

Push, ignore or surrender?

Party responses to the ideational momentum of international events

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Abstract: What is the effect of international events on ideas and discourses at the national level? This paper argues that an international event may set in motion an ideational momentum that gives positive attention to certain ideas, strengthening the credibility of political actors that hold these ideas, and hurting the credibility of actors promoting competing ideas. Based on a regression discontinuity design and quantitative text analysis, we employ insights from discursive institutionalism and issue competition theory to analyse parliamentary debates in Denmark following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The analysis demonstrates a shift towards more market-friendly discourses across the political spectrum. Both parties with liberal and socialist ideologies strengthen their market-friendly discourses, although for different reasons. Liberal parties seize the momentum brought on by the fall of the wall to promote their ideology, while the left promotes market-friendly discourses to strengthen their legitimacy in a post-Soviet world.

Introduction

September 1, 1939. November 9, 1989. September 11, 2001. September 15, 2008. October 7, 2023. Most people readily connect these dates to the very significant events that took place here and recognize that they reshaped – and continue to reshape – political ideas and discourses within multiple policy areas. However, the capacity of policy research to demonstrate the effect of international events like these on national policy debates remains limited. To be sure, numerous strands of scholarship underscore the importance of the international level for accounting for ideational and institutional change at the state level (Campbell 2004; Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). Important agents of the spread of ideas include international organizations like the European Union (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004) or the International Monetary Foundation (Clift 2018); international networks of economists that promote and translate policy ideas to the national level (Ban 2016; Hall 1989); and global policy networks' transfer of fashionable ideas across the planet (Stone 2004). Despite these advances, we largely remain in the dark when it comes to understanding how international events come to impact on national policy debates. Part of the challenge is methodological – how can we demonstrate empirically that international events significantly impact on national ideational structures? – and another part is theoretical: What are the mechanisms through which international events come to have an effect at the national level? To provide first answers to the methodological and theoretical issues currently stymying our effort to understand how international events impact on national policy debates, this paper asks: How can international events affect the politics of ideas at the national level?

Our case concerns the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall on support for neoliberal ideas among Danish political parties. We are pursuing a basic intuition of the post-Berlin Wall era where the dominance of liberalism followed in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As famously theorized by Fukuyama (1992), the degeneration of the Soviet Union signified the end of the ideological battle between socialism and liberalism. Although this thesis has met its share of criticism, few would dispute that the fall of communism challenged socialism and offered significant impetus for liberal ideology. What is important for our purposes is whether this international event set in motion an ideational momentum that helped strengthen the legitimacy of neoliberalism in national debates. Neoliberalism is a notoriously slippery concept (Flew 2014), but following Schmidt and Thatcher (2013, 4), we broadly understand neoliberalism as a core set of ideas about markets and the state's role in (or as part of) such markets that hold "that markets should be as 'free' as possible, meaning governed by competition and open across borders, while the state should have a limited political economic role in creating and preserving the institutional framework that secures property rights, guarantees competition, and promotes free trade." This is not to suggest that the state does not play a central role in promoting neoliberal policies – indeed there is something of a consensus that the state has been instrumental for the rise of neoliberalism (e.g. Peck, 2010; Slobodian, 2018) – but here we focus on neoliberal discourses that tend to tout the strengths of unfettered market competition. Our investigation is couched in the specific historical setting of the late-1980s, where neoliberal ideas were on the rise in Danish economic policy making (Stahl 2022). The liberal-conservative government headed by the Conservative prime minister, Poul Schlüter, wanted to promote neoliberal ideas – with the future prime minister, Anders

Fogh Rasmussen, as a particularly staunch proponent of neoliberal ideas – but, without the necessary parliamentary backing, the institutionalization of neoliberal ideas did not happen until the 1990s (Fuglsang 2023; Larsen and Andersen 2009).

Taking a strategic constructivist perspective (Béland and Cox 2016; Carstensen 2011; Culpepper 2008; Jabko 2006), we employ insights from the issue competition literature (see Green-Pedersen, 2023) to develop hypotheses about the responses of national political parties to the international event of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Our argument comes in two parts. First, we propose that one key mechanism through which international events can matter for national ideas and discourses is that they may create an ideational momentum that within a short period of time gives significantly increased positive attention to certain ideas. The power of the momentum lies in the attention it gives to some ideas (that in turn leaves less attention to other ideas), and that the positive nature of this attention increases the legitimacy of the ideas, and the credibility with which political actors may promote them.

Second, to understand how agency may further expand or limit the effect of an international event, we theorize the response of parties – a key type of ideational leader (Stiller 2009) – to an ideational momentum. We develop three overall strategies that political parties may pursue. Some parties will find that the international event significantly increases the legitimacy of their own ideas, leading them to push the ideational momentum further by giving it plenty of attention in public debate. Others will find that the legitimacy of their ideas have not been affected in any substantial way by the ideational momentum, and they will see reason to ignore it in the hope of limiting its positive effect on other parties. Finally, some parties will be left with ideas with significantly decreased legitimacy. These parties will seek to strengthen their own

credibility by attaching themselves to the ideas that are now experiencing momentum, even though these ideas in many ways lie in opposition to the ideas that these parties wish to promote. We refer to this strategy as surrendering to the ideational momentum. The broader implication of the argument is that an international event may give significant and stable tailwind to certain ideational coalitions, while others suffer from decreased legitimacy of their ideas, and the international event thus impacts the capacity of different parties to promote their ideas differently.

We employ a regression discontinuity design (RDD) and natural language processing (NLP) to demonstrate the shifts in the discourses of political parties. Simply put, we leverage the fall of the Berlin Wall as a sudden shock which creates opportunities for parties to push or limit an ideational momentum for neoliberalism. Empirically, we focus on parliamentary speeches from Denmark in the years 1974-2009. We measure the ideational momentum by looking for jumps in the attention paid to neoliberal terms and to terms critical of socialism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Moreover, we measure whether discourses on neoliberalism become more positive after November 1989. We also explore whether differences in the response of parties can be accounted for by their strategic preferences in pushing, ignoring or surrendering to the ideational momentum. Denmark is a fitting case because at the time of reunification, neoliberalism was receiving increased political attention but had not yet become dominant. This provides a useful setting for exploring the impact of an international event like the fall of the Berlin Wall to produce an ideational momentum for neoliberalism.

The paper is structured in the following way. First, we explore relevant literatures that investigate the impact of international developments on national ideas

and discourses, where we find that the effect of international events at the national level remains both empirically and theoretically underexplored. Second, we conceptualize an ideational momentum and theorize the three strategies of pushing, ignoring and surrendering to an ideational momentum. Following a presentation of our research design and data, the empirical analysis demonstrates the occurrence of an ideational momentum for neoliberalism in Denmark following the fall of the Berlin Wall and details the varying strategies pursued by Danish political parties, as we see a general strengthening of market-friendly discourses. Finally, we conclude and point to avenues for future research.

The international spread of policy ideas

To understand how international events can matter for the politics of ideas at the national level, a range of literatures offer up useful insights. Broadly focused on how policy ideas travel between countries, or between international organisations and into a national setting, multiple literatures on policy diffusion point to ways that international developments may translate into ideational change in national settings (Agartan and Béland 2024; Campbell 2004). One line of investigation understands policy diffusion as a result of policy actors learning from the experiences of other countries with policies as successes or failures (Butler et al. 2017; Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Volden, Ting, and Carpenter 2008). From this perspective, new policy ideas gain acceptance and spread as a result of policy innovation and careful evaluations (Gilardi, Fuglister, and Luyet 2009). Here, diffusion powerfully shapes policy making by “changing the terms of the political debate, making some ideas taboo

or, on the contrary, increasing their acceptance in the mainstream political discourse” (Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2019, 1250).

