

Identifying Ideologues: A Global Dataset on Political Leaders, 1945-2020

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Abstract

Researchers have long studied how the ideology of political leaders affects policymaking and social welfare. The limited coverage of existing cross-country ideology datasets, however, has meant that researchers have mainly focused on OECD countries. This dataset feature therefore presents the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the scope of previous datasets by classifying chief executives as leftist, centrist, rightist, or non-ideological in 182 countries annually from 1945 or independence to 2020. The paper describes the dataset's contents and coding, compares it to existing datasets, and illustrates its uses by exploring how the ideologies of political leaders differ around the world and over time. The feature thereby outlines a research agenda on the global causes of chief executives' ideologies, and their effects on policies and socioeconomic outcomes.

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Introduction

Researchers have long studied how the ideology of political leaders affects policymaking and social welfare¹. The study of the effects of political leaders' ideology, however, has been held back by the limited coverage of cross-country ideology datasets. While data on governments' ideologies have become more detailed and far-reaching, existing datasets still almost exclusively cover democratic countries in Europe and the Americas (e.g. Armingeon et al. 2019; Brambor et al. 2017; Polk et al. 2017; Volkens et al. 2019; Huber and Stephens 2012). And the few exceptions have limited coverage across countries (Manzano 2017), time (Norris 2020), or many missing values and coding procedures limiting their use (Lührmann et al. 2020; Cruz et al. 2021). Our knowledge of the ideological orientations of most of the world's governments and their effects on policymaking has therefore remained limited.

This dataset feature therefore presents the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the scope and refines the coding of existing datasets by identifying the economic ideology of chief executives in 182 countries on an annual basis from 1945 or independence to 2020. The dataset distinguishes between leftist, centrist, rightist, and chief executives with no discernible economic ideology, and covers both heads of government and political leaders as identified by the Archigos project (Goemans et al. 2009). The dataset thereby provides unprecedented coverage of chief executives' ideologies across time and space.

The paper describes the dataset's contents and coding, compares it to existing datasets, and illustrates its uses by exploring how the ideologies of political leaders differ around the world and over time. The data highlight that most chief executives around the globe have discernible ideologies, and that they differ between and within countries, and over time. The dataset thereby allows scholars across Comparative Politics and International Relations to study both why the ideologies of political

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

leaders differ, and how these differences affect their policies and social welfare, ranging from economic inequality and growth to international cooperation, and to the political status of women and minorities.

Existing datasets

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

Other datasets tell us more about the ideological orientation of governments in these regions but have an otherwise limited coverage. Manzano (2017) covers the ideologies of chief executives between 1960 and 2008, but only for dictatorships. The Global Party Survey (Norris 2020) provides economic ideology measures for the largest political parties in most countries, yet only for the year 2019. And the V-Party dataset (Lührmann et al. 2020) provides ideology information for political parties in many countries since 1970, but it only covers election-years.

The dataset with the widest coverage across countries and time, and the one commonly used by researchers, has been the Database of Political Institutions (DPI; Cruz et al. 2021). For 180 countries from 1975 until 2020, the dataset annually codes the economic ideologies of a country's chief executive and the largest government and opposition parties.

While far-reaching and fine-grained, the DPI's ideology data has many missing values, non-transparent and contradictory sourcing, and possibly tautological

reasoning². It has high shares of observations without a coded ideology (approximately 40% for chief executives and the largest government party). Its specific sources are unclear, and its primary source for parties' ideologies – the editions of the Political Handbook of the World (Lansford 2019) – in a fair number of cases does not corroborate or even contradict their own coding. And its coding rules allow for a chief executive's ideology to be inferred from the policies they implemented – which risks turning any analysis of the effects of political leaders' ideology on policymaking which relies on this data into a tautology.

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

Data contents and collection

This feature introduces the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which identifies the chief executives, their parties, and their ideologies in 182 countries for each year from 1945 or independence to 2020.

