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Ideology and the Two-Party System: From Neutral to Critical Assessments

The assertion that ideology and party politics are intertwined (or, more specifically, that ideology drives party politics) has become a contentious claim. Although political stances and popular movements based upon issues such as abortion, capital punishment, the treatment of the sick/poor, and education are shaped by more than mere pragmatism or efficiency, the very term ideology is packed with an ambiguous multiplicity of meanings and assumptions. As such, claims about the ideology of a person, group, or party are often met with hostility. According to political theorist David McLellan, "Ideology is the most elusive concept in the whole of social science… With significant exceptions, the word ideology comes trailing clouds of pejorative connotation."[1] Rather than dispense of the term, however, I wish to navigate through the tortuous history and deprecatory nature of the term in hopes of salvaging this useful and essential notion in order to describe its importance in the realm of political parties and the roles thereof.

Inseparable from the discussion of ideology, the role of ideas within the political realm is nearly undeniable. Ideas provide the normative foundations through which we situate policy stances, set societal goals, and differentiate opposing viewpoints. Political parties effectively provide the medium through which ideas and interests organize in an effort to transfer ideological principles into practice. To help to solidify this point, several key questions must be asked: What is ideology? How do political parties

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[1] David McLellan, *Ideology*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 1.

develop, maintain, alter, and utilize ideology within a system in which they must compete

for votes? And how must a third-party movement perform ideologically if it wishes to

persevere in the American electoral process? This paper will address these questions

through an analysis of the limitations of the current literature regarding the role of

ideology within political parties. In particular, I argue, categorizing and describing

ideological measurements are inadequate predictive and descriptive tools of party success

and failure. Rather, I shall argue that a more concrete understanding of various *modus

operandi*, or methods of functioning, of ideology will aid in the understanding of the

issues that lie beneath the surface of the contemporary political debate that has come to

dominate the policy agenda – and provide the lines of demarcation – of political parties.

What is Ideology?

When examining ideology, one must enter a controversial and divisive theoretical

discussion – a discussion, moreover, in which virtually all actors, theorists, and

discussants are themselves 'under the influence' of ideology. Definitions and

descriptions of ideology and its functions vary widely, and explanations often remain

very broad. As political theorist Manfred Steger has pointed out, "Most political and

social theorists define ideology as a system of widely shared ideas, patterned beliefs,

guiding norms and values, and regulative ideals accepted as fact or truth by some

group."[2] Ideology is often spoken of metaphorically, described as a 'lens' or 'filter'

through which we sort, situate, and explain the manifold of our perceptions and intuitions

about the world and its people. It is also often seen as a method of simplification, or a

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[2] Manfred B. Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology*, New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield
Publishers, Inc., 2002, p. 5.

process of interpretation. In this regard, theories of ideology are not only wide-ranging

but also abstract, and reaching a consensus on the influence, and even the definition, of

ideology is rather difficult.

The very term 'ideology' (coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy soon after the

French Revolution) often evokes negative feelings and images, and the term 'ideologue,'

or one who is an advocate of a particular ideology, is often applied to one's political or

philosophical opponents.[3] Quite simply, ideologues are often looked upon with distrust

and contempt. Historically, this conception began with the portrayal of Napoleon as an

ideologue who dogmatically advanced doctrines that harmfully affected his nation. The

negative connotation of the term 'ideology' was kept intact by Karl Marx and Friedrich

Engels, who condemned ideology as a method by which power relations were retained

(or advanced) through the use of illusory images that incorrectly described concrete,

objective reality. Ideology can be viewed as a purely descriptive *neutral conception*, or

as a system of thought or set of symbolic practices pertaining to the social and political

world, or as a *critical conception*, or method of retaining asymmetrical power relations.[4]

Most thorough discussions of ideology within contemporary Western political thought, I

argue, defend and advance the critical conception of ideology. In John B. Thompson's

words, this critical conception offers "an account of the relations between action,

institutions, and social structure."[5]

Within the literature regarding political parties and voter behavior, ideology is

predominantly viewed and explained as a purely neutral conception. In other words,

