

## Ideas of Power

This groundbreaking book challenges the dominant view of ideology held by both political scientists and political commentators. Rather than viewing ideological constructs like liberalism and conservatism as static concepts with fixed and enduring content, Professor Verlan Lewis explains how the very meanings of liberalism and conservatism frequently change along with the ideologies of the two major parties in American politics. Testing a new theory to help explain why party ideologies evolve the way that they do, this book traces the history of American political parties from the Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans of the 1790s to the liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans of today. *Ideas of Power* shows us how changing party control of government institutions, such as Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court, influences how party ideologies develop.

Verlan Lewis is a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Political Science at Stanford University. His research focuses on how political institutions and ideas interact over time, and his work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *Studies in American Political Development*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *The Forum*, and *The Washington Post*.

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# Ideas of Power

## *The Politics of American Party Ideology Development*

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*For Katherine*

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## Contents

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| <i>List of Figures</i>   | page ix |
| <i>List of Tables</i>  | xi      |
| <i>Preface</i>   | xiii    |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>   | xvii    |
| 1 The Liberal Conservative Myth and Political Science  | 1       |
| 2 A Political Theory of American Party Ideology Development  | 25      |
| 3 The Presidency and Party Theories of Foreign Intervention  | 49      |
| 4 Unified Government and Party Theories of Economic Intervention   | 81      |
| 5 The Supreme Court and Party Theories of Judicial Intervention  | 130     |
| 6 Politics, History, and American Party Ideology Development   | 167     |
| <i>Appendix 1: Percentage of Respondents Expressing a More Interventionist Attitude on Foreign Policy, 1948–2016</i> | 173     |
| <i>Appendix 2: Level of Economic Interventionism in Major Party Platforms, 1920–2016</i>                             | 175     |
| <i>Appendix 3: Partisan Composition of the US Supreme Court, 1789–2019</i>   | 177     |
| <i>Bibliography</i>  | 183     |
| <i>Index</i>   | 199     |

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-47679-9 — Ideas of Power  
Verlan Lewis  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---



## Figures

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1.1 Party ideology development since 1879 using<br>DW-NOMINATE scores                             | <i>page</i> 13 |
| 2.1 Change in party control of institutions leads to change<br>in party ideologies                | 33             |
| 2.2 Ingredients for party ideology change   | 40             |
| 3.1 Differences between Republican and Democratic levels of<br>foreign interventionism, 1948–2016 | 72             |

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Verlan Lewis  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

## Tables

|     |  |                |
|-----|--|----------------|
| 2.1 | Party control of the presidency and party theories of foreign intervention (expectations)      | <i>page</i> 44 |
| 2.2 | Party control of unified government and party theories of economic intervention (expectations) | 45             |
| 2.3 | Party control of the Supreme Court and party theories of judicial intervention (expectations)  | 46             |
| 3.1 | Party control of the presidency and party theories of foreign intervention (expectations)      | 52             |
| 3.2 | Party control of the presidency and party theories of foreign intervention (results)           | 79             |
| 4.1 | Party control of unified government and party theories of economic intervention (expectations) | 85             |
| 4.2 | Party control of unified government and party theories of economic intervention (results)      | 129            |
| 5.1 | Party control of the Supreme Court and party theories of judicial intervention (expectations)  | 136            |
| 5.2 | Party control of the Supreme Court and party theories of judicial intervention (results)       | 166            |

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-47679-9 — Ideas of Power  
Verlan Lewis  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

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## Preface

This book tells the story of American party ideologies by chronicling the ideas and rhetoric articulated by the two major parties throughout US history: from the Federalists and Republicans of the late eighteenth century, to the Whigs and Democrats of the mid-nineteenth century, to the Republicans and Democrats of today. Unlike most scholars of American party ideologies, I emphasize how they have changed over time rather than how they have stayed the same. One of the reasons that political scientists tend to overlook party ideology evolution is because the dominant paradigm of their discipline rests on the assumption that political ideologies like “liberalism” and “conservatism” (“left” and “right”) have fixed and enduring meanings. Thus, in this mistaken view, as long as one party has always been “liberal” and another party has always been “conservative,” we can conclude that the ideologies of the two major parties must have been relatively fixed and static over the course of American history.

The first main contribution of the book is to show why we are mistaken when we conceptualize ideology in this way. Once we recognize that the meaning and content of ideological constructs like “liberalism” and “conservatism” are subject to dramatic change over time, we can recognize that the ideologies espoused by the Democratic and Republican Parties are likewise subject to significant change even if one is always “liberal” and the other is always “conservative.” After establishing the fact that party ideologies can, and do, evolve in important ways, we face the question of what explains the ideological transformations we observe. While some political scientists have written about the *economics* or *psychology* or *sociology* of American party ideology development,

ironically, few have examined the *politics* of this phenomenon (Gerring 1998, 257–275).

