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Taking Ideas Seriously in Political Science: The Diffusion of Presidentialism in Latin America after Independence

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Abstract

Today it is rare to find a political scientist who rejects that "ideas matter"—at least in the abstract. But if ideationally inclined theorists have gained seats at the disciplinary table, their approaches still occupy disadvantaged positions. Ideational theories typically must confront nonideational alternatives to achieve salient publication, but nonideational theorists routinely design and publish research without considering ideational alternatives. This is even true on topics where all scholars seem to agree a priori on the importance of ideas. Erratic attention to ideas appears to be justified by widespread views that even if ideas plausibly "matter," they are too intractable to address in concrete research: too difficult to measure empirically, to relate in explanatory ways to action, or to connect to goals of theoretical generalization. This article first highlights major problems with these views in the abstract, and then illustrates them in the example of early Latin American constitutional design. On this terrain, there are good reasons to think that an ideational account connects in more concrete ways to available evidence than leading nonideational hypotheses about constitutional choice. Political science should move toward better balanced debates between plausible explanations, upgrading the rigor of the discipline overall.

Keywords: ideas; political science; political institutions; diffusion; presidentialism; Latin America

Introduction

Today it is rare to find a political scientist who directly rejects that "ideas matter."[1] Widely ignored in the discipline into the 1980s, ideas attracted new attention

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[1] Alan M. Jacobs, "How Do Ideas Matter? Mental Models and Attention in German Pension Politics," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (October 2009): 252–79; Jal Mehta, "The Varied Role of Ideas in Politics: From 'Whether' to 'How'," in *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, eds. Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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toward the end of the millennium. As Mark Blyth[2] chronicled best, not only did a wave of idea-centered scholarship achieve newfound salience but many scholars who had previously conceptualized politics in material or organizational terms began to consider that ideas might shape politics.[3,4] This did not mean that ideas became integral elements in all theories, nor should it have. Unless we insist that *only* ideas matter, as relatively few scholars do, acceptance that "ideas matter" implies debate over how and how much they matter.[5] Such debates presumably include hypotheses in which they matter little or not at all. The shift of the 1990s was simply that ideational alternatives gained admission to central disciplinary debates about the conditions shaping political outcomes.[6]

A seat at the disciplinary table did not mean, however, that ideational alternatives received more concrete recognition as routine components of mainstream research designs. Two decades on, many scholars who abstractly acknowledge ideas' potential importance continue to ignore them in research designs due to methodological or epistemological misgivings. As even Blyth allowed in his account of the turn to ideas, taking ideas seriously comes with "a price to be paid in generalizability, conceptual clarity, and rigor."[7] Another influential advocate of ideational theorizing, Alan Jacobs, echoed more recently that "ideational mechanisms have characteristics that make them especially difficult to study, as compared to materially driven causal processes"; ideas are "difficult to measure," "often highly correlated with other possible causes," and "operate within a 'black box' of unobservability."[8] Neither Blyth nor Jacobs mean to authorize inattention to ideas, but their characterizations suggest widespread views that ideas—while surely important—may be too intractable to address in rigorous social science research.

As a telling example of these concerns, consider the disjuncture between recognition that "ideas matter" and their uneven appearances in research designs concerning constitutional choice and change in Latin America. On its face, constitutional design is explicitly about big political ideas. As Bruce Ackerman argued in a celebrated account of American constitutional politics, ideas are "inescapable" on this topic. America's founders "were children of the Enlightenment, eager to use the best

[2] Mark M. Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[3] Peter A. Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions. Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Peter A. Hall, "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (April 1993): 275–96; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*; Robert C. Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 96 (December 2002): 697–712; Dabuek Béland and Robert Henry Cox, *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Craig Parsons, "Ideas and Power: Four Intersections and How to Show Them," *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 3 (December 2015): 446–63.

[4] Some of this scholarship focused more on norms or identities than "ideas" per se, especially in the subfield of international relations, but these strands of theorizing mostly share foundations, challenges, and implications. For discussions of distinct strands within ideational theorizing, see Campbell 2004; Parsons 2007, Gofas and Hay 2012.

[5] Alan M. Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas," in *Process-Tracing in the Social Sciences*, eds. Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 41–73, at 41; Mehta, "The Varied Role of Ideas in Politics: From 'Whether' to 'How'."

[6] Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[7] Blyth, *Great Transformations*.

[8] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas," 41–73.

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political science of their time to prove to a doubting world that republican self-government was no utopian dream. Otherwise they would never have tried to write a constitution whose few thousand words contained a host of untried ideas and institutions."[9] The presumptive importance of ideas seems equally compelling in the diffusion of the U.S. constitution as a model for its hemispheric neighbors. That constitutional principles diffuse across countries is "uncontroversial," notes Zachary Elkins.[10] All accounts agree that Latin American constitution-making in the nineteenth century was strongly informed by the U.S. model. As Gabriel Negretto puts it, "There is no doubt of the influence that the 1787 Philadelphia convention and the U.S. constitution had in Hispanic America after independence."[11] The same observation leads Latin Americanist Kurt Weyland to remark, "As a surprising variety of countries adopt the core principles of the same innovation, the power of new ideas . . . becomes obvious."[12] Yet, despite agreement among Latin Americanists that American ideas influenced the political systems to the south, ideas only receive erratic attention in their empirical research and analyses. Negretto's leading analysis of constitutional choice pays no real attention to ideas at all.[13] Even Weyland restricts himself to the "modest proposal" that diffused ideas affect the supply of constitutional options, while theorizing political demands and choice in nonideational ways.[14] Such hesitant attention to ideas on this seemingly idea-heavy terrain suggests widespread reticence to take ideas seriously in empirical research.

Employing the illustrative example of Latin American constitutional design, this article unpacks and challenges common reasons why, in the context of concrete research projects, political scientists see ideas as costly for scholarly rigor. Ideas are indeed difficult to study empirically, we argue, but not distinctively so. All the main challenges facing ideational analysis also bedevil theories that privilege nonideational causal conditions. Moreover, once we accept abstractly that ideas might matter, the rigor of nonideational theorizing depends logically on taking ideas seriously, whether doing so is difficult or not. Only by engaging debates over how much ideas matter can nonideational theorists specify the reach and limits of their own claims. This view applies symmetrically to both sides—rigorous ideational theories too must seek their limits by engaging nonideational alternatives—but much ideational scholarship already does so.[15]

Our first section briefly surveys the asymmetrical status of ideational theorizing in mainstream political science today. Ideational accounts are expected to debate nonideational alternatives but are only erratically treated as serious alternatives by nonideational theorists. The second section presents and rebuts methodological and epistemological views that underlie this asymmetry. The third section illustrates these arguments on the empirical terrain of Latin American constitutional choice. Although we can only give a brief account of the design of Latin American political institutions after independence—a suggestive illustration, not

[9] Bruce Ackerman, *We the People1 Foundations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[10] Zachary Elkins, "Diffusion and the Constitutionalization of Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (May 2010): 969–99.

[11] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 29.

[12] Kurt Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America: External Models and Their Unintended Consequences," *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1, no. 1 (April 2009): 37–66, at 40.