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[3] See John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984. See also Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003.
[4] See Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, pp. 3-6.
[5] Ibid., p. 4.

ideology is often simply measured rather than investigated and explained. Simply measuring the ideology of a voter or a party as a basis of comparison or describing the mechanical process of ideological alignment within party systems will provide a valuable tool for describing the political actors within a given system or institutional arrangement; however, these comparisons do not adequately describe the underlying functions and mental processes that are at work in forming, guiding, restricting, and shaping the social norms and practices in which one's ideas are situated. In this regard, notions of ideology as they relate to political parties must take critical, theoretical notions of ideology into consideration in order to bring the discussion of party politics into the context of Western political thought. Additionally, I argue, a deeper understanding of these critical influences of ideology can aid in the attempts to either alter the two-party system or supplant one of the two major-party contenders.

Ideological Measurements: Distinguishing Parties and Platforms

Because of the often-imprecise definition of the term, measuring an individual's or party's ideology is particularly complicated. As Alan Ware has pointed out, the party literature tends to distinguish between two approaches to measuring a party's ideology: one approach relates party ideology to *spatial competition between parties*, while the other approach is an *institutional* method that separates ideologies into categories or families.[6] Both approaches, I argue, provide an incomplete explanation of how political parties utilize ideology in order to advance their policy aims.

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[6] Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 18-24.

The often-referenced 'political spectrum,' or left-right continuum, advanced by rational-choice theorist Anthony Downs (among others), provides the key tool of measurement of the spatial model of ideology. Under this spatial framework, communist, socialist, or contemporary 'liberal' ideologies comprise the left end of the continuum while reactionary, fascist, or 'conservative' ideologies occupy the right side of the spectrum. In this regard, the spatial competition model measures ideology via collecting an individual's or party's positions or platforms on political issues and mapping these positions/platforms onto a contrived ideological space or continuum. Use of this spatial political spectrum is quite commonplace, as this model conforms to commonly-held notions of the political 'left' or 'right.' From each individual's or party's space on this spectrum, categorizations can further be made to group people/parties into ideological categories (e.g. 'Communist,' 'Socialist,' 'Centrist,' 'Conservative,' etc.). Additionally, Downs' model provides a convenient tool for ideological measurement and comparison because of its visual appeal.[7]

In constructing this spatial model, Downs drew largely upon Harold Hotelling's economic theory of competition, which explains that competitive businesses located on the same street will attempt to attract as many customers as possible by situating itself in a centrally located position. The result, under this economic theory, is a situation in which two competing businesses will be located immediately near one another in this central location. When transferred to ideologies within the American electoral system (rather than businesses within a given neighborhood), the result becomes two parties

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[7] More recently, spatial theorists such as Ian Budge and David Robertson have built upon Downs' work by acknowledging limitations created from the assumption of a single ideological spectrum. In this regard, these thinkers have extended the ideological spectrum from a mere left-right distinction into a multidimensional approach. See Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, pp. 19-20.

located near one another at the 'center' of the spectrum. In fact, Downs stated: "Parties in a two-party system deliberately change their platforms so that they resemble one another; whereas parties in a multi-party system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible."[8] In this regard, Down's analysis mirrors that of Duverger; in an attempt to remain competitive in plurality elections, both the Democrats and Republicans must seek to position themselves at the 'center' of the given framework – while still appealing to the party's 'base' – in an effort to gain as many votes as possible. In other words, the spatial model essentially takes for granted that the Democrats will fight for an ideologically 'centrist' position and obtain all votes to the left of center, while the Republicans also fight for the center of the ideological spectrum, obtaining all votes to the right of center. Third-parties, then, are relegated to obtaining votes from the extremes or 'fringes' of each side; for example, Democrats will lose some votes to the far-left Greens or other socialist parties, while the Republicans will lose some votes to Libertarians, the Constitution Party, and other parties to the far right.

