Identifying Ideologues:
A Global Dataset on Political Leaders, 1945-2019

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Abstract

Researchers have long studied how the ideology of political leaders affects policymaking and social welfare. The limited coverage of existing cross-country ideology datasets, however, has meant that researchers have mainly focused on OECD countries. This paper therefore presents the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the scope of previous datasets by classifying chief executives in 182 countries annually from 1945 or independence to 2019 as leftist, centrist, rightist, or non-ideological. The paper describes the dataset's contents and coding, compares it to existing datasets, and illustrates its uses by exploring how the ideologies of political leaders differ around the world, over time, and across political regimes. The paper thereby outlines a research agenda to study the global causes of chief executives' ideologies and their effects on policymaking and socioeconomic outcomes.

Introduction

Researchers have long studied how the ideology of political leaders affects policymaking and social welfare[1]. The study of the effects of political leaders' ideology, however, has been held back by the limited coverage of cross-country ideology datasets. Though data on government's ideologies has become more detailed and far-reaching, most existing datasets still almost exclusively cover democratic countries in Europe and the Americas (e.g. Armingeon et al. 2019; Brambor et al. 2017; Polk et al. 2017; Volkens et al. 2019; Huber and Stephens 2012). And the few exceptions have limited coverage across countries (Manzano 2017), time (Norris 2020), or many missing values and coding procedures which limit their use (Lührmann et al. 2020; Cruz et al. 2021). Thus, our knowledge of the ideological orientations of most of the world's governments and their effects on policymaking has remained limited.

This dataset feature therefore presents the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the scope and refines the coding of existing datasets by coding the annual ideological orientation of chief executives in 182 countries from 1945 or independence to 2019. The dataset distinguishes between leftist, centrist, rightist, and chief executives with no discernible economic ideology, and spans heads of government in 178 countries from 1945 or independence to 2019, and political leaders in 182 countries from 1945 or independence to 2015. The dataset thereby provides unprecedented coverage of chief executives' ideologies across space and time.

The paper describes the dataset's contents and coding, compares it to existing datasets, and illustrates its uses by exploring how the ideologies of political leaders differ around the world, over time, and across political regimes. The data highlights that most chief executives around the globe not only have discernible ideologies, but that there exists much variation between and within countries and political regimes, as well as over time. The dataset thereby allows scholars across Comparative Politics

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[1] Potrafke (2017) provides an overview of about 100 studies.

and International Relations to study both where the ideologies of political leaders come from and how they affect their policies and social welfare, ranging from economic inequality and growth, to international cooperation, to the political status of women and minorities.

Existing datasets

While previous data collection efforts have much improved our understanding of how governments' ideologies differ across space and time, the scopes of existing datasets on the ideological orientations of political leaders have remained limited. They cover exclusively or mostly industrialized democracies in Europe and North America (e.g. Armingeon et al. 2019; Brambor et al. 2017, Polk et al. 2017; Volkens et al. 2019) or Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g. Huber and Stephens 2012). While they thereby allow investigating the ideological orientations of political leaders in these countries and their causes and effects, they exclude leaders and parties in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East.

Other datasets tell us more about the ideological orientation of governments in these regions but have an otherwise limited coverage. Manzano (2017) covers the ideologies of chief executives for countries around the globe between 1960 and 2008, but only as long as the country is a dictatorship. The Global Party Survey (Norris 2020) provides economic ideology measures for the largest political parties in most countries, yet only for the year 2019. And the recently released V-Party dataset (Lührmann et al. 2020) provides ideology information for political parties in many countries since 1970, but it only covers election-years, for which it also commonly has few expert coders.

The dataset with the widest coverage across countries and time, and the one most often used by researchers interested in the ideologies of political leaders worldwide has been the Database of Political Institutions (DPI; Cruz et al. 2021). For 180

countries from 1975 until 2020, the dataset annually codes the economic ideology of a country's chief executive and the largest government and opposition parties.

