party ideology development if the party as a collective entity publishes thoughts whose articulation has benefited or was instigated from internal debate. In this vein, just like the development of party ideology, political justification may reveal both what parties do and what parties are.

Yet, the subject carrying out the activity of political justification is the ‘individual’ and not the partisan. Whereas the ‘individual’ engages in dialogues within or outside a party and may do so either in order to benefit the party as a whole or damage it, to prove herself or prove a point, the partisan develops party ideology further, strictly for her party’s benefit and thus within the sphere of the party’s interests and strategic ideational initiatives. Political justification is thus not directed by a collective agent. Rather, it is an internal-interactive process whose very occurrence can potentially lead to, or be the result of, dissent. It differs from party ideology development, given that the latter expresses the collective body’s ideological will. By extension, the arguments exchanged in political justification will not be binding for the party as a whole and may even challenge or influence the official party line.
Consider the example of party leaders who were inclined towards the production of ideological analysis. In fact, party leaders were, on many occasions, the ones to achieve an ‘ideological breakthrough’, by providing the theoretical fuel necessary for decades-long action that broke with a previously established tradition. Lenin was the main theoretician of the party of the new type, as was Disraeli the writer of British one nation conservatism’s main intellectual forces, ‘Sybil’ and ‘Coningsby’. Willy Brandt was the theoretical rationalizer of *ostpolitik* (along with Egon Bahr), as was Santiago Carillo, the main theorist of Spanish Eurocommunism, or Enrico Berlinguer, the theoretical architect of the ‘historic compromise’. Anthony Crosland (before becoming a Labour leader) and his *The Future of Socialism* played a part in changing Labour’s ideological outlook, by introducing, explaining and popularizing the claim that demand-management techniques within a mixed economy were the appropriate route for securing the interests of the lower classes.

These leaders’ individual works, in the form of books, speeches, journal articles or pamphlets were not the result of collective decision-making, and it is in this manner that their contribution differs from party ideology development. Although subsequently influencing their respective parties’ ideologies, by having their ideas incorporated into party programmes, they originally wrote as ‘political justifiers’ of this or that path to the party’s future; they wrote as individuals trying to influence the interpretation of their party’s identity through ideological reasoning.

*Ideological propaganda*
Ideological propaganda can be distinguished from party ideology development in two respects: intention/target and content. It must arouse attention, relate to the recipient’s own wishes and be appraised, among other things, on the basis of the communicator. Moreover, propaganda must be easily intelligible (Sjöblom 1968, 20). It is, therefore, de facto not accompanied by an attempt at elaboration or updating. Propaganda unpacks ideologies simplistically, skewing deeper elaborations that seek multidimensional understandings of reality and concentrating on a direct effect that occurs within a short period of time. Although both party ideology development and ideological propaganda can convey what parties are and what parties do, the former relies only on words, since its aims are realized through the elaboration and/or updating of ideology, rather than through simply conveying a message or instigating a feeling, as the aims of the latter are realized.

Propaganda itself is a means of advertising a political idea, aimed at influencing the attitudes, opinion and behaviour of people and, in so doing, to satisfy the interests of the propagandist (Jowett and O’Donnell 2005, chapter 1). Ideological propaganda can thus be regarded as one of the parties’ strategic action variables (Sjöblom 1968), aimed at promoting the objectives of the communicator and not mutual understanding or the mutual fulfilment of needs (Jowett and O’Donnell 2005, 29), which may be the case with partisans writing on behalf of the party. Naturally then, unlike party ideology development, it concentrates mostly on the electoral arena (voters), rather than the internal arena (members). Large bulks of (sometimes complicated) text cannot be intended for the electorate at large, which is targeted ‘rationally’ through more conventional methods and easy-to-digest signals. Conversely, most people
inside the party are commonly more knowledgeable about country and party politics and thereby less receptive to (unrefined) propaganda. As Sjöblom (1968, 16) explicated, ‘the higher the degree of knowledge that the members of an arena have on average for the political facts, the more must the parties rely on their standpoints as means of influence and the less effect their propaganda has and vice versa’.

