

Is There a Rebel Resource Curse?

Abstract:

How do recruitment tactics affect the success of rebel groups in civil wars? To what extent do material resources “curse” rebels? The conventional wisdom holds that recruitment strategies that rely more on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, attract more committed recruits who are more invested in the success of their groups than their materially motivated counterparts. However, I argue that highly committed recruits provide rebel organizations with a double-edged sword. I posit that while ideological appeals help attract committed recruits, the most devoted militants are often unwilling to compromise with governments, they do not sufficiently increase rebel groups’ strength, and can spark internal clashes over ideological issues, making it difficult for such groups to achieve their long-term goals. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom, I expect that ideologically based recruitment strategies do not help rebels achieve long-term success. To test this claim, I employ novel data on the recruitment practices of rebel organizations that were active across the world between 1989 and 2011. Departing from previous literature, I do not find evidence that greater reliance on ideological recruitment appeals, relative to material incentives, increases or decreases the probability that rebel organizations experience favorable or unfavorable outcomes.

Jeremy Weinstein (2005, 2007) famously argued that there is a “Rebel Resource Curse.” Specifically, Weinstein posits that rebel groups with access to significant material wealth, that use these resources for recruitment, will be flooded with opportunistic recruits who are not committed to the long-term goals of these organizations. However, Weinstein expects that groups lacking material resources will instead mobilize around shared identities and/or grievances. He expects that these individuals will be more committed to their groups, as they are willing to forgo short-term material gain for long-term benefits.

However, the extent to which material-based recruitment strategies “curse” rebel organizations is not clear in previous scholarship. Indeed, much of the related work on the consequences of rebel recruitment strategies tends to focus on patterns of civilian victimization (e.g., Weinstein 2005, 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Cohen 2013, 2016). While this work is valuable, it does not address how rebels’ recruitment tactics affect their ultimate success.

A logical extension of the work by Weinstein and others is that, if ideological appeals really attract more committed recruits, then such strategies should enhance the probability of rebel groups achieving their goals, as they need committed recruits to be successful (Gates 2002). Indeed, Weinstein (2007) even predicts that rebel organizations will be more resilient when they rely more on ideological appeals for recruitment.

However, there is a dearth of prior research examining how rebel recruitment strategies affect their long-term success. I posit that previous work has overlooked some of the distinct drawbacks of ideological based recruitment strategies, and that on the whole, such tactics do not provide rebels with a distinct advantage, relative to those that rely more heavily on material incentives for recruitment. Importantly, I am not arguing that groups will be more successful if they employ material recruitment incentives. Indeed, these groups tend to be plagued by a lack of

commitment, desertion, defection, and in-fighting among the ranks. Instead, I argue that both material and ideological-based recruitment strategies often come with similar drawbacks.

There is also little quantitative analysis examining this relationship as well, producing further ambiguity about the consequences of recruitment for the long-term success of rebels. Thus, it has so far been difficult to make generalizable claims about the consequences of recruitment strategies for the long-term success of rebel groups.

Specifically, in this paper, I contend that ideological appeals and ideologically motivated recruits can often (1) introduce problems into the bargaining process; (2) fail to mobilize sufficiently strong fighting forces; and (3) create and/or exacerbate internal divisions. Using novel data on the recruitment practices of 232 rebel movements, active across the world, from the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID) (Soules 2023), I do not find evidence that groups that rely more on ideological appeals for recruitment are more or less likely to achieve favorable (or unfavorable) outcomes than those organizations that rely more heavily on material incentives to mobilize recruits.

Several contributions are made with this paper. First, it challenges the notion that material-based recruitment strategies are a “curse” for rebel organizations. Instead, I posit that there are also many disadvantages to relying on ideological appeals for recruitment, and that these recruitment strategies ultimately do not make groups more successful. Again, I am not arguing that it is more beneficial for groups to recruit with material incentives, as there are many disadvantages associated with these appeals as well (e.g., Weinstein 2005, 2007). However, the benefits of non-material recruitment strategies have been overstated in some prior work.

Second, this paper provides, to the best of my knowledge, the first cross-rebel group quantitative analysis of how the material and ideological recruitment appeals rebels employ affect the favorability of the outcomes they experience. Relatedly, prior work examines how variation in the types of rebel ideologies affect their longevity and success (e.g., Keels and Wiegand 2020; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022). While vital, that work does not speak to a central claim in the literature that greater reliance on ideological appeals, *relative* to material resources, for mobilization, affects the success of militant groups. Said differently, prior quantitative work examines variation in different types of ideologies but does not directly compare ideological and material-based recruitment, despite their relevance in the literature.

Third, prior work examines how rebel ideology affects the probability of conflict termination (e.g., Keels and Wiegand 2020; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022) and the probability that a rebel group ends by entering a negotiated settlement (Keels and Wiegand 2020). While this work is again valuable, it overlooks how ideology and recruitment affects other types of outcomes rebels typically face, including total victory, total defeat, or fizzling out through low levels of activity (see Kreutz 2010). This distinction is consequential as these types of outcomes often have very different causes (e.g., Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). Indeed, ideologically motivated rebels often view peace agreements as inadequate compromises, and instead, push for total victory (Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt 2020). Thus, it is important to understand how rebel recruitment tactics affect all types of outcomes, not just general termination, or the adoption of negotiated settlements.

