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### Process Tracing and Ideational Theories

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This paper draws on current practice in the qualitative study of ideas to elaborate a set of inferential strategies, grounded in the logic of process tracing, through which scholars can empirically evaluate ideational theories.<sup>1</sup> As I will argue, ideational effects in politics have characteristics that make them difficult to study. The paper nonetheless seeks to demonstrate that ideas and their effects are empirically tractable: in particular, that process-tracing offers a powerful logic for testing well-constructed theories of ideational causation.

More specifically, the paper seeks to demonstrate that process tracing of ideational effects can benefit from an expansive empirical scope. It is often tempting for the analyst to zero in on key moments of political decision, on the handful of elite actors who were “at the table,” and on the reasons that they provided (publicly or privately) for their choices. For reasons that I will outline, such a tight focus on critical choice points will rarely be empirically sufficient. To detect ideational effects and distinguish them from alternative possible causes, our analytic field of view must be expanded beyond deliberation and argumentation at critical decision points to encompass broader intellectual, sociological, and institutional processes unfolding over considerable periods of time. A well-specified theory of ideas will imply a series of predictions about the observable footprints that ideational mechanisms should leave on a political terrain at multiple points in time and levels of aggregation: not only on individual elites’ statements but also on sequences of events, on flows of information, on organizational membership, on institutional routines, and on the outcomes being explained. Taken together, I will argue, strategies of textual, temporal, organizational, institutional, and outcome analysis

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Justin Shoemaker for invaluable research assistance.

can help analysts persuasively distinguish ideational accounts from the materialist or rationalist alternatives.

In outlining, illustrating, and assessing these strategies, the paper emphasizes the importance of careful and explicit reasoning with causal-process evidence about ideas. As in all inferential endeavors, analysts seeking to trace ideational processes must relentlessly confront their interpretations of the data with plausible alternatives. In particular, they must justify their inferences by reference to knowledge of and reasoning about the broader context within which decisions unfold. Contextual knowledge is particularly important for the testing of rival, rationalist explanations: many of the material incentives to which actors might be responding will derive from the larger institutional, economic, and political setting in which they are operating. In this sense as well, effective process-tracing of ideational effects must shuttle between levels of analysis. A sole focus on macro-level structures and processes will tend to render ideational effects invisible; a sole focus on individual decision-makers may overemphasize their self-described motivations and occlude the objective constraints under which they were operating.

The paper proceeds in four sections. The first section briefly delimits the topic by providing a working definition of an ideational theory. The second section outlines three challenges of causal inference that afflict the study of ideas with particular acuteness. This section both establishes a case for adopting a within-case analytic approach and identifies important hurdles that process tracing must overcome. The third section turns to the paper's main business, outlining, illustrating, and assessing several categories of strategy for tracing ideational processes and distinguishing them from materialist

alternatives. The concluding section returns to the paper's central themes, reflecting on both the potential and the challenges of testing ideational theories through methods of process-tracing.

### I. Defining an ideational theory

What exactly do we mean by an “ideational” theory or hypothesis? As I will employ the concept, an ideational theory is *a causal proposition in which the independent variable is a cognitive structure and the dependent variable is a response to a choice situation by actors who possess that cognitive structure*. The dependent variable in an ideational theory – that “response” – may take the form of *action* by states or political organizations (e.g., parties, interest groups, or international bodies). Yet ideational theories will sometimes stop short of explaining ultimate governmental or organizational outputs, seeking instead to account for the *positions* that particular actors take in a decision-making process or their *preferences* over options or outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, it should be added, I limit the focus to ideas held by *political elites* – such as politicians, senior civil servants, and interest-group officials – as distinct from those held by members of the mass public.

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<sup>2</sup> Two features of politics may limit analysts' capacity to explain ultimate governmental or organizational outcomes as a function of ideas – even when ideas have had a strong effect on powerful actors' deliberations and decision-making. The first is that the agreement of multiple actors may be necessary to authorize action by states and political organizations: thus, even if a given idea has shaped the positions taken by one set of powerful actors, those positions may not be sufficient to determine the outcome. Second, political actors frequently, for strategic reasons, take positions at odds with their beliefs and preferences; thus, even where policy preferences have been powerfully shaped by a particular cognitive structure, actors may face incentives to take public positions – and push collective outcomes – in a direction that diverges from their sincerely held preferences.

By “cognitive structure” – the theory’s independent variable – I mean a generalized mental representation of some feature of the social or natural world. Such representations may have either normative or descriptive content. A normative idea is, of course, one that assigns value to particular outcomes or arrangements and, thus, discriminates among the appropriate goals of political action: a belief, for instance, that greater equality is a valid aim of public policy or that equality should take precedence over individual liberty. Descriptive ideas will capture either an aspect of the *state* of the world (e.g., a belief that inequality is high) or a *causal* relationship among parameters (e.g., a belief that a larger welfare state tends to reduce inequality). Some cognitive constructs – such as political ideologies<sup>3</sup> – are compound structures with both normative and descriptive content, capturing features of the way the world works as well as a vision of how it *ought* to work.

Some ideational structures take the form of propositions, explicitly understood and discussed by actors as claims about or theories of the world (e.g., a Keynesian model of the economy or a Rawlsian theory of justice). Other influential mental representations, however, will take non-propositional form: consider, for instance, the descriptive and normative content embedded in the analogies, metaphors, and images that political actors often use to make sense of the problems they confront.

One further logical distinction can help us draw a line between ideational theories and their alternatives. We need to distinguish claims about ideas as *influences* on choice from claims about discourses with ideational content as post-hoc *justifications* of choice. As conceived of in this paper, the ideas in an ideational explanation of choice are

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<sup>3</sup> Hall’s (1993) “policy paradigms” and Bleich’s (2003) policy “frames” similarly combine normative and descriptive content.

*sincerely held* by decision-makers. To study the effect of ideas on politics is, on this view, not simply to analyze the discourses *surrounding* an issue or decision but to examine the cognitive “lens” through which actors’ perceptions, interpretations, or calculations are refracted. As will be discussed below, discourses will commonly serve as one kind of *evidence* of the presence or effect of ideas. But at the core of any ideational theory, in this paper’s definition, is the claim that the ideas in question exert an influence on the sincere reasoning and preferences of the actors who hold them.

As should also be evident, this paper’s is oriented toward what we might loosely call the “positivist” study of ideas, as opposed to a more interpretivist outlook on intellectual constructs. That is, I am interested in strategies for testing claims about ideas as a causal variable, much as one might test a causal theory of institutional or electoral effects. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that ideas can be conceptualized independently of other variables (such as interests),<sup>4</sup> of the actors who hold them, and of the outcomes they are thought to explain. Only on this basis can we meaningfully entertain the proposition that actors’ ideas can have a distinctive causal effect on their preferences or choices.

## **II. The challenges of testing ideational theories**

As compared to many of the explanatory variables employed in political analysis, the study of ideas and their effects confronts a set of unusual challenges. Before we can assess potential strategies of empirical ideational analysis, we must identify the specific reasons why it can be difficult to detect ideational influence and to distinguish that

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<sup>4</sup> For the alternative (but still positivist) view that ideas and interests cannot be separated, see Blyth(2003)

influence from the effect of plausible non-ideational alternatives. I focus here on three principal hurdles to the empirical testing of an ideational theory: the difficulty of observing the independent variable; the challenge of dismissing rival explanations; and the difficulty of observing key mechanisms of influence.

### **The challenge of discrimination among alternatives**

Causal inference implies empirical discrimination: deriving and testing predictions that distinguish one account of an outcome from the plausible alternatives. In testing ideational theories, scholars confront at least three challenges of discrimination.