The dataset codes economic ideology and party affiliation of two types of chief executives: the head of government and the leader, the politically most powerful individual.³ To identify the heads of government, a team of research assistants and I used data from the Varieties of Democracy-project (V-Dem, Coppedge et al. 2021), and supplanted it with information from Cahoon (2021), Schemmel (2021), and Lentz (1994). We identified leaders with data from the Archigos project (Goemans et al. 2009), with data for the years 2016-2020 added from Bell et al. (2021). In many cases,

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

³ Table A1 in the supplementary materials lists the countries and years covered.

the head of government and the leader are the same person. When they differ, the head of government tends to be primarily responsible for domestic policymaking, while the leader often is a head of state focusing also or more on foreign policy. We code the head of government and leader in office on December 31 of each year. In total, the dataset covers the heads of government in 178 countries from 1945 or independence to 2020, and the leaders in 178 countries from 1945 or independence to 2020.

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

The ideology coding is based on many diverse sources. We drew on chief executives' own statements about their beliefs and agendas, their personal background – such as membership in leftist student organizations – and secondary sources' direct descriptions of a chief executive's ideology, including the datasets by Brambor et al. (2017) and Manzano (2017). In many cases, we identified a chief executive's ideology

indirectly by first identifying with which party they were affiliated, and then which ideology the party had. Finally, in rare instances we used chief executives' specific actions unrelated to policies, such as constitutional provisions for socialism or bans on leftist newspapers, or close ties to other political leaders.

We also relied on numerous sources to code chief executives' parties and their ideologies. For chief executives' party affiliation, we used information by Mattes et al. (2016), Cahoon (2021), Schemmel (2021), and many other sources. To identify parties' ideologies, we used wherever possible the datasets by Armingeon et al. (2019), Huber and Stephens (2012), the Global Party Survey, and V-Party, and added to them information from Cahoon (2021), the Perspective Monde project (2021), the DPI party coding⁴ – which we checked against the Political Handbooks of the World – and many additional sources, including parties' memberships in international organizations such as the Socialist International. If we found evidence that the chief executive's ideology deviated from their party, we coded their personal ideology.

To ensure the validity of the coding, we went to great lengths to not infer a chief executive's ideology from their policies. We excluded any descriptions of implemented economic or social policies, such as the nationalization of companies or cuts to social services, and disregarded sources that seemed to base their assessment on such policies. We also sought to distinguish rightist and centrist economic positions from other issue dimensions, such as disregarding sources that used “rightist” or “centrist” in terms of social matters, ethnicity, or religion.

We further worked to make the coding reliable and comparable across countries and years. We sought to base each coding on at least two sources, and often have more in support of a coding decision. When sources disagreed, we worked to either bolster one of the views, or to resolve the discrepancy, such as because the ideology of the

⁴ The DPI's coding rules for legislative parties in the legislature does not mention the option of inferring their ideology from policies the party passes.

chief executive differed from their party's. We also preferred sources covering several or many countries, and sources describing a chief executive's personal background and views in detail, to reduce the risk that their information is idiosyncratic. We further preferred academic and expert sources to newspaper reports. Finally, for each chief executive, two or more coders evaluated all the sources and the coding based on them.