[13] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*.

[14] Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America: External Models and Their Unintended Consequences," 40.

[15] Parsons, "Ideas and Power: Four Intersections and How to Show Them," 446–63.

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a full demonstration of the explanatory power of ideas—we suggest that an ideational account is not only worth considering but seems to have advantages over nonideational alternatives. Its theoretical logic connects more directly to available evidence from historians and constitutional scholars. The political institutions of the new republics visibly mixed ideational models from the United States and Spanish colonial legacy. Our conclusion calls for better balanced substantive debate over the conditions that might "matter" in politics. Unless we revert to insisting that ideas do not matter—a view that most of the field ostensibly left behind in the 1990s—then the rigor of all kinds of theorizing depends on taking ideas seriously.

The Asymmetrical Incorporation of Ideas into Political Science

"Ideas" are conscious, relatively discrete, causal and normative beliefs about a given issue or realm of action.[16] Arguments about their explanatory importance were never absent from scholarship on politics, but only in the 1990s did an "ideational turn" garner major attention across the discipline. Scholars whose explanations of political outcomes centered on ideas gradually achieved publication in leading venues and chairs in top departments across the subfields of international relations,[17] comparative politics and political economy,[18] public policy,[19] and American politics.[20]

These ideationally inclined scholars gained recognition through frontal engagement with nonideational theories. In a variety of ways, they argued that nonideational theories could not explain certain cross-case, temporal, or counterfactual variation in outcomes and attempted to show that an ideational account could do better. Political scientists today will surely evaluate differently how well these scholars "won" these empirical debates, but their records of publication, hiring, tenure, and leadership in the discipline make clear their basic acceptance in the field. As one recent (and partly critical) survey of this literature in public policy puts it, it is now "uncontroversial to argue that ideas matter in the explanation of policy change."[21]

The more controversial divide today falls between the "ideas school," along with the "modern" theorists who entertain causal-explanatory questions, and other strands of ideational scholarship that eschew debate with nonideational

[16] John L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*; Béland and Cox, *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*.

[17] Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions*; Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*; Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*; Blyth, *Great Transformations*; Colin Hay, "Taking Ideas Seriously in Explanatory Political Analysis," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6, no. 2 (January 2004): 142–48; Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*.

[18] Hall, *The Political Power of Economic Ideas*; Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions*; Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*; Blyth, *Great Transformations*; Hay, "Taking Ideas Seriously in Explanatory Political Analysis," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6, no. 2 (January 2004): 142–48.

[19] Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*; Marc Smyrl and Genieys William, eds., *Elites, Ideas, and the Evolution of Public Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Michael A. Orenstein, *Privatizing Pensions. The Transnational Campaign for Social Security Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Daniel Béland, *How Ideas and Institutions Shape the Politics of Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[20] Rogers M. Smith, "If Politics Matters: Implications for a 'New Institutionalism,'" *Studies in American Political Development* 6, no. 1 (March 1992): 1–36; Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change," 697–712; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *In Search of American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[21] Jonathan C. Kamkhaji and Claudio M. Radaelli, "Don't Think It's a Good Idea! Four Building Sites of the 'Ideas School,'" *West European Politics* (August 2021): 1–22.

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theories.[22] Most scholars in the latter category now use the label "interpretivist" to characterize epistemological positions in which nonideational theory is simply invalid with respect to human action, since humans never access a context without ideational filters.[23] We find a great deal of interpretivist work substantively insightful—and even, we think, potentially "translatable" into positions in causal-explanatory debates; but our understanding is that its practitioners prefer to stand outside the present discussion about how ideas matter in causal-explanatory terms.[24]

That said, interpretivists may feel somewhat validated by our characterization of the asymmetric role that the "ideas school" has achieved in the discipline. Nonideational theorists may have admitted ideationally inclined colleagues quite broadly to top journals and departments, but their concrete engagement with ideational theory remains erratic. In 1997, Blyth compellingly argued that leading rationalist-materialist and institutionalist theorists were only acknowledging ideas as residual "filler" when nonideational dynamics seemed indeterminate.[25] A quarter of a century later, some theorists trained in nonideational traditions have taken up ideas more seriously, but much nonideational scholarship still achieves high salience publication without any nod toward ideational alternatives. Examples in the former category include Beth Simmons in international relations, Theda Skocpol in American politics, or Sven Steinmo in comparative politics.[26] Illustrations of the latter are so legion that readers will find them in practically any recent issue of top journals outside the subfield of political theory. We focus here on those from literature on the diffusion of political regimes and constitutions, where apparent universal agreement on the a priori importance of ideas puts these asymmetries in sharp relief.

A broad glance at this literature displays highly uneven attention to ideas. Though ideational mechanisms of organizational isomorphism have long been central to sociologists' studies of the diffusion of institutions, political scientists sometimes consider such alternatives, and sometimes they do not.[27] On the one hand, ideational mechanisms receive substantial consideration (if to varying degrees) in salient work like Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán's contribution about democracy and dictatorship in Latin America; Brinks and Coppedge's analysis of the diffusion of democratic regimes; Zachary Elkins's work on constitutional

[22] Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* (September 1997): 319–63.

[23] Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (September 1971): 3–51; Bent Flyvhjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[24] Parsons, "Ideas and Power: Four Intersections and How to Show Them," 446–63.

[25] Mark M. Blyth, *'Any More Bright Ideas?' The Ideational Turn of Comparative Political Economy* (New York: City University of New York, 1997), 229.

[26] Beth A. Simmons, *Who Adjusts? Domestic Sources of Foreign Economic Policy during the Interwar Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Beth A. Simmons and Hein E. Goemans, "Built on Borders: Tensions with the Institution Liberalism (Thought It) Left Behind," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 387–410. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Sven Steinmo, *Taxation and Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Sven Steinmo, "The Evolution of Policy Ideas: Tax Policy in the 20th Century," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 2 (2003): 206–36. Just how fully and coherently these scholars analyze ideas is open to debate, in our view, but their later work considers ideational alternatives and assigns significant explanatory power to them.

[27] Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

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diffusion; explanations of postcommunist regime transitions by Jeffrey Kopstein, David Reilly, Hilary Appel, and Mitchell Orenstein; general discussions of diffusion by Beth Simmons and co-authors; and much of Weyland's work on these issues.[28] In 2017, Weyland and André Bank edited a special issue of *Democratization* framed explicitly around the roles of "interests versus ideology" in diffusion of authoritarian models.[29] On the other hand, many prominent publications on the same subjects give no significant attention to ideas, like Negretto's work on Latin American constitutions (of which more later on), Timothy Frye's analyses of postcommunist constitutional/regime choices, Cindy Skach's work on constitutional borrowing in Western Europe, or Boix's and Samuels's and Ansell's political-economic explanations of democratization.[30] Even within the Weyland and Bank issue about "interests versus ideology," two of the five empirical contributions sidestep that theme.[31] Jason Brownlee looks at how patterns of democratic breakdown relate to nonideational conditions (wealth, geography, institutional memberships, trade, and direct autocratic meddling in elections).[32] May Darwich proposes a theory of diffusion of repression in the Middle East based on "regime regional interest and the regime's relative autonomy at the domestic level," without empirical consideration of alternatives.[33]