**The multiplicity of alternatives.** The first is the sheer multiplicity of viable alternatives. One important feature of an ideational theory is that it seeks, at least in part, to account for variation in the *preferences* that actors form over options.<sup>5</sup> The most prominent alternatives to an ideational explanation will typically be a range of rationalist explanations grounded in ostensibly objective logics of material interests and conditions. Rationalist alternative accounts of preference-formation will take the general form of: “The observed variation in preferences across cases is explained by variation in Objective Condition X across cases that logically implied this differential preference.” So, for instance, policymakers in two cases may not have chosen different levels of public expenditure because of different economic ideas but because they faced different levels of unemployment, which logically dictated different fiscal strategies.

The classic response to a problem of control in small-n work is to seek to hold potential confounds constant (or to have them vary counter to the rival prediction) across

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<sup>5</sup> By contrast, many causal theories – such as most institutional or group-politics explanations – take preferences as given.

cases. The problem is that the number of potentially viable Objective Conditions X is usually quite high: there is not just a single “rational” line of reasoning in a given choice situation. The large number of potentially important objective conditions derives, first, from the multiplicity of potential *goals* that political actors might be pursuing. For instance, politicians might seek to select the policy option that will a.) maximize net utility for society as a whole, b.) maximize net utility for some sector of society, c.) maximize their own career prospects, or d.) maximize their own personal incomes. Each possible goal-orientation directly implies a distinct class of objective conditions – from aggregate social and economic conditions to sectoral conditions to electoral pressures to individual financial circumstances – that might rationally dictate choices. Each goal thus suggests a distinct set of objective conditions that might vary across cases and for which comparative analysis must control.

The potential confounds further multiply because of the large number of possible *causal logics* connecting objective conditions and policy options to goals. Consider a rival explanation grounded in the alternative assumption that politicians seek to maximize their own prospects for reelection. For *which* objective condition should the analysis control in order to test the claim that observed variation in politicians’ policy positions across cases is driven by differing electoral circumstances, rather than by differing policy ideas? This question has no single answer because there is no single objective determinant of electoral success or, for that matter, consensus among political analysts about what the most important *class* of determinants is. Consider, for instance, the role of economic conditions in shaping electoral outcomes. The literature on economic voting, for instance, suggests that economic conditions affect governments’ electoral prospects;

but it offers contending views on which economic conditions matter: unemployment or inflation; past economic experience or future economic expectations (for a review, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000)? Meanwhile, economic theories of voting contend with spatial models in which voters choose parties based on their policy positions (Downs 1957). Even the literature on spatial modeling, however, leaves open the question of *which* voters politicians ought rationally to court and how those voters reason (for a review, see Grofman 2004): are a politician's reelection prospects maximized, for instance, by aligning herself with the median voter as opposed to presenting a distinctive ideological profile or satisfying the policy demands of her core electoral "base"? In seeking to rule out an electoral explanation, should comparative analysis, in turn, control for variation in the policy views of the median voter across cases, for the policy views of the governing party's core constituency, or for relative positioning of rival parties in the policy space? A multiplicity of plausible causal models implies – for each class of goal – a multiplicity of exogenous conditions that comparative analysis must take into account. In short, because the "rational" logic of political choice is so radically underdetermined, ideational theories face not a handful but a multitude of rival materialist hypotheses – a serious challenge for standard strategies of control in small-n analysis.

**Multicollinearity.** A second challenge arises from the prevalence of political processes that tend systematically to generate multicollinearity between ideational and material explanatory variables. In cross-case comparative analysis, it is far easier to distinguish between the effect of ideas and the effect of material conditions when the former can be seen to vary across cases independently of the latter. Yet there are at least

two kinds of selection mechanisms at work in politics that will tend to make dominant ideas highly congruent with those objective conditions that might also shape choices.

First, processes of *political competition* tend to select for actors who hold ideas that dovetail with other exogenous influences on choice. This process is easiest to conceptualize in the electoral arena: effective competition will tend to produce winning candidates whose ideational commitments align closely with the attitudes of their constituents.<sup>6</sup> The more generalized dynamic can be described in terms of elementary delegation theory: when principals have a choice among agents, they can reduce the risk of agency loss by choosing agents who share their goals (Bendor et al. 2001). Where a selection mechanism of this type is operating, the result will tend to be a high correlation between the principal's attitudes and the ideational worldview of the agent. Thus, the agent's incentives to satisfy the principal will tend to dictate similar choices to those implied by the agent's own ideas. So, for instance, members of the U.S. Congress who take conservative stances on social issues would be likely both to a.) sincerely hold conservative social attitudes and b.) come from districts in which a large share of the voting public holds conservative social attitudes. While this may be good news for democratic representation, it is bad news for causal explanation: if the former fact supports an ideational explanation of roll-call voting patterns, the latter will suggest an equally plausible office-seeking motive. And where ideational selection mechanisms are strong, the independent variation that would allow us to use cross-case comparison to distinguish between these two variables will be rare.

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<sup>6</sup> While candidates may misrepresent their private views in campaigns, a record of ideological consistency makes campaign promises more credible (Downs 1957), and consistency is more likely to be born of sincere belief than of strategic positioning.

In a second type of selection mechanism, driven by processes of learning, exogenous conditions tend to select for congruent *ideas*. Consider a common model of policy learning. As the state of the world changes, the conceptual understandings underpinning existing policies and institutions may become more difficult to apply and less credible. If the misfit between dominant ideas and objective conditions becomes sufficiently large – when, in Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) and Peter Hall’s (1993) terminology, an “anomaly” arises – existing ideas become vulnerable to replacement by alternatives that provide a better account of observed facts. The problem is that the change in exogenous conditions that encourages or allows ideational change may also shift the terms of a purely rational calculus of choice in the same direction. Similarly, as rational calculi of choice change, public discourses surrounding those choices often shift in ways that seem to signal a change in underlying ideas.

This type of multicollinearity, for instance, has confronted scholars seeking to explain the dramatic change in Soviet foreign policy in the 1980s. On the one hand, it is possible that the Soviet Union’s more cooperative and accommodationist stance reflected the rise of “new thinking” about the sources of national security and the nature of the international system, most directly embodied in the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev (e.g., Stein 1994). On the other hand, in the midst of a massive arms buildup by the West and economic weakness at home, Soviet leaders also faced strategic incentives to reduce enmity with the United States. The central point is that, whichever explanation is correct, this confound of potential causes was probably not accidental. If Gorbachev and his allies *did* subscribe to “new thinking,” their rise to power was likely encouraged by a shift in the exogenous strategic environment that made their ideas more credible. If the true

explanation of Gorbachev's behavior is strategic, new strategic realities would have created an incentive to engage in accommodative public "talk" emphasizing the virtues of international cooperation and the dangers of conflict – generating plentiful evidence suggestive of an ideational shift. In sum, common pressures in politics for actors to find a persuasive "fit" between ideas and objective conditions will tend to generate high covariance between the two.

**A tilt toward precision.** The third challenge faced by ideational hypotheses springs directly from the difficulty of measuring their independent variable. Most of the objective conditions that serve as explanatory variables in materialist theories can be measured with greater precision and reliability than can the sincere ideational commitments of political elites. One likely consequence is sociological: where scholars are confronted by two plausible explanations – but a substantial difference in the reliability with which their causal variables can be measured – they will often find it easier to convince their readers (and journal reviewers and editors) of the importance of the independent variable that can be more readily observed. Yet there is also an analytical consequence: in correlational analysis, random measurement error (i.e., imprecise measurement) in an explanatory variable biases estimates of that variable's causal effect toward zero (King et al. 1994). If we have good measures of the material implications of political choice but "noisy" measures of its cognitive foundation, the findings of cross-case analysis will be systematically tilted against ideational explanations, even when they are correct.