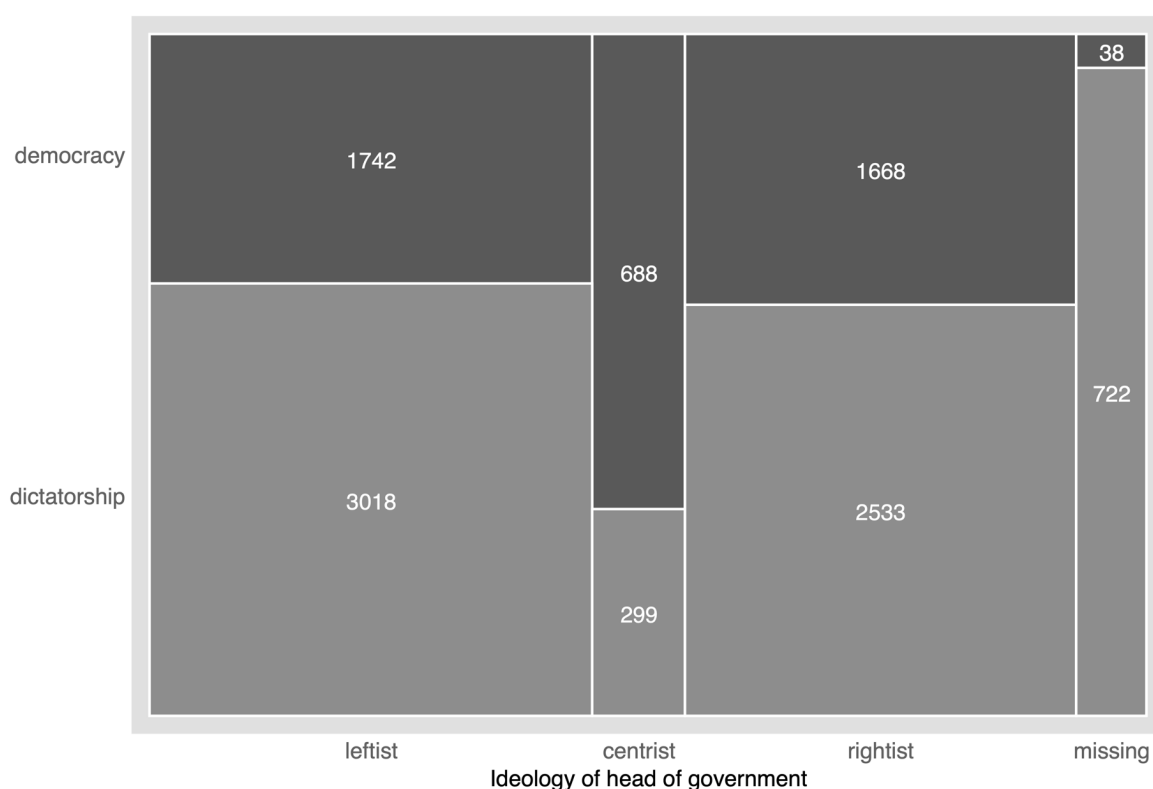
To make our coding transparent, we have written several hundred pages of country profiles. In addition to the information in the dataset – the head of government and leader for each year, their parties, and their ideologies – the profiles list and often quote the sources used to code each chief executive. The dataset furthermore includes a party's numerical PartyFacts identifier (Döring and Regel 2019) and variables indicating whether the head of government and leader match the chief executives identified by Brambor et al. (2018), Manzano (2017), and Mattes et al. (2016), which allows to easily merge the dataset with others on political parties and leaders.

Descriptive statistics

The Global Leader Ideology dataset allows us to explore the frequency of leaders' ideological orientations worldwide. It reveals that most chief executives have identifiable ideologies: Figure 1 shows that among the 10,708 country-year observations covered for heads of governments, we only could not identify an ideological orientation – or found sources explicitly stating that they had none – for 760 (7%) observations. Examples are monarchs Khalifah ibn Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Bhutan's Jigme Dorj Wangchuk. Among heads of governments with an identifiable ideology, leftist country-years constitute almost a majority (4,760 observations), with most other heads of government being rightist (4,201) and the remainder centrist (987). Examples of leftist chief executives include democrats Robert Fico of Slovakia and South Africa's Nelson Mandela, as well dictators Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and North Korea's Kim Il Sung. Rightist chief executives include democratically elected Japanese prime

minister Shinzo Abe and Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite, as well as autocratic presidents François Duvalier of Haiti and Ivory Coast’s Felix Houphouët-Boigny. Centrist chief executives include presidents Bill Clinton of the United States, Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, and South Korea’s Kim Dae-jung.