We do not mean to insist that all these works consider ideational alternatives in identical research designs, since they pose a variety of questions to which such alternatives may be relevant in varying ways. The specifics of attention to ideas in some of the work we have cited also warrants more detailed dissection, which we provide below as a lead-in to our empirical illustrations about Latin American constitutional choice. For the moment, though, this simple survey displays the pattern that concerns us. Even in scholarship that is directly about whether (and how) people adopt highly abstract constitutional ideas and regime models from abroad, serious empirical consideration of the role of ideas appears to be optional. As we see it, the problem is not that this oversight by itself falsifies or invalidates any of these theorists' accounts. The problem is that those who neglect ideational alternatives are not attempting to specify rigorously how much their theories are falsified or not, in light of plausible alternatives. Such set-asides might be legitimate if ideational alternatives were simply not amenable to rigorous

[28] Beth A. Simmons and Zachary Elkins, "The Globalization of Liberalization: Policy Diffusion in the International Political Economy," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (February 2004): 171–89; Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, "Diffusion Is No Illusion. Neighbor in the Third Wave of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 4 (May 2006): 463–89; Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffret Garrett, "Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism," *International Organization* 60, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 781–810; Elkins, "Diffusion and the Constitutionalization of Europe," 969–99; Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal S. Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[29] Andre Bank and Kurt Weyland, *Clusters of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation: The Role of Interests vs. Ideology? Democratization Special Issue* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[30] Timothy Frye, "A Politics of Institutional Choice: Post-Communist Presidencies," *Comparative Political Studies* 30 (October 1997): 523–52; Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Cindy Skach, *Borrowing Constitutional Designs: Constitutional Law in Weimar Germany and the French Fifth Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Ben Ansell and David Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2014).

[31] Kurt Weyland, *Bounded Rationality and Policy Diffusion: Social Sector Reform in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[32] Jason Brownlee, "Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization," *International Society of Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2009): 157–61.

[33] May Darwich, "Creating the Enemy, Constructing the Threat: The Diffusion of Repression Against the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East," *Democratization* 7, no. 2 (April 2017): 1289–306 at 1291.

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empirical consideration. This is indeed what many political scientists appear to believe—but not for coherent reasons.

The Case for More Symmetric Attention to Ideational Analysis

Why would scholars agree broadly that ideas have shaped Latin American constitutions but then give erratic attention to ideas in theorizing these outcomes? This section highlights common views that rationalize this situation. We agree that rigorous scholarship involving ideas is challenging, but not that it is any more so than other ways of analyzing politics. The real and present danger to rigorous political science lies in *not* taking ideas seriously—neglecting substantively plausible alternatives for bad reasons. The most common arguments about special methodological or epistemological disadvantages of ideational theorizing cannot withstand scrutiny.

Methodological Challenges

On a methodological level, it is common to portray ideas as especially difficult to describe and measure, or to relate in explanatory ways to human action. In one of the contributions that introduced ideas to mainstream political science, Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane stressed the "key problem" that "students of the role of ideas must interpret what is in people's heads: their conceptions of what is true, reflecting their own attempts to create meaning in their lives."[34] Yet, if intangible ideas *are* difficult to measure and relate in explanatory ways to action, these difficulties are not systematically greater than analogous challenges around the explanatory conditions of nonideational theories. Take the measurement problem first. Most nonideational theories explain action as a rational reaction to positioning in environments of material or institutional conditions. Research designs for such theories typically seek the most measurable indicators for their conditions, as well they should, but few theories are so simple as to rest directly on literal visible phenomena.[35] Instead, they typically gather proxies for less directly observable conditions like a "distribution of power," "market positioning," "party competition," "institutional resources," and so on. Though it may seem prima facie advantageous to rest explanatory claims on putatively objective conditions "out there," rather than on the internal "content of actor's cognitions," our relative ease and confidence in such measurements vary massively across both categories.[36] At the origins of Latin American constitutions, for example, extant documents or correspondence may suggest strongly that certain actors believed that various challenges made a centralized presidency necessary to uphold political order. Documenting the nature or severity of "real" threats of disorder at the time could be considerably harder.

Even more problematic is the notion that ideas are especially difficult to relate in explanatory ways to action. It is frankly odd to see ideational theory as distinctive for making hard-to-document claims about "what is in people's heads." Again, most nonideational theories link environmental conditions to action in explanatory ways via the mechanism of rationality. To hypothesize that people did

[34] Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 27.

[35] Martin Bunzi, "Pragmatism to the Rescue?," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 4 (October 1995).

[36] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas," 41.

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something (let's say, adopting a certain constitutional feature) because they rationally pursued fixed preferences amid certain environmental conditions is a very strong claim about understandings in their heads. Indeed, to even formulate preferences over options like features of constitutions, rational actors depend on "theories" (or beliefs) about those features' likely effects.[37] Supporting claims that certain people rationally chose a certain constitutional feature—or did anything at all in a rational way—is a tall order. In fact, most rationalist theorists agree both that rational decision-making is impossible to document fully under any real-world conditions, and also that real actors are never fully rational, so they settle pragmatically for some evidence of roughly rational-looking perceptions of environmental conditions and instrumental decision-making.[38] No matter the degree of evidence we decide to require for "what is in people's heads," most ideational and rationalistic theories are variants of intentional explanation that share these methodological challenges. Rationalistic theories seek evidence that people's perceptions and decision-making connect fixed preferences rationally to environmental conditions. Ideational theories seek evidence that people's perceptions and/or decision-making vary independently from environmental conditions in ways that reflect certain cognitive or affective filters.

It follows that the rigor of nonideational explanation depends on empirical consideration of ideational alternatives and vice versa. They confront equal evidentiary demands to attempt to document actors' thinking and how it relates to environmental conditions. Some of the best guidance for doing so—useful for theorists of all persuasions—comes from Jacobs's work on ideational methods. But first, even his guidance must be shorn of asymmetries, since three key challenges that he highlights for ideational claims are shared with nonideational theories.

Jacobs's first challenge is that we typically access actors' ideas through their rhetoric, and political actors often cloak self-interest in rhetorical altruism.[39] This is indeed a challenge, but Jacobs is wrong to imply that materialist theory avoids it. Why would a rigorous scholar accept by default claims that behavior is driven by certain specific interests without some evidence—presumably somehow spoken or written—those actors perceive such interests and act on them coherently? Strategic dissimulation is a challenge for any account of people's choices.

Jacobs's second challenge concerns documenting mechanisms by which cognitions influence choices. This can certainly be very difficult but is equally so for rationality-based mechanisms. For these reasons, we must disagree with Jacobs's suggestion that "far more of the causal action of an ideational theory . . . [takes] place inside the minds of individual decision-makers."[40] Both kinds of theorizing hypothesize highly specific "causal action" in actors' minds, as well as certain relationships between that "action" and environmental conditions.

[37] Victor Vanberg and James Buchanan, "Interests and Theories in Constitutional Choice," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, no. 1 (April 1989): 49–62.