In *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Downs addressed the plausibility of the success of new and emergent parties by stating that such parties must locate themselves "nearer a large number of voters than any other parties… Its location is as dependent upon where other parties are as it is upon where voters are."[9] In other words (and rather obviously), new parties can emerge by appealing to a location on the ideological spectrum that contains a large number of potential voters; this location need not be located between the two pre-existing parties, but at any area – even the extreme left or extreme right – where a potential majority of voters reside. According to Downs, new

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[8] Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1957, p. 115.
[9] Ibid., p. 128.

parties are most likely to emerge in periods of rapid change, in which ideologically immobile parties fail to adjust to changing voter demands. This situation occurred in Great Britain in the early portion of the 20th century, as a large bloc of voters emerged on the left of the political spectrum, allowing for the emergence of the Labour Party, even as Britain's prevailing 'leftist' party, the Liberals, shifted leftward.[10] This phenomenon arguably began to occur in the United States prior to the New Deal, as the rise of the socialist parties forced the Democratic Party to move leftward in an effort to pre-empt the emergence of leftist parties as legitimate major-party contenders.

Despite the sophistication of Downs and other spatial theorists, there are several problems related to a spatial representation of party ideologies. First, the spatial model assumes party unity on a broad range of issues. This unity presumably transfers to a coherent plot within the spatial spectrum, falling into a visible area along the left-right continuum (or multidimensional array). Often, political parties (both major and minor) are not completely unified on a variety of issues and choose instead to emphasize policies and positions that contain widespread intra-party appeal. If the Democrats, for example, are not unified on an issue such as abortion, how can this disunity transfer to a visual model? Will the mean or median levels of support for this issue adequately represent the Democrats' true policy stance? Secondly, such a spatial plot cannot adequately describe reactions to issues or events that ideological forces might incite or direct. In other words, important ideological components such as populism or nationalism, which rely heavily on reactions to events rather than policy stances, cannot be charted on a spatial spectrum.[11] Further, Downs' theory of competition, which essentially stated that parties must situate

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[10] Ibid., pp. 128-129.
[11] Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, p. 21.

itself in a particular ideological neighborhood on the spatial array in order to attract

voters, relies perhaps too heavily on the role of strategic placement in party competition.

After all, even if party leaders seek votes according to a strategic ideological plan, the

core components of ideology itself (guiding norms, shared beliefs, etc.) will still

influence the voter's acceptance of the party's ideological platform.

The second approach, the institutional approach, views party ideology not merely

as an aggregation of the policy preferences of its members, but as an institution or force

that governs the party program by appealing to the norms, values, and beliefs of its

members.[12] This framework, developed by Klaus von Beyme, identified nine major

'party groups' (or *familles spirituelles'*) that have historically governed European

democracies.[13] Certainly, many of von Beyme's party groups can be mapped onto an

ideological spatial array, though an institutional analysis of parties or groups of parties

can further clarify the guiding assumptions and values of a party and its political

program. In this regard, the institutional approach provides more than simply a relational

measurement of prevailing party attitudes regarding a prescribed list of contemporary

issues; rather, this approach more explicitly reflects the need for ideologies and

ideological parties to defend particular interests and place heightened emphasis on certain

issues. A Socialist party, for example, may choose to place more emphasis on issues

relating to ownership of resources than a Christian Democratic party, even if these two

parties may share some common economic assumptions. Essentially, the institutional

approach provides an explanatory (rather than spatial) model of ideological comparison,

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[12] Ibid., pp. 21-22.
[13] See Klaus von Beyme, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985, pp. 29-158. Von Beyme's nine party groups are Liberal/Radical, Conservative, Socialist, Christian Democrat, Communist, Agrarian, Regional/Ethnic, Right-wing extremist, and Ecology movement parties.

as it views ideologies as distinctive foundations or establishments rather than comparative references to a fluid and connected spectrum of policy stances.