Figure 1: Heads of government’s ideologies across regimes, 1945-2020



The dataset also shows that the frequency of ideologies differs across regimes. Figure 1, with regime data from Lührmann et al. (2018), demonstrates that heads of government with a missing ideology preside almost exclusively over non-democracies.⁵ Whereas they constitute a sizable minority (15%) of democratic country-years, centrist governments are relatively rare in dictatorships. In democracies, leftist and rightist

⁵ This may be because autocrats are more often non-ideological, but it could also be that less information is available on them.

heads of government are about equally common, while in dictatorships, leftist heads of government are clearly more common than rightist ones. This questions the common assumption that dictatorships are political systems of and for the wealthy (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Acemoglu et al. 2015), and instead corroborates and expands other research that suggests that autocracies do not only differ in their political institutions, but also in the actors that run them (Manzano 2017).

When comparing the data on heads of government and political leaders, I find that ideological cohabitation of chief executives is rare. Among the 26% of country-years for which the head of government and leader differ, their ideological orientation differs in only 20% of cases. The data thereby also speaks to debates about the commonality of cohabitation and pitfalls of systems of government (e.g. Samuels and Shugart 2010; Sedelius and Linde 2018).

Validation

To externally validate the data, Table 1 compares the Global Leader Ideology dataset to datasets by Brambor et al. (2017), by Manzano (2017), to the DPI, and V-Party. I find overlaps in a large majority of cases. Table 1 shows that when I and Brambor et al. (2017) identify the same head of government, the ideologies match for 96% of observations, and for about 94% when comparing them to the leaders in Manzano (2017). The data is more difficult to compare to DPI and V-Party because DPI does not identify chief executives by name and V-Party identifies the ideologies of political parties. For DPI, I therefore used its information on the system of government and assumed that in presidential systems their chief executive matches my leader, and in parliamentary and semi-presidential systems my head of government. Under this assumption, the ideology matches about 81% of the time. To compare my data and V-Party, I collapse its data into leftist, centrist, and rightist parties, use PartyFacts IDs to link them to my heads of government, thereby assuming that party and head-of-

government ideology matches. This yields about 77% matching observations. The main difference seems to be that Lührmann et al. (2020) assign an outright centrist ideology to more parties in their dataset than my dataset to its heads of government.

Table 1: Chief executives' ideologies across datasets

		Global Leader Ideology dataset				matching observations
		Leftist	Centrist	Rightist	Total	
Brambor et al. (2017)	Leftist	728	5	2	735	
	Centrist	15	384	68	467	
	Rightist	3	4	992	999	
	Total	746	393	1,062	2,201	96%
Manzano (2017)	Leftist	1,969	1	112	2,082	
	Centrist	0	9	0	9	
	Rightist	122	1	1,567	1,690	
	Total	2,091	11	1,679	3,781	94%
DPI	Leftist	2,081	105	80	2,266	
	Centrist	95	170	200	465	
	Rightist	169	146	1,114	1,429	
	Total	2,345	421	1,394	4,160	81%
V-Party	Leftist	3,031	115	241	3,387	
	Centrist	492	421	362	1,275	
	Rightist	341	213	2,328	2,882	
	Total	3,864	749	2,931	7,544	77%