The second main contribution of this book is to show how a political factor – party control of government institutions – also helps explain the evolution of American party ideologies. The influence of changing party control of government institutions is examined across three domains of party ideology: economic policy, foreign policy, and judicial policy. To do this, I use both direct and indirect measures of ideology.

We can measure party ideology *directly* by analyzing the language espoused by partisans. After all, party ideology exists in language: in “thinking, speech, and writing” (Elkins and McKittrick 1993, 13). To directly measure ideology, I read every party platform published in American history, and took note of every sentence dealing with economic policy, foreign policy, and judicial policy. I also examined the speeches and writings of party leaders like presidents, members of Congress, and presidential candidates. To quantify the ideological content of party platforms, I relied on the coding decisions made by researchers contributing to the Manifesto Project Dataset. An analysis of party rhetoric demonstrates that the two parties have changed their ideologies significantly over the course of American history, and that the meanings of “liberalism” and “conservatism” have similarly changed.

We can measure party ideology *indirectly* by analyzing the behavior of partisans that we have reason to believe are influenced by party ideology. To do this, I examined the roll call votes cast by members of Congress, the political decisions made by presidents, and the survey responses given by ordinary party identifiers. To the extent that we believe party ideology influences the roll call votes cast, the political decisions made, and the survey responses given, these can be indirect, or proxy, measures of party ideology. These supplementary measures of party ideology confirm the finding that “liberalism,” “conservatism,” Democratic Party ideology, and Republican Party ideology have all changed significantly over time.

#### “IDEAS OF POWER”

The title of this book, “Ideas of Power,” has three different meanings. First, it refers to the fact that the two major parties’ ideologies are *powerful ideas*. As this book shows, even though they are often in flux, party ideologies are not mere rhetoric. They are mental frameworks and linguistic structures that shape the way Americans think about politics, talk about politics, and act in politics – for better or for worse. Given the

force that they have in determining political outcomes, despite their evolutionary character, ideas are some of the most important things for political scientists to study (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, R. Smith 1995, Ceaser 2006, Rodrik 2014).

Second, I use the title “Ideas of Power” because this book focuses on certain kinds of ideas: namely, *ideas about power* and who should or should not wield it. Ideologies are vast and expansive mental frameworks and language structures that hold together many different ideas (e.g., issue positions, ideas about the ends of politics, social attitudes, ideas about the appropriate distribution of economic goods, religious values, ideas about the relationships between groups in society, theories of historical progress, and ideas about justice). While I will, of course, touch on many of these aspects of party ideologies, in the finite space of this book I will focus on describing the two major parties’ evolving ideas about how power should be distributed among different government institutions and how much power the US government should exercise in American society and the world. Specifically, the three empirical chapters of this book examine party theories of presidential power and foreign intervention, theories of national government power and economic intervention, and theories of judicial power and judicial intervention.

Third, and finally, “Ideas of Power” refers to one of the important factors determining the content of party ideologies: *exercising power* in government. I argue that changing party control of government helps drive changes in party ideology over time. This theory is tested across three branches of government (the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court) and three policy areas (foreign policy, economic policy, and judicial policy). I chose these policy domains both because they are useful tests of the proposed theory about how party ideology develops and because I believe they are of general interest to most people. The two major parties’ dominant ideas about economic policy, foreign policy, and judicial policy have enormous consequences for American politics and the world more broadly.

#### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1 I demonstrate the dynamic character of American party ideologies, and I show why this is an important corrective to the static view currently dominant among political scientists. With the evolutionary character of party ideologies established, the rest of the book examines the question that necessarily follows: What causes the changes in party ideologies that we observe?

Chapter 2 proposes a new political institutional theory of when and why party ideologies change. I argue that whichever party controls government is likely to exercise and expand the powers at their disposal. When they do this, they face incentives to change their ideology in ways that justify this behavior. Likewise, whichever party is in opposition faces incentives to change their ideology in ways that criticize this behavior. As a result, changes in control of government institutions can lead to enduring changes in party ideologies.

Chapters 3–5 then test this theory in three different ways. Chapter 3 shows how changes in party control of the presidency have shaped changes in party ideas about executive power and foreign intervention. In this chapter, I look at the ideologies of the two parties in every presidential administration from Theodore Roosevelt to the present. Chapter 4 shows how changes in party control of unified government have shaped changes in party ideas about national government power and economic intervention. This analysis covers every era in American history – from the Hamiltonian Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans of the 1790s to the liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans of today. Finally, Chapter 5 shows how changes in party control of the Supreme Court have shaped changes in party ideas about judicial power and judicial intervention. I examine each of the five periods of party control of the Supreme Court in American history: Federalist Party control at the turn of the nineteenth century, Democratic Party control in the mid-nineteenth century, Republican Party control at the turn of the twentieth century, return to Democratic Party control in the mid-twentieth century, and return to Republican Party control at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 6 concludes by summarizing the findings of the three empirical chapters and reminding us of the two main contributions of the book. I also reflect on the blind spots in the political science discipline that have prevented us from seeing these things before and suggest directions for future research.



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