Interestingly, von Beyme claims that his schema cannot adequately describe political parties in the United States (and several other liberal democracies, such as Canada), as both the Democrats and Republicans have developed from an inherently 'liberal' party system (as it did not develop from feudalism, but arose as a 'natural phenomenon' within an already liberal tradition, as von Beyme described it).[14] Thus, because of both the nature of America's de facto two-party system and the 'natural' development of its liberal parties, neither the Democrats nor Republicans have faced serious challenges from Nationalist, Socialist, or Radical parties (to stick with von Beyme's categorizations). In fact, only a select few third-parties have historically emerged to challenge this liberal base. In sum, the "bourgeois, business-oriented politics" (in Alan Ware's words) of the Democrats and Republicans have dominated the American political landscape without serious, long-standing competition from any other major parties.[15] But why has liberalism – in its classical sense – permeated American politics for such a long period of time? And why haven't other ideological movements gained hold within the party system? While the institutional structure of the American party system can provide a partial answer to these questions, a deeper understanding of the functions of ideology – in effect, a critical conception of ideology – may help to uncover how power struggles and social relations have shaped America's (and indeed, the world's) dominant ideological suppositions.

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[14] Ibid, p. 39.
[15] Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, p. 25.

The Critical Functions of Ideology

To come to a better understanding of the roots and impact of ideology on American political parties, we must move beyond mere descriptions and measurements of ideology to examine the ambiguous and abstract functions that aid in the construction of an individual's or culture's ideology. In other words, we must move beyond the 'rationalist' bias of party/voter behavior to illuminate and scrutinize the metaphoric conception of a 'filter' or 'lens' that often comes to the fore of the theoretical discussion of ideology. In large part, the 'filtering' function of ideology – that which simplifies and describes social and political reality – is influenced by cultural contexts, constraints, and biases. In short, the Weberian and rational-choice notions of the individual as the primary and independent actors of culture (and, indeed, ideology) provide insufficient reference points regarding the ideas that drive the behavior of political parties and voters. Rather, the influences of culture, power relations, and collective identities must be critically examined in order to account for the "outside-in" forces that shape the ideological behavior of American voters.

The examination of such external circumstances and effects of ideology has strong roots in Marxist literature. To Marx and Engels, philosophy concealed objective reality and, furthermore, was historically and intricately connected with the ideas of the ruling classes.[16] Ideology, then, was viewed as a means to grant validity to the truth-claims of those groups and members of society who held power. These truth-claims gained validity via an assortment of cultural and political representations, laws, and terminological usages (i.e. the shaping of the dominant political discourse). To Marx,

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[16] Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 5-6.

then, ideology provided a barrier to the truth, and an obstacle to overcome (though critics

can quickly point out that many of Marx's claims are themselves steeped in ideology).

Regardless, Marx has pointed out the importance of historical circumstances in the

shaping of our political ideals; ideals are not spontaneously generated manifestations of

the truth, but rather systems of meaning that are (at least in part) products of existing

structures and contexts of power.

These structures of power, though, are not easily undermined. In the early

twentieth century, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci altered Marx's notion of ideology,

arguing that ideology was more than a mere tool of the capitalist state. Rather, Gramsci

thought, cultural factors also imparted dominant ideas into the citizens, establishing a

hegemonic structure of ideas. *Hegemony,* according to Gramsci, is essentially the

dominance of the ideas of one social group over another in the establishment of the

intellectual and moral direction of the society as a whole.[17] A hegemonic relationship of

power does not rely on sheer force (contrary to Marx's view of class domination), but on

the internalization of dominant norms and values. As Gramsci scholar Luciano Pellicani

put it:

> Gramsci's theory of hegemony is nothing more than a conceptualization of the
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> observation that the supremacy of one class over others relies on a tight net of intellectual
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> and moral relations that involve a capacity for determined leadership on the one hand and
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> more or less spontaneous acceptance of this leadership on the other. In short, the social
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> order is an essentially cultural phenomenon. It is the institutionalization of a certain

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[17] Luciano Pellicani, *Gramsci: An Alternative Communism?* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1976, p. 33.

model of collective life – its norms, values, and collective aims – achieved through the assimilation by the subordinate classes of the ideology of the hegemonic class.[18]

In effect, the leading social group or class gains the consent of subordinate groups, allowing for a perpetuation of the interests of those in power. In other words, the interests of the elites become the interests of all. In Eugene Genovese's words, "An essential function of the ideology of a ruling class is to present to itself and to those it rules a coherent world view that is sufficiently flexible, comprehensive, and mediatory to convince the subordinate classes of the justice of its hegemony."[19]