Another literature points to policy transfer as an important source of ideational and institutional change at the level of the nation state. Here, policy transfer is understood as a process by which “knowledge about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting” (quoted in Marsh and Sharman 2013, p. 270). Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 346) argue that both supporters and opponents of various policies use lessons selectively to gain advantage in the struggle to get their ideas accepted, but they did little in way of theorizing this process or how it may impact on broader ideational currents in a national setting.

The literatures on policy diffusion and policy transfer have significantly advanced our understanding of how ideas travel and are taken up at the national level. However, they ultimately turn up short in accounting for how international events like the fall of the Berlin Wall matter for the politics of ideas at the national level. First, both literatures tend to leave politics in the background. Although the key actors of diffusion are typically governments or the legislature that make decisions based on information gathered from elsewhere, these processes are not very political in nature, with policy makers either rationally learning from other units or reacting to decisions from elsewhere because of economic incentives that are the result of competition or coercion (Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2019, 1248). The literature thus lends limited insight to how interactions between political actors produce changing ideas at the national level. Gilardi and Wasserfallen (2019) also point out that the policy diffusion

literature focuses most of its effort on the adoption stage, in turn giving too little attention to issue-definition stage, when the nature, causes and solutions of problems are discussed from competing perspectives.

Another shortcoming for understanding how international events impact on the politics of ideas is obvious: these literatures do not explicitly take international *events* into consideration. While focusing on how more specific policy ideas and norms gain impact, or how the spread of broader ideational currents like neoliberalism gain a hold at the national level, they say little about how public debates are affected by international events. How events impact on the policy process is the main focus of another strand of policy scholarship analysing ‘focusing events’ (see Birkland & Schwaeble, 2019). A seminal statement on the importance of focusing events was provided by Kingdon (1984). He suggested that windows of opportunity could sometimes be triggered by apparently unrelated external focusing events, such as crises or accidents, that gave “policy entrepreneurs” the opportunity to act when the political environment is right to join problem definitions and ideas for solutions. Later work by Birkland (1997, 1998) refined this insight to account for how focusing events could trigger not only the rise of certain issues on the political agenda but also different kinds of learning. This insight has also been developed within the very rich literature on punctuated equilibria in public policy, which has demonstrated the pervasiveness of events as a key driver of significant policy change (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Although these strands of scholarship provide important insight on how focusing events may impact on the policy process, it has little to say about the broader impact on the power of the ideas that are debated in a country. The mediating impact

of party-political dynamics on how international events translate into ideational change at the national level is also left unspecified. The notion that focusing events may propel ideational change resonates more broadly with a range of literatures on the policy process that highlight the potential of external events to impact on policy ideas and beliefs (e.g. Hall, 1993; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). These literatures offer analytical room for external events to impact the authority of policy ideas, and potentially open the way for new ideas to gain the attention of policy makers. However, on a theoretical level, external events remain something of a black box, as these policy theories leave the impact of international events on public debate and the politics of ideas in the national setting largely unexplored. In the following, we put forward the concept of ideational momentum to better understand how international events may change the terms of ideational contestation at the national level, and how it ties in with strategic interaction between political parties.

Ideational momentum and party-political strategies

Our theorizing of ideational momentum is structured in three parts. First, we conceptualize ideational momentum and discuss what the concept means in the context of the rise of neoliberalism. Second, we present the concept of legitimacy space to argue that when an international event sets in motion an ideational momentum, it will shift the space of what is considered politically legitimate in policy discourse. Finally, to understand the varied responses of political agents to a shift in the legitimacy space, we employ insights from the issue competition literature to explain when parties choose to either push, ignore or surrender to an ideational momentum.

Conceptualizing ideational momentum

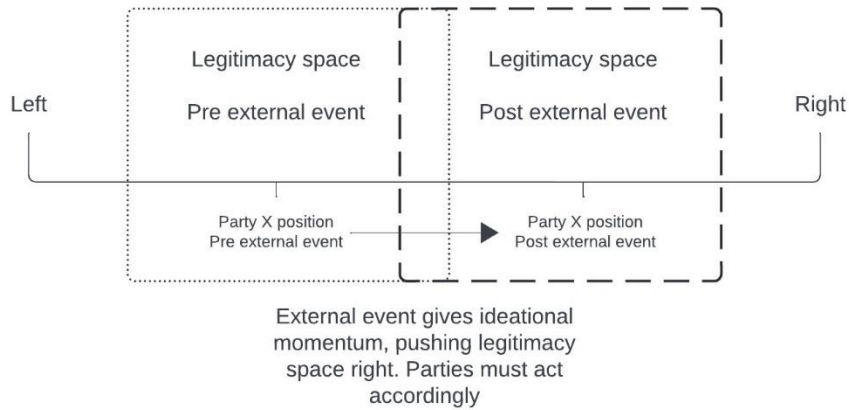
Despite the intuitive appeal of the claim that international event can have lasting effects on national debates, policy theories only to a limited extent offer theoretical tools to help us analyse these effects. To fill this lacuna, this paper theorizes one mechanism through which international events may have a significant and lasting effect on national ideational structures. Specifically, we argue that international events may create an ideational momentum at the national level. By this we mean that, within a relatively short period of time, international events may promote a heightened and temporally stable level of positive attention towards specific ideas or sets of ideas. That is, as an international event grips the attention of national policy elites and the public, as a side-effect it promotes the legitimacy of certain ideas among policymakers, which comes at the expense of other, competing ideas. To be sure, the notion that ideas can gain ideational momentum need not be limited to international developments. Indeed, extant ideational scholarship has highlighted a number of reasons why ideas gain or lose support, including the opening of a window of opportunity (Kingdon 1984), the rise of anomalies that undermine the dominant policy paradigm (Hall 1993), or changes in external circumstances that undermine support for fundamental beliefs in a policy subsystem (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Here we highlight the possibility that international events may set in motion an ideational momentum.

We broadly understand an idea as a particular set of beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their actions and attitudes (Béland and Cox 2011). We employ a strategic constructivist perspective (Jabko 2006), where agents depend on ideas to make sense of reality and to convince others of their view of the world, but are sentient in the sense that they are also able to think outside these

ideas (Carstensen 2011; Culpepper 2008; Schmidt 2008). In the context of a policy system, the capacity of ideas to gain impact depends on their ability to gain the attention of policymakers, without which it will lead a quiet life waiting for its time to come (Kingdon 1984). The potential of an idea to reach the policy system agenda hinges not only on attention. In the first place it requires legitimacy. Without broad based legitimacy among relevant audiences – whether elites or the public (Schmidt 2008) – ideas will not gain the necessary support to inform policy, nor form the basis for coalition building among parties or other political actors. The impact of ideational momentum as conceptualized above thus matters in two connected ways. First, it involves increased attention among policymakers to certain ideas – with attention being among the most coveted resources in politics (Jones and Baumgartner 2005) – and, second, that this attention is predominantly positive. With the combination of significantly increased attention and strengthened support, an ideational momentum thus has the potential to produce long-term shifts in the legitimacy of ideas.

What are the effects of an ideational momentum on the discursive interaction of political parties? To simplify, we propose to couch the interaction of political parties in a one-dimensional legitimacy space. In this space, parties position themselves to appeal to voters as well as key societal constituents. They do so by employing ideas and discourses that indicate their positions, both on specific policy ideas as well as broader ideological issues. As ideational momentum involves the sudden rise in positive attention towards certain ideas at the expense of other ideas, it may be thought of as a shift in the space of policy ideas that are considered legitimate. That is, some policy ideas gain increased legitimacy, with this momentum pushing other ideas outside the scope of what is considered politically legitimate.