[38] Elster, 1986, 12–16; Fiorina, 1995; Levi, 1997; but see Tsebelis, 1990: 31–39, for a different view. Some rationalist scholars take the alternative route of espousing a model of science in which predictive models are correlated to outcomes and do not claim to capture actual processes (Friedman, 1953). Such theorizing may produce useful results in strongly modelable contexts, but there exits the terrain of evidence-based debate about why something happened.

[39] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas," 44–47.

[40] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas," 46.

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Jacobs's third challenge is that "correlation between actors' ideas and their material circumstances makes it harder for the analyst to establish that the former are exogenous to the latter." This is true, but Jacobs again overlooks that nonideational theories confront the flip side of this problem. Actors' choices could well correlate with both material positioning and certain ideational filters, like conflict along class lines that is shaped by ideas about the feasibility of revolution.[41] Serious evaluation of materialist theories requires methods that could ask how much actors make such interpretive leaps. These are precisely the methods we use to evaluate ideational theories. Jacobs breaks them down into useful guidance on measuring cognitions, establishing their exogeneity (*or not,* we would add) from environmental conditions, tracing mechanisms from cognitions into choice, and addressing multicollinearity.[42]

Epistemological Challenges

The preceding methodological points counter only some of the reasons for skepticism about the rigor of ideational theorizing. As Blyth implied in referring to a "price to be paid in generalizability" for considering ideas, political scientists commonly avoid ideational alternatives for deeper epistemological reasons.[43] Many scholars see generality as the key criterion for theoretical contribution. They agree with King, Keohane, and Verba that "the question is less whether, in some general sense, a theory is false or not . . . than *how much of the world the theory can help us explain*," and fear that serious attention to ideas means weaker generalizations.[44] Yet, if ideational theory does indeed threaten to undercut the generalizability of social-science theory, that is the key reason why nonideational aspiring generalizers *should* take it seriously. Rigorous evaluation of "how much of the world the theory can help us explain" means a serious search for the bounds of general dynamics, which requires attention to ideas.

To see why, note first that ideational theory is inherently about the substantive particularity of human action. In Jacobs' definition, it assigns explanatory power to "cognitive structure that is not wholly endogenous to the objective, material features of the choice situation being explained."[45] That is, within scholarly debates that are partly about how much people's cognitions are exogenous to environmental choice situations, we call a theory "ideational" to the extent that it attributes this sort of exogeneity to cognitions. Such theories focus on contextually particularistic ideas that are socially constructed by contingent creativity or accident, implying that the same ideas might not take hold even if we placed the same people in the same choice situation again. Ideational theories can aspire to *process* generalizations, formulating expectations about how processes of action tend to operate under certain scope conditions, but not substantive ones. For example, they might

[41] Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*.

[42] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas." For additional guidance on ideational methods in causal-explanatory debate, see Biernacki, 1995: 1–36; Parsons 2016.

[43] Blyth, *Great Transformations*, 701–701.

[44] Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 101. Their emphasis.

[45] Jacobs, "Process-Tracing the Effects of Ideas." We believe that we basically agree with Jacobs on the core ideas here, and this discussion employs his terms for fluidity. Strictly speaking, though, we would quibble with equating nonideational and "material" explanation (since it surely includes rationalist forms of institutionalism) and also with limiting ideational theory to "cognitive structure" (since it can include affective elements, like values).

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theorize common processes of socialization,[46] persuasion,[47] bricolage,[48] or organizational isomorphism,[49] but they hypothesize the substantive content of such dynamics to be contextually contingent and path-dependent. Importantly, substantive particularity does not preclude broad empirical scope. Scholars like John Meyer and Martha Finnemore theorize dynamics of "world culture" that affect practically all human beings in a certain era.[50] In their accounts, though, global patterns reflect the proliferation of historical ideational constructs, not people arriving at similar choices through the separate and parallel operation of general dynamics.

Consider, then, what this body of scholarship implies for evaluating the contribution of a nonideational theory. At an overarching level, it makes clear that deep debates in the social sciences address the generality of human action. This is different from the natural sciences, where no one hypothesizes that atoms, tectonic plates, or bacteria invent contextual rules for themselves.[51] Because generalizing theories in the social sciences face alternatives built on ideational particularity, they face higher evidentiary bars for generality than most natural-science theories do. Theories of fire behavior or ocean currents can make powerful contributions if they propose new general models and offer some (even local) support for them, because they do not confront plausible questions about whether *this* fire or water obeys distinctive rules. No rationalist theory of constitutional design, war initiation, or electoral strategy can similarly take for granted the generality of its phenomena. Evidence to evaluate such theories rigorously begins by seeking cross-case patterns that correlate environmental conditions to action, but no respectable test of explanatory power can stop there. We also need evidence that people at least roughly followed the causal logic posited by the theory. This is especially true because general models in the social sciences rarely achieve very strong correlative support and often point to statistical significance rather than claiming a large share of variation. Such findings leave ample room for questions about how much they explain, especially because ideational alternatives may also be consistent with cross-case patterns due to cross-case diffusion or shared cultural contexts. The key reason for nonideational scholars to then try to consider such alternatives—investigating plausible ideational sources for the actions in question and undertaking process-tracing evaluation of how decisions are made—is not just to satisfy ideationally inclined colleagues by speaking to their different hypotheses (though that is a

[46] Jeffrey Checkel, "International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework," *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 801–26; Jeffrey Lewis, "The Janus Face of Brussels: Socialization and Everyday Decision Making in the European Union," *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (October 2005): 937–71.

[47] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 887–917; Nicolas Jabko, *Playing the Market: A Political Strategy for Uniting Europe, 1985–2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[48] Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change," 697–712; Martin Carstensen, "Paradigm Man vs. the Bricoleur: Bricolage as an Alternative Vision of Agency in Ideational Change," *European Political Science Review* 3, no. 1 (February 2011): 146–67.

[49] Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[50] Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*; John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez, "World Society and the Nation-State," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (July 1997): 144–81.

[51] Contingent material processes might generate path dependence and distinctive local equilibria, but that is a far narrower basis for locally contextual dynamics than creative agents. Unsurprisingly, animal behavior is the natural-science area with the most analogous debates (e.g., Laland and Galef, 2009).

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decent reason). *It is because this step is necessary to seriously evaluate the explanatory reach of their own theories, for themselves.* Scholars whose explanations depend on highly distinctive, nonobvious claims about how people perceive and choose presumably have strong self-interest in seeking evidence for those claims.

In sum, given today's diffuse acceptance that "ideas matter," it remains plausible and potentially useful for some political scientists to pursue general nonideational theories, but not to assume their explanatory power by default. Most research designs that ignore ideational alternatives, or place them on asymmetric footing for poorly elaborated reasons, cannot be portrayed as rigorous. Nonideational theorists must move in this direction to recognize the distinctive general/particular stakes of social-science debate, such that theorists on both sides embrace the discipline of "disciplines" by trying to convince their colleagues. Additionally, even if those colleagues did not exist, nonideational theorists would need to look for evidence of ideational particularity to understand the reach of their own theoretical insights.