Rappe (1996) shows that Finnish parties’ increasingly catch-all behaviour has led them to rely on various propaganda techniques, aimed at swaying public opinion: name-calling (labelling an idea as bad, without examining the evidence); testimony by a respected or hated person; card-stacking (in order to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea or programme); bandwagoning (denoting wide acceptance among the target group); glittering generality (associating something with a ‘virtue word’); plain folks (the method by which one attempts to convince that a thing is good because it is of the ‘people’). Such techniques have been widely used. Harry Belafonte’s testimonial for the Kennedy campaign in 1960 underpinned an attempt by the American presidential candidate to build an image based on the civil rights issue; Alfred M. Landon’s slogan, ‘Defeat the New Deal and its reckless spending’ during the 1936 U.S. presidential campaign exemplifies anti-statist labelling; the British Conservative Party’s poster in 1997 of Tony Blair sitting in the lap of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, under the slogan, ‘Labour’s position on Europe’ is indicative of how card-stacking can be used to counter-attack attempts at political reinvigoration; Bill Clinton’s campaign motto, ‘Putting people first’ is a prime example of ‘plain folks’.

---

3 For these and other examples, see Seidman (2008).
The utility of party ideology development as a concept in party politics research

My aim in this section is to fully develop the connections between the conceptual architecture of party ideology development, as sketched above, and the possibilities it offers in party politics research. I first examine how it contributes to shaping and challenging the judgments upon which the dominant theories in scholarly research on party strategy are premised. Gerring (1999) reminds us that concepts and theories are inherently related. Accordingly, the theoretical utility of party ideology development needs to be clarified. I then proceed to briefly discuss the possible determinants that may condition its intensity. Finally, I consider the implications of more or less party ideology development for contemporary democracy.

Gauging the boundaries between competing claims about party strategy requires answers to a number of questions. Are parties at all engaged in constructing theoretical building blocks drawn from external belief systems? Aren’t party leaderships, even those of parties that are generally believed to be the most ideologically driven, very pragmatic in adapting whatever doctrine they inherit from their predecessors in order to obtain their desired electoral or policy results? The apparent difficulty with which such questions can be and have been answered in a general way reveals the pertinence of pursuing the study of party ideology development as a strain of research in comparative party politics. According to one set of empirical observations, parties are thought to be constrained in their manoeuvres within the party system and the political process by what Berman has called ‘policy legacies’ (Berman 1998); or, to have fixed and ideologically rigid preferences for
attaining parliamentary office or policy outcomes (Strøm 1990). van Dijk (2005, 732) summarizes this strain of thinking concisely:

If there is one social field that is ideological, it is that of politics. This is not surprising because it is eminently here that different and opposed groups, power, struggle and interests are at stake. In order to be able to compete, political groups need to be ideologically conscious and organized. Few ideological groups besides political parties have ‘programs’ that formulate their ideologies explicitly, and that compete for new members or supporters on that basis … In other words, the political process is essentially an ideological process, and political cognition often simply identified with ideology (see Freeden, 1996; Ball & Dagger, 1999; Eatwell, 1999; Leach, 2002; Seliger, 1976).

Alternatively, parties are approached merely as rational actors that fight electoral battles, whose ultimate and most important pay-off is power. Premised on Down’s (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, rational choice theory has traditionally treated parties as utility-maximizing actors, largely, or fully, unconstrained by ideological considerations, able to be consistent in their views about the outcomes that will result from their actions and capable of ranking the relative desirability of all possible outcomes. Downsian models thus tend to predict that candidates and parties would ‘rationally’ move to the centre in formulating programmatic positions and in making appeals to the electorate.

Within the context of rational behaviour, ideologies are largely seen as tools for getting across packaged messages to the electorate (Hinich and Pollard 1981), or as a way to solve coordination problems within given electoral and party systems (Cox 1997). Ideology then is not seen ‘as an independent causal force, but simply the net effect of interest and the structure of political interaction’ (Bawn 1999, 328). From this angle, parties are unlikely to be interested in spending time and resources to
elaborate and explain their ideologies. Since in the rational choice tradition, the explanatory variables for the explanation of party behaviour are essentially motivational, ideology serves an exogenous preference in the form of a clearly conceived and pre-defined telos—vote maximization and political power.