While far-reaching and fine-grained, DPI's information on the ideological orientation of political leaders has many missing values, non-transparent and contradictory sourcing, and possibly tautological reasoning[2]. It has high shares of observations without a coded ideology (approximately 40% for chief executives and the largest government party), especially in non-democracies, which risks analyzing a non-representative group of all regimes. Its party ideology coding in a fair number of cases is not corroborated or even contradicted by its primary source, the editions of the Political Handbook of the World (Lansford 2019). And its coding rules also allow for a chief executive's ideology to be inferred from the policies they implemented – which risks turning any analysis of the effects of political leaders' ideology on policymaking which relies on this data into a tautology.

Taken together, although existing datasets cover a fair share of countries and years and can tell us much about the ideological orientation of political leaders, their coverage ultimately has remained limited. The next section therefore presents a dataset on chief executives' ideologies with both comprehensive coverage across time and space and refined coding procedures.

Data contents and collection

The Global Leader Ideology dataset identifies the chief executives, their parties, and their ideologies in 182 countries for each year from 1945 or independence to 2019.

The dataset codes the party affiliation and economic ideology of two types of chief executives: the head of government and the leader, the politically most powerful individual. To identify the heads of government, my research assistants and I primarily used data from the Varieties of Democracy-project (V-Dem, Coppedge et al. 2021),

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[2] These issues also hold for Ha's (2012) extension of the DPI.

but occasionally supplanted it with information Cahoon (2021), Schemmel (2021), Lentz (1994) when those agreed on a different head of government. We identified leaders with data from the Archigos project (Goemans et al. 2009). In many cases, the head of government and the leader are identical. In political systems in which the two are not the same person, the head of government tends to be primarily responsible for domestic policymaking, while the leader is a head of state who often tends to focus on foreign policy. We code the head of government and leader in office for each year on December 31. In total, the dataset covers the heads of government in 178 countries from 1945 or independence to 2019, and the leaders in 182 countries from 1945 or independence to 2015.

For these heads of government and leaders, the dataset distinguishes between chief executives with a leftist, centrist, rightist, or no economic ideology, understood as the values and beliefs over how much the state should intervene into the economy. Leftist chief executives are those that believe that the state should intervene into the economy to increase social equality, while rightist chief executives believe that the state should rarely intervene into the economy to increase the freedoms of their citizens. Centrist chief executives hold middling beliefs on these questions. Chief executives may be genuine believers but may also partially express these beliefs strategically because they think it will help them gain and hold office by attracting support, such as from workers or business owners. We only made a nominal distinction between leftist, centrist, and rightist chief executives because finer-grained measures – such as distinguishing between center- and far-leftist chief executives – may be incomparable across the wide country and year coverage (Brambor and Lindvall 2018). Importantly, distinguishing chief executives based on their economic ideology does not mean that they did not have other views and preferences, such as about the role of religion or ethnicity. We generally assumed that a chief executive did not sufficiently change their ideology over time to warrant a different coding.

The ideology coding is based on a large number of diverse sources. We drew on chief executives' own statements about their beliefs and agendas, their personal background – such as membership in leftist student organizations – and secondary sources' direct descriptions of a chief executive's personal ideology, including the aforementioned datasets by Brambor et al. (2017) and Manzano (2017). In many cases, we identified a chief executive's ideology indirectly by first identifying with which party they were affiliated, and then which ideology the party had. Finally, in rare instances we used chief executives' specific actions unrelated to policies, such as constitutional provisions for socialism or bans on leftist newspapers, and close ties to other political leaders.

We also relied upon numerous sources to code chief executives' parties and identify their respective ideologies. For chief executives' party affiliation, we used information by Mattes et al. (2016), Cahoon (2021), Schemmel (2021), and numerous other sources. To identify parties' ideologies, we used wherever possible the previously mentioned datasets by Armingeon et al. (2019), Huber and Stephens (2012), the Global Party Survey, and V-Party, and added to them information from Cahoon (2021), the Perspective Monde project (2021), the DPI party coding[3] – which we checked against the Political Handbooks of the World to bolster its assessment – and many additional sources, including parties' memberships in international organizations such as the Socialist International. If we found evidence that the chief executives ideology deviated from their party, we coded their personal ideology.