Fourth, this paper contributes to the rich literature on the causes and consequences of rebel recruitment strategies (Lichbach 1994, 1995; Gates 2002; Weinstein 2005, 2007; Humphreys and

Weinstein 2008; Oyefusi 2008; Eck 2014; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt 2020; Lewis 2020; Sawyer and Andrews 2020; Hanson 2021; Plapinger 2022).

In the next section, I will discuss what “success” is in the context of this analysis. Following this, I review the literature on the consequences rebel groups face for their recruitment strategies. Next, I layout a variety of drawbacks of ideological-based recruitment strategies. I then present the research design and results and conclude by discussing the implications of the findings.

Defining Success

In analyzing how recruitment strategies affect rebel success, it is important that we first define success. In the context of civil war, success could mean a variety of achievements, including the retention of troops or the successful execution of military operations, among other outcomes.

However, to analyze the full extent to which recruitment tactics “curse” (or benefit) rebel organizations, I argue that we must understand how they affect the ability of groups to achieve their goals, as military success is the central goal of all rebel organizations (Gates 2002, p. 112). Despite this, as noted above, most of the literature on the consequences of rebel recruitment tends to focus on violence against civilians (Weinstein 2005, 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Cohen 2013, 2016). Thus, while this segment of the literature finds that material-based recruitment strategies have dire consequences for civilian populations, it says little about the long-term effects that rebel organizations face.

Building off prior work on rebel success, I examine how recruitment tactics affect the probability that rebels experience favorable outcomes, such as entering peace agreements or achieving total victory over government forces, or unfavorable outcomes, such as total defeat by

government forces or by ending through low levels of activity (e.g., Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Kreutz 2010; Fortna 2015; Briathwaite and Ruiz 2018; Greig, Mason, and Hamner 2018; Silverman, Acosta, and Huang 2023). Said differently, I examine whether material-based recruitment strategies provide more of a “curse” to rebel organizations than mobilizing with ideological appeals.

Benefits of Ideological Recruitment

Scholars have detailed multiple benefits associated with relying more on ideological appeals than material incentives for recruitment. First, as noted above, ideological based recruitment strategies are expected to attract highly committed individuals who are willing to forgo short-term benefits for long-term gains (Weinstein 2005, 2007). All recruits, regardless of motive, have the incentive to signal that they are committed to the long-term goals of their organization, which can make it difficult for rebel leaders that recruit with material incentives to filter out uncommitted recruits (Weinstein 2005, 2007). However, rebel leaders can engage in a variety of strategies, including utilizing social ties to gain information on recruits, to help screen out uncommitted individuals (e.g., Weinstein 2005, 2007; Johnston et al. 2016).

Consequently, ideologically committed recruits are expected to be less likely to desert and defect (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sanín 2008; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Altier al. 2017; Riley and Schneider 2022). Ideologically driven recruits are expected to prioritize actions that benefit the group as a whole, while materially motivated recruits are predicted to pursue private rewards, even at the expense of their groups (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006).

Second, many scholars expect that ideological-based recruitment strategies will help improve rebel organizations' popularity. Indeed, non-violent propaganda by militant movements that includes ideological and grievance-based messaging helps increase support for the group (Mitts, Phillips, and Walter 2022). Furthermore, rebel groups that rely more on ideological appeals than material incentives are more likely to be perceived as sincere advocates for change rather than as opportunistic criminals (Soules 2022).

Third, Humphreys and Weinstein (2006) posit that materially driven recruits are more likely to pursue personal, material gain over actions that benefit their groups. As a result, they are more likely to engage in abusive behavior towards civilians, particularly when it facilitates the acquisition of material resources (i.e., looting). In contrast, they expect that ideologically motivated recruits will be more likely to prioritize engagement in activities that benefit the group as a whole and are less interested in personal enrichment. Thus, relative to materially motivated recruits, ideologically driven recruits are expected to be more likely to engage in behavior that is for the good of their organizations.

Thus, a prevailing expectation in the literature is that rebel groups that rely more on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, for recruitment, will be more likely to attract highly committed recruits who are less likely to desert and defect, and who work for the good of the group. Furthermore, ideological appeals are expected to make groups more popular or improve their image.

This would all suggest that groups should be more likely to achieve their long-term goals if they have recruits who are more committed to the cause and who engage in behavior to benefit their group as a whole. More popular groups are also better positioned to receive the levels of material and political support from civilians that are often needed to make rebels successful.

However, there are several disadvantages to ideological-based recruitment strategies that have been overlooked in prior scholarship. I turn to these issues in the next section.

Bargaining Issues

Three interrelated issues create difficulties in settling conflicts: private information and incentives to misrepresent; credible commitment problems; and issue indivisibilities (Fearon 1995). These issues have been applied to varying degrees to explain why certain types of ideologies create barriers to the settlement of civil wars (e.g., Svensson 2007; Keels and Wiegand 2020; Nilsson and Svensson 2021; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022). However, it is also important to consider these arguments in the context of material and ideological-based recruitment strategies.

Private Information and Incentives to Misrepresent

First, there can be great uncertainty around the intentions of ideologically motivated recruits. Ideologically committed recruits are less likely to desert or defect to government forces, even when offered material incentives, and in some cases, are more likely to reject offers of amnesty (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sanín 2008; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Altier al. 2017; Riley and Schneider 2022). Thus, precisely because ideologically driven rebels cannot be easily bought off, there can be great uncertainty around their willingness to come to a political compromise.