But the above views of political parties are certainly not mutually exclusive. Recognizing that party officials and leaders can and often do act rationally does not exclude viewing rational actions alongside other forms of action and approaching parties as involving both rational and non-rational elements (Scott 2000). Such perspectives furnish the rationality assumption with various forms of value-oriented thinking. In this vein, party ideology development can be motivated by strategic or ideological considerations, or both, according to the structural characteristics of the party in question. Embracing, deploying and articulating ideas and ideologies can be psychologically, emotionally or ethically important, but it can also help actors to effectively navigate the opportunity structures in which they find themselves (see Laitin 2003). Recent evidence, for instance, suggests that whether parties are ‘programmatic’ or ‘clientelistic’ is principally driven by the characteristics of the political system in which they operate (Stokes et al. 2013).

Further, rational choice theory, although having perhaps the most familiar presence in comparative party politics, has traditionally made relatively little effort to differentiate between party members and activists on the one hand and voters on the other. As emphasized in the second section of this article, while the latter may be more superficial, less ideological, forgetful or rationally incentivized, the former tend to have an innate interest in their party’s ideology as something valuable in and of itself.
Since the 1990s, when behaviouralists began digging deeper into the details of party membership and activism, this inclination of parties’ core supporters to be more ideological has become widely acknowledged (Heidar and Saglie 2003; Seyd and Whiteley 1992). The commonly used general incentives model of participation, as originally developed by Seyd and Whiteley, argues that political activism can be best explained by incentives which lie outside rational choice frameworks and include ideology (Seyd and Whiteley 1992).

Still, there is little focused work on party ideology development to help us plot a course among competing models. With the debate far from resolved, the relation of parties to ideologies remains considerably under-researched both in itself and within the analytical frames that dominate the field. To paraphrase Berman’s (2001) examination of the pertinence of ideational analysis in political science tout court, the study of party ideology development can shed light on three especially important questions: How do ideas, norms and culture affect party life? Why and how do particular political ideas become significant for and within the party? Why and how do some ideas remain significant within the party over time? (see also Finlayson 2007, 560)

Taken together, these three questions, pursued within the context of party ideology development can additionally shed light on the latter’s relation with its semantically neighbouring concepts of policies, political justification and propaganda. Does party ideology development predominantly take the form of policy rationalization or that of theorizing about non-policy and multi-policy issues? To what extent do most parties
follow a centralist mentality whereby party ideology development is the task of a selected few or a pluralistic approach based on political justification among ‘competing’ partisans? Has propaganda substituted party ideology development or can the two co-exist in parties and among partisan audiences?

In order to realize the full potential of party ideology development as an object of scholarly inquiry, it is worth exploring the proliferating dynamics between the rationality assumption and non-rationality based explanations within the boundaries of two empirical possibilities. The first is that party ideology development may vary across space—some parties may elaborate or update their ideologies more than others. A number of conditioning factors that are gauged and tested in relation to various other aspects of party life can also be considered in relation to party ideology development: most importantly, party system position, ideological radicalism and organizational dynamics.

If marginal, protest and opposition parties differ from mainstream and pivot ones in what concerns reliance on ideology, then they can be assumed to curve out a differentiated strategy with regard to ideology development as well. To reiterate a central argument of Kirchheimer’s (1966) classic study on the emergence of catch-all parties, the less articulate parties’ ideologies are, the more flexible they may be assumed to be vis à vis the voters. The intensity of party ideology development could also vary with the extremity of policy preferences—Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989), for example, assume that more extreme preferences tend to correlate with
stronger emphasis placed on an issue. It may be that radical parties will contest the status quo and in so doing, they will resort to the elaboration of their ideology since the ideal future they propound (i.e. Heywood’s ‘way to get from a) to b’) will be in need of more analysis if they are to convince people of the substance, logic and feasibility of their alternative proposals.

Similarly, given that factional strife within parties, their degree of centralization, their linkages to society and intellectuals more specifically impact the nature and extent of ideological discussions within the organization, they can also do so in terms of ideology development. In parties with established factions that threaten the leadership’s dominance, there are incentives for the dominant faction to avoid stirring up ideological debate and ‘giving excuses’ that might jeopardise its dominance. It would thus be more likely that detail is avoided for the sake of the smooth and uninhibited coexistence of different schools of thought within the same organization. In contrast, a strong intellectual presence inside or around a party might render ideology a less ephemeral constellation than it would have been within the structure of an ‘empty vessel’ and thus infuse the party leadership with the urgency of interacting with intellectuals and promoting party ideology development.