To ensure the validity of the coding, we went to great lengths not to infer a chief executive's ideology from their policies. In our coding, we did not rely on but explicitly excluded any descriptions of implemented economic or social policies, such as the nationalization of companies or cuts to social services. We further disregarded

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[3] The coding rules of the DPI for political parties in the legislature, contrary to its coding rules for chief executives, does not mention the option of inferring their ideology from policies the party legislates.

sources that seemed to base their assessment of chief executives' ideology on their policies. We also worked to distinguish rightist and centrist economic positions from other issue dimensions, and disregarded sources that used "rightist" or "centrist" not in terms of the chief executive's or their party's view on the relationship between the state and the market, but instead in terms of social matters, ethnicity, or religion.

We also worked to make the coding reliable and comparable across countries and years. We sought to base each coding on at least two sources, and often have more than two sources in support of a coding decision. When sources disagreed, we worked to either find more sources bolstering one of the views, or resolving the discrepancy entirely, such as because the ideology of the chief executive and their party's ideology differed. We also preferred more specific sources describing a chief executive's personal background and view in more details over less stub sources. We also preferred sources covering several or many countries as this makes it less likely their information is idiosyncratic. We further preferred sources from academics and experts to non-specialist sources such as newspaper reports. Finally, for each chief executive, two or more coders evaluated all the sources and the coding based on them.

The dataset further includes a party's numerical identifier in the PartyFacts database (Döring and Regel 2019) as well as variables indicating whether the identified head of government and leader match the chief executives identified by Brambor et al. (2018), Manzano (2017), and Mattes et al. (2016), which allows researchers to merge the dataset with other datasets on political parties and leaders.

To make our coding transparent, we have written several hundred pages of country profiles. In addition to the information in the dataset – the head of government and leader for each year, their parties, and their ideologies – the profiles list and quote the sources used to code each chief executive. The transparent sourcing allows researchers to track the dataset's coding, makes it easier for them to come to different conclusions, and to collect additional information.

Descriptive statistics

The Global Leader Ideology dataset allows us to explore the frequency of ideological orientations around the globe.

The data reveal that most political leaders have identifiable ideologies: Figure 1 shows that of the 10,534 country-year observations covered for heads of governments, only for 710 (7%)[4] of them were we unable to identify their ideological orientation, or found sources explicitly stating that the head of government had no economic ideology. Prominent examples are monarchs Khalifah ibn Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan. The dataset thereby has much fewer uncoded chief executives than DPI. Of the heads of governments with an identifiable ideology, leftist country-years constitute almost a majority of all observations (4,726), with most other heads of governments being rightist (4,124) and the remainder holding centrist views (974). Examples of leftist chief executives include democratic chief executives Robert Fico of Slovakia and Nelson Mandela of South Africa, as well dictators Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Kim Il Sung of North Korea. Rightist chief executives include democratically elected Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite, as well as autocratic presidents François Duvalier of Haiti and Felix Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast. Centrist chief executives include presidents Bill Clinton of the United States, Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, and Kim Dae-jung of South Korea.

The data also show that the frequency of ideologies differ across regime types. Figure 1, with regime data from Lührmann et al. (2018), demonstrates that heads of government with no or non-identified ideology preside almost exclusively over non-democratic governments. This may be because non-democratic chief executives are more often non-ideological, but it could also be that this is because less information is available on them. In democracies, leftist and rightist heads of government are

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[4] There are even fewer (approx. 5%) missing observations for political leaders.

approximately equally common, whereas in dictatorships, leftist heads of government are clearly more common than rightist heads of government. And whereas they constitute a sizable minority (18%) of democratic country-years, centrist governments are relatively rare in dictatorships. The common leftist chief executives in dictatorships question the common assumption that dictatorships are political systems of and for the wealthy (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Acemoglu et al. 2015), and instead corroborate and expand other research that suggests that autocracies do not only differ in their political institutions, but also in the actors that run them (Manzano 2017).