Additionally, issues can arise related to uncertainty surrounding how ideologically extreme recruits are. Walter (2017) posits that one advantage of ideologically extreme recruitment appeals is that they signal groups' sincerity and commitment to a cause and can be appealing to

moderates who fear that the process of bargaining with government forces will dilute rebel demands too much if the militants do not push for significant concessions from the outset.

However, this strategy could prove risky for at least two reasons. First, this strategy can generate significant ambiguity about the true beliefs of recruits. Specifically, it can become difficult for a government to ascertain whether the recruits are actually ideologically extreme, or if the extremist recruitment appeals are merely a bargaining tool. This creates a situation in which there is a large amount of uncertainty about the intentions of ideologically driven recruits, making it difficult to negotiate with them.

Indeed, this dynamic likely raises several questions for governments when they are considering negotiating with rebels. Are the recruits sincerely radical, leading them to reject any moderate policy concessions by governments? Or are the recruits actually moderate and willing to negotiate? If this is the case, how moderate are they? These uncertainties make bargaining difficult, which can make negotiated settlements less likely to occur.

Second and relatedly, this strategy also assumes that civilians believe that rebel recruits are sincere about ideological change but not so sincere that they want the extreme changes that are reflected in the groups' recruitment messaging. Thus, again, there can be substantial ambiguity in the beliefs of ideologically motivated recruits.

In sum, ideological based recruitment strategies can draw in cadres, both moderates and extremists, who are unwilling to be bought off, including through amnesty programs, making it more difficult to negotiate with them. Said differently, the fact that ideological recruitment appeals attract committed recruits also means that organizations are bringing in recruits who will be less likely to negotiate on certain issues. Relatedly, when groups make ideological appeals,

there can be great uncertainty surrounding how extreme the joiners really are, making governments hesitant to negotiate as well.

Credible Commitment Problems

Ideologically committed recruits can also introduce credible commitment problems into the bargaining process. Keels and Wiegand (2020) posit that when there are stark ideological divides between rebel groups and governments, making concessions risks alienating supporters who might be dissatisfied with their side compromising on its ideological positions. Relatedly, ideologically driven recruits are more likely to defect or demobilize when their groups shift ideological positions (Oppenheim et al. 2015).

Said differently, ideologically driven recruits who are committed to the cause could become quite alienated and aggrieved if their groups pursued compromises that they viewed as giving up too much ground. As a result, groups with ideologically committed recruits can have difficulty negotiating, as they risk alienating their cadres by compromising. Given this need to maintain a certain level of ideological purity, rebel organizations that employ ideological-based recruitment strategies can have difficulty credibly committing to negotiations.

Furthermore, even if rebels accept some concessions, governments might fear that the rebels will renege and pursue more concessions in the future. This is particularly salient for groups that rely heavily on ideological recruitment appeals, given evidence that the most ideological committed recruits are the ones more likely to remobilize (Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt 2020).

Issue Indivisibilities

Deeply ideologically devoted recruits are also more likely to view the issues they are fighting for as indivisible or unable to be compromised on, posing further problems for the bargaining process (Keels and Wiegand 2020). Ideological rebels will continue their fight either out of sincere belief or their ability to motivate others to continue fighting (Leader Maynard 2019; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022).

Put another way, ideologically committed rebels are often unwilling to compromise. In the Syrian Civil War, ex-fighters that were ideologically committed to fighting the Assad regime or establishing an Islamic state were more likely to remobilize (Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt 2020). These recruits are also more likely to remobilize when they believe the group will pursue totally victory over negotiated settlements (Mironova, Alhamad, and Whitt 2020). Recruits with religious (Hassner 2003; Svensson 2007; Toft and Zhukov 2015; Nilsson and Svensson 2020; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022) and/or (ethno)nationalist motives (Hasner 2003; Goddard 2006; Wucherpfennig et al. 2012) particularly view certain issues as indivisible. Relatedly, the opposition will often crackdown hard on rebels that are able to effectively use ideology to mobilize recruits out of the fear that such rebels are unwilling to compromise but are effective and devoted (Balcells and Kalyvas 2015; Hafez 2018). This poses further obstacles to groups achieving their goals.

Mobilizing Sufficient Support

Ideological recruitment strategies can sometimes make it difficult for rebels to generate sufficient civilian support to be successful. Specifically, ideological appeals (1) can fail to attract as many recruits as material incentives, (2) do not necessarily attract superior fighting forces, (3)

fail to resonate with large portions of the public, (4) risk being perceived as either too moderate or too extreme, and (5) attract individuals who engage in ideologically motivated violence, which alienates civilians. All these issues make it difficult for groups that employ ideological-based recruitment strategies to mobilize sufficiently strong fighting forces to be successful.

Sufficient Number of Troops

Weinstein (2005, 2007) predicts that, relative to material incentives, ideological appeals tend to attract fewer recruits. He expects, instead, that rebel organizations that offer material incentives will be flooded by a high number of opportunistic recruits. Particularly depending on the ideology of the group, ideological appeals also might not persuade as wide of a portion of the public. Consequently, material incentives likely appeal to a larger number of people.

Thus, even if they attract recruits who are more committed, ideological appeals are not always effective at mobilizing a large number of combatants. Given the importance of overall strength and troop size in achieving favorable outcomes (e.g., Gates 2002 Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009), having a small number of recruits, even if they are devoted, might be detrimental to militant organizations.

Quality of Troops

Relatedly, while ideological-based recruitment strategies might attract recruits who are more devoted, they do not necessarily attract recruits who are higher quality soldiers on other dimensions. Specifically, ideologically motivated recruits are not necessarily better fighters.