### **The problem of observing the independent variable**

For the most part, the problems discussed so far are challenges for correlational analysis: they involve the control of explanatory variables and will particularly complicate efforts to assess *covariation* between independent and dependent variables across cases. By contrast, process-analytic methods – that draw their leverage from observation of processes unfolding *within* cases – face much less of a threat from these problems. Through process-tracing methods, analysts should be able to discriminate between ideational and materialist explanations via observable features of the causal logics, or mechanisms, that each posits. Even if more than one potential cause is present in a case, the mechanisms through which they would be expected to operate are likely to differ in observable ways.

Yet efforts to trace ideational processes must also be guided by an awareness of important challenges to identifying ideas and their effects *within* cases. In this subsection and the next, I confront two such problems: the difficulty of measuring the independent variable and the difficulty of observing mechanisms of ideational influence.

While measurement problems bedevil most variables of interest to political scientists, there exist relatively valid and broadly accepted methods of measuring many of the most commonly cited causal influences on state action, such as institutional rules, economic conditions, electoral circumstances, and levels of group organization. By comparison, the independent variable in an ideational theory – the ideas to which political decision-makers sincerely subscribe – is particularly difficult to observe. At the heart of the measurement problem is the fact that the most readily interpretable manifestation of actors' cognitive commitments – their own verbal expressions of their ideas – is often a

systematically biased measure. On the whole, this bias will risk generating measures that *overstate* the effect of ideas on choices.

Measurement bias in the observation of ideas has at least two sources. The first, and most commonly recognized (Goldstein 1993; Shepsle 1985), is that politics generates strong incentives for actors to employ verbal communication to strategically misrepresent the reasoning underlying their choices. In particular, officeholders or interest-group leaders frequently have incentives to occlude the material and self-interested motives underlying their policy positions and to exaggerate the importance of “good policy” motives and of the salubrious effects of their favored arrangement for society as a whole. A social desirability bias in public justifications derives from political elites’ need – in both democratic and most non-democratic contexts – to build broad societal bases of support to advance their careers and to build coalitions in favor of their preferred policies. “Good policy” justifications, in turn, tend to be based on a widely recognized normative framework or causal theory.

A measure of motives based on decision-makers’ statements can risk biasing inferences in at least three systematic ways: it can imply a high *correlation* between the policy choice and policymakers’ ideas, regardless of whether policymakers, in fact, subscribed to the ideas they use to justify the policy; it can tend to overstate the degree to which policymakers, even if they held such ideas, *applied* those ideas to a given choice; and it can *understate* the presence or role of other potential, less socially acceptable considerations in Administration decision-making. Nor is this problem necessarily limited to utterances made *at the time* of decision: in recounting the decision later in memoirs, speeches, and interviews, actors may face similar incentives to protect or

restore reputations for civic-minded leadership. In sum, many of the most readily available measures of the independent variable in an ideational theory will often bias analysis toward explanations based on that variable.

A second source of measurement error derives from a deeply engrained feature of human cognition: an aversion to cognitive dissonance. One of the most established findings in social cognition is that individuals tend to adapt their cognitions to fit their behavior when the two are inconsistent with one another (Festinger 1957; for a review, see Fiske and Taylor 2008; for an application to voting, see Mullainathan and Washington 2009). A tension between behavior and cognitions generates unpleasant psychological arousal, and individuals seek to reduce this arousal by minimizing the dissonance. Because it is often easier to adapt cognitions than behavior, the reduction of dissonance frequently takes the form of an adjustment in beliefs and attitudes. People may adapt their cognitions in numerous ways: for instance, by attending more closely to behavior-consistent information, by interpreting information in behavior-consistent ways, or by selectively learning more behavior-consistent arguments.

Applied to political decision-making, dissonance theory implies its own risk of measurement error. Consider a politician who, initially, does not believe that a particular policy or institutional arrangement will deliver broad social benefits but who feels compelled by electoral constraints to support that option. The acts of proposing, voting for, or publicly justifying the option are likely to generate substantial psychological tension between behavior and cognitions. That dissonance, in turn, is likely to yield greater attention and receptiveness to arguments and evidence that support an evaluation of the option as socially beneficial, reshaping the politician's mental representations of

the policy toward greater consistency with its advocacy. Over time, the independent variable will thus become endogenous to the dependent variable: rather than the politician's pre-existing ideas driving her choice, her choice will reshape her ideas. The measurement problem will particularly afflict attempts to observe actors' ideas based on their own *subsequent self-reports*, such as interview responses and memoirs. Even if actors candidly reveal their ideational commitments, those ideas may be at least partly a downstream product – rather than a pre-existing cause – of policy positions that were adopted for other reasons. The result, again, will be an overestimate of the congruence between ideas and choices at the moment of decision, and a tendency to overstate the effect of such ideas on the choice.

As I will contend, process analysts have formidable tools at their disposal for observing elite actors' ideational commitments. But those strategies must be designed with a careful eye to the potential strategic and cognitive sources of measurement error.

### **The difficulty of observing the mechanisms**

A central focus of process analysis is the attempt to observe the *causal mechanisms* posited by the theory being tested – a search for what Collier, Brady, and Seawright term “causal process observations” (Collier et al. 2004) that bear on the theory's validity. One pervasive challenge of studying ideational influence, however, is the difficulty of observing some of the most theoretically important mechanisms.

Consider first many of the mechanisms through which commonly studied independent variables – such as institutions or the organization of interests – shape

political outcomes operate at the level of *social interaction*. Institutional models of policymaking – such as theories of veto points or veto players – posit efforts by opponents of policy change to exercise influence at points of institutional opportunity and efforts by proponents to bargain their way to winning coalitions across institutional venues. Interest-group theories predict similar interactions. While some of this activity may be (strategically) hidden from view, much of it will be at least in principle observable by virtue of the fact that it involves communication and behavioral interaction *among* individuals and organizations. Far more of the causal action in an ideational theory, by contrast, is *intrapersonal*, taking place *inside the minds* of individual decision-makers as their pre-existing conceptual frameworks lead them to prioritize particular goals, attend to particular arguments or pieces of information, and consider particular normative or causal logics.

Political psychology – the study of the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying individual-level political choice – is, of course, a burgeoning field of political research. The most frequently employed research designs in the field are the large-sample opinion survey and the randomized experiment, either embedded in a survey or administered in a laboratory setting. By virtue of the large number of cases (i.e., individual subjects), random assignment to causal conditions, or both, these common research strategies are relatively well-suited to deriving inferential leverage correlational analysis. And such studies rely overwhelmingly on “dataset observations” – measures of the independent and dependent variables – typically making limited use of “causal

process observations” of the mechanisms that lie between (see Collier et al. 2004).<sup>7</sup> In effect, conditions relatively favorable to cross-case comparison allows for persuasive hypothesis-testing even in the absence of detailed evidence of mechanisms.

While a large-n design is readily available to students of mass political cognition, however, the study of elite decision-making is typically a “small-n” affair.<sup>8</sup> It is usually the study of choices made by a handful of key officials or group leaders across a small number of episodes. Given the well-known “degrees of freedom” problem bedeviling cross-case comparisons in small samples, ideational analyses tend to be particularly reliant on the observation of causal processes to discriminate among alternative hypotheses. As I will argue below, ideational analysts have a range of process-tracing tactics available to them, but many strategies will involve a search for the indirect behavioral implications of mental processes.