An Illustration: Diffusion and Translation of Presidentialism in Latin America

Constitutional choices in Latin America during the nineteenth century offer an excellent opportunity to take ideas seriously. Historians and constitutional scholars focus on ideational diffusion and translation: new Latin American republics adopted the U.S. presidential model while adapting it to local contexts. Political scientists, by contrast, address such dynamics in selective ways or set them aside, focusing mainly on institutionalist or psychological hypotheses. This section first briefly highlights widespread scholarly agreement on the nature and sources of institutional principles that informed Latin American constitutions. Then it dissects in more detail the erratic incorporation of that consensus into political scientists' hypotheses. Finally, we suggest that a hypothetical ideational argument about the origins of Latin American institutions as a mix of two ideational streams—one descending from the North, the other arising from Spanish colonial legacies—connects more concretely to available evidence than nonideational alternatives.

The Scholarly Consensus on Diffusion and Translation of Ideas

All empirical scholarship agrees on two aspects of the constitutional origins of the Latin American republics: they borrowed the presidential model from the United States, but also "translated" it in ways that related strongly to Spanish colonial governance.[52]

The basic historical process by which Latin American came to consider these two streams of institutional principles also attracts no real contestation among historians and constitutional scholars. The Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808 opened a process of institutional change across its empire. Although the French army quickly crowned the Emperor's brother Joseph Napoleon as King of Spain (1808–13), the authority of the new monarch was not recognized either within Spain or in the overseas colonies. This rejection was widely justified with reference to the political theory of the Jesuit Francisco Suárez, which was widely disseminated in Spain and its territories at the time. In Suarecian doctrine, power *ultimately* derives from God, but

[52] Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*.

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in the absence of the king (*vacatio regis*), sovereignty returns to "the peoples."[53] Appealing to this concept, the Spanish installed the Government Board (*Junta de Gobierno*) in Seville. This model immediately underwent a process of diffusion to the elites of the main Spanish colonial cities in Latin America.

The enlightened "creole" elites of Latin America had more than the Spanish and Portuguese[54] political tradition in mind. They paid close attention to the French constitutions written from 1789 onward (1791, 1793, 1795, 1799), the British monarchy, the 1812 liberal Constitution of Cádiz, and the innovative institutions of the young American republic to their north.[55] According to Hilda Sabato, they drew upon the "available pool of changing ideas and values in circulation," "[searching] for inspiration" in the "republicanism of the ancients," "Anglo Saxon civic humanism," and "the doctrine of natural rights"—all while directly considering the concrete U.S. manifestation of these ideas, about which their views and debates are very well-documented.[56] Historians have access to the minutes of the debates in the assemblies in which the constituents quoted their favorite authors and institutional models. Specialists in the history of ideas have been able to determine through which translations Latin American elites learned the details of American institutions. For instance, they documented that in 1792, French translations of the Constitution of Philadelphia were already circulating in the region.[57] They also showed that the institutional arrangements of various states of the Union, the 1787 Philadelphia Constitution and the thought of Thomas Paine became much better known after 1811, thanks to the publication (in Spanish) of Manuel García de Sena's book *La independencia de Costa Firme justificada por Thomas Paine treinta años ha*. Finally, the biographies provided key information on the readings and preferences of the main leaders of the Latin American independence process.[58]

Political scientists have tracked the components of various models into Latin American constitutional choices, highlighting the influence of U.S. institutions and other models, as well.[59] The contribution of José Antonio Cheibub, Zach Elkins, and Tom Ginsburg is especially clear in the Comparative Constitutions Project.[60] "Latin American elites were fully acquainted with enlightenment

[53] According to Howard Wiarda: "Indeed Suárez (whom we tend to ignore in our histories of political thought) should be seen as the counterpart in Latin America of Locke in the North American colonies." *The Soul of Latin America* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 6.

[54] Brazil proclaimed its independence from Portugal in 1822. The Constitution of 1824 maintained the imperial institutions, but in 1889, a military-led political revolution brought down the monarchy. In 1891 largely thanks to the leadership of Rui Barbosa, they adopted presidentialism by copying the Philadelphia model. However, as in the rest of Latin America, the colonial ideational heritage left a mark on the new institutions. The Brazilian model also centralized and concentrated power in the presidency.

[55] David Bushnell, "The Independence of Spanish South America," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Volume III, From Independence to c.1870*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 107.

[56] Wiarda, *The Soul of Latin America*; Paul W. Drake, *Between Tyranny and Anarchy. A History of Democracy in Latin America, 1800–2006* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Maria Victoria Crespo, *Del rey al presidente: poder Ejecutivo, formación del Estado y soberanía en la Hispanoamérica revolucionaria, 1810–1826* (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2013); Roberto Gargarella, *Latin American Constitutionalism, 1810–2010. The Engine Room of the Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[57] Gabriel González Nuñez, "Early Translations of the U.S. Constitution into Spanish: Taking a Look Through a Functionalist Prism," *Minor Translating Major* IV (2012): 46–64.

[58] John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar. A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale, University Press, 2006); John Lynch, *San Martín. Argentine Soldier, American Hero* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

[59] Colomer, "Comparative Constitutions," 219; Donald L. Horowitz, "The Federalist Abroad in the World," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2009), 505; Negretto, *Making Constitutions*.

[60] "Comparative Constitutions Project," accessed 30 April 2023, https://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/

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thought and drew on eclectic sources," they note, "Including French and British thought and, notably, the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz, the embodiment of Spanish liberalism."[61] The U.S. model too was "undoubtedly significant" right away—informing, among others, Venezuela's constitution of 1811, Mexico's of 1824, Argentina's of 1826, and Ecuador's of 1830—and its influence grew through the early nineteenth century.[62] After a period of experimentation with institutional formulas inspired substantially by the revolutionary French constitutions, following a typical diffusion pattern, all the former Spanish colonies eventually chose the U.S. style presidential solution as their main institutional framework.[63] Along with it, Latin American elites incorporated other institutional innovations embedded in the 1787 Philadelphia model such as the separation of power, federalism, bicameralism, and judicial review. They also considered more idiosyncratic features of American constitutional design, like the right to bear arms and the electoral college, though these were mostly "adopted but then discarded."

Scholars agree on the main arguments that influential Latin American elites made about the appeal of the U.S. presidential model and that those arguments pointed toward its combination with other features.[64] The popular election of a president gave a simple answer to the core question of how to replace the political legitimacy of the Crown.[65] At the same time, this leader with legitimacy separate from that of the legislature lent itself to modifications driven by very un-Philadelphian concerns.[66] For the United States' "founding fathers," the presidency was one part of an institutional architecture designed above all to avoid an excessive concentration of power. Horizontal separation of power and "checks and balances" combined with vertical dispersal of competencies between the federation and the states to make the president more like the "Mayor of New York" than the "King of Great Britain," as Federalist No. 69 put it.[67] Among Latin American "founding fathers," by contrast, Simón Bolívar nicely summarized the dominant view in his 1826 address to the Bolivian Constituent Congress: "The President of the Republic comes to be in our Constitution as the sun that forms at its the center, gives life to the Universe." He argued that postindependence Latin America needed "kings with the name of presidents."[68]

[61] Jose Antonio Cheibub, Tom Ginsburg, and Zachary Elkins, "Latin American Presidentialism in Comparative and Historical Perspective," *Texas Law Review* 89, no. 7 (August 2011): 1707–74.