Indeed, Gates and Podder (2015) even argue that over-zealous recruits can be a significant liability on the battlefield as they are not well-trained soldiers, even though they are ideologically committed. Furthermore, groups that employ material incentives sometimes recruit mercenaries. While these individuals are unlikely to be ideologically committed, they sometimes have combat experience, which can help groups on the battlefield. Thus, while ideologically committed recruits might help rebel groups be more resilient, they do not necessarily sufficiently enhance their strength enough to achieve long-term success.

Resonation

Ideological appeals will not always resonate with a large number of civilians. This makes it difficult for groups to generate sufficient support to be successful. For instance, in Colombia, the EPL shifted its recruitment appeals away from Maoism to try to attract more recruits (Martin 2011). While the group made other, more effective recruitment appeals, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was unsuccessful at mobilizing many individuals with class-based appeals (Hudson 1999).

However, shifting the types of ideological appeals made is not always an effective solution to this problem either. Abrahms (2008) argues that multiple militant groups, including ETA, the PFLP, and the PKK, among others, shifted their ideologies and goals over time, making it difficult to determine what their ultimate objectives were. Thus, mixed or unclear ideological messaging could undermine the ability of rebel groups to mobilize recruits.

Goldilocks Problem

There is also a “Goldilocks Problem” associated with employing ideological recruitment appeals. Said differently, rebel groups are at risk of making ideological recruitment appeals that are perceived as too moderate or too extreme. Instead, their ideological appeals must be “just right.” Again, this makes it difficult for rebels to recruit adequate fighting forces.

If rebels make ideological appeals that are perceived as too moderate, then they risk civilians believing that they will be more inclined to “sellout” the cause or to not push hard enough for substantial concessions. Furthermore, civilians might fear that if groups have moderate ideological platforms, that the bargaining process will dilute the rebels’ demands so much that they will not achieve sufficiently significant concessions. Relatedly, more moderate appeals are not as effective at screening out uncommitted recruits (Walter 2017).

Mobilizing around platforms that are perceived as being ideological extreme can also lead to popular backlash against militant groups and repel external support (Schwab 2023). Indeed, militants that are perceived to be attempting to fundamentally alter or destroy existing societal structures risk alienating significant portions of civilian populations (Abrahms 2006). Even if rebels’ demands are diluted in the bargaining process, civilians might fear that groups that make extremist ideological appeals will only try to make ideologically extreme demands.

Thus, rebel organizations that rely primarily on ideological appeals to mobilize recruits must strike a balance between not appearing too moderate and non-committal, while also not appearing too extreme and overly committed. This balance can be difficult to achieve, as what constitutes “too moderate” and “too extreme” likely varies significantly within populations.

In sum, ideological appeals, whether they are moderate or extreme, do not always resonate with a large number of potential joiners, and in some cases, might even alienate civilians against groups. Furthermore, material incentives also often attract a larger number of recruits, which can advantage groups on the battlefield. Thus, while ideological appeals might attract more committed individuals, material incentives can bring in more individuals overall. Thus, both types of recruitment appeals have tactical advantages and disadvantages, and as a result, neither type of group has a clear military advantage.

Ideologically Motivated Violence

As noted earlier, scholars posit that materially driven recruits are more ill-disciplined and abusive towards civilians than their ideologically driven counterparts (e.g., Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2005, 2007). Thus, a logical extension of the conventional wisdom is that because ideologically driven recruits treat civilians better, their groups will garner greater civilian support, which will help them be more successful in the long-run. Said differently, ideological appeals are expected to attract recruits who have better relationships with civilians than their materially motivated counterparts, which should contribute to the success of the former type of rebel organization.

However, other research highlights how rebel ideology can drive violence against civilians in ways that alienate the latter from the former. Indeed, mass killings often have important ideological dimensions (Valentino 2004, 2014). Certain ideologies emphasize the “othering” of out groups, or fail to respect certain populations, which can increase both the killing of civilians (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Polo and Gleditsch 2016; Polo 2020) and use of sexual violence

(Sarwari 2021). Violence against civilians erodes public support for militant organizations (Arves, Cunningham, and McCulloch 2019), and increase groups' reputations for being radical, making it difficult for them to gain enough civilian support to be successful (Abrahms 2006). Thus, ideologically motivated recruits who engage in violence could repel additional civilian support and recruits, making it difficult for these groups to be successful.

For example, the effectiveness and popularity of Boko Haram's recruitment appeals declined because of the group's brutal violence (Inks, Wolfe, and Ouvry 2016). In Spain, the Basque separatist movement—ETA—recruited primarily with ideological appeals (Soules 2023). However, many Basque nationalists stopped supporting ETA after the group disrupted peace negotiations with its notorious 2006 bombing of an airport terminal in Madrid (Cala 2011). In Serbia, nationalist ideology drove many youths to join militias, but many defected after the intensity of violence undermined their idealist notions of fighting for Serbian nationalism (Schlichte 2010). Abrahms (2008) cites examples across multiple countries, including the United Kingdom, Russia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Indonesia, and the Philippines in which public support for militant movements, many of whom were ideologically driven, declined following their use of terrorism. Hafez (2018) argues that Radical Islamist movements have ideologies that lead to the indiscriminate killing of civilians and militants in other factions, which has made it difficult for Islamist rebels to achieve many of their long-term goals.