Figure 1: Frequency of heads of government's ideologies across regimes, 1945-2019
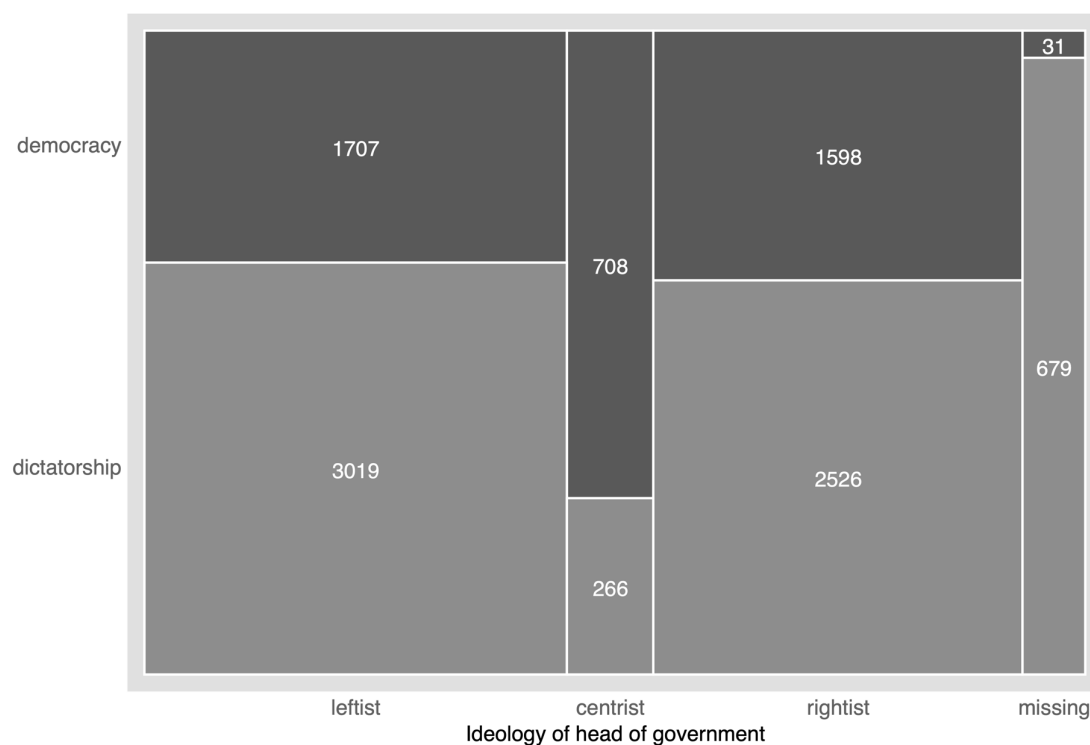
When comparing the data on heads of government to the data on political leaders, I find that ideological cohabitation of chief executives is rare. Among the 26% of country-years for which the head of government and leader differ, their ideological

orientation differs in only 19% of cases. The data can thereby also inform debates about the potentials and pitfalls of cohabitation and systems of government (e.g. Samuels and Shugart 2010; Sedelius and Linde 2018).

Validation

To externally validate the data, Table 1 compares the Global Leader Ideology dataset to previous data collection efforts by Brambor et al. (2017), Manzano (2017), DPI, and V-Party.