### **III. Strategies for process-tracing ideational effects**

In the remainder of this paper, I discuss strategies of (largely) within-case empirical inquiry that can help scholars discriminate between ideational theories and plausible materialist and interest-based alternatives. These strategies vary in their probative importance. No single strategy, by itself, can provide “smoking gun” evidence of ideational influence though some offer more decisive tests than others. Certain classes of strategy, I will argue, represent something close to a “hoop test”: a test that an

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<sup>7</sup> Among the innovative exceptions would be the use of “dynamic storyboards” (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006) that track individuals’ search for information during decision-making and the use of magnetic resonance imaging techniques that collect data on brain activity during decision-making (e.g., Westen et al. 2006)

<sup>8</sup> One exception is the study of legislative behavior.

ideational hypothesis *must* pass in order to remain a credible explanation (Van Evera 1997). Not every strategy will be feasible, given data constraints, in every issue domain or political context. But analysts will usually have to employ a combination of these strategies if they wish to overcome the empirical hurdles detailed above: persuasively measuring the independent variable, detecting the operation of ideational mechanisms of influence, and discriminating among rival explanations.

I consider here five classes of empirical strategy:

- examining records of private deliberations,
- examining the temporal structure of causal processes,
- moving from individuals to collectivities (organizations and institutions),
- disaggregating the dependent variable, and
- deconstructing rationalist alternatives.

For each type of strategy, I discuss specific forms that the strategy can take, provide illustrations from existing scholarship on ideas in politics, and – where relevant – note important limitations to its probative value or domain of application. For ease of reference, these arguments are summarized in Table 1.

### **Analyzing (mostly private) discourse**

The most direct and legible manifestation of an idea is its verbal discourse. Yet, for reasons outlined above, verbal communication by strategic political actors can also be misleading. Inevitably, the tracing of ideational causal processes will have to rely, to a substantial extent, on an analysis of the things that decision-makers hear, read, say, and

write. The selection and interpretation of discursive data must, however, proceed with close attention to the *context* in which utterances are made, in particular with careful reasoning about how that context may shape actors' incentives to engage in "crafted talk" as opposed to sincere reasoning. Or, in George and Bennett's (2005) broader formulation, the analyst must consider "*who is speaking to whom, for what purpose and under what circumstances*" (100, emphasis in original).

Among the most important features of discursive context is audience. In particular, analysts will often privilege communications delivered in more private settings – such as cabinet meetings or correspondence between officials – over public statements. There is good reason to make this distinction. In more public settings, political elites will, in general, have stronger incentives to justify pre-determined decisions in socially acceptable terms. In private settings, on the other hand, decision-makers can let down their guard. Especially where actors with *similar* goals are deliberating together, it is more likely that they will understand themselves to be engaged in the collective pursuit of optimal (from their shared perspective) choices. In such a setting, actors are more likely to candidly reveal their goals and their causal beliefs about the connection between options and outcomes. Their recorded statements may also reveal more implicit features of their thought processes, such as the set of concepts on which they draw, the problem-definitions that they employ, and the informational and intellectual foundations on which their beliefs rest. Where an assumption of "collective deliberation" is justified, private discourse can be a rich source of data on actors' cognitive commitments and their sources.

One of the most striking illustrations of the use of private discourse to test an ideational argument appears in Yuen Foong Khong's (1992) study of U.S. decision-making during the Vietnam War. The ideas posited as influential in Khong's study are *analogies* between past historical events – particularly, the appeasement of Hitler at Munich and the Korean War – and current choice situations. In testing his analogical theory, Khong relies heavily on quotations from correspondence, meeting minutes, and other primary documentation of closed-door deliberations over Vietnam among top U.S. officials. These communications reveal actors reasoning about the risks and potential benefits of military options in Vietnam by reference to events in Europe in the 1930s and the Korean peninsula in the 1950s. Khong shows actors engaging in this process of selective historical inference repeatedly, across numerous contexts, and often in great detail.

In some cases, records of private deliberations may also be revealing for their silences. The analysis of reasoning in which actors do *not* engage plays an important role in my own study of governments' long-term choices in the field of pension policy (Jacobs 2011). The study seeks explain the choices that governments have made between two alternative methods of financing public retirement schemes: between pay-as-you-go, or PAYGO, financing (the collection of just enough tax revenue each year to match annual spending) and pre-funding (the accumulation of a fund to meet long-run pension commitments). Among the propositions tested is the claim that policymakers' choices were influenced by the "mental model" that they employed to conceptualize pension arrangements: in particular, whether they understood a state retirement program (a.) as a form of insurance, analogous to private insurance or (b.) as a social mechanism for the

redistribution resources. While the insurance model was expected to tilt actors' preferences toward pre-funding, a redistributive understanding was expected to yield preferences for PAYGO financing. Further, these ideational effects were theorized to arise through an *attentional* mechanism: a given mental model was expected to direct actors' attention disproportionately toward those particular lines of reasoning logically implied by the model, and away from logics extrinsic to it.

The case of the design of the world's first public pension scheme, by Germany in 1889, yields especially clear discursive evidence of this effect (84-90). On the one hand, archival records show actors in closed-door settings drawing repeatedly on an understanding of public pensions as a form of "insurance" and following actuarial lines of reasoning that flow from this private-sector analogy. Equally revealing, however, is the *absence* of any record that officials considered key lines of reasoning that were inconsistent with the model. For instance, in their tight focus on the actuarial logic of commercial insurance, Bismarckian officials never considered the *political* logic of fund-accumulation: in particular, the possibility that a pension fund accumulated in state coffers might be misused or diverted by future governments. This silence is particularly revealing – as evidence of *biased* information-processing – by comparison to two further observations. First, actors in other cases analyzed – where the redistributive model was dominant – paid close attention to the political considerations that German officials ignored. Second, the political risks to fund-accumulation appear to have been objectively present in the German case: within 30 years of the program's enactment, its fund had been wiped out by political misappropriation.

The discursive evidence adduced in ideational analyses rarely rest wholly on private communications. For some purposes, public statements will be of equal or greater inferential value. Political elites' public accounts of their decisions, for instance, may be informative precisely because they do serve a justificatory function: an actor's public arguments may reveal something about the broader ideational milieu – that is, about the kinds of reasons that her audience would have found acceptable and the concepts on which they would have drawn.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, a strategy focused on private discourse can itself be limited or complicated in a number of respects.<sup>10</sup> Most obviously, for many political and policy decisions in many contexts, a sufficiently complete and reliable set of records of actors' closed-door deliberations may not exist or be available to the researcher, especially where actors are intent on keeping their discussions secret. Nor can those records of private deliberations that are available be deemed free of strategic dynamics. Even in closed-door settings, political elites may engage in crafted talk. They may frame arguments less for the purpose of open-minded deliberation than for the purpose of coalition-building, selecting lines of reasoning and pieces of data to maximize the persuasive effect on fellow decision-makers. Those records that are available may also have been created or released strategically by participants in the decision-making process. As George and Bennett emphasize, assessing archival evidence thus requires knowledge of the broader context within which deliberations unfolded: the role of a given discussion and deliberative venue within the larger decision-making process; the incentives and

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<sup>9</sup> Key pieces of evidence in King and Hansen derive from the public report that a key civil-service committee produced.

<sup>10</sup> This discussion draws heavily on insights in George and Bennett (2005) and Trachtenberg (2006)

pressures that actors faced; and the procedures by which records were kept, stored, and declassified in the political context under analysis.

Moreover, many of the most compelling uses of discursive evidence depend on a high degree of theoretical specificity. A central theme of the recent literature on case-study methods has been that effective theory-testing via process-tracing depends, first, on a clear theorization of the causal logic or mechanisms underlying a causal effect (Collier et al. 2004; Hall 2003; George and Bennett 2005). The importance of theoretical specificity is apparent in both Khong's and my own analyses of discursive evidence. Both studies set out to test ideational claims grounded in relatively detailed cognitive mechanisms, drawn from psychological models of mental representation and information-processing. These theories do not posit simply that a given set of ideas will influence decisions; they also supply a more specific set of predictions about the ways in which ideas should shape the *processes* through which actors arrive at those decisions. It is these mechanism-level predictions that make patterns of argumentation and uses of information in elite deliberations analytically interpretable. Such specificity generates a more unique set of predictions and a substantially harder test of ideational claims. Drawing on schema theory, Khong, for instance, predicts not just that actors will make use of analogies but that they will ignore or discount information inconsistent with the analogy and interpret ambiguous information in ways that support the analogy. These predictions raise the bar for Khong's analogical theory, and his careful documentation of the expected biases in elite argumentation allows him to more decisively discriminate between his explanation and the alternatives.