In the political realm, party politics provides one arena to perpetuate this hegemonic ideological structure. In fact, it was through the establishment of an emergent political party – the Italian Communist Party (PCI) – that Gramsci sought to confront the perceived capitalist hegemonic structure of his own time, with the weapon of a strong counter-ideology leading the way. In the American context, while the winner-take-all electoral system may dictate that only two viable contenders will likely emerge as legitimate candidates in any given election, the candidates themselves must operate within a given set of ideological constraints imposed by a given party's leaders and financiers (for purposes of receiving campaign contributions, among other reasons). In a party structure in which the two parties ideologically converge (as Downs and Duverger have pointed out), the political discourse is more open to a hegemonic ideological paradigm, as neither party has a vested interest in producing any drastic or significant institutional changes. In other words, with the Democrats and Republicans in agreement

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[18] Ibid., p. 3.
[19] Quoted in Pellicani, *Gramsci*, p. 29.

on a wide variety of issues that remain out of mainstream policy debate, an organized

party movement shall provide a means of confrontation to this hegemonic structure.

Confronting the structure of the two-party system, however, is no easy task, as

political parties provide a central (and, to some degree, symbolic) structure for the

organization of ideological interests. The role of interest (whether self-interest or group

interest) plays a key role in formulating and expressing one's ideology. Though ideology

and self-interest may seem to possess antagonistic qualities, interests can be viewed as a

driving force of ideological movements, as voters often project or displace their own

interests onto the whole. Furthermore, groups pursuing common interests often coalesce

around a central tenet or core group of principles. In this regard, ideology and

ideological movements are shaped by the function of *unification*, or the articulation and

embracement of a collective identity despite possible differences.[20] Within a

majoritarian political system, unification is a necessary tool of the major party

contenders, as a common party label – usually, of course, Democrat or Republican – is

diffused amongst an assortment of groups. These groups utilize a common, and perhaps

symbolic, narrative and a shared history in an effort to gain power and build an electoral

majority while appealing to the interests of the whole. Political parties must appeal to as

broad of a base of voters as possible, utilizing vague appeals to the American

'mainstream' – an undefined majority which both major parties claim to represent –

providing a means of association and unity within an organized political movement.

Typically, then, party allegiances (in America, almost always to the Democratic or

Republican parties) play a large role in voter behavior and voter identity, ultimately

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[20] John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Age of Mass Communication*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 64.

helping to further grant legitimacy to the hegemonic ideology perpetuated by the dominant political parties.

On the other hand, ideology also is shaped by an opposing function of unification – that of *fragmentation*. Under this modus operandi, relations of domination are maintained "not by unifying individuals in a collectivity, but by fragmenting those individuals and groups that might be capable of mounting an effective challenge to dominant groups."[21] Thus, although two individuals may share a common fondness or aversion to certain governmental practices (e.g. domestic spying, NAFTA, states' rights, or any of a number of broad issues), these similarities may be overshadowed by the differences that comprise the dividing lines of contemporary party politics. For example, while two individuals or demographics may both oppose free trade measures, their differences on other matters – abortion, for example – might overshadow these similarities, polarizing them along party lines. While the functions of unification and fragmentation may appear to contradict one another, these functions, working in tandem, help to set the dominant political agenda and organize the dominant themes and debates around a common dividing line of political discourse. In other words, by uniting groups around some themes and dissolving them according to particular differences, political parties and the key players thereof can shape and define the roles that meaning and power play upon the political realm.