Figure 1. Ideational momentum pushes the legitimacy space:



We illustrate this in figure 1 above, which shows how the ideational momentum brought on by an external event moves the space of what are considered legitimate ideas and discourses placed within a simple left-right axis. Prior to the international event, the discourses applied on an issue are placed within what is considered politically legitimate discourse, i.e. the legitimacy space. As the international event occurs, it sets in motion an ideational momentum that shifts the legitimacy space – in this illustrative case rightwards – placing party X outside the legitimacy space. To return to the legitimacy space, which is necessary to remain credible in relation to the policy area, party X will shift its discourse towards parties placed to their right, in effect moving to a different position on the left-right scale. The nature of the event will likely also matter for its impact on the legitimacy space. Some events will be the culmination of a long process (like the end of the Cold War), while others will be experienced as more isolated or the beginning of a new line of events (as with the terrorist attacks on 9/11). In the former case, political actors are likely to have already developed discourses and ideas that they can almost readily employ to piggyback on

the ideational momentum to enable a fast discursive change. In the latter case, actors will first have to develop discourses, likely leading to a more gradual discursive shift. In the context of the rise of neoliberalism following the fall of the Berlin Wall, our expectation is that it will produce an overall momentum for market-friendly ideas and a relatively fast increase in negative discourses about socialism:

H1: Following the Fall of the Berlin Wall, positive attention towards market-oriented ideas and negative attention towards socialism-oriented ideas will increase almost immediately following the event.

Party-political responses to ideational momentum

Although the international impact provides impetus for discursive change, the extent of the shift will depend on whether agents see an interest in strategically pushing the ideational momentum, limit its impact or ignoring it altogether. To understand how agency plays into the dynamics of ideational momentum, we need a variegated view of how different parties may react to shifting strategic circumstances. Here we draw on a rich political science literature on issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2023) and agenda setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). As noted by Green-Pedersen (2019, 18), the underlying idea of this literature is that “parties have preferred issues, and that they compete by trying to draw attention to these issues and avoid having to focus on the issues preferred by opponents”. In the context of analysing how actors respond to an ideational momentum, we employ three key insights of this strand of scholarship. First, parties seek to bring attention to and politicize issues on which the electorate considers them particularly credible, what a long-standing literature refers to as ‘issue

ownership' (Budge 2015; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Issue ownership has been demonstrated to be stable across long periods of time (Seeberg 2017) and is an important focus of parties in maintaining electoral support as well as appealing to new groups (Sio and Weber 2014). From this perspective, parties are not so much focused on positioning themselves on certain issues as deciding which issues they seek to bring attention to.

Second, parties do not act in a vacuum. In deciding how and whether to respond to an international event, the action of other parties will be of key importance. Green-Pedersen (2019, 28) thus argues that "At any point in time, a hierarchy of issues that influences party attention exists, while parties try to influence the future content of this hierarchy." That is, although parties see an interest in bringing attention to certain issues, scholarship has demonstrated a considerable overlap in the issues parties focus on (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Sides 2006). A key reason for issue-overlap is the effort of parties to challenge the issue ownership of other parties.

Another reason – and here we hit upon the third insight from the issue competition literature that we employ – is that political logic requires of actors that they respond to the problems of societal importance. Specifically, problem developments in the world surrounding parties incentivize them to address similar questions (Kristensen et al. 2023; Seeberg 2022). This aligns well with the agenda setting literature that has pointed to the importance of focusing events for explaining which issues end up on the political agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1984; Walker 1977). Focusing events direct the attention of policymakers, who are not otherwise invested in the issue, creating a push for potentially path-breaking change in a policy area (Birkland 1997). Even if the event does not produce major policy

change – and there are significant political and institutional frictions militating against this outcome (Jensen 2011) – politicians will find it more than difficult to simply ignore the event.

The overall implication emanating from these insights about party competition is that although parties are pressed to respond to an international event – helping in the first place to produce the ideational momentum set in motion by the event – the specific, strategic response of political actors will vary depending on whether actors see an interest in promoting the ideas that are experiencing ideational momentum. That is, under the general movement in the legitimacy space towards greater support for a specific set of ideas at the expense of other ideas, parties will potentially play very different roles in producing this outcome.

To unpack the different incentives of political parties, we suggest that three principal strategies are available to political parties that are faced with an ideational momentum. Each of these strategies produce a hypothesis about party-political responses to ideational momentum. First, a party may seek to *push* the ideational momentum, by bringing additional attention to the ideas that are experiencing increased tailwind. This will be the preferred strategy of actors who are not only placed solidly within the new legitimacy space, but also enjoy significant credibility as supporters of the ideas that have momentum. A party in this situation, stands to gain from furthering the ideational momentum and so will use considerable resources in strengthening the prominence of the ideas and discourses enjoying momentum.

H2: Parties that benefit from increased attention to market-friendly ideas will increase their positive attention towards these ideas.

Second, a party may opt to *ignore* the ideational momentum. This will be the preferred strategy of parties that are situated within the new legitimacy space, but who are not particularly credible in relation to the ideas experiencing momentum, and so do not stand to benefit from further promoting these ideas. Ignoring the issue also serves to limit the positive impact on rival parties that are credible in relation to the ideational momentum.

H3: Parties that do not benefit from increased attention to neoliberal ideas, and whose credibility does not suffer from sticking to their existing ideas, will not increase their attention to market-friendly ideas.

Finally, a party that finds itself outside the new legitimacy space, or in risk of ending up there, may choose to *surrender* to the ideational momentum. This means that the party pushes the ideas that are experiencing momentum, not because it stands to gain from the momentum, nor because its ideological basis aligns with these ideas, but rather to avoid losing overall credibility from supporting ideas that are now placed outside the legitimacy space. We thus arrive at the counterintuitive outcome that parties that do not agree with the ideas that are gaining tailwind may still have an interest in giving attention to these ideas to avoid losing credibility. Of course, this strategy is not without its risks. To avoid losing electoral support from embracing the ideational

momentum, the party will need to convince its constituents that it is not undermining its ideological basis.

H4: Parties that lose credibility from sticking to their existing market ideas will increase their attention towards market-friendly ideas.

Research design

Our research design has two overall aims. First, we seek to demonstrate that the international event of the fall of the Berlin Wall created an ideational momentum for market-friendly ideas, the impact of which lasted years after the fact. Second, we want to explore how different parties reacted to the ideational momentum by investigating whether they sought to push, ignore or surrender to the ideational momentum. In the rest of the section, we present the case and data along with our research strategy for estimation and measurement.

Case and data

To study the ideational momentum at the national level, we focus on Denmark and, specifically, debates taking place in the Danish parliament *Folketinget* before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Danish case provides a fitting context to explore how parties react to an international event that sets in motion an ideational momentum in favour of neoliberalism. According to the literature on Danish neoliberalism and market-reforms, marketization and neoliberalism had not yet become completely dominant by the end of the 1980s (Kjær and Pedersen 2001; Klitgaard 2007; Larsen and Andersen 2009), making Denmark a case where we could potentially detect an

effect from the fall of the wall in 1989. This in turn would be less likely in societies where neoliberalism was already strongly entrenched in public debate.