The second empirical possibility is that party ideology development varies across time—parties may, on average, elaborate or update their ideologies less, or more, than previously, or individual parties may choose to change their levels of party ideology development. If party ideology development is taken to imply a tendency for parties
to try (among other things) and inculcate in their supporters a stable identity, then the widespread decline in membership and activism (Whiteley 2011) should also predispose us to a decreasing trend in party ideology development.

At the same time, it is generally accepted that parties proceed to elaborate on their ideologies when these (are about to) change or significantly adjust, in the sense of those moments in which parties re-found themselves, seeking to change parts or the whole of their identity. Although political competition is an intensely dynamic phenomenon, in accordance with which parties are required to continuously adapt to changing circumstances, certain historical events require parties to change significantly within a short span of time. Such episodes are not as infrequent as we might initially think. Motivations for change that can prompt leaders to develop their party’s ideology further may include sudden realignments in the party system, damaging shifts in public opinion, regional crises or boiling points of factional struggle within the party. On these occasions, party ideology development is often employed in order to consign to the dustbin of historic images and imaginaries that were previously a significant part of a party’s identity, on the grounds that they are scientifically disproven or socially outmoded.

Taken together, the various logical hypotheses in comparisons of party ideology development across or within cases can discover new ground in regard to the eternal debate on the relevance of agency compared to that of structure (Hay 1995); that is,
the manner in which, environmental—socio-economic, political, global or regional—factors are more or less important than, or interact with, agential ones.

Turning to the influence that party ideology development can have, this is largely a normative issue concerning the very spirit of democratic governance with parties as key players. How parties adapt and differ in terms of ideology development can generate insights into the health of modern politics. The legitimacy of representative democratic systems stems, in large part, from their capacity to promote and institutionalize deliberation (Dryzek 2001, 161). Since modern democratic systems are so complex that deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question is impossible, political parties are essential as intermediaries between citizens and the act of direct government (policy-making) (Hendriks et al. 2007). White and Yipi argue forcefully that parties can and should exhibit a motivational element, since ‘they have the capacity to generate a sense of political collectivity among citizens, both by articulating political identities and giving visible expression to their cross-temporal and cross-spatial reality’ (White and Yipi 2010, 815).

From this perspective, the origination of ideas within a party, and their subsequent dissemination among the party’s circles can have significant implications for democratic theory. The more analytical parties are in what concerns their identity and vision, the more their linkages with society can eschew the patron-client type of relation and be ‘really’ representational. The more responsive parties are to outside developments that affect their ideology, and the more frequently they explain or draw
upon such developments in order to express the previously unsaid, the greater the deliberative element of their existence. Returning to White and Yipi’s (2011) normative exposition of the role of partisanship in political justification, developed party ideologies are more likely to allow for fruitful debate among competing parties and partisans, which in turn distinguishes existing democratic systems constructed on reasoning and the exchange of argumentation from (potential) systems entrenched in the mere brute projection of self-interest, whereby normative justifications would be comfortably sidestepped.

Methodological considerations

If one is to compare ideology development across parties or time in an attempt to understand the factors that condition it or the processes that underlie it, first the phenomenon must be traced and measured. To produce credible empirics, one needs to connect the components of the concept with the appropriate units of analysis and data sources. Before proposing an ideal and a second best way of observing the concept, let me briefly explicate the ‘must not dos’.

A fundamental matter would be to ensure that no subjective judgement is made on how scrupulous, scientific or elucidating party ideology development is. Quality, or the lack thereof, must not take away from the issue of intensity, and subsequently from the significance of the praxis of developing ideologies. Remembering, therefore, Keohane’s (1976, 2) succinct evocation that ‘ideology is not simply philosophy badly done but a different sort of intellectual construction with different functions’, one
must bear in mind that some elaborations of ideology by partisans may be more superficial or less historically important than others, but this does not cancel out their main attributes. Judgements about the qualitative state of the content of ideological documents will be of little significance to the understanding of the dynamics of a party’s ideational life.