I find overlaps in a large majority of cases. Table 1 shows that for the cases for which the head of government is the same as the one identified by Brambor et al. (2017), the ideologies do not match for fewer than 4% of all observations, with a Cramer's V of 0.93. Comparing the country-years for which I identify the same leader as Manzano (2017), the ideology differs for only about 6% of observations, with an overall Cramer's V of 0.89. My data is more difficult to compare to DPI and V-Party, because DPI does not identify chief executives by name, and V-Party does not identify the ideologies of chief executives at all, but of political parties instead. To render the data as comparable as possible, I for DPI use its information on the system of government to assume that in presidential systems the chief executive matches my leader, and in parliamentary and semi-presidential system matches my head of government. Under this assumption, the ideology of approximately 17% of observations does not match, though Cramer's V is still 0.62 overall. And to compare my data and V-Party, I collapse its distinction between left (right), center-left (-right), and far-left (-right) parties into one category for leftist (rightist) parties, and then link its party information to my heads of government via the PartyFacts ID, assuming that the head of government has the same ideology as their party overall. This yields more differences, with about 24% non-matching observations, though Cramer's overall still is 0.56. The main difference seems to be that Lührmann et al. (2020) assign an outright

centrist ideology to more parties in their dataset than we do to the heads of government in the Global Leader Ideology dataset.

Table 1: Chief executives' ideologies across datasets

|		Global Leader Ideology dataset				non-matching observations	Cramer's V
		Leftist	Centrist	Rightist	Total		
Brambor et al. (2017)	Leftist	728	5	2	735		
	Centrist	11	391	65	467		
	Rightist	3	4	992	999		
	Total	742	400	1,059	2,201	4%	0.93
Manzano (2017)	Leftist	1,969	1	112	2,082		
	Centrist	0	9	0	9		
	Rightist	122	1	1,567	1,690		
	Total	2,091	11	1,679	3,781	6%	0.89
DPI	Leftist	2,031	89	50	2,170		
	Centrist	90	172	162	424		
	Rightist	148	146	1,066	1,360		
	Total	2,269	407	1,278	3,954	17%	0.62
V-Party	Leftist	2,976	129	240	3,345		
	Centrist	503	398	348	1,249		
	Rightist	357	216	2,256	2,829		
	Total	3,836	743	2,844	7,423	24%	0.56

Overall, the Global Leader Ideology dataset yields very similar results for the chief executives also included in other datasets, and broadly similar results to datasets which are not as readily comparable.

Illustrations

This section further illustrates the Global Leader Ideology dataset's uses by exploring how chief executives' ideologies differ across countries, over time, and how changes relate in them relate to changes in political regimes.

With respect to how chief executives' ideologies differ across countries, I find that the ideological orientations of chief executives have not been equally common around the globe. Figure 2 graphs the share of leftist and rightist heads of government for each country between 1945 or independence and 2019. The graphs show that leftist heads of government have been especially prevalent in South and East Asia as well as Southern Africa, whereas rightist heads of government have been predominant in Western Europe and on the Arabian Peninsula. This again highlights that many governments even beyond the commonly studied OECD have identifiable and diverse ideologies. The graph further shows that despite cross-regional and cross-national differences, many countries around the globe have experienced ideological changes and have been headed by both leftist and rightist heads of government in the last decades.