[62] Cheibub, Ginsburg, and Elkins, "Latin American Presidentialism in Comparative and Historical Perspective," 1710.

[63] Adolfo Garcé, "Hacia una teoría ideacional de la difusión institucional. La adopción y adaptación del presidencialismo en América Latina durante el siglo xix," *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 44 (July 2017): 13–41.

[64] Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America: External Models and their Unintended Consequences," 37–66; Drake, *Between Tyranny and Anarchy. A History of Democracy in Latin America, 1800–2006*; Crespo, *Del rey al presidente: poder Ejecutivo, formación del Estado y soberanía en la Hispanoamérica revolucionaria, 1810–1826*; Gargarella, *Latin American Constitutionalism, 1810–2010. The Engine Room of the Constitution.*

[65] Joseph Colomer "Elected Kings with the Name of Presidents. On the Origins of Presidentialism in the United States and Latin America," *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencia Política* 7 (July 2013): 79–97.

[66] Gabriel L. Negretto and José Antonio Aguilar-Rivera, "Rethinking the Legacy of the Liberal State in Latin America: The Cases of Argentina (1853–1916) and Mexico (1857–1910)," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 2000): 361–97; Wiarda, *The Soul of Latin America*; Cheibub, Ginsburg, and Elkins, "Latin American Presidentialism in Comparative and Historical Perspective," 1707–40.

[67] Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers, 1787* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[68] Juan Bautista Alberdi, *La monarquía como mejor forma del gobierno en sud américa* (Buenos Aires: A. Peña Lillo, 1970); Colomer, "Elected Kings with the Name of Presidents. On the Origins of Presidentialism in the United States and Latin America," 79–97.

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Leading Latin American figures like Bolívar or Juan Bautista Alberdi left extensive testimonies justifying this preference for centralization. All called themselves republicans and wrote about proclaiming freedom, but they argued that U.S. style decentralization was not the correct solution for *their* contexts. Widespread views that political order was unachievable in Latin America without a strong executive inclined most postindependence leaders toward some version of a moderate monarchy. As Alberdi would write frankly at the end of the century, "There is only one way to compose the republic: it is to leave it for times and for men more worthy of it."[69] For Bolívar in 1826—just seven years after advocating the importance of free elections in Angostura—the danger of anarchy meant that "elections had to be avoided."[70] In the Congress of Tucumán that in July 1816 led to the independence of the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata (i.e., what later became Argentina, [parts of] Bolivia, and Uruguay), Manuel Belgrano (1770–1820) proposed to crown an Inca.[71] In Mexico, Agustín de Iturbide (1783–1824) and Vicente Guerrero (1782–1831), in the 1821 Plan de Iguala, proposed a Catholic monarchy. José de San Martín (1778–1850), a revolutionary who helped bring about the independence of his own country, Argentina (1812), but also Chile (1818) and Peru (1821), also called for monarchy rather than a republic.[72]

Yet, monarchical solutions repeatedly faced questions about their general postindependence legitimacy, as well as the absence of any obvious candidates for new monarchs, such that country after country eventually turned to modified versions of U.S. presidentialism. The most fundamental adaptations drew on Spanish models, including the 1812 Cádiz constitution, that empowered the executive in the legislative process. Just as Article 15 of the Cádiz constitution specified that "the power to make the laws reside in the Cortes with the King," so Latin American presidentialism gave presidents substantial influence over legislative processes. Alongside it came other modifications that Negretto summarizes well:[73]

> Most of the Latin American new republics created a much more powerful presidential office than that of their counterpart in the United States. In the area of government, most constitutions gave the president the power to unilaterally appoint cabinet ministers, senior administrative officials, and executive positions at the local level; as well as giving him initiative and control over the intervention of the army in internal or external conflicts. In terms of legislation, the majority of presidents received formal authority to present bills in Congress, in addition to the exclusive initiative regarding the national budget, and the power to call Congress to extraordinary sessions to deliberate on matters proposed by the President. Lastly, a typical president in Latin America enjoyed discretionary emergency powers.

As Garcé emphasizes, these changes came close to reversing the logic of the Philadelphian model. A system designed to prevent tyranny by dispersing power was translated to act as a buffer against anarchy by concentrating political power.[74]

[69] Alberdi, *La monarquía como mejor forma del gobierno en sud américa*; Colomer, "Elected Kings with the Name of Presidents. On the Origins of Presidentialism in the United States and Latin America," 79–97.

[70] Lynch, *Simón Bolívar. A Life*.

[71] Crespo, *Del rey al presidente: poder Ejecutivo, formación del Estado y soberanía en la Hispanoamérica revolucionaria, 1810–1826*, 94.

[72] Lynch, *San Martín. Argentine Soldier, American Hero*.

[73] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 128–29.

[74] Garcé, "Hacia una teoría ideacional de la difusión institucional. La adopción y adaptación del presidencialismo en América Latina durante el siglo xix," 13–41. The same thing happened regarding the territorial

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Experts generally take as simple fact that Latin American constitution designers consciously copied the U.S. presidential model and that they deliberately mixed it with features most directly inspired by Spanish models to produce more centralized control. To even try to narrate these events without emphasizing the diffusion of American ideas and Spanish colonial legacies seems awkward—as difficult, for example, as narrating economic policies in Europe after 1929 while disregarding the influence of Keynesian economic ideas.[75] If economic paradigms shape the economic policy of nations, as Peter Hall suggested long ago, would we not expect that political paradigms shape constitutions?

Political Scientists' Leading Hypotheses

Given the strength of the empirical consensus that diffusion and translation of certain constitutional principles shaped the origins of Latin American constitutions, it seems reasonable to expect that related political-science work would stand out for considering ideational hypotheses. Analytically, however, the leading political scientists on this topic showcase the discipline's broader hesitancy to entertain ideational alternatives. They compartmentalize or sidestep ideas in favor of more traditional hypotheses about uninterpreted "interests" or general psychological mechanisms.

The most notable—but still partial—exception is Weyland, who has done more than any other scholar to highlight ideational dynamics in Latin American regimes. He emphasizes that "external institutional ideas and models have shaped Latin American polities since the struggles for independence in the early nineteenth century".[76] Still, he compartmentalizes ideational dynamics within a primary emphasis on psychology and material interests. The leading edge of his far-ranging scholarship on institutional change criticizes rationalist theories for unrealistic microfoundations "systematically falsified in psychological studies," he observes, and instead imports microfoundations of bounded rationality from cognitive psychology.[77] His theory of major institutional change posits that accumulating problems within existing institutions push actors into a psychological realm of losses, à la prospect theory, priming them to look around in risk-tolerant ways for new solutions. The "supply side of drastic change" then tends to reflect ideas borrowed from other contexts, to which actors frequently turn due to cognitive heuristics of availability (reaching for easily available options) and representativeness (assuming that salient options are viable in general). In postindependence Latin America, "the new nations, constrained by standards of normative appropriateness, borrowed predominantly the institutional model of the U.S."[78]

Ideas thus fill in a key part of Weyland's theoretical synthesis, but they do not receive consistent attention as plausibly significant causes of political action. While hypothesizing ideational supply of institutional models, he theorizes demands for change and final constitutional choices as a function of "primarily interests and power". He does so explicitly to avoid the dangers of a "profound

organization of power, even in countries that formally opted for federal structures: centralization prevailed over decentralization (Wiarda 2001: 131; Drake 2009: 98–99).