To study the strategy that a party uses in response to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the article builds a new and original data set from the Danish parliament which compiles Danish parliament debates of the final quarter of the 20th century. The dataset has been generated from publicly available transcriptions of Danish parliamentary debates. For each transcription we have annotated speaker, the party of the speaker, and the date of the speech. Where information on party was missing, this information was coded manually. The transcriptions are made available by the Danish Parliament and comprise all debates of the Danish main chamber, Folketinget, from 1974-2009.¹ The data set consists of 599,787 speeches, giving an average of 16,661 speeches per year.

Estimation strategy

The study uses an RDD to investigate the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall (the independent variable) on the attention that Danish political parties in parliamentary debates give to market-friendly ideas and ideas critical of socialism (the dependent variables). The cutoff for the RDD is the date of the fall of the Berlin Wall, November 9, 1989. The logic is that the months preceding and following November 1989 will be largely comparable, and that the events of November 1989 will be the main political difference between these months.

¹ Rauh and Schwalbach (2020) has earlier made a data set from 1997 to 2018 but as their method of capturing speeches relies on web scraping, their data cannot go further back. Folketingstidende - which this article takes records from - stopped publishing in the current format in 2009.

The RDD can, when the units before and after the cutoff point are comparable, resemble an experimental design (Cunningham 2021), because the treatment and control groups are alike, as well as because only the treatment group gets the treatment, and because it becomes possible to rule out other variables than the treatment as having caused the effect. Literature on Danish socio-economic politics of the months surrounding November 1989 (Kjær and Pedersen 2001; Larsen and Andersen 2009; Petersen, Petersen, and Christiansen 2013) provide no evidence of other substantial events regarding socio-economic policy that could explain a rise in pro-market and anti-socialist discourse, and there were also no national elections or changes of government during these months. We therefore see it as plausible that any significant jumps in our dependent variable will be caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Measurement of ideational momentum

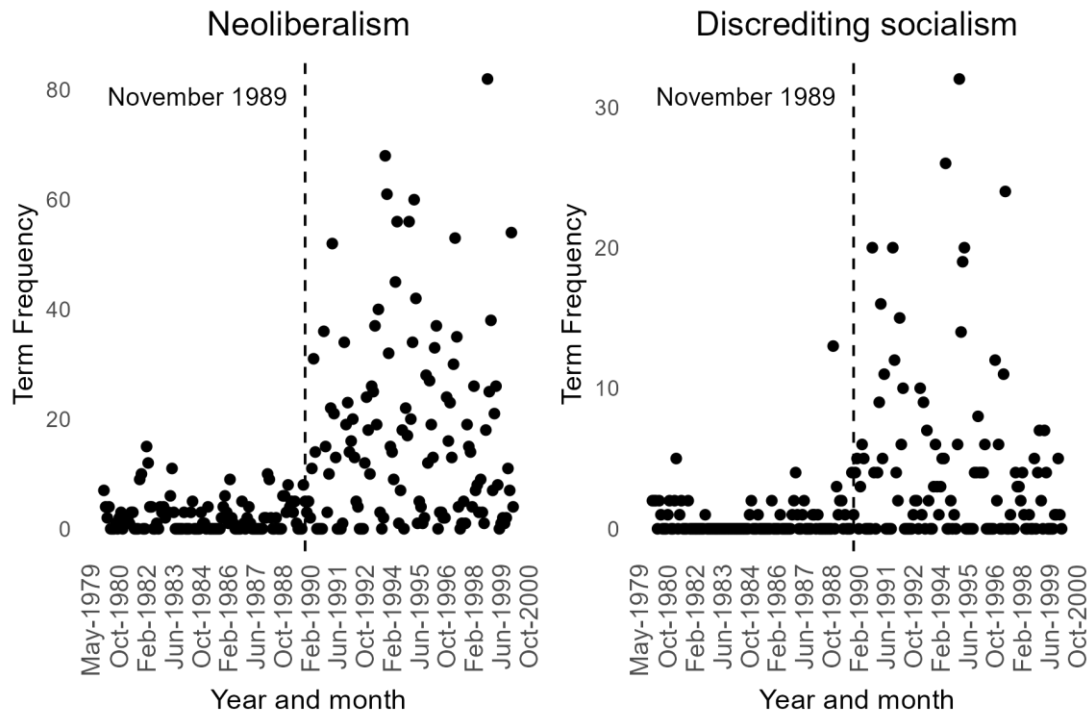
What we aim to measure are changes in attention paid to neoliberal and socialist ideas as well as whether these ideas are presented in a positive or negative light. We do this in three ways. First, we measure attention to neoliberal ideas. We do this because we see increased attention to an idea as one requisite of increased legitimization of this idea. We therefore make a dictionary of neoliberal terms which we use with the RDD to measure the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall on how frequently these neoliberal terms are used. For our main dictionary on neoliberalism, we have chosen a more parsimonious set of terms which covers core aspects of neoliberalism. This dictionary builds on literature on neoliberalism and literature on the marketization that followed from the 1990s onwards globally and in Denmark (Fuglsang 2023; Klitgaard 2007;

Slobodian 2018). The terms for the main dictionary are “market economy”, “market reform”, and “the free market”. These are more abstract terms than e.g. the privatization of specific public companies or reforms of certain sectors. We have chosen more abstract terms for our main dictionary because we expect the initial effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall to be on the use of abstract terms and not more specific policy, as policy takes more time to formulate.

Second, we measure whether the increased attention to neoliberal ideas is also more positive. We do this by using the Wordscores model (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003), and follow previous research that use Wordscores to measure ideological changes in political texts over time (Hakhverdian 2009; Hjorth et al. 2015; Klemmensen, Hobolt, and Hansen 2007). We follow Herzog and Benoit (2015) in assigning a reference score of -1.0 and 1.0 to the most extreme opposing actors in the political spectrum. To find the most extreme left and right of Danish politics, we use the expert surveys used by Klemmensen et al. (2007) (see also Hjorth et al. 2015). We therefore code the Danish Communist Party as the most extreme left-wing as -1.0 and the Danish Progress Party as the most extreme right-wing as 1.0. As reference texts, we use all of these parties’ speeches mentioning one or more of the terms from the neoliberal dictionary within the years 1974-1991. To have sufficient data to compute the Wordscores, we compare the years 1985 until November 9 1989 with the years from November 9 1989 until 1991. A shorter time span would have been more advantageous but is not possible if we want a Wordscores computation. In sum, if we see an increase in attention to neoliberalism, and if all parties move closer to the discourse of the very economically right-wing Danish Progress Party after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this would indicate an ideational momentum.

Third, to investigate whether increasing positive attention comes at the expense of support for competing ideas, we measure whether there is increased attention on phrases that are negative of socialist-related ideas. This we see as a measurement of increased delegitimization of socialism. Our main dictionary here is built on the nouns that notable critics of socialism used to describe the socialist economies, especially critics like Milton Friedman (1988) and former Danish prime-minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (whose 1993-book [Rasmussen, 2017] was an important pro-marketization publication in the Danish political debate). From here, we get the terms “command economy” and “planned economy”. To enhance the validity of terms, we also read through Danish parliamentary debates of the 1980s from before the fall of the Berlin Wall to ensure that the dictionary corresponded to words also used in practice. After having confirmed this for the two first terms, we added the term “plan tyranny” as this term was sometimes used in connection to or instead of the other two terms. Our dictionary of terms critical of socialist-related ideas therefore comprises “command economy”, “planned economy” and “plan tyranny”. In validation of these terms, appendix C shows the dictionary in Danish and translated excerpts of how these terms were used in parliament. Figure 2 plots our dependent variables before and after November 1989 (indicated by the dashed line), here shown with months to make the illustration more intelligible.