These functions – hegemony, unification, and fragmentation – have raised fundamental questions about the role of coercion, domination, and masked conflict within the socio-political world. It also leads to the important issue of *agenda* within the political world. Perhaps most important to the role of agenda-setting within political

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[21] Ibid., p. 65.

discourse, political theorist Michael Freeden has identified ideology's important role of

decontestation, or the authoritative removal of normative debate regarding the meaning

or 'truth' of a particular word or concept. The process of decontestation – which is

critical to the establishment of hegemony – ultimately imposes constraints upon one's

ability to contest the validity of political terminology. As Freeden explained:

> An ideology attempts to end the inevitable contention over concepts by decontesting
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> them, by removing their meanings from contest. 'This is what justice means,' announces
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> one ideology, 'and this is what democracy entails.' By trying to convince us that they are
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> right and that they speak the truth, ideologies become devices for coping with the
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> indeterminacy of meaning.[22]

This control of political language greatly enhances one's ability to respond to the

vital political questions of the day by employing non-negotiable assumptions as logical

points of reference; in the process, the function of decontestation also imposes constraints

upon the parameters of ideological debate by demanding an internal ideological

consistency. For example, the notion of 'liberty' inherent to liberalism would

automatically refute slavery as an acceptable ethical behavior and impose an inherent

consensus that such behavior is intolerable. The issue of slavery, in fact, serves as a

prime example of the role that decontestation has played in the history of American party

politics. A vital issue throughout the first century of American political life, slavery was

accepted by both major parties of the day (though on different grounds) – the Whigs and

the Democrats. Southern citizens and politicians sought to decontest the issue – that is,

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[22] Michael Freeden, Ideology: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 54.

they sought to imbed slavery into American culture as a longstanding and irreversible institution. However, through a minor-party movement – that of the Republican Party in the 1850's and 1860's – Americans, particularly in the North, contested the ethics of slavery by thrusting it to the fore of their party ideological platform. Thanks in large part to the success of the emergent Republican Party, the immoral nature of slavery became *decontested*, or removed from debate, and the institution of slavery has been removed from society entirely.

These critical approaches to ideology help to illuminate the forces through which political orthodoxy is used to sustain a given system of power relations, and these approaches serve as more than a mere detour from the theme of party politics. Given that the spatial models of ideology are relational, there is no objective 'center' of American politics – or world politics, for that matter – that has persisted throughout the nation's history. The underlying forces that these critical conceptions of ideology present sheds light upon the means by which the 'mainstream' or the status quo – involving the foundations and guiding assumptions of American politics – is formed. Thus, if we are to study change – or even the possibility of future change – in the American electorate, we need to take these critical conceptions of ideology into account as ways by which ideological movements utilize existing forms of power and meaning to overcome (or reinvent) the status quo. Today, I argue, a given set of ideological foundations permeates both the Democratic and Republican parties. This ideology, which Manfred Steger has labeled 'globalism,' drives both parties and has taken hold of American politics, casting aside discontents to the fringes of both major parties.

The Rise of Globalism as the Ideology of America's Two Parties

Manfred Steger, in his 2002 book titled *Globalism: The New Market Ideology*, identified the concept of 'globalization' as the new, dominant buzzword of a capitalist, neoliberal ideological project that draws largely upon the economic philosophies of Adam Smith (1723-1790), David Ricardo (1772-1823), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). According to Steger, the guiding principles of this neoliberal project include "the primacy of economic growth, the importance of free trade to stimulate growth, the unrestricted free market, individual choice, the reduction of government regulation, and the advocacy of an evolutionary model of social development anchored in the Western experience and applicable to the entire world."[23] This ideological outlook – which, he contends, has emerged as a 'macro-ideology' and comprises "the dominant belief system of our time against which all of its challengers must define themselves"[24] – promotes the economic sphere over the political sphere, extols the virtues of competition and self-interest, and castigates the constraints imposed by governments upon the economic sphere. Though the guiding principles of neoliberalism are rooted largely within 18th and 19th century doctrines, an assortment of factors – including the collapse of world trade during and after World War I, staunch trade protectionism, and the creation of the modern welfare state after the Great Depression – placed the neoliberal dream on hold throughout much of the 20th century.