### **Examining temporal structure: process-tracing over time**

Process analysis can take advantage of the temporal structure of causal processes to uncover evidence of actors' cognitive commitments (i.e., to measure the independent variable), to rule out the possibility of endogeneity (i.e., that ideas are a product of, rather than an influence on, choices), and to demonstrate that a set of ideas played an important role during the decision-making process (as compared to other motives or lines of reasoning). Analysts can usefully trace processes over time in at least three respects: by tracing actors' statements and behavior over long periods of time; by tracing ideas back to their intellectual origins; and by attending to the sequence of steps in the decision-making process.

**Tracing actors and decisions over time.** For reasons outlined above, a “snapshot” observation of decision-making can leave much ambiguity about motives and reasoning: in any single choice situation, material factors and hypothesized ideational commitments will, for systematic reasons, often push toward a similar response. However, observing key decision-makers over substantial stretches of time – extending both prior to and after the outcome to be explained – allows for the application of a form of within-unit Method of Agreement (Mill 1868), breaking a single unit into multiple cases: if actors' statements and choices remain consistent with an hypothesized ideational commitment at multiple points in time, even as material conditions shift, the circumstantial case for ideational effects has been strengthened. If, on the other hand, choices seem to shift with material conditions, an ideational explanation is substantially weakened.

Students of ideational effects have frequently engaged in long-term longitudinal analysis to exploit this logic. Judith Goldstein (1993), for instance, in her landmark study of U.S. trade policy, examined decision-making over the course of more than a century. This timeframe included two decades-long periods during which a single idea – protectionism in one period, free-trade liberalism in the other – was dominant. In examining decision-making across several episodes in each period, Goldstein demonstrates that commitments to protectionism and free trade, respectively, are little moved by changes in economic conditions to which, under a materialist explanation, ought to have been highly sensitive. During the postwar era of liberal dominance, for instance, Congress and the President continued to reduce tariff barriers even as the country's trade position dramatically worsened and well-organized interests lobbied hard for protectionism (167-69).

Sheri Berman, in her comparative study of social democratic parties, similarly leverages a longitudinal design to examine the presence and effects of specific ideas. She demonstrates the cognitive grip of Marxist doctrine on German social democrats, for instance, by outlining party leaders' rigid adherence to it over time; most strikingly, during the Weimar period the party refuses to broaden its appeal beyond the working class or embrace Keynesian responses to unemployment despite strong electoral incentives and problem pressures to do so.

While the longitudinal strategy seems simple enough, evidence of consistency over time will not always imply support for an ideational theory. For some ideational theories, evidence of *change* in ideas and outcomes under particular circumstances may provide crucial support: for instance, when existing ideas and their policy implications

*fail* in spectacular fashion, we might expect actors motivated by “good policy” reasoning to reconsider prior understandings and adjust course. This is where a clear specification of an ideational theory’s mechanisms becomes important. Are actors understood to engage in such strongly confirmatory reasoning such that we should expect consistency over time *regardless* of the outcome? Are there conditions under which actors attend to discrepant information and revise their ideas – i.e., learn? Are there sociological processes through which old ideas (or their adherents) get replaced by new?

Often, ideational theories do not explicitly answer these questions. Berman and Hall (1993), however, usefully adopt relatively clear and distinct positions on the conditions for ideational change and, as a result, look for differing kinds of evidence of ideational effect. Berman emphasizes the biasing of cognitive structure on information-processing, arguing that “ideas play a crucial role in structuring actors’ views of the world by providing a filter or channel through which information about the external environment must pass” (30). Given this “top-down” theorization, Berman seeks evidence of over-time ideational and policy rigidity, even in the face of failure and seemingly clear objective indications that other options might be preferable.

Hall, in contrast, sees prior ideas as constraining only up to a certain point. Actors will tend to draw by default on existing paradigms, even in the face of considerable policy failure. But when failures sufficiently accumulate – and if they are inexplicable in the terms of the old paradigm – then social learning may occur.<sup>11</sup> In support of this argument, Hall demonstrates, on the one hand, rather remarkable consistency in British

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to emphasize that Hall’s argument is *not* primarily intended as a claim about cognitive processes. The process of learning that Hall documents is explicitly *social*, driven as much by shifts in the locus of authority and turnover in office as by individual-level information-processing.

policymakers' adherence to Keynesian principles and prescriptions – despite little success – through the stagflation of the 1970s. At the same time, he shows that Keynesian doctrine loses credibility and gets replaced as persistent failure took a form (especially high inflation combined with high unemployment) of which Keynesian theory could make no sense. In Hall's argument, that is, it is precisely because British policy *does* change in response to a strong form of objective feedback that the case for a particular kind of ideational influence receives support.

As these examples illustrate, the longitudinal pattern for which analysts should go looking depends strongly on theoretical claims about the conditions for ideational revision. It is worth noting that different kinds of claims on this point may be differentially falsifiable. A prediction of strict rigidity is relatively easy to test for: any evidence of significant ideational change undermines the theory. The predictions of a learning mechanism are much harder to specify and operationalize. If learning can occur in the wake of dramatic failure, what counts as “dramatic”? If repeated failure is necessary, how much repetition is required? When exactly does an unexpected failure become anomalous? Clear answers to these empirical questions depend on better-crystallized theoretical accounts of the mechanisms through which learning operates.

**Identifying ideational origins.** Extending the time horizon of analysis can also help to establish that ideas are *exogenous* to the outcome. Analysts should be able to demonstrate the the idea serving as the theory's independent variable has its origins in a prominent source external and antecedent to the decision being explained. Indeed, I consider this strategy as akin to a “hoop test” against the rival logic of ideas as “hooks” –

as post hoc justifications for decisions taken for other reasons. Without a demonstration of prior intellectual ancestry, the case for ideational influence will look rather weak.

Such demonstrations are, unsurprisingly, quite common in ideational accounts. Berman exhaustively documents how the Swedish Social Democrats' programmatic beliefs emerged from the thinking of early party leader Hjalmar Branting (38-65) while those of the German SPD emerged from the thinking and argumentation of theoreticians Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky (66-95). Goldstein traces the free-trade ideas that dominated the postwar era back to work being done in economics departments at U.S. universities decades earlier (88-91). And Hall can readily establish that monetarist ideas had become well-established within the U.S. economics profession and had, subsequently, been taken up by British right-of-center think tanks and journalists prior to the policy shifts that he seeks to explain.

Demonstrations of antecedent origins do not, by themselves, establish exogeneity. Actors within the decision-making episode being explained could still have “cherry picked” – from among the pre-existing ideas available in their environment – those that most compatible with their material interests; the ideas employed during that episode, in that case, would still be mere “hooks.” Moreover, not just any intellectual antecedent will satisfy the “hoop test.” The source must be sufficiently prominent to have influenced the broader intellectual environment influential and to have served as a credible source of theoretical insight. Likewise, analysts will do well to identify the *pathway* of ideational dissemination: the transmission belt through which ideas traveled from their origins into the decision-making process of interest. I address such processes in greater detail below.