Figure 2: Dependent variable plots



Of course, using quantitative content analysis of parliamentary debates in our effort to gauge the ideational impact of international events is not without its limitations. First, changes in the ideas that structure policymaking in political parties can also change through internal processes characterized by very limited public discourse (Jacobs 2015). Although ideas will at some point have to be presented publicly to have broad political impact, the first response may only show in internal discursive contests (Carstensen and Röper 2024). Moreover, even if the responses are aired in public, the more formal nature of parliamentary debate may make parties opt for a different avenue to present new discourses. Although unable to capture all ideational shifts, it is worth noting that the method creates a relatively high bar for the discourse to pass: if discourses do change – and change relatively fast – in parliamentary debate, it is a strong sign that the party has undergone a significant ideational shift. A second issue

is that discourses are not static. With changes in the meaning of words, we run the risk of measuring different ideas at T2 than T1. Although words are necessarily a more rough indicator than what a more elaborate qualitative analysis would allow for, we focus on words with a long history in economic and political thought that are unlikely to substantially change meaning over the relatively short time periods that are the focus of our study. Also, while we do not capture new words that may be introduced into the political debate, we still by using classic concepts like ‘free market’ or ‘market reform’ likely tap into key dimensions of political debate.

To control for possible confounders, we introduce covariates in tests presented in the robustness check section. We control for Danish quarterly GDP and monthly unemployment (OECD n.d.a, n.d.b), as fluctuations here may have influenced public debates, and we control for election years as these may have given incentive to increase attention to certain topics. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for our variables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

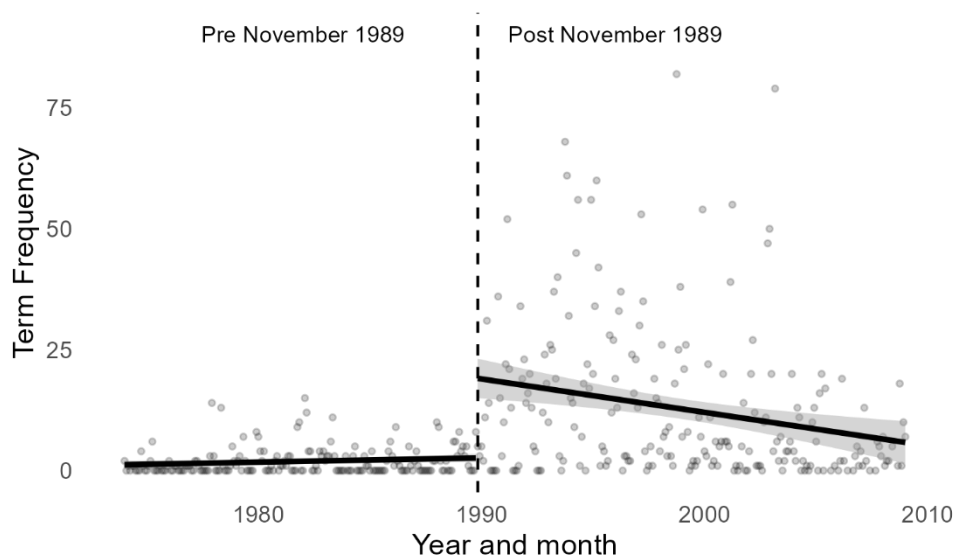
Variable	Total (all years)	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Dependent variable (count)					
Neoliberalism	3189	88.58	7	323	85.99
Discrediting socialism	790	21.94	0	101	21.83
Controls					
Quarterly GDP growth		0.43	-2.55	3.29	1.17
Monthly unemployment		5.83	2.1	10	1.67
Election	Election years controlled for: 1975, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007				

Analysis

The empirical analysis is structured in two parts. First, we assess whether in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall we detect a heightened degree of positive attention to neoliberal ideas across the political spectrum and a heightened degree of negative attention to socialism. Next, we turn to each party of the Danish parliament to assess whether they use the expected strategies in response to the fall of the wall.²

To test hypothesis 1 – whether positive attention towards market-friendly ideas and negative attention towards socialism-oriented ideas increases on an aggregate level following the fall of the Berlin Wall – we first explore whether there is heightened attention towards neoliberal ideas. Here we find a statistically significant jump in the attention that neoliberalism gets in parliamentary speeches after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We see this in figure 3. Moreover, table 2 shows that this jump is highly statistically significant, being well below even the 0.001-level.

Figure 3: Attention to neoliberalism



² Full model results are found in appendix B1.

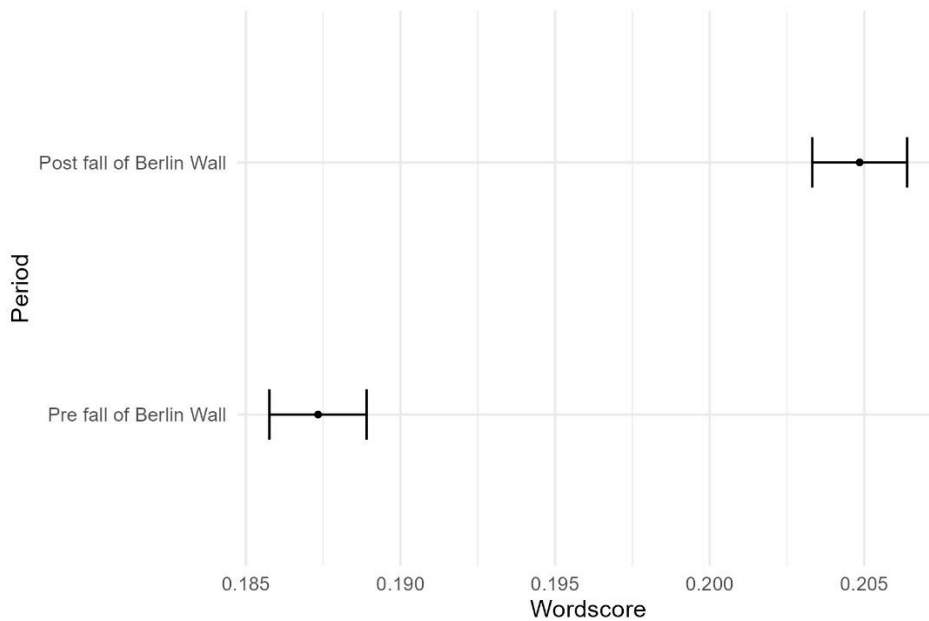
Table 2: Changes in attention

	Neoliberalism	Discrediting socialism
Fall of Berlin Wall	0.015*** (0.0008)	0.005*** (0.0003)
Bandwidth (days)	4435	5273
Observations	358,521	466,219

*Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1*

This suggests that, as we expected, the fall of the Berlin Wall set off a large jump in attention to neoliberalism. But to test whether the legitimacy of neoliberalism increased, we also need to test whether speeches on neoliberalism become more pro-market after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Figure 4 shows the implementation of the Wordscores-model, and we here see that there was a general rightwards shift. Speeches using neoliberal terms in general became more like the discourse of the most right-wing party, the Progress Party. The shift to the right is statistically significant.