Weinstein (2005, 2007) also expects that shared identity-based ties, not just any kind of ideological appeal, will help form more cohesive, and less abusive, rebel forces. However, ethnic dimensions of conflicts can also lead to extreme violence. Eck (2009) argues that ethnic conflicts are more likely to escalate than other types of conflicts because shared ethnic identity is much less ambiguous than shared ideological affinity. This facilitates mobilization in a way that

increases the size of ethnic-based forces, and their efficiency in the use of resources, making these rebel groups more deadly. More radical demands made by ethnopolitical organizations are also associated with an increased risk of violent escalation (Vogt, Gleditsch, and Cederman 2021). Relatedly, rebels will often target governments' co-ethnics to undermine the strength of their enemies (Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Fjelde et al. 2021).

Thus, while ideologically motivated recruits commit less violence against civilians in some contexts, their beliefs can spur such actions in other situations, undermining support for these groups. We should therefore not expect ideological recruitment appeals to have a universal restraining effect on rebel violence against civilians, and as a result, ideologically driven rebels will not always be better at garnering civilian support.

Internal Division

Scholars also expect that groups will be more internally cohesive if they mobilize around shared identities or ideologies (e.g., Weinstein 2005, 2007; Fjelde and Nilsson 2018). However, ideological divisions among recruits can also manifest in a couple of different ways. First, recruits can be divided over how extreme they are in their beliefs, which can lead to a lack of cohesion and organizational splintering. Second and relatedly, these internal divisions can undermine rebel groups' effort to negotiate with governments. Third, ideological appeals do not always translate perfectly into mobilizing recruits who hold specific beliefs.

Splintering

Mobilizing around ideological appeals does not always ensure internal cohesion. Internal, ideological disagreements can significantly undermine the functionality and cohesiveness of

rebel organizations (Perkoski 2015), and splinter fractions often frame their decision to form new groups around ideological issues (e.g., Gates 2002, Mosinger 2019). Perkoski (2015) finds that disagreements over ideology, along with tactical and leadership disagreements, are the main factors driving rebel group splintering.

Such ideological splits typically occur because of internal disagreements over how extreme of a position to adopt within specific ideologies, rather than divides over totally different types of ideologies (Perkoski 2015). Al-Shabaab split from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) because the former believed the latter was not committed enough to enforcing Sharia law (Perkoski 2015). Ideological and strategic issues drove the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) to split from the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) (Perkoski 2015).

Thus, when rebel organizations have a higher percentage of ideologically committed individuals among their ranks, stark internal divisions can arise over ideology, which can lead to internal fractionalization.

Internal cohesion also tends to be higher in groups that mobilize with ideological appeals, as there are higher levels of social homogeneity in the ranks of these organizations (Weinstein 2005, 2007). However, for sub-commanders in rebel organizations to successfully convince their individual units to split off and form a new organization with them, there must be high levels of trust and cohesion within units (Nagel and Doctor 2020). Thus, internal cohesion stemming from ideological-based recruitment strategies is not necessarily sufficient to prevent rebel groups splintering.

Bargaining Difficulties

Related to the first set of arguments, internal ideological divisions can also undermine rebel groups' efforts to negotiate with governments. In the Philippines, some members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) splintered and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in part because of ideological disagreements over religion, which were exacerbated during negotiations with the government (Mapping Militant Organizations 2019). In Senegal, the MFDC suffered from internal divisions caused by a lack of agreement of goals across factions and a lack of unified political messaging, which undermined the ability of the group to negotiate with the government. Many members of the group choose to continue fighting through various rounds of negotiations because they believed the government was not adequately addressing issues related to the perceived mistreatment of the Casamance region in Senegal (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003; UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia).

Thus, while ideological mobilization strategies might attract recruits who are more committed, they do not always draw in recruits with the exact same beliefs. Indeed, precisely because they attract individuals who are committed to their personal beliefs, ideological recruitment strategies can contribute to stark, ideological divides within rebel organizations that can lead to splintering and difficulties in negotiating with governments.

Imperfect Translation

While non-material recruitment appeals might attract individuals who are not opportunistic, they do not guarantee that the individuals brought in will be devoted to the specific ideologies and goals of the groups making these appeals. Said differently, appeals made around Ideology X

sometimes imperfectly translate to the types of recruits drawn in, as individuals adhering to Ideology Y join instead.

First, some individuals who join ideologically driven groups might not be ideologues themselves. Abrahms (2008) challenges many of the rationalist explanations for why individuals join militant groups, arguing instead that individuals often participate because of the opportunities for developing social bonds and comradeship. Abrahms cites examples across a diversity of conflicts, including of groups that employ ideological recruitment appeals, in which recruits are unable to clearly articulate even the most basic ideological principles of their groups.

Second, recruits with other ideological convictions might join a rebel movement with different ideological goals if they believe doing so is still their best option. Marks (2004) argues that during the Cold War, while many rebel leaders organized around Marxist principles, many of their rank-and-file recruits did not have the same motives and were not interested in Marxism. Thus, ideological recruitment strategies do not guarantee ideological coherence within rebel organizations.

Tying these points together, just as materially motivated recruits have the incentive to (falsely) signal their commitment to their groups (Weinstein 2005, 2007), recruits with ulterior social or political motives also have the incentive to signal their commitment to their organizations. Thus, while rebel leaders that recruit with material incentives have difficulty identifying and filtering out uncommitted and opportunistic recruits (Weinstein 2005, 2007), rebel leaders that make ideological appeals might still have difficulty identifying and pushing out individuals who are not committed to the specific ideological causes of their groups, as they have ulterior social or political motives. This means that rebels drawn in by ideological appeals are not always fighting for common goals.