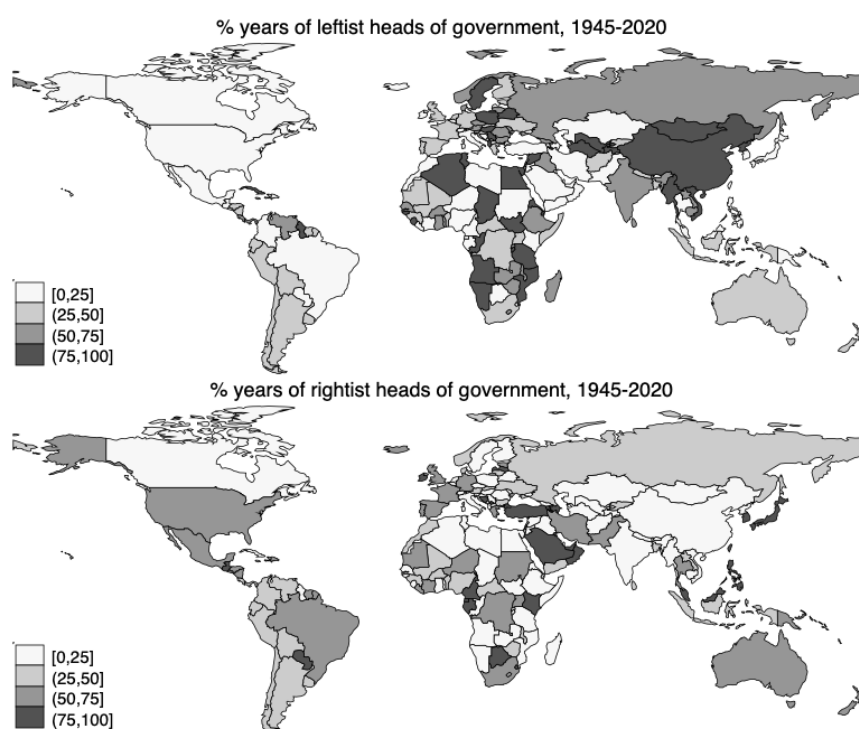
Overall, my dataset therefore yields very similar results for the chief executives also included in other datasets, and mostly identical results to datasets which are not as readily comparable.

Illustrations

I further illustrate the Global Leader Ideology dataset's uses by exploring how chief executives' ideologies differ across countries and regimes, and over time.

With respect to how chief executives' ideologies differ across countries, I find that leaders' ideological orientations have not been equally common around the globe. Figure 2 graphs the share of leftist and rightist heads of government for each country between 1945 or independence and 2020. The graphs show that leftist heads of government have been especially prevalent in South and East Asia as well as Southern Africa, whereas rightist heads of government have been predominant in Western Europe and on the Arabian Peninsula. This again highlights that many governments even beyond the commonly studied OECD have identifiable and diverse ideologies. The graph further shows that despite cross-regional and cross-national differences, many countries around the globe have been headed by both leftist and rightist heads of government in the last decades, and therefore have experienced ideological changes.