The late 1970's and early 1980's witnessed a return to neoliberal doctrines and philosophies, as laissez-faire economists and politicians found a place within a favorable context of high inflation, high unemployment, and the largely unpopular foreign policy of

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[23] Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology*, pp. 8-9.
[24] Manfred Steger, "Ideologies of Globalization," from *Journal of Political Ideologies*, v. 10, n. 1 (Feb. 2005), p. 12.

the Carter administration. These conditions paved the way for the emergence of Ronald

Reagan, who, together with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, combined the

guiding principles of the neoliberal project with social conservatism and an aggressive,

hawkish foreign policy to combat foreign adversaries (namely, in the Reagan era, the

Soviet Union and its overarching communist ideology).[25] This ideological hybrid

between neoliberalism, social conservatism, and a hard-line foreign policy has come to be

known as 'neoconservatism,' and it has dominated the Republican platform since the

Reagan administration. Even a cursory glance at each Republican State of the Union

Address since the Reagan administration – from Reagan's 1982 address in which he

speaks of the "strengths of the free marketplace system" and the necessities of

privatization of low taxes[26] to George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address in

which he promised to build prosperity by "leading the world economy" by avoiding

isolationism and protectionism which "end in danger and decline"[27] – reveals a firm

commitment to globalist principles and ideals.

     As Reagan's popularity led to twelve years of a Republican executive branch, the

Democratic Party underwent a series of ideological changes. Whereas it once embraced a

strong blue-collar, egalitarian appeal via New Deal reforms, the party reacted to the

perception of the changing electorate and began to embrace business-friendly, neoliberal

reforms. The party began to embrace economic growth as a benchmark of national

success, though with a slightly more receptive stance toward forms of income

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[25] Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology*, pp. 11-12.
[26] Ronald Reagan's 1982 State of the Union Address, his first such Address, can be accessed online at <http://www.presidentreagan.info/speeches/reagan_sotu_1982.cfm>
[27] George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address can be accessed online at <http://www.c-span.org/executive/transcript.asp?cat=current_event&code=bush_admin&year=2006>

redistribution than their Republican counterparts.[28] After the fall of the Soviet Union (followed by a decade of relative American security), the American electorate largely abandoned the perception of the necessity for a hard-line foreign policy (with no clear enemy to justify vast military operations abroad), paving the way for a Clinton presidency and a return to the neoliberal, rather than the neoconservative, project.

Under Democratic president Bill Clinton, framers of the neoliberal project "sought to cultivate in the popular mind the uncritical association of 'globalization' with the supposedly universal benefits of market liberalization."[29] According to Steger, the Clinton regime and the 'Roaring Nineties' marked the heyday of the globalist ideology, which, at this time, utilized diplomacy and 'soft-power' in order to coerce a privatization of resources and enterprises, a deregulation of the global marketplace, cut taxes, and reduce governmental spending. Thus, utilizing 'softer' foreign policy tactics, the Democrats (under Clinton) perpetuated economic policies that the Republicans began to advance under Reagan, with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) serving as a shining moment in the course of globalist neoliberalization. It is this 'market fundamentalism' in the age of technological advancement and global interconnectivity that characterizes the ideology of globalism, and it is the 'soft-power,' neoliberal policy aims that have emerged as the guiding values of the modern Democratic Party. In effect, then, the competition between Democrats and Republicans has largely become a battle between neoliberal and neoconservative ideals – both of which are guided by globalist ideological principles.

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[28] Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 22-35.
[29] Steger, *Globalism: Market Ideology Meets Terrorism*, New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, p. 11.

Steger's 'Six Core Claims of Globalism'[30] provide an important tool for understanding the basic economic claims of both the Democratic and Republican platforms. Furthermore, it is upon these claims that the Democratic and Republican parties have undergone attempts to decontest several key globalist economic assumptions. Both major parties rely heavily on campaign contributions from corporate elites, and both parties have emerged as key players in the struggle to advance the globalist paradigm; as a result, partisan battles are often fought over cultural and tactical issues rather than over the underlying principles of the global economy. The Six Core Claims, then, are the rhetorical manifestations of the attempts to situate the key assumptions of globalism as the foundational facts of the American political discourse, integrating these claims into American politics in a matter-of-fact, seemingly apolitical manner. Five of these six claims, I argue, are shared by both major parties, with a sixth claim serving as a primary site of distinction between the Democratic (neoliberal) and Republican (neoconservative) parties.