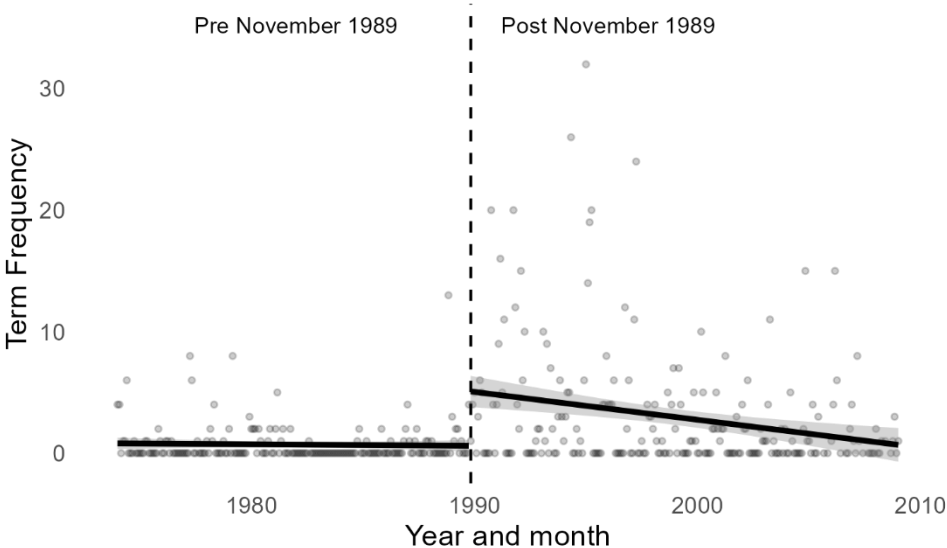
Figure 4: Wordscores on market discourse



The result of the Worsdcores-model is thus also in line with our first hypothesis. There is a general shift towards increasingly using the discourse of the most pro-market party in parliament. Although the results are in line with expectations, the statistically significant rightwards shift is more difficult to translate in substantial terms.

Finally, we want to test whether we see a jump in attention to terms discrediting socialist economies. As figure 5 shows, we also see a large jump for the socialism-discrediting terms. The jump is highly statistically significant (table 2).

Figure 5: Attention to discrediting socialism



While the coefficients in table 2 are small because the changes are divided on all MPs, the combined changes in attention are substantial. As can be seen on figures 3 and 5, looking at the changes from one month to the next, the months just after November 1989 see increases in attention to neoliberalism of around 13 mentions per month and increases of around 4 mentions per month in attention to socialism-discrediting.

We see from our tests of the first hypothesis a significant increase in attention to neoliberalism in speeches. We also see that speeches using neoliberal terms become more pro-market, and we also see a significant increase in attention to discrediting socialist economies. These results suggest that the legitimacy of neoliberalism increased after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while the legitimacy of socialism decreased, as we expected given our theory.

To test the second, third and fourth hypotheses, we divide the parties into three groups: for hypothesis 2, those who we expect to push the ideational momentum; for hypothesis 3, those we expect to ignore it; and for hypothesis 4, those who we expect to surrender to the ideational momentum.

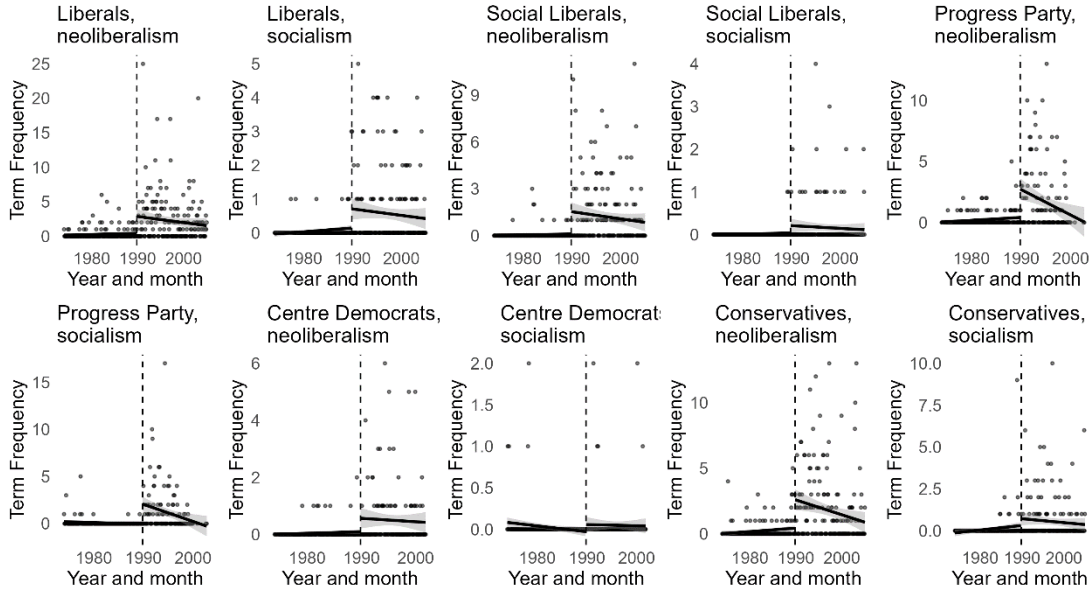
Table 3: Party-level changes in attention

	Neoliberalism			Discrediting socialism		
	<i>Fall of Berlin Wall</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Bandwidth (days)</i>	<i>Fall of Berlin Wall</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Bandwidth (days)</i>
Push (H2)						
Liberals	0.0226*** (0.0019)	55778	4869	0.0051*** (0.0006)	84884	6431
Social Liberals	0.0207*** (0.0028)	31735	5512	0.0028*** (0.0007)	39119	6650
Progress Party	0.0152*** (0.0023)	40015	5107	0.0101*** (0.0022)	27218	2863
Conservatives	0.0151*** (0.0022)	46011	4876	0.0037** (0.0013)	48480	5068
Centre Democrats	0.0077* (0.0032)	15385	3844	Not enough observations		
Ignore (H3)						
Christian People's Party	-0.0030 (0.0044)	6463	2391	Not enough observations		
Social Democrats	0.0088*** (0.0017)	70147	3831	Not enough observations		
Surrender (H4)						
Socialist People's Party	0.0211*** (0.0020)	66446	8873	0.0085*** (0.0011)	57306	5881

*Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1.*

First, for hypothesis 2, we look at the parties where we expect a push to the ideational momentum – those who see electoral and political benefits from increasing the legitimacy of neoliberalism and delegitimizing socialist-related ideas. These are the right-wing and liberal parties of the Liberals (Venstre), the Progress Party (Fremskridtspartiet), the Conservatives (Konservative), the Centre Democrats (Centrumdemokraterne) and the Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre). Despite significant differences in the particular kind of liberalism they support – ranging from anti-establishment, laissez faire liberalism (the Progress Party) to social liberalism (the Social Liberal) – they are joined in their support for liberal ideology and an outspoken scepticism towards socialism. As a response to the fall of the Berlin Wall, all parties would expectedly see an opportunity to promote their own ideology.

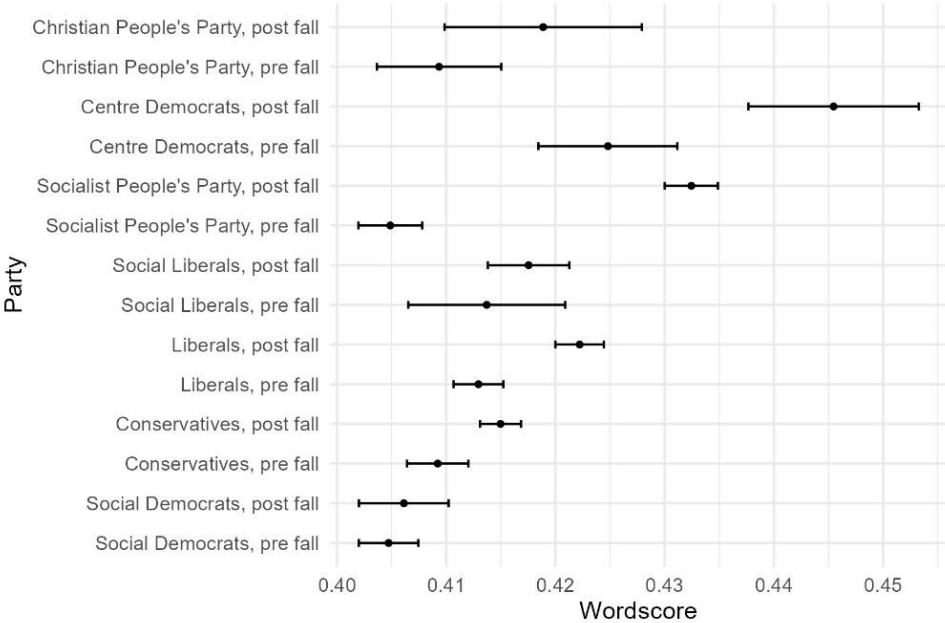
Figure 6: Changes in attention for push parties