Figure 2: Heads of government's ideologies per country, 1945-2020



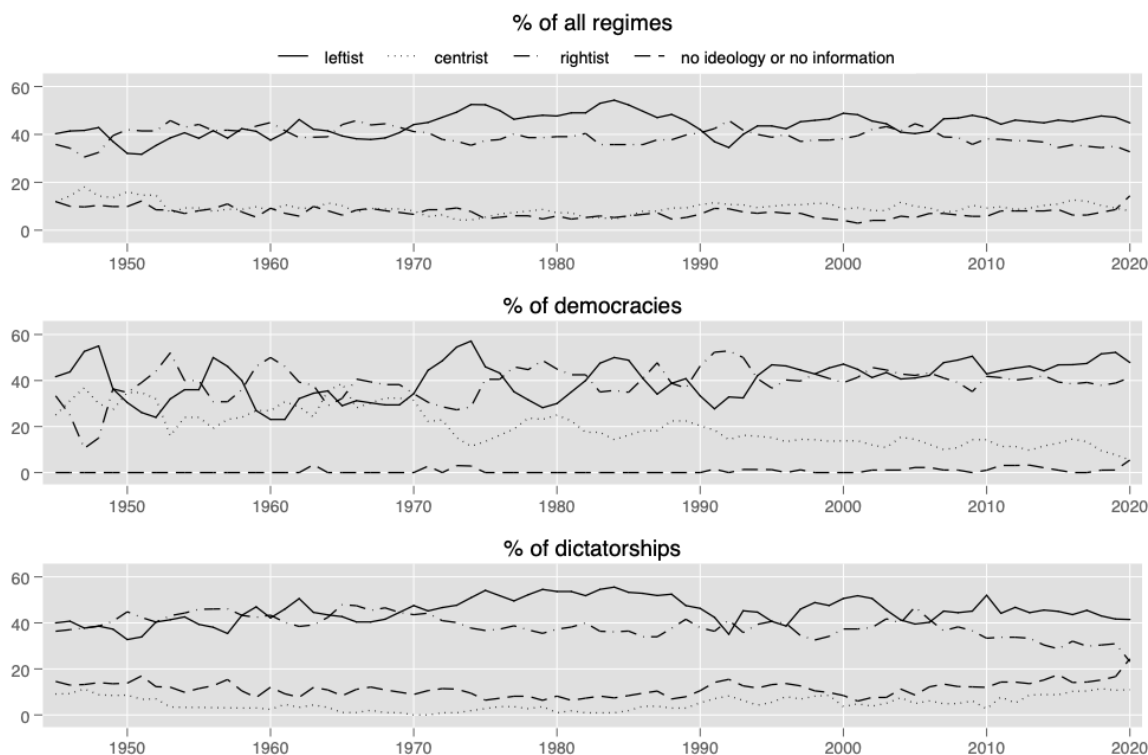
With respect to how the ideological orientation of chief executives has developed over time, I find both trends across regimes and different dynamics within them. Figure 3 gives the share of political leaders of each ideology per year⁶. Across regimes, the graph shows that leftist political leaders became increasingly common in the first few decades after World War II, increasing from a low of about 30% of all countries in 1950 to a high of more than 50% in the mid-1980s. This contrasts with Brambor and Lindvall's (2018) finding for advanced industrialized democracies that the political left was relatively weak in the often-supposed 'Golden Age' of social democracy of the 1950s and 1960s. The global data instead suggest that leftist political leaders around the world were gaining ground during the Cold War. In the wake of its end, leftist leaders then became less and rightist ones more common, though leftist political leaders until today have been the most common type of leader in almost all years. Since the mid-2000s, rightist leaders have meanwhile slightly lost ground to centrist leaders.

Additionally, I find that trends over time have differed between democracies and dictatorships. Using again regime data from Lührmann et al. (2018), I find that the trends for dictatorships and all regimes have been similar, as most countries have had non-democratic governments. Beyond these general similarities, however, leftist political leaders were even more predominant in dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, making up almost 60% of all non-democratic leaders. Leftist leaders in democracies were only predominant in democracies in the early 1970s, fluctuated in the 1980s and 1990s, and were less common than rightist leaders in a fair share of years. Rightist non-democratic leaders meanwhile – despite temporary gains in the 1990s and early 2000s – have become less and less common, making up only about 20% of all non-democratic leaders in 2020. This has gone along with more non-democratic leaders with no or a non-identifiable ideology. Finally, centrist non-democratic leaders have

⁶ I created this figure in Stata using Bischof's (2017) graphic schemes.

recently become more common, while centrist democratic leaders were prevalent (at time around 30% of all democratic leaders) in the 1950s and 1960s, but have since been relegated to a stable, but ultimately limited share of around 15% of democratic leaders.

Figure 3: Heads of government’s economic ideology per year, 1945-2020



Conclusion

This dataset feature presented the Global Leader Ideology dataset, which vastly expands the coverage of existing datasets on the ideologies of political leaders. The paper then illustrated the dataset’s uses by exploring the differences in the ideological orientations of political leaders around the world and over time. I show that common assumptions that political leaders in many parts of the world are non-ideological or exclusively rightist are incorrect, and that they instead hold identifiable and diverse ideologies worldwide. These findings corroborate research that highlights political

systems around the globe do not only differ in their political institutions, but also in the actors that run them.

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

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