**Examining the sequence of decision-making.** Process tracing can help more decisively discriminate among rival explanations by attending to the temporal *sequence* of steps within a given decision-making process. Sequential analysis can take advantage of the fact that different actors and different venues are likely to play an important role in decision-making at different stages in the process. Sequential analysis begins by examining a decision-making process to determine at what point in the process it became highly likely that the final outcome would be adopted or plausible alternatives were ruled out. The analyst can then inspect most closely – and attribute greater causal influence to – the motives and lines of reasoning adopted by actors *prior* to that point relative to those involved after the watershed moment had passed.

In my analysis of pension policymaking (Jacobs 2011), I seek to distinguish between electoral and ideational motives in governments' choices between PAYGO financing and pre-funding. In general, PAYGO financing tended to be the more appealing option in electoral terms because it imposed the lowest costs on constituents and delivered the largest pensions in the near term. At the same time, prominent ideas about the political economy in certain cases analyzed also favored PAYGO financing, particularly the notion that elected governments cannot credibly commit themselves to saving large reserves for future use. From a correlational perspective, cases in which pro-PAYGO ideas were dominant are thus difficult to decipher. Sequential analysis plays an especially useful role in the study's consideration of the British pension system, designed on a PAYGO basis in 1925 (104-107). As secondary histories and archival records make clear, Conservative ministers in Britain initially proposed a scheme with full pre-funding. This blueprint was then sent to an influential interdepartmental committee of civil

servants for vetting and, according to an internal report, was rejected by this committee on the grounds that elected officials could not be trusted to resist short-run political pressures to spend the fund – a view with a long pedigree within Whitehall. After this stage, there is no evidence in the historical or archival record of pre-funding having been considered further by elected or unelected officeholders. These temporally ordered data are revealing on two points: a.) that those actors with the *strongest* electoral motivations (ministers) placed the less electorally appealing option on the agenda and b.) that option no longer appeared on the menu after those actors with the *weakest* electoral motivations (career bureaucrats) – and a strong set of cognitive commitments running counter to the plan – had rejected it. In short, the observed sequence is far less consistent with an electoral than with an ideational explanation.

Tightly assembled sequential evidence can provide quite decisive evidence against a rival hypothesis by helping to eliminate, as potential causes, the motives of downstream actors. At the same time, temporal orderings must be interpreted with caution. If political actors are even moderately strategic, they will frequently take positions and make choices *in anticipation* of other actors' reactions. Perhaps British civil servants simply discarded an option that they knew their political masters would, if presented with it, later reject.<sup>12</sup> In social causation, temporally prior observations of political behavior *can* be endogenous to subsequent (expected) outcomes. Sequential analysis should thus be informed by evidence or reasoning about the incentives that actors involved early in the process might have had to pander to the preferences of those who would arrive on the scene later.

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<sup>12</sup> What makes this an unlikely interpretation in the present example is the *prior* step in the sequence: the initial proposal of the rejected idea by elected officials.

### **Moving from individuals to collectivities**

In most theories of ideas, important causal mechanisms are expected to unfold at the level of individual cognition, as actors' ideational commitments shape their goals, causal beliefs, processing of information, or other elements of reasoning. It is at this individual level – the level of mental process – that ideational mechanisms will be most difficult to directly observe. For reasons outlined above, discursive evidence may only provide a narrow window into individual cognition. Fortunately, however, political decision-making is almost always a *collective* endeavor, involving multiple individuals embedded within organizational structures and institutionalized rules and routines. If ideational processes are at work in decision-making, their paths of influence are likely to run through – and leave an observable mark on – collective social structures.

**Identifying ideational transmission belts.** As mentioned above, an ideational explanation requires evidence both that the idea in question has antecedent origins *and* that decision-makers had been exposed to it prior to the decision being explained. Establishing the latter requires identifying the pathway – the social structures – through which ideas travel.

Alastair Iain Johnston (1996), in his case study of Chinese security policy, examines an ideational explanation of China's apparent shift toward a more constructive engagement in arms-control. One form of evidence for which Johnston looks is indications that Chinese officials were exposed to new, more doveish security ideas through transnational communities of experts. He uncovers evidence of several pathways

of dissemination, finding that considerable numbers of Chinese officials spent time at Western security institutes and took part in bilateral meetings and training programs with U.S. organizations committed to arms control – much of this, prior to the policy shift being explained (43-46). These data help keep an ideational explanation in contention; but, importantly, Johnston treats this probe as a “hoop test” – a hurdle that the ideational claim *must* surmount – not as “smoking gun” evidence of ideational influence. In fact, for a reason that I outline below, Johnston concludes that mere *exposure* to a set of new ideas could not have been responsible for the policy change observed.

Erik Bleich (2003), in his study of race politics in Britain and France, similarly provides evidence of transnational contacts as a pathway of ideational dissemination. He shows that an influential group of British Labour Party politicians were exposed to new understandings of racism – as a problem of access and discrimination, best handled through civil penalties and administrative procedures – both through visits to North America and through the study of U.S. and Canadian models of race relations (53-56).

Goldstein elaborates the tactic of analyzing transmission belts by attending to negative as well as positive cases of transmission. As she documents, theories supportive of free trade were relatively well entrenched within U.S. economics departments by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Policymaking processes, however, remained virtually untouched by these ideas – despite potential economic gains to be had from liberalized trade – because of the *lack* of interaction between academic economists and government officials; formal economic models were both inaccessible and of little interest to members of Congress (83-91). Free-trade arguments became prominent in the public sphere – and liberal trade policy emerged – only after “economics classes became

incorporated into the core curriculum on university campuses” during the next century and, in turn, college graduates with an interest in public policy could popularize economic ideas and “[make] them available for political entrepreneurs and policy makers...” (135). This temporal sequence suggests not just that the relevant economic theory was available to policymakers as they reduced tariffs, but also that the availability of those ideas may have been *necessary* for the policy shift to occur.

**Studying mobile “carriers.”** While ideas themselves are elusively, we can often readily observe the movements – through organizations and institutions – of individuals who are reliably known to hold those ideas. The empirical case for ideational influence often rests, in part, on correlating changes in outcomes to the movement of these mobile “carriers” of ideas across loci of political authority. Both the analysis of carriers and the analysis of transmission pathways chart ideational movements, but in distinct ways.

While transmission pathways are mechanisms of ideational diffusion *across individuals*, carriers are idea-bearing individuals who themselves move *into or across organizational or institutional settings*.

The institutional analysis of mobile carriers is central to Margaret Weir’s (1989) explanation of the differing fates of Keynesian policy prescriptions in the United States and Britain. Weir begins with the observation that Keynesian policies were introduced earlier in the United States but proved less enduring than in Britain. She accounts for this temporal pattern, in large part, by reference to differing patterns of recruitment and distributions of power in the two political systems. Staffed by a large number of political appointees, the U.S. bureaucracy is a relatively porous environment characterized by rapid turnover in personnel and without a single, centralized locus of policymaking

authority. With high turnover across a fragmented system, disciples of Keynesian thought gained relatively quick entry to federal economic councils and agencies in the 1930s. The dispersion of authority, however, limited their ability to enact the type of coordinated policy responses that Keynesian theory prescribed. Moreover, serving at the pleasure of the president, Keynesian advisors never achieved a stable and secure foothold within government. The result is the quick adoption of, but unsteady commitment to, countercyclical macroeconomic management.

Weir also documents, by contrast, the far more regimented environment of the UK Treasury: not only was the department dominated by career bureaucrats (making turnover slow), but recruitment procedures and lines of authority severely limited the entry or influence of carriers of new ideas. The Treasury's virtual monopoly on economic policymaking authority within the state further restricted access opportunities for ideational upstarts. It took the national emergency of World War II to pry the system open: Treasury authority was temporarily diluted, and Keynesian economists (including Keynes himself) were brought into government to help manage the wartime economy. Following the war, the same organizational rigidities and concentration of authority that postponed the Keynesians' entry then secured their position within the state, leaving them ensconced in career positions at the Treasury. Keynesian principles came to dominate British fiscal and economic policymaking for the next 30 years.