Regarding units of analysis and on the basis of the conceptualization laid out in the second and third sections, we must avoid using election manifestos, since they primarily unveil policies and not ideologies. As Mair and Mudde (1998, 219) clarify:

> Although the diachronic strategy adopted in the manifesto analysis approach makes it more likely that scholars can tap into the long-term ideological predispositions of the parties involved, the data nevertheless remain tied to the exigencies of short-term electoral competition. Party manifestos and elections programmes ... are also explicitly designed in the context of election campaigns in order to publicize and clarify potentially appealing policy commitments and it is these that remain contingent.

Consequently, a great degree of selection bias may be present in the choice of election manifestos, since in the cases of many parties, these can be thought to be drafted in a way that inhibits party ideology development in the first place.

A number of document types can be identified as potential units of analysis, although not all are traditional parts of parties’ organizational strategies: congress decisions, pamphlets and brochures (which are, on many occasions based on thematic conferences, or seminars, organized by parties), announcements by party organs, editorials and articles in party newspapers (a typical feature of communist and
extreme right parties) and articles in party theoretical journals (again, a typical feature of parties on the left of the political spectrum).

Some of the landmark historical examples would include the Bad Godesberg programme (1959) of the German Social Democratic Party when the party decided to abandon Marxism and adopt a revised model of social democracy; the Labour Party’s manifesto, ‘The Peace’ (1941), which attempted to justify the party’s participation in the wartime coalition government (Cole, 1969); the Italian Communist Party’s strategy of a ‘historic compromise’ with the Christian Democrats, itself emerging gradually through articles and editorials in *Rinascita* [the then political and theoretical weekly organ of the Italian Communist Party] by Gerardo Chiaromonte and Enrico Berlinguer (D’Alimonte 1999); the Hamburg party conference of the German Christian Democratic Party in 1994, where a new party program embracing neoliberal ideas was presented (Bosch 2007).

The method of measuring concepts must respect their definition in the sense of ensuring that the units of analysis include or indicate the agents, processes and phenomena that constitute the concept’s main referents. Accordingly, a number of conditions must hold for party documents to be included as units of analysis in the study of party ideology development, and these essentially concern the two agents referred to in the original definition laid out earlier: documents must be driven or instigated and thus also endorsed by the party leadership; documents must be written by individuals acting as partisans, that is, on behalf of the collective body.
Consequently, the issue of representativeness is crucial in identifying the relevant documents (Macdonald and Tipton, 1993), hence, data collection must be context specific and applied on the basis of careful reading of a party’s organizational culture.

Notably, articles by the editor of a party newspaper always echo the party leadership in centralist parties (e.g. the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) in Portugal and the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in Greece), while they often question the party line or facilitate a ‘challenge and reply’ process in parties where tendencies or formations co-exist (as in Bloco Esquerda in Portugal or the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in Greece). The safest way to ensure that the analysis is endorsed by the party leadership, however—and thus to certify an identical ‘rhetorical situation’ (Bitzer 1999 [1968], as cited in Finlayson 2007) across cases—is to identify those pieces of analysis that concentrate on one or more of the party’s manifesto points or higher organ announcements that are officially collective, or formulate an official position on a new issue that is subsequently preserved, or not contradicted in party publications. Only a qualitative read would suffice to prepare the ground for the largely numerical exercises that must follow.

The crucial measurement criterion for the intensity of a phenomenon regards volume and recurrence, which in our case, that of documents developing ideology translate into length and frequency of publication. Put differently, measuring party ideology development must entail the production of an index that combines the number of documents (circulated among members, voters or both) explicitly intended for party
ideology development and the length of these documents. Taking only frequency into consideration would be problematic since certain types of documents are produced with equal frequency across different cases (such as congress decisions).