Another related issue is that rebel leaders are sometimes insincere in their use of ideological recruitment appeals. Thaler (2022) explains the process by which materially motivated rebel leaders engage in pandering. Specifically, Thaler posits that it is relatively costless for insincere militant leaders to pander to political grievances to quickly mobilize a larger number of aggrieved civilians. However, Thaler notes that this is a risky strategy because if recruits detect the insincerity of these leaders, they will defect or shift towards other militant factions or the government if those actors come to better address their grievances. Thaler describes how these dynamics played out for Renamo, the FDN, and the NPFL. Thus, even if rank-and-file soldiers of a group are ideologically devoted, the leaders may not be.

Rebel Recruitment and Outcomes

Given these issues discussed above, I expect that ideological-based recruitment strategies do not have an unambiguously positive effect on rebels' long-term success, as some prior scholarship would suggest. This is for at least three reasons. First, ideologically committed recruits introduce a variety of problems into the bargaining process, making peace agreements less likely. Second, ideological-based recruitment strategies can fail to mobilize a sufficiently strong fighting force for groups to be successful. This can make it difficult for rebel organizations to either pressure governments into negotiations or to defeat them outright. Third, internal divisions can arise among ideologically committed recruits, which also makes it more difficult for rebels to successfully reach negotiated settlements or achieve total victory over government forces.

As noted above, an important caveat is that I am not arguing that rebels will be more successful if they mobilize recruits with material incentives. These groups suffer from similar

problems to those discussed above. First, groups that are primarily materially motivated also have issues in negotiations. This is because they have difficulty credibly committing that they will not renege on the peace agreement to pursue a larger share of the material wealth that was being fought over (e.g., Walter 1997; Fearon 2004).

Second, while material incentives often mobilize a larger number of recruits (Weinstein 2005, 2007), these cadres are often more likely to desert or defect (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sanín 2008; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Altier al. 2017; Riley and Schneider 2022). This could also make it difficult for rebel groups that employ material recruitment incentives to maintain enough strength to effectively fight government forces.

Third, groups that recruit with material incentives also often suffer from internal divisions. Gutiérrez-Sanín (2004) argues that one reason groups avoid providing material benefits to members is that such provisions threaten group cohesion if some members desert immediately upon receiving payouts. It is difficult to foster bonds among combatants when they are primarily motivated by material gain and do not share common social or ideological ties (Weinstein 2007). Thus, groups that employ material recruitment incentives also often have difficulty achieving favorable outcomes.

However, the benefits of ideological-based recruitment strategies, relative to material-based tactics, have been overstated. Instead, I expect that both types of recruitment strategies often introduce similar problems. In other words, I expect that economic endowments are *not* more a curse for rebel groups than social endowments. Thus, the core hypothesis is that:

*H1: Rebel groups that rely more on ideological recruitment appeals, relative to material incentives, are **not** more likely to achieve favorable outcomes.*

Research Design

While a variety of useful datasets categorize the ideologies of rebel organizations (e.g., Henshaw 2016; Polo and Gleditsch 2016; Wood and Thomas 2017; Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Keels and Wiegand 2020; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman. 2022), they do not directly measure these groups' recruitment tactics. This is significant for a couple of reasons. First, rebel groups with clearly defined ideological platforms still often employ at least some material incentives for recruitment and some groups make ideological appeals that are not captured by their broader ideologies (Soules 2023). Second, rebels employ ideological and material appeals in various combinations. It is not a binary where one type of appeal is present and the other is absent (Soules 2023).

Thus, to assess the effects of rebel recruitment strategies on their overall success, I need data that are specific to their recruitment tactics. To address this, I employ novel data from the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID), which contains information on the persuasive recruitment practices of 232 rebel organizations that were active across the world at least at some point during the period of 1989 – 2011 (Soules 2023). The actors in RAID are derived from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD).

Independent Variable

RAID contains a five-point ordinal indicator measuring the degree to which rebel groups rely on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, for recruitment. This variable captures whether groups rely totally on material incentives (0), mostly on material incentives and somewhat on ideological appeals (1), a relatively even mix of both types of appeals (2), mostly on ideological appeals and somewhat on material incentives (3), or total reliance on ideological

appeals (4).¹ In the sample, 99 groups are coded as relying exclusively on ideological appeals, 65 as relying mostly in ideological appeals, 26 as employing a relatively mixed approach, 28 as relying mostly on material incentives, and 14 as relying exclusively on material incentives.

This variable was coded based on information in detailed, qualitative narratives of the recruitment practices of rebel groups that were constructed for RAID, which contain evidence of the types of recruitment appeals militants employ, and the relative frequency at which they use them (Soules 2023). This variable is ideal for testing the hypothesis as it measures reliance on ideological recruitment appeals *relative* to material incentives. Again, previous data captures only whether groups possess specific ideologies and material resources, not the relative frequency at which they recruit with them. This measure allows for recruitment strategies to be directly compared.