A focus on mobile carriers can assist scholars in establishing that an idea was both exogenous to the choice being explained and of likely influence in that choice. It is important to emphasize, however, the conditions that make this strategy plausible. First, we must be able to *reliably identify* the carriers' ideational commitments. Indeed, what

makes a carrier analytically “useful” is that their cognitive commitments are more readily knowable than those of other actors involved in decision-making, especially elected officials. Carriers’ belief systems can often be inferred by reference to their sociological context – such as their embeddedness within professional networks or the site of their training – or from past verbal communication. In this last respect, one “useful” quality in a carrier is a prior track record of activity *outside* of politics – i.e., in an intellectual or professional setting in which the incentives for strategic misrepresentation of beliefs are limited. Second, for their ideas to have explanatory power, the carriers must take up residence within major loci of authority; the ideas must be “carried” to venues in which they can actually matter. Likewise, carriers must have sufficient influence *within* a venue for their ideas to shape its outputs.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the analyst must dispense with an alternative explanation: that the carriers were *selected* by a set of political principals in order to provide intellectual cover for an option that was appealing (to the politicians) for reasons of political or material interest. Otherwise, the carriers – and their ideas – remain epiphenomenal. One response to this quandary is to employ the carriers as an explanation of *longer-term* rather than immediate choices: even if politicians chose carriers strategically, the case for enduring ideational influence can be maintained if the carriers remain in place – like entrenched Whitehall bureaucrats – long after their political masters have departed the scene.

**Studying institutional “anchors.”** In addition to being carried by observable agents, ideas may also leave behind identifiable institutional fingerprints. Once they become broadly accepted within an organization norms, beliefs, and principles that ideas

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<sup>13</sup> I thank Justin Shoemaker for bringing this point to my attention.

imply may become institutionalized in the form of operating procedures, decision rules, allocations of authority, and patterns of recruitment. This logic of structural entrenchment is, indeed, a core historical institutionalist insight about how ideas come to shape political development.

In Goldstein's account of U.S. trade policy much of the influence of ideas runs through their institutionalization. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, elites from across the American political spectrum came to agree on the wisdom of protectionist commercial policies and on the appropriateness of using tariffs as a form of "pork." Goldstein shows that Congress and the executive then set about creating procedures and decision-making bodies to implement these preferences (132). In particular, they created an elaborate advisory apparatus – an Office of the Commissioner of the Revenue, cost-of-production studies, an advisory board of experts – to inform and routinize the setting of tariff levels. Equally important, they located most tariff-setting authority with Congress itself, a venue of course dominated by actors with strong incentives to create and distribute particularistic benefits to geographically concentrated producers. These formal structures turned the policy implications of protectionist thought into standard operating procedure and wedded them to a matrix of compatible institutional incentives – thus underwriting a protectionist trade regime for the next 60 years.

What inferential purposes can data on institutional anchors serve? In principle, they might provide evidence for two temporally distinct inferences: (1.) institutional structures may be taken as a kind of archaeological evidence of the early influence of an idea; and (2.) the operation of those institutional rules over time may supply a mechanism through which that idea continues to influence choices over the long run, even as material

conditions or the ideas of those in office change. Inference Number 2 depends on the validity of inference Number 1. And that first inference hinges on ruling out rival explanations of the original institutional design: institutions *congruent* with an idea may, of course, have been chosen for other reasons. An empirical strategy built around institutional anchors must therefore be combined with tools for distinguishing material from ideational explanations.

### **Unpacking the dependent variable**

In large-n analyses, scholars are usually forced to code case outcomes relatively crudely – along a single dimension, for instance, or using a very small number of categories. Within-case analysis affords the opportunity to attend more closely to character of decisional outputs, and such scrutiny can sometimes reveal discriminating evidence as to motives. The analyst can often usefully ask of a policy or institutional outcome the following question: is this *precisely* the way that actors would have constructed the outcome if they were motivated by an ideational commitment as opposed to more strategic imperatives? Clues to motives, that is, may lie in the details. For instance, a policy adopted because of policymakers' commitment to a specific set of policy goals would likely be crafted in ways that, given the state of knowledge at the time, was likely to effectively promote those objectives. A similar policy adopted for electoral reasons, on the other hand, might be designed so as to make its benefits to electorally important groups more salient, possibly at the expense of policy efficiency or coherence. A casual example will help illustrate: President George W. Bush's tax cuts of 2001 were partly sold to the public as much-needed stimulus for a slowing economy. An

inspection of the package's specific provisions might cast doubt, however, on an explanation based on Keynesian ideas: a large majority of the revenue cuts were both substantially delayed in time and targeted to those (the wealthy) least likely to spend the additional disposable income (Hacker and Pierson 2005).

In his study of Chinese security policies, Johnston undertakes a more systematic unpacking of the dependent variable. The starting point for Johnston's analysis is an apparent accommodative shift in China's position on international arms-control treaties: the question is whether this shift is generated by an interest in improving China's image or by a new set of more internationalist ideas about global security. By closely examining the specific international agreements to which China has been willing to accede, Johnston is able to derive considerable discriminatory leverage. In particular, he finds that Chinese leaders have largely cooperated with international arms-control efforts when those efforts would exact a low *cost* to China's military capabilities but walked away from efforts that would impose substantial, binding constraints (49-57).

### **Deconstructing the rationalist alternative**

As discussed above, ideational explanations will typically confront not just one but *several* plausible rationalist alternatives. That is to say that it is usually possible to describe several logics of rational action through which decision-makers in a given case might have responded to the material conditions they faced. Ideational analyses, however, can use precisely this feature of rationalist explanation *against* the materialist alternative. If the analyst can establish that actors confronted multiple, competing plausible logics of action – i.e., that they faced *uncertainty* about how to proceed – the case for any single

rationalist explanation is undermined, and causal space is opened for the interpretive role of an ideational lens.

Deconstruction of the rationalist alternative is a strategy commonly employed in ideational accounts. In her study of U.S. trade policymaking, for instance, Goldstein argues that there were several different trade policies that would have worked as well as or better than the one chosen to improve America's economic position in the postwar era (16). Similarly, Berman informs her argument about the effects of ideas on party strategies by pointing out that Swedish and German social democrats' respective coalitional strategies were underdetermined by electoral conditions. Given distributions of electoral support and common issue positions, she argues, each party could have readily formed coalitions with reasonable prospects for success *other* than the coalitions that they in fact chose (203-4). And Bleich, in analyzing the sources of British and French race policies, seeks to establish that the objective problems in each country had multiple plausible interpretations. Rioting between whites and immigrant blacks in Britain, for instance, could have been understood as problems of immigration or as problems of economic deprivation affecting the two groups. There was no objective reason why the prevailing racial interpretation ought to have been chosen (60-61).

The strategy of problematizing materialist alternatives may rely on both logic and data. The analyst will typically draw on intuitions or contemporary theories of the substantive issue at hand to derive alternative logics that might plausibly have animated decision-makers' thinking. The most effective uses of this strategy will also provide empirical evidence that an alternative logic was, in fact, likely the right one. In Berman's account, for instance, the declining electoral fortunes of the German SPD during the

interwar era – and the ultimate collapse of the republic that they had founded – provides considerable evidence that they had not made optimal strategic choices. In my case study of Bismarckian pension policymaking, the subsequent loss of pension funds to political predations similarly suggests an irrationality in policymakers’ inattention to this causal possibility.