The first major claim of globalism, according to Steger, is that globalization is about the liberalization and integration of markets. According to this claim, a self-regulating market that is free from governmental regulation provides the primary tenet of a free and democratic society. The free market, then, is the basis for a natural and rational order, and the resulting benefits and drawbacks are not manmade, but rather the product of the 'invisible hand' that guides and directs economic interactions.[31] Steger's second major claim of globalism states that globalization is both inevitable and irreversible – a claim similar to Marx's notion of 'historical inevitability,' only with a

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[30] For an extended discussion of the Six Core Claims of Globalism, see Steger, Globalism: Market Ideology Meets Terrorism, pp. 47-90.
[31] Ibid., p. 53.

distinctly capitalist view of economic fate. These claims to inevitability legitimize policy

initiatives that aim to deregulate economic markets, while also spurning the integration of

consumer-based attitudes into cultures around the globe. According to the third claim,

nobody is in charge of globalization; rather, the rational objectives of the market

determine the course of economic 'ups' and 'downs.' Fourth, globalists claim,

globalization benefits everyone (in the long run). Unequal distributions of resources and

market power provide 'irregularities' that temporarily thwart economic opportunity, but

the playing field will eventually level, according to this line of thought. Fifth, globalists

claim that globalization spreads democracy around the world, linking freedom and

democracy with deregulated markets. These five claims provide important ideological

claims for both major parties, and the sixth and final claim provides a key line of

distinction between America's two thriving parties.

According to the sixth of Steger's claims of globalism, globalization requires a

War on Terror. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on Washington, DC and New York

City, the neoconservative agenda of hard power and expansive military endeavors

reemerged, as new fears regarding national security surfaced along with the view that, all

around the world, 'terrorists' were attempting to interfere with the 'freedoms' granted by

the free market of the Western world. In many ways, the George W. Bush administration

has reintroduced and extended the policies of the Reagan-Bush years, and it has brought

back into power many of the same political players, such as Dick Cheney and Donald

Rumsfeld. In the post-Sept. 11 age, the Republican party's neoconservative agenda has

gained a renewed prominence, as the perceived need for a hard-line stance against

terrorism has fueled new foreign policy initiatives that have included regime changes

(through war) in Iraq and Afghanistan. The foundational economic agenda, however, has not changed from that of the Clinton era; free trade, deregulation, and claims to the universal benefits of market liberalization have remained, with the tactics of globalism, rather than the overarching ideology of globalism, serving as the primary distinction between the two parties. Although both major parties have accepted and advanced globalist principles, I argue that (similar to the institution of slavery in the years preceding the Civil War) the proper course of globalization has not been completely decontested, and that a minor-party movement may assert itself by situating itself in stark opposition to the globalist ideology.

Conclusions: Contesting the Two-Party System

Despite the visual appeal of mapping party ideology onto a continuum and the simplicity of categorizing parties into one of several ideological institutions or clusters, minor-party success is not dependent merely upon finding an ideological 'center' or appealing to predominant majoritarian ideological categories. Rather, the success of an emergent party is largely dependent upon recognition of the theoretical ideological functions that have historically tended to hinder change.

Through an organized effort to contest the assumptions of globalism, I argue that a third-party can effectively contest the two-party system itself. In other words, by calling into question a key set of political assumptions that underlie the ideological agenda of both major political parties, the very legitimacy of the institutional dominance of the two-party system can be called into question. Whereas the Democratic agenda emphasizes market globalism (through a less aggressive form of a War on Terror) and the

Republican agenda emphasizes imperial globalism, those who do not fall into either camp, I argue, are susceptible to a third-party campaign that attempts to situate anti-globalist issues at the forefront of partisan debate. In summation, a new party must seek to unify voters under a new model of ideological division, fragment the voters residing within the two major parties, openly challenge the structures of the two-party system that allow for a hegemonic duopoly, and reinvigorate and re-contest the dominant ideological assumptions of contemporary political life. Of course, contesting a broad range of decontested assumptions is no easy task; however, the debate over the 'correct' ideology is unending, and, in particular, the ideological discourse regarding globalization is ripe for the emergence of an oppositional coalition that is perhaps best fought in the forum of party politics.