Dependent Variable

To test the central hypothesis, I employ data on the ways in which groups end. Following the precedent of several studies on civil war termination (e.g., Fortna 2015; Gurses 2015; Greig, Mason, and Hamner 2018; Phayal, Mason, and Gurses 2019), I use data from the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (version 3-2021), updated from the original version developed by Kreutz (2010). This dataset contains information on multiple types of outcomes, including whether (1) a rebel group ends because of a peace agreement or ceasefire; (2) a rebel group achieves total victory; (3) a rebel is defeated by government forces; or (4) the group ends through low levels of

¹Soules (2023, endnote 4), notes that nine groups that met the inclusion criteria for RAID were not included because there was inadequate information on their recruitment practices. He also notes that two groups—the LRA and the SSPP—were not coded because evidence suggested that they relied almost entirely on forced recruitment. However, all other groups engaged in recruitment practices that fell on this five-point ordinal scale.

activity (i.e., “fizzling out”). I employ competing-risk duration models because they allow for the analysis of the probability that conflicts end in specific ways, *relative* to other potential types of outcomes (e.g., Fortna 2015; Phayal, Mason, and Gurses 2019, 490).

The main independent is time invariant. Thus, following the precedent of Wood and Allemang (2022), who also use a time invariant explanatory variable, I use a dyad-episode unit of analysis, based on information in the UCDP Dyadic Dataset (version 21.1) (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson et al. 2021). The data are neither left nor right censored. Thus, a group can enter the dataset before 1989 and exit after 2011. It simply must have been active at some point during this period to enter RAID.²

Control Variables

I control for a variety of potential confounding variables. First, groups’ support bases and goals affect their recruitment strategies and long-term success. Militant organizations that rely more on ideological appeals tend to be socially homogenous (Weinstein 2007) and rebels with linkages to politically excluded ethnic groups survive longer (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012). Thus, I include a binary indicator of whether an organization has a *multi-ethnic membership*. This variable is taken from RAID. Additionally, I control for whether a group has *secessionist aims*, as these groups are more likely to employ ideological recruitment appeals (Soules 2022) and secessionist conflicts tend to be more difficult to resolve (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline 2000).

I also include a variety of indicators of rebel group capacity. Conflicts involving stronger groups end more favorably for rebels (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2009) and rebels’

² However, to be included in the analysis, the dyad had to begin by at least 2011 (e.g., the Islamic State-Iraq dyad is included but NOT the Islamic State-Cameroon dyad).

resources affect their recruitments strategies (Weinstein 2005, 2007). Thus, I control for the ordinal measure of *rebel group strength, relative to the government*, from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). I also control for a dichotomous indicator of whether an organization received *funding from natural resources* at any point during its lifespan with data from the Rebel Contraband Dataset (Walsh et al. 2018). Natural resource wealth affects recruitment strategies (Weinstein 2005) and conflict termination (e.g., Conrad et al. 2019).

Furthermore, with data from the NSA dataset, I employ a binary indicator of whether a group *controls territory* because such control affects rebel recruitment strategies (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012) and rebel group outcomes (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). Additionally, also with information from the NSA dataset, I also include two binary indicators, one measuring external support for rebels, and the other external support for the governments they are fighting. I do so because material resources provided to rebel groups by foreign governments can draw in opportunistic recruits (Weinstein 2005). Certain types of external support also affect conflict outcomes (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008).

Additionally, I control for country-level factors as well. Specifically, I use the Polity2 measure of *regime type* from the Polity V dataset (Marshall and Gurr 2020). I control for regime type because it affects conflict resolution (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2009) and because rebel groups in democracies are more concerned about their reputations (Stanton 2013), which could incentivize them to rely on ideological recruitment appeals. Using data from the World Bank (2021), I also control for the *logged per capita GDP* of the government that the group is fighting. I do this because conflicts last longer in lower income countries (Cunningham,

Gleditsch and Salehyan 2009) and material recruitment appeals could also be more effective in these countries.

Results

The results are presented in **Table 1**. Hazard ratios are reported. Thus, coefficients above one indicate an increased probability of experiencing the outcome variable in a given time period, while values below one indicate a decreased probability of experiencing the outcome in question. The standard errors are clustered on the rebel group.

The effects of reliance on ideological recruitment appeals are shown for each potential outcome: peace agreements and ceasefires (Models 1 – 2); rebel victory (Models 3 – 4); government victory (Models 5 – 6); and fizzling out or ending through low levels of activity (Models 7 – 8). The baseline category represents groups that have not yet ended. Models with and without country-level control variables are included.³

³ I also conduct simpler, bivariate analyses examining the effects of ideological recruitment on rebel outcomes. None of the bivariate relationships achieve traditional levels of statistical significance. See the appendix.