Such reasoning is, of course, open to challenge: analysts must consider the possibility that failure emerged from unpredictable and, effectively, stochastic causes that no rational agent could have taken into account. Moreover, there is risk in taking the strategy of deconstructing rationality too far. In particular, we should be cautious about a study design that *selects cases* for their unusually high levels of uncertainty, such as moments of major political or economic rupture. One of the most interesting insights to emerge from Berman’s study is that ideas often have their greatest effects during moments of crisis, when the environment sends ambiguous signals about how actors might best advance their interests: in such situations, ideas can be unusually influential if they provide a “road map” for actors to follow.<sup>14</sup> The implication, however, is that studying moments of crisis may lead us to overstate the general importance of ideas in politics. On the other hand, such a case-selection strategy may be justified if the analyst seeks primarily to uncover the mechanisms through which ideas matter *when* they matter, rather than to generalize to all situations of political choice.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Blyth (2002) makes a similar point about the uncertainty-reducing effect of ideas during moments of crisis.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Ideational variables do not lend themselves to low-effort measurement, and ideational explanations typically face a multiplicity of viable rivals, often based on variables that are collinear with ideas themselves and much easier to measure. Political scientists' response to these empirical difficulties has, all too often, been to privilege materialist over ideational modes of explanation. This response, of course, has its own deep empirical weakness. In ignoring a potential influence on outcomes that may be correlated with materialist factors, this strategy leaves materialist findings themselves at severe risk of omitted variable bias. In other words, the empirical challenge of studying ideational processes is of consequence not just for scholars trafficking in cognitive explanations; they are equally important to scholars who wish to advance rational-materialist accounts.

More importantly, there is little reason to consider ideational theories, on the whole, to be empirically intractable. The unique challenges of studying ideational effects are most acute from the perspective of extensive, cross-case analysis: they particularly confound a logic of inference tied to the observation of covariation between independent and dependent variable across a large number of cases. In contrast, the intensive analysis of a small number of cases can allow analysts to assemble a series of clues that persuasively distinguish ideational from materialist logics of explanation. Even when multiple causes are present, within-case analysis can distinguish among rival explanations based on features of the processes through which alternative causal logics expected to unfold. Moreover, the tracing of ideational processes will be most effective, I

have argued, when it extends outward – in time and in level of analysis – from individual actors and their behavior at key moments of decision.

In measuring politicians' and policymakers' ideational commitments, analysts may begin with actors' statements at or just prior to the moment of choice. But this circumstantial evidence can be tested against several independent forms of data, including long track records of behavior and expression over time and the processes of prior professionalization and socialization to which public officials were subject. Analysts can further exploit the fact that actors from *outside* the state, with relatively knowable ideational commitments, frequently move *into* the state, carrying their ideas with them into key loci of authority.

In seeking to observe mechanisms of ideational influence, analysts can read the deliberative record for usage of the concepts, norms, and causal beliefs to which actors' subscribed and for mentions of the considerations they may have applied to the decision. Yet scholars can also examine discourses for more implicit indications of cognitive distortion, including silences in the deliberative record and biased use and interpretation of information. Further, they can also examine less cognitive and more concrete manifestations and mechanisms of ideational influence, including the encasement of ideational commitments within institutional structures that shape decision-making over the long run.

The intensive analysis of cases over time can also yield evidence with considerable power to discriminate between ideational and material explanations. Analysts can examine sequences of intermediate decision-making outcomes for consistency with rationalist accounts. The details of institutional and policy outputs can

be queried for signs of the motives that produced them. And careful reasoning about the logic of a choice situation can often reveal a rationalist explanation to be deeply underdetermined.

At the same time, this paper has suggested that none of this is straightforward. None of the foregoing strategies can, by itself, yield unambiguous evidence of ideational effect. Echoing general advice on the conduct of case studies, this paper has issued three kinds of caution about the interpretation of apparent evidence of ideational effects. First, scholars must routinely confront their interpretations of evidence with alternative accounts. Especially important are alternatives grounded in a strategic logic of action: could statements made or decisions taken by actors reflect an attempt to anticipate the reactions of others, rather than their own beliefs and goals? Second, assessing rationalist alternatives will require considerable attention to the larger context within which decision-making unfolds. To assess actors' career or electoral incentives, the material threats they face, and the power relationships among them, analysts must deploy knowledge of the broader societal and political context. This includes formal and informal institutional structures, patterns of political competition, economic and social conditions, and details of the substantive issue at hand.

Finally, I have emphasized the value of richly theorized mechanisms for effective process-tracing. In my view, it is on this kind of theoretical development that further progress in the empirical study of ideas most depends. Theories about ideational effects have tended to leave key causal processes a black box, drawing a direct line from the content of an idea to the content of actors' policy preferences. I would encourage analysts, instead, to specify the causal logic of ideational influence as clearly as possible.

Ideational mechanisms are likely to be specified on one or both of two levels. Scholars may, on the one hand, draw on the findings of cognitive and social psychology to elaborate the mechanisms through which agents' mental representations of the world affect their reasoning and their processing of information. Alternatively or in combination with a cognitive account, analysts may also want to theorize the sociological processes through which ideas are disseminated, embedded in organizational routines and memories, and replaced over time. On either level, such theoretical refinements can considerably expand the set of relevant causal process observations and can yield far more precise empirical predictions that more starkly differentiate explanations theories from materialist alternatives.

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**TABLE 1. STRATEGIES OF PROCESS-TRACING IDEATIONAL EFFECTS**

Process-tracing strategy	Possible probative value	Pre-requisites or limitations
<b>Analyzing private discourse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Measure of IV under reduced strategic pressures</li> <li>- Indicator of application of ideas to decisions</li> <li>- May test for cognitive mechanisms (e.g., attention) through which ideas exert influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires relatively complete deliberative record</li> <li>- Must take into account internal (e.g., intra-governmental) strategic motives for persuasion</li> <li>- More decisive when specific psychological mechanisms theorized</li> </ul>
<p><b>Examining temporal structure</b></p> <p><i>Multiple decisions over time (longitudinal Method of Agreement)</i></p> <p><i>Ideational origins</i></p> <p><i>Decision-making sequence</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aids discrimination by allowing materialist factors to vary while ideational measures and DV remain constant</li> <li>- Change in ideational measures and DV may support ideational theory of learning</li> <li>- Helps rule out endogeneity</li> <li>- Aids discrimination by identifying “watershed” moment in process, ruling out reasoning or incentives that had not yet impinged on process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires theoretical specificity about conditions under which ideas should persist or change</li> <li>- Learning-based theory will have less certain and unique predictions than theory of ideational persistence</li> <li>- At best, a “hoop test” for ideational theory</li> <li>- Must rule out strategic “cherry-picking” of idea</li> <li>- Strategic anticipation must be ruled out</li> </ul>

## Analyzing organizational processes

### *Ideational transmission belts*

- Required to establish that decision-makers had access to specific ideas prior to decision
- Variation in transmission over time helps test for causal necessity of ideas

- Generally, a “hoop test”

### *Mobile “carriers” of ideas*

- Helps establish value of IV
- Helps establish exogeneity of ideas

- Carriers’ ideational commitments must be readily identifiable (e.g., based on professional affiliation)
- Carriers must arrive within key loci of authority

### *Institutional “anchors”*

- Institutional structure may provide “archaeological” evidence of early ideational influence
- May, in turn, supply a mechanism of long-run ideational influence

- Must rule out strategic *selection* of carriers by political principals at time of outcome to be explained
- Must rule out materialist explanation of institutional origins

## Unpacking the dependent variable

- Analysis of likely costs and benefits of decision outputs, and their visibility, can aid discrimination between strategic and ideational motives

## Deconstructing the rationalist alternative

- Undermines logic of rationalist explanation
- Undermines certainty of rationalist predictions

- Most effective when combined with *evidence* that the option chosen was suboptimal, and that negative outcomes were foreseeable
- If cases *selected* for high uncertainty, cannot draw inferences about general importance of ideas in politics