Indeed, we see in figure 6 that all push parties exhibit clear jumps in the attention paid to neoliberalism. They also significantly increase their discrediting of socialism-related ideas. These increases are all statistically significant, except in one case (see table 3). The exception is the Centre Democrats, as this party has too few observations to compute the RDD with single dates. Instead, appendix B2 shows an alternative computation for this party, using monthly aggregates. This shows no significant jump, thus being the only case deviating from our expectations.

When using the Wordscores-model (figure 7), we see shifts towards increasingly using the discourse of the most pro-market party in parliament.³ Here we again note that while the results are in line with expectations, these rightwards shift are more difficult to translate in substantial terms. Overall, we see that the first tests are generally in line with our second hypothesis on what we would expect from pushers of the ideational momentum.

Figure 7: Party-level Wordscores on market discourse



³ The reference parties, the Progress Party and Communists, are not included.

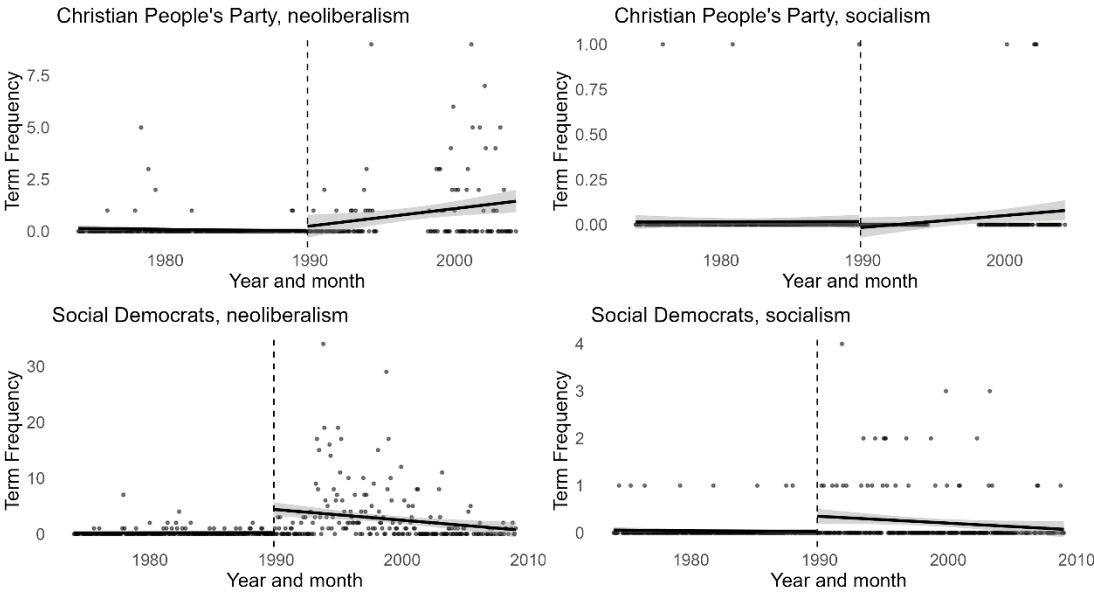
We then move to the ignorers and hypothesis 3. These are the parties that have nothing or little to gain by increasing the legitimacy of neoliberal ideas. Here, we have the Christian People's Party (Kristeligt Folkeparti) for whom neoliberal ideas are not a core issue. They therefore have no incentive to raise attention on these ideas and would rather like the political conversation to focus on other issues, e.g. issues linked to religion or family. Similarly, we would expect the Social Democrats to ignore the ideational momentum, since their credibility is not seriously under threat, and they do not see anything to win from giving attention to ideas that contending liberal parties benefit from.

We see the results for these parties in table 3 and depicted graphically in figure 8. The results show, as we expected, the Christian People's Party does not increase attention to neoliberalism. But we do see a significant jump in Social Democratic discourse on neoliberalism, although even the jump is significant, it is quite small. On discourse on discrediting socialism, the ignore parties did not have sufficient observations to compute the RDD. Appendix B2 shows an alternative computation with monthly aggregates, and these computations follow the results on neoliberalism: the Christian People's Party ignore the ideational momentum, while the Social Democrats increase attention to discrediting socialism.

While the results regarding the Christian People's Party are in line with our hypothesis, the results concerning the Social Democrats break with our expectations. Here it is important to note that the strategy of ignoring the ideational momentum does not necessarily mean that the party will have nothing to say about the topic. As noted in the agenda setting literature, parties generally have to respond to societal problems and concerns (Kristensen et al. 2023), and this is particularly

important for large parties, who voters expect to develop policies on all relevant issues (Green-Pedersen 2019). This might explain why the Social Democratic response deviates from our expectations, and this result could be the subject of future theoretical developments.

Figure 8: Changes in attention for ignore parties

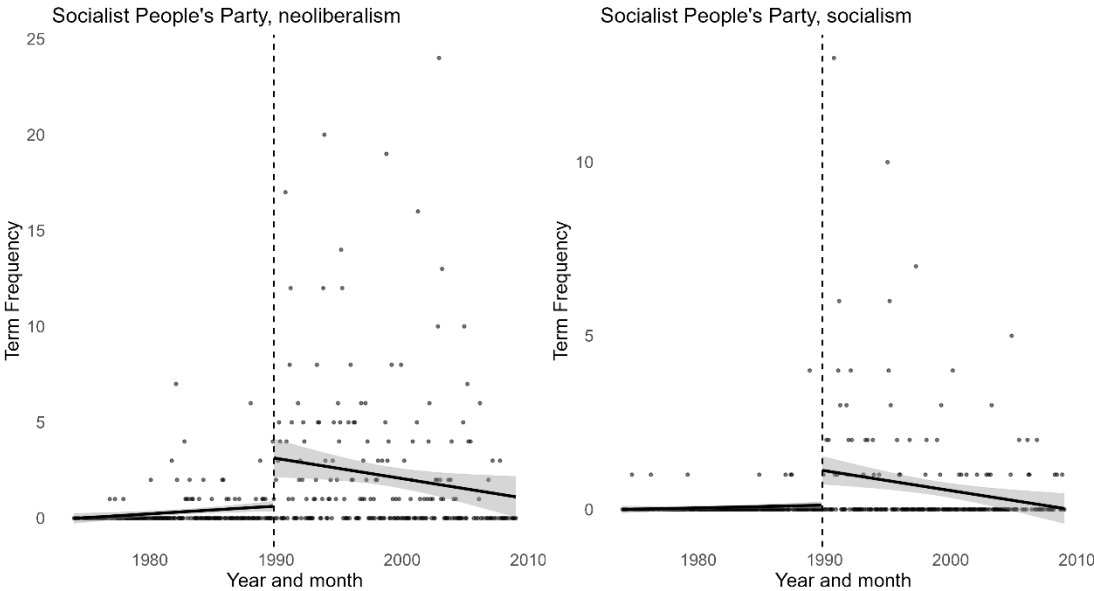


Finally, we turn to hypothesis 4 to investigate the parties we expect to surrender to the ideational momentum. These are parties for which the ideational momentum challenges a core aspect of their party ideology or policy. In this specific case, the ideational momentum delegitimizes socialism and increases the legitimacy of neoliberalism. A surrender party would here be one where the ideational momentum challenges the party’s agenda because they build on socialist ideals and emphasize strong regulation of the market economy.