Figure 2: Heads of government's ideologies per country, 1945-2019
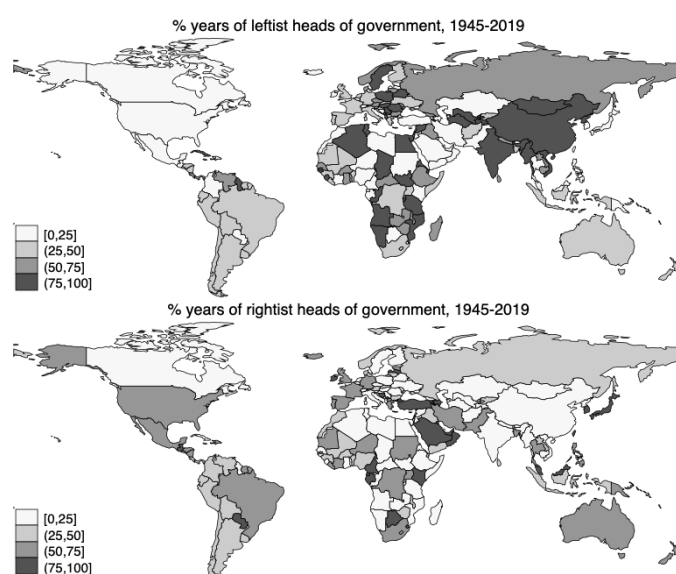
With respect to how the ideological orientation of chief executives has developed over time, I find both trends across all regimes and different dynamics in democracies and dictatorships. Figure 3 gives the share of political leaders of each ideology per year[5]. Across regimes, the graph shows that leftist political leaders became increasingly common in the first few decades after World War II and increased from a low of about 30% of all countries in 1950 to a high of more than 50% in the mid-1980s. This contrasts with Brambor and Lindvall's (2018) finding that for their sample of advanced industrialized democracies the political left was relatively weak in the often-supposed 'Golden Age' of social democracy of the 1950s and 1960s. The global data, however, suggests that leftist political leaders around the world were indeed gaining ground during the Cold War. In the wake of its end, leftist leaders then became less and rightist ones more common in the late 1980s and early 1990s, though leftist political leaders until today have been the most common type of leader in almost all years. Since the mid-2000s, rightist leaders have slightly lost ground, while centrist leaders have become somewhat more common.

Additionally, I find that trends over time have differed between democracies and dictatorships. Again distinguishing political regimes with data from Lührmann et al. (2018), I find that the temporal trends for dictatorships mirror the trends across all regimes, as most countries have had non-democratic governments. Beyond these general similarities, however, leftist political leaders were even more predominant in dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s than across all regimes, making up almost 60% of all non-democratic leaders. Leftist leaders in democracies were only predominant in democracies in the early 1970s, fluctuated in the 1980s in the 1990s, and were less common than rightist leaders in a fair share of years. Rightist non-democratic leaders meanwhile – despite temporary gains in the 1990s and early 2000s – have become less and less common, making up only about 20% of all non-democratic leaders in 2019.

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[5] I created this figure in Stata using Bischof's (2017) graphic schemes.

This has gone along with more non-democratic leaders with no or a non-identifiable ideology in recent decades, which have been rare throughout time in democracies. Finally, centrist non-democratic leaders have recently become more common, while centrist democratic leaders were prevalent (at time around 30% of all democratic leaders) in the 1950s and 1960s, but have since been relegated to a stable, but ultimately limited share of around 15% of democratic leaders.