75 Hall, *The Political Power of Economic Ideas*.

76 Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America," 47.

77 Weyland, *Bounded Rationality and Policy Diffusion*, 285.

78 Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America," 42.

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reconceptualization of rationality," preferring instead a "modest proposal" that only "calls attention to the issue of ideational supply."[79] This move may be comprehensible as an effort to win over rationalist theorists, but seems arbitrary in substantive terms. If actors borrow major constitutional ideas without much consideration of rational fit to their local environment, why would we simply assume their perception of problems, demand for solutions, and adaptations of borrowed models to be free of ideational filters?

A deeper neglect of ideational alternatives characterizes Negretto's 2013 book *Making Constitutions*. Arguably the leading theoretical work directly about Latin American constitutional choice, it aims "to develop a comparative explanation of the origins of constitutional designs."[80] The book's empirics address constitutional changes in the twentieth century, but he notes that the theory applies to constitutional origins, as well.[81] Negretto echoes the consensus that Latin American constitutions clearly imported foreign ideas and acknowledges that "the leading classical explanation is based on the idea of diffusion, contagion, or imitation of constitutional models between countries." However, he observes that mechanisms of diffusion are often unclear, and "even when the diffusion mechanism is specified, it cannot account for why certain models are adopted instead of others also available at the time when institutional change takes place."[82] These are fair questions, but rather than considering conceivable alternative answers, Negretto simply states that politicians select institutions based on the outcomes they expect to obtain once institutions are in place. He then builds his own theory in which elites choose constitutional features by rationally balancing efficient solutions to cooperative problems with partisan interest in arrangements that advantage them and their allies. Ideas seem to lurk in Negretto's list of perceived cooperative problems "such as political order, government stability, effective decision making, or citizen inclusion and participation," but they are taken as given problems.[83] Aside from thin statistical controls for diffusion during the twentieth century—finding no statistically significant, temporally proximate, geographic neighbor effects in the adoption of specific constitutional features—that is the last point in the book where the reader hears about ideas.

In an ironic further testament to the thin role of ideas in this literature, Negretto is then cited as the source of the hypothesis that "ideology and partisanship" might explain constitutional choice by the later similar work of Javier Corrales (2018, 65). To be fair, Corrales does control for Left/Right ideology of leading politicians in evaluating his Negretto-like "power asymmetry" theory of constitutional change. But his conclusion—that ideology is unimportant because power asymmetries appear to matter across a wide range of left- and right-leaning regimes in Latin America—oddly overlooks the larger fact that all these different political forces in the same region are debating a relatively narrow set of institutional models for democracy.

[79] Weyland, "Institutional Change in Latin America," 40.
[80] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 13.
[81] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 56.
[82] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 48.
[83] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 7.

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The Relative Concreteness of a Hypothetical Ideational Account

Earlier we argued abstractly that these leading political scientists' preferences for nonideational explanations over ideational ones cannot be justified methodologically as reflecting a priority on clear, empirically testable theory. We now illustrate that claim by sketching a hypothetical ideational account of Latin American constitutional choice in the nineteenth century and considering how it and the preceding alternatives seem to relate to available evidence. We aspire only to suggest the robust plausibility, not to demonstrate the superiority, of an ideational analysis. That is sufficient for our goal of justifying further empirical debate between these approaches.

An ideational account of these nineteenth-century constitutional choices would hypothesize that the intersection of two ideational "streams" highlighted in the scholarly consensus we described before, American and Spanish colonial models of government, strongly shaped Latin American elites' constitutional choices.[84] Calculations of tangible benefits surely contributed to their motivations: many Creole elites had much to gain from liberation from Spanish taxes and authority. But these streams of ideas substantially defined the main lines of the options they perceived for new regimes and the logic of their decisions among them.

As historian Frank Safford puts it, "No matter how hostile they had become to Spanish rule during the struggle for independence, they could hardly escape the Spanish political tradition in which they had been nurtured; no matter how much they might formally disavow tradition, it lived on, often in formal institutions and, in any case, informally in modes of political behavior."[85] Latin American elites could read with fascination *The Federalist Papers* and brilliant antimonarchist writers like Thomas Paine, but they could not escape the ideational context in which they had learned to think and solve political problems. It was far easier for them to support change in the way in which the ruler is selected (from family succession to popular election) than to abandon a deeply embedded conception of how to build a stable political order (from the concentration of power to its dispersion). Their eventual constitutional choices for centralized presidentialism thus amounted to grafting features of a strong Spanish executive onto the American framework.

The core expectations of such a hypothetical account are for evidence that a sufficient coalition of Latin American elites came to believe that no legitimate monarchy was possible, that a presidential regime was more legitimate, and that a president required robust centralized powers to maintain order in these societies. Such evidence would suggest that a monarchy was feasible in material and institutional terms—a monarch could have been named and tasked with running inherited or modified colonial organizations—but that new battles over political legitimacy favored installation of a president. It would show that Latin American elites stood out for demonstrably believing that only centralized power could deliver political order, in ways that drew on Spanish-colonial intellectual heritage, more than they stood out for demonstrably facing problems that were most functionally resolved through strong centralized power.

[84] Garcé, "Hacia una teoría ideacional de la difusión institucional. La adopción y adaptación del presidencialismo en América Latina durante el siglo xix," 13–41.

[85] Frank Safford, "Politics, Ideology and Society in Post-Independence Spanish America," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Volume III, From Independence to c.1870*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 355.

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Elaborate research design and evidence are necessary to turn this hypothetical account into explanatory claims, but it seems concretely researchable. Indeed, the literature from historians and constitutional scholars that we surveyed earlier suggests that it may relate more closely and cleanly to available evidence than nonideational alternatives. We do not wish to make this argument too strongly, since our main position is that evaluation of these theories is interdependent: sharp evaluation of ideational theories depends on sharp evaluation of nonideational alternatives, and vice versa. Still, to make the case for taking ideas seriously, it is worth noting that in this example, the most obvious evidence for ideational dynamics stands out as accessible and parsimoniously narratable relative to the evidentiary foundations of salient nonideational hypotheses.

As we have seen, many sources preserve the reflections and discussions of Creole elites about the desirability and legitimacy of various constitutional features. Some sources record public statements, like speeches or the minutes of debates in assemblies, but letters and other personal documents also record a considerable volume of private commentary. A great deal of scholarly work is required to assess such data robustly, of course. We must triangulate sources, consider inconsistencies and gaps, and place rhetoric in specific context to discount arguments made most obviously to please a certain audience or rationalize unwelcome constraints. That said, not even the most skeptical observer would expect such records overall to systematically misrepresent actors' sincere views of their constitutional options. Like with measurement of practically all conditions in social science, some healthy ongoing debate will remain around any characterizations of actors' sincere views, but we can arrive at empirically based, methodologically justified "estimates" for what many of these actors believed about salient constitutional options and the logic they employed in making choices among them.