A more static approach would be to include party websites, on the premise that websites are structured in such a way so as to convey the party profile to the population at large, including both members and voters and reflecting the tendency of parties to theorize more or less on ideological issues. As a snapshot in time of party ideology development, websites may not always exemplify the actual magnitude of the activity in question and are not useful for a temporal view. Essentially, they will fall short of capturing the whole ‘population’, primarily because various documents circulated only among members will not be accessible via parties’ websites. But this approach to selecting units of analysis through sampling can generate reliable measurements of that part of party ideology development that is publically accessible at all times. In other words, it can capture the amount of information about the party’s identity and policies, that is disseminated the most. Given that one of the basic goals of political party websites is to recruit voters (Gibson and Ward 2000), a fairly representative picture of the place of party ideology development in electoral competition can be produced.

Moreover, collective documents found on websites clearly satisfy the necessary conditions for including a text in the units of analysis, as identified above: they are driven or instigated by the party leadership; they are written by individuals acting as
partisans. Hence there is less—and more manageable—data, which is concurrently of much better quality, in terms of reliability. More precision in the identification of the units of analysis—due to less reliance on party informants or more certainty about the nature of the document—decreases the likelihood for arbitrary decisions during the stage of data collection.

At the post-collection stage, one can then consider each of the themes of party ideology development—the number and nature of topics upon which party ideological development unfolds—and thus differentiate between types of party ideology development and their causes. Party ideology development itself can be broken down into its constituent parts and analysed in terms of its most frequent manifestations. Do certain political parties, typically ones considered highly dogmatic, consistently avoid developing policy issues and instead focus on multi- or non-policy ones? Do parties prefer to emphasize a certain dimension of ideology over others? The highly ideological orthodox communist parties, for example, appear to place much more emphasis on macro-historical matters (such as the nature and evolution of intra-imperialist contradictions) and teleological discourse (such as the inner workings of socialism) rather than short-term policy positions. This level of nuance can in turn invoke the relevance of micro-ideational incentives. The case of the KKE, for instance—which in the midst of the 2009 Greek economic crisis was laughed at for spending tens of pages of its Congress political document to outline the strengths and weaknesses of Soviet economic planning before and after the 1950s—may be explained by the protest-orientated logic that falling short of an explanation of
revolutionary policy-making would have done injustice to its subversive discourse regarding the crisis.

Conclusion

Whilst debates in the literature have helped to cast light on the way party ideology interacts with strategic considerations in order to produce a political trajectory, no efforts exist that seek to curve out the full implications of treating party ideology as having its own intrinsic logic, and thus as a party trait that is the epicentre of certain processes unfolding inside the party. This deficit may be due to the fact that scholars have increasingly focused on parties as the short-term seekers of political utility and much less as repositories of ideologies. Ideational studies of parties and their evolution remain sidelined in the literature, especially in view of evidence that political competition has become increasingly cartelized. Yet, it is one thing to consider certain non-ideological facets of party behaviour more important than the ideological ones and another to dismiss the latter altogether, or downplay their interaction with more tangible inducements. This becomes all the more clear once we consider that members are often the main target of ideological discourse.

To recapitulate the main points of the article, a gap in current conversations about party politics has been identified—the lack of study of that party activity of ideology development through which parties express and translate their worldviews and policies into theoretical building blocks—and subsequently, an attempt has been made
to conceptualize the main attributes of party ideology development, animate its usefulness and discuss emerging measurement issues, in an attempt to fill the gap. Although party ideology development has evaded scholarly attention, it remains a germane concept through which we can further disentangle forms of ideological expression. Its study, like those of other conceptually circumscribed traits of party behaviour, can add to our corpus of knowledge about how and why parties adapt and differ, and enable more definite conclusions on the qualities and pathologies of democracy. An in-depth understanding of particular instances of the diffusion of ideas will shed light on the role of ideas in party life and extend interpretations of parties’ interactions with their social milieu. If we are to take ideology seriously, then paying attention to any possible modalities of its development within and by political parties can only enrich our understanding of party politics and democratic governance more broadly.

**Funding**

*The research received no grants from public, commercial or non-profit funding agency*

**Acknowledgements**

*The author would like to thank Antonis Ellinas, Marco Lisi, Cas Mudde, Jonathan White and various anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous drafts.*
Figure 1 Conceptual architecture of party ideology development

Based on Goertz (2006, 154–165)

- 'Cause'
- Substitutability (between elements of secondary level overarching concept)
- Ontological (constitutes a phenomenon)
Conjunction of non-causal necessary conditions
References