In the Danish political context of 1989, this only concerns one party, the Socialist People’s Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti). Here we expect them to surrender

because they need to address the rise of neoliberalism, both by showing that their party already distances itself from the socialist economies of Eastern Europe, and by showing that they already acknowledge the benefits of markets. As we can see from figure 9, the Socialist People’s Party show a clear jump in attention paid to neoliberalism and terms discrediting socialist economies, and, as shown on figure 7, they move significantly rightwards in their discourse. This is in line with our expectations.

Figure 9: Changes in attention for surrender party



Robustness checks

To check the robustness of our results, we take several steps. First, as is advised for an RDD (Cunningham 2021), we use placebo dates to test that the jumps we see do not occur regularly. The placebo plot in appendix B3 shows that the jumps we see are generally unique. Next, we test for bandwidth sensitivity. While our main models choose bandwidth using the method suggested by Imbens & Kalyanaraman (2012), appendix B4 shows sensitivity tests for our main RDD-models using other bandwidths.

We see that results are robust to large differences in choice of bandwidth. Third, we want to make sure that our observations have not pre-sorted themselves to be at either side of the RDD-cutoff. We test for sorting in appendix B5 and find that we can reject sorting for our main models.

Fourth, we check the sensitivity to non-linear specifications by using a second order polynomial for our two aggregate RDD-models. As shown in appendix B6, the models are very robust when testing in this way. Fifth, we use placebo dictionaries to validate the RDD-models. We here use randomly generated dictionaries to test whether the jumps we see for our main dictionaries are found for other, non-related words as well. Our results are also robust to this test, as shown in appendix B7. Sixth, we want to test whether dictionaries with other relevant words change the results. Appendix B8 shows that our results are also robust to the implementation of dictionaries with a wider array of relevant terms. We moreover control for possible confounders of election years, GDP growth and unemployment in appendix B9 and still find very statistically significant results. We then want to test that these possible confounders do not jump at our cutoff, and appendix B10 shows no statistically significant jumps. Finally, to account for our dependent variables being count variables, we rerun our main models with quassi-Poisson regressions, and we again find very statistically significant increases in attention to neoliberalism and discrediting socialism (appendix B11).

Conclusion

How do international events affect ideational power struggles taking place in national political debates? Extensive literatures have studied the global spread of ideas and

institutions, but the impact of international events has so far remained largely unexplored. This paper provides a first stab at theorizing and empirically investigating this question through a study of the ideational impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall on the legitimacy of neoliberal ideas in Danish public debate. In this context, we suggest that one key mechanism through which international events can come to impact national ideas and discourses is by creating an ideational momentum that within a short period of time gives an increased positive attention to certain ideas at the expense of others. The empirical analysis shows that the fall of the Berlin Wall set in motion an ideational momentum for pro-market neoliberal ideas in public debate that was sustained in the years that followed. It also demonstrated that beyond the general movement towards greater attention, parties responded differently based on their strategic interest in pushing, ignoring or surrendering to the momentum.

The concept of ideational momentum more broadly advances our understanding of how the legitimacy of ideas can shift in reaction to sudden shocks and events. While extant scholarship focuses on how external events can offer up windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984) and that events can chip away at the authority of policy ideas and thus propel ideational change (Hall 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), external events have nonetheless remained somewhat of a theoretical black box in regards to their effect on public debate and the politics of ideas in the national setting. We show how the ideational momentum concept changes the ideational legitimacy space on political ideas, and that the external event and the ideational momentum force parties to transform their ideas strategically to conserve or win political power.

Of course, plenty of work remains. One key question is thus how the concept of ideational momentum travels to other settings. For example, external shocks such as the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 2001, or the Covid crisis in 2020, could be analysed through our analytical lenses to assess whether these events created an ideational momentum that shifted the legitimacy of certain ideas, and how different parties used different strategies to take advantage of the external shocks in the fight over ideas. An important issue is which antecedent conditions are sufficient and necessary for international events to create an ideational momentum, let alone produce institutional change. For example, the macroeconomic challenge to neoliberal ideas after the financial crisis of 2008 came quite late, perhaps first with the election of the more mercantilist Donald Trump, or with the relaxation of EU fiscal rules during the Covid crisis. In these cases, any ideational momentum seems to not have produced similar effects, although this would require additional empirical analysis to determine. Moreover, our party strategy expectations are designed for a multi-party system with proportional representation. Other systems may give other incentives that produce different kinds of interactive dynamics.

More broadly, the paper expands the expected set of strategies that parties may follow to respond to an external event. Where previous literature on strategic constructivism has outlined that different actors will use their own preferred ideas strategically by building coalitions around them (Blyth 2002; Béland & Cox, 2016; Jabko, 2006), we highlight the importance of the interaction that take place between actors in positioning them in relation to the same set of ideas. That is, rather than focusing only on how actors promote their favoured ideas, we take seriously the argument that ideational struggle is interactive (Schmidt 2008). Despite the centrality

of discursive interaction for the explanation of change in discursive institutionalism, the theoretical tools that one may employ to account for variation in the interactive strategies of political agents has remained limited. This also indicates a broader potential for ideational scholarship to use scholarship on party competition and agenda setting (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014) to deepen and systematize our understanding of how strategic actors work with ideas in power struggles.

Another broader contribution is our use of quantitative analysis and NLP for the study of discursive interaction and ideational struggle. While the most cited ideational literature has usually focused on qualitative readings (e.g. Blyth, 2002; Hall, 1993), some recent studies on ideas and discourse have implemented more quantitative measures of ideational change (e.g. Jabko & Schmidt, 2022; Skonieczny, 2018; Wueest & Fossati, 2015). We build on this trend but expand the use of quantitative measures by our use of regression discontinuity, and we add NLP to the range of possible methodologies through our use of Wordscores. In this way, the paper suggests that one way ideational scholarship can benefit from quantitative text analysis is by substantially expanding the amount, kinds and temporal scope of textual data that can be explored within an analysis. Despite the potential of research advances through quantitative text analysis, it is also clear that the qualitative analysis remains absolutely key for granular analysis of how actors actually work with ideas and for understanding the important nuances in how ideas develop over time.

Finally, the paper makes an empirical contribution by advancing our understanding of why neoliberalism spread. Literature on the spread of neoliberal ideas has for decades debated why European and North American states shifted to more market-oriented ideas by the late 20th century (e.g. Harvey, 2007; Hay, 2001;

Slobodian, 2018). This debate has also focused on Denmark more specifically, with scholars arguing that the shift towards neoliberalism and marketization was a result of new rationales among experts and bureaucrats (Larsen and Andersen 2009), or a result of bureaucrats translating external ideas of neoliberalism into a Danish context when adapting to globalization (Kjær and Pedersen 2001). We complement these accounts by showing that the fall of the Berlin Wall seems to have instigated a large jump in attention paid to neoliberal ideas, and that the fall of the wall may also have shifted parties towards being more pro-market in their discourse. Future research will hopefully show if a similar dynamic has taken place in other countries, both in and outside of Scandinavia.

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