It seems less clear how well we can empirically evaluate the nonideational conditions featured in theories like Weyland's or Negretto's. Weyland's appeal to psychological microfoundations seems especially hard to test on distant historical processes. We can scour recorded rhetoric for indicators of actors perceiving realms of losses or displaying risk tolerance, but any claims about psychological dynamics seem likely to remain highly speculative. Somewhat more amenable to testing are the conditions of "interests and power" that Weyland invokes to explain demand for institutional change, which also form the core of Negretto's theory. The most plausibly researchable such propositions concern how Creole elites saw particular constitutional features as advantaging or disadvantaging them relative to domestic rivals. We might find evidence that political groupings consistently evaluated the most distributionally oriented constitutional features in similar and roughly rational appearing ways, given their positioning in the material or organizational landscape, as Negretto does in cases of constitutional change in the twentieth century. Harder, though, is to empirically evaluate how interests rationally derived from material or organizational position relate to "the more abstract level of organizational principles, which determine the general guidelines of reforms and the range of alternatives that designers consider." Negretto theorizes these interests as reflecting efficient cooperative solutions to major extra-institutional challenges.[86] Evaluating this hypothesis about these larger constitutional choices would presumably mean measuring such challenges, like "political order," and relating their

[86] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 107.

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measurement to expectations about particular institutional solutions. This is surely not entirely impossible, but it seems quite difficult to provide evidence that a certain constitutional feature rationally "fit" with a certain degree or configuration of societal (dis)order. Indeed, Negretto makes little attempt to do so, even in applying his theory to the more accessible twentieth century. He nods in this direction in finding a statistically significant relationship between change in the rate of inflation and choices for stronger presidential legislative powers (though not for their nonlegislative powers), hinting that disorderly conditions justify centralization.[87] But in his only qualitative case study of constitutional change involving major problems of societal disorder—Colombia in 1991—he finds the reverse logic: since powerful Colombian presidents had failed to restore order, constitutional redesigners agreed that they should *weaken* presidential powers in favor of Congress.[88]

These problems are not actually good news for ideational scholarship. To the contrary, difficulties in empirical evaluation of nonideational explanatory conditions for Latin American constitutional choices pose problems for all research on the topic, not just within these approaches. Evaluating the role of ideas in these choices depends on evaluating how actors' ideas relate to their nonideational environment, as well. Challenges in these salient theories' empirical applications do, however, make the main point of this article: nonideational theories do not enjoy any generic advantage over ideational ones in terms of measurable conditions or testable mechanisms. In the diffusion and adaptation of presidentialism to Latin America, tracking ideas looks like the relatively concrete part of explanatory research.

Before our last remarks, four caveats are important. The first three emphasize that our hypothesized ideational account is a considerable simplification of the historical process. First, as authors such as Antonio Annino, François-Xavier Guerra, and Elías Palti have shown, ideas cannot be separated from their social context and political practices.[89] The emphasis on ideas is only analytical. Secondly, the distinction between two broad ideational streams is also an analytical reduction. Neither was a uniform stream. Thanks to authors such as Charles Hale[90] or Richard Morse,[91] we know that the Hispanic political tradition is complex and mutant. Third, we also simplify the institutional dynamics of the region by not considering differences across time and space. Each country has a changing history that is different from the others. Yet, none of the three simplifications invalidates the main argument. Generalization and the search for simplicity are procedures inherent to theoretical elaboration. Their validity must be judged in terms of how much they contribute to the understanding of the process under scrutiny. Lastly, our analysis of the origins of Latin American political institutions should not be interpreted as if the legacy of the past determined the present. Origins can help us grasp the present, but agents always have a chance to learn from the past to alter their trajectories.

[87] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 99–101.

[88] Negretto, *Making Constitutions*, 110.

[89] Antonio Annino y François Xavier-Guerra (coordinadores), *Inventando la nación. Iberoamérica. Siglo XIX* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003); Elías Palti, *El tiempo de la política. El siglo XIX reconsiderado* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007), 21–36.

[90] About Charles Hale, see for instance: Stanley J. Stein, Review of "Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821–1853 by Charles A. Hale," *Political Science Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (September 1971): 502–504.

[91] Richard Morse, *El espejo de Próspero. Un estudio de la dialéctica del Nuevo Mundo* (México: Siglo XXI, 192).

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Conclusion

In her address at the 2021 American Political Science Association conference, APSA President Janet Box-Steffensmeier described the potential opening of a "golden age of social science" due to the proliferation of available data, different scholarly approaches, and social diversity within the academy. Titled, "Engaged Pluralism," her speech emphasized that this potential is not merely about increasing tolerance for diverse perspectives. It offers opportunities for all scholars to do better, more rigorous research by recognizing, confronting, and learning from the widest possible range of imaginable alternative answers to their questions. This article has both highlighted some obstacles to this worthy goal and suggested that many of them can be overcome.

What we have called the "asymmetrical" role of ideas in political science since the 1990s is basically a form of tolerant political pluralism, with much less of the deeper engaged pluralism advocated by Box-Steffensmeier. Ideas-focused scholarship has been increasingly tolerated and even allocated significant resources in professorships and publication venues, but only erratically taken seriously in research design and practice. In our view, this state of affairs reflects some common misconceptions about methods and philosophy of science, not a nefarious plot. Whatever their favored approaches, most political scientists put considerable effort into rigor as they understand it, attempting to subject their designs and findings to the range of skepticism and alternative interpretations that they see as relevant to their work. The problem is that traditional mainstream political science taught them wrongly that ideas were too intangible to measure, too inaccessibly relating to action "inside heads," and either irrelevant or an annoyance for theoretical attempts to build substantive generalizations across contexts.

As we have seen, none of these points makes much sense. The many conditions relevant to explanation of political action vary in how difficult they are to measure confidently. Sometimes ideas are harder to measure than other things, but often not. All explanations of human action pass through "people's heads," and this shared challenge can only be avoided if we drop all pretense of explanation in favor of a "useful prediction" model of inquiry, a route that is not well-recommended by the record so far of useful predictions of consequential political action.[92] On generalization, it is accurate to say that the more politics is ideationally constructed, the less it reflects objective general relationships, and that is precisely why scholars seeking "how much of the world a theory can explain" must seek out empirical debate with ideational alternatives.

For scholars of constitutional choice and Latin American regimes, the "golden age" awaits. Though we have made our point by taking advantage of their especially clear contrast between widespread recognition of ideas and hit-or-miss incorporation of ideas into research designs, our more sympathetic overall argument is that their practices are merely representative of the field. As those practices move toward a broader *and more rigorous* theoretical engagement, we would expect that research on these topics could provide leading examples of taking ideas seriously.

[92] Milton Friedman, *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

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