Figure 3: Heads of government's economic ideology per year, 1945-2019
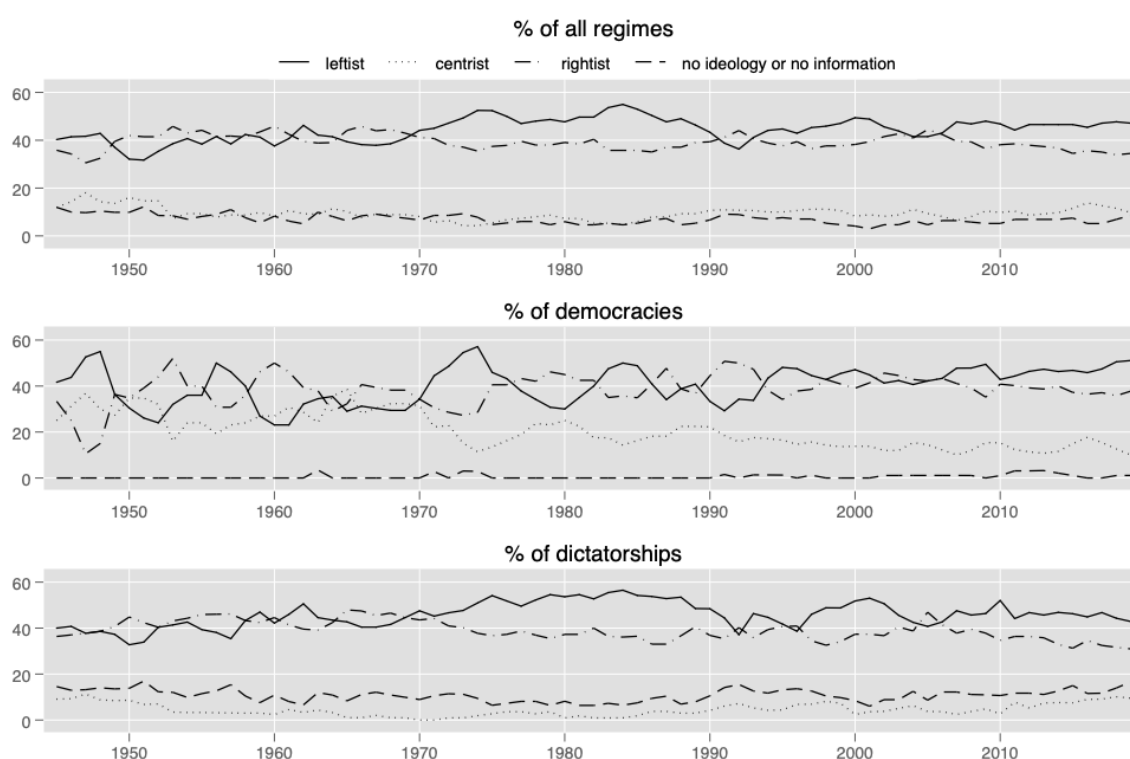
In addition to different frequencies of ideologies across regime types, I further find interesting patterns when comparing changes in the ideological orientation of the chief executive and the regime. Table 2 shows that both ideologies and regime are relatively stable over time, as neither the ideological orientation of the leader nor the regime type change in most years across countries. Though when they do, these changes in preferences and institutions rarely coincide: changes in the ideological orientation of the leader are more than four times as common as changes in the regime

type. This suggests that ideology may be more helpful in explaining changes in policymaking over time than the relatively rare changes in the regime type. Furthermore, most regime changes occur while the ideological orientation of the leader remains unchanged. This indicates that major changes in political institutions seem to go along with at least some stability in the preferences of political leaders, which matches research on how political leaders commonly maintain power while either establishing or subverting democratic institutions (e.g. Albertus and Menaldo 2018; Svolik 2020). And looking more into the cases where the regime is unchanged but the ideological orientation of the leader changes, I find that a large majority of these changes occurred under democracy (390 cases, 68%) but a large minority (186 cases, 32%) happened during non-democratic rule. This again suggests that ideological competition also occurs in dictatorships and not just in democracies.

Table 2: Leader ideology and regime changes, 1945-2015

	No regime change	Regime change	Total
No leader ideology change	8354	137	8491
Leader ideology change	576	31	607
Total	8930	168	9098

Conclusion

This dataset feature presented the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the coverage of existing datasets on the ideologies of political leaders. The paper then illustrated the dataset's uses by exploring the differences in the ideological orientation of political leaders around the world, over time, and across political regimes. I show that common assumptions of political leaders as non-ideological or exclusively rightist in many parts of the world are incorrect, and that political leaders worldwide hold identifiable and diverse ideologies. This meanwhile corroborates

research which has highlighted that political systems not only differ in their political institutions, but also in the actors that run them.

Beyond the illustrations in this paper, the dataset offers researchers new opportunities to study the causes and effects of political leaders' ideologies. Researchers can leverage the data to explore the global origins of the ideological orientation of chief executives, such as economic development and decolonization sparked the rise of leftist governments over time. And scholars can study the global consequences of political leaders' ideologies, such as whether leftist governments lower economic inequality while rightist government promote economic growth, and whether governments with the same ideology cooperate more internationally. These opportunities promise to deepen and widen our understanding of how political leaders and their ideologies matter for politics.

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