Table 1: Reliance on Ideological Appeals and Rebel Group Success

	(1) Peace Agreement	(2) Peace Agreement	(3) Rebel Victory	(4) Rebel Victory	(5) Gov. Victory	(6) Gov. Victory	(7) Fizzled Out	(8) Fizzled Out
Ideological Recruitment	1.006 (0.0833)	1.064 (0.0915)	1.508 (0.449)	1.240 (0.332)	0.904 (0.155)	0.850 (0.166)	1.026 (0.0661)	1.013 (0.0750)
Multi-Ethnic Rebels	1.012 (0.223)	1.104 (0.281)	0.812 (0.489)	0.403 (0.323)	0.373* (0.191)	0.549 (0.331)	1.181 (0.164)	1.149 (0.167)
Secessionist Aims	1.296 (0.268)	0.944 (0.218)	0.0785** (0.0857)	0.101** (0.106)	0.446* (0.211)	0.639 (0.403)	1.069 (0.174)	1.254 (0.286)
Relative Rebel Strength	1.509*** (0.174)	1.691*** (0.245)	2.956*** (1.076)	6.304*** (3.209)	0.938 (0.201)	1.110 (0.270)	0.517*** (0.0908)	0.434*** (0.105)
Lootable Resources	0.850 (0.177)	0.713 (0.175)	3.053* (1.896)	4.861** (3.462)	1.222 (0.545)	1.107 (0.586)	0.794 (0.124)	0.889 (0.144)
Territorial Control	1.188 (0.247)	1.367 (0.324)	1.645 (0.996)	1.507 (1.008)	2.062* (0.845)	2.330* (1.017)	0.850 (0.152)	0.785 (0.174)
Externally Supported Rebels	1.604** (0.347)	1.557* (0.358)	1.756 (1.039)	2.113 (1.426)	0.248*** (0.108)	0.190*** (0.0931)	0.913 (0.138)	0.887 (0.136)
Externally Supported State	1.736** (0.378)	1.817*** (0.403)	0.363 (0.231)	0.322* (0.191)	0.697 (0.325)	0.630 (0.338)	0.876 (0.120)	0.881 (0.135)
Polity2		1.050** (0.0212)		0.942 (0.0544)		1.000 (0.0466)		0.968** (0.0147)
per capita GDP		0.999 (0.0769)		0.794 (0.265)		0.880 (0.130)		1.032 (0.0596)
Observations	382	314	382	314	382	314	382	314

Hazard ratios reported
Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

As the results indicate, greater reliance on ideological recruitment appeals does not have a statistically significant association with any of the types of outcomes under investigation. Put another way, I do not find evidence that greater reliance on ideological appeals makes rebels more (or less) likely to achieve favorable outcomes, such as achieving peace agreements or total victory over government forces. I also do not find evidence that heavier reliance on ideological appeals reduces (or increases) the probability of rebels experiencing unfavorable outcomes, such

as total defeat or fizzling out. This challenges the conventional wisdom that material resources provide a distinct “curse” for rebel organizations, as there is not clear evidence that material-recruitment strategies are distinctly worse for rebels in their efforts to achieve long-term success.

Robustness Checks

I conduct a series of robustness checks to assess whether the null results are driven by choices in research design. To begin, RAID contains two measures that help account for subjectivity in the coding of the five-point ordinal variable measuring relative reliance on ideological appeals (Soules 2023). The first is a simplified, three-point ordinal scale, measuring whether a group relies fully on material incentives, any sort of mixed approach, or fully on ideological appeals. This measure collapses the three “mixed” categories together to mitigate the subjectivity of distinguishing between these levels. Second, RAID also contains a three-point ordinal measure of the degree of confidence (i.e., low, medium, and high) in the coding of the main five-point ordinal indicator. I rerun the main analysis, first with the simplified ordinal indicator, and then with dropping all observations with the lowest certainty coding. The results remain consistent with the main analysis.

Other studies on the fate of rebel groups employ multinomial logistic regression analysis, rather than competing risk analysis (e.g., Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Braithwaite and Ruiz 2018). Thus, to ensure that the original estimation strategy is not driving the results, I reconduct the main analysis, employing multinomial logistic regression analysis. I continue to not find evidence of a link between reliance on ideological appeals and any type of outcome.

Finally, it is possible that the most radical ideologies are affecting the results, and that moderate rebels that make ideological appeals are more successful. Islamist conflicts in particular are found to be intractable (Hafez 2018; Nilsson and Svensson 2021; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022). Thus, to ensure that radical rebel organizations are not exclusively driving the results, I rerun the main analysis, excluding all groups that make Islamist recruitment appeals. When these observations are excluded, there is some evidence that groups that rely more on ideological appeals are able to stave off defeat by government forces for longer. However, I still do not find a statistically significant association between reliance on ideological appeals and the probability of peace agreements, rebel victory, or groups fizzling out.

Thus, even when employing a variety of other tests, I continue to find an absence of evidence that rebel groups are more successful when they rely more heavily on ideological appeals than material incentives for recruitment.

Discussion and Conclusion

A commonly held wisdom is that rebel organizations that mobilize recruits with material incentives are cursed, as they tend to attract uncommitted, opportunistic individuals who undermine the long-term goals of their groups. However, there is a dearth of literature, particularly quantitative scholarship, investigating how recruitment practices affect the success of rebel movements.

In this paper, I posit that there are several significant, but often overlooked, drawbacks of ideological-based recruitment strategies, and the ideologically committed recruits they draw in. These issues challenge the idea that ideological appeals are the superior recruitment tool.

Specifically, ideological appeals and recruits can introduce a variety of problems into the bargaining process with governments, create difficulties in mobilizing sufficiently strong fighting forces, and spark internal divisions, all of which undermine rebels' chances of success.

Using novel data on rebel recruitment practices, I examine how armed groups' reliance on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, affects their fate. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, I do not find evidence that ideological based recruitment strategies increase or decrease the probability of success for militant movements. Again, I do not expect that rebels will be more successful if they employ material incentives to mobilize recruits, nor do the results show this. Instead, there is no clear evidence of material incentives or ideological appeals having greater long-term benefits for rebels' efforts to achieve their goals.

There are a couple potential issues that should be addressed. First, the data cover only groups that have been active since the end of the Cold War. Scholars have argued that the characteristics of the average civil war have fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War and that many of these conflicts now center on profit (e.g., Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Thus, it is possible that examining a greater time horizon would reveal that ideological-based recruitment strategies have been more successful on the whole. It is therefore important to note that the findings of this study are specific to groups that operated after the Cold War. However, the majority of groups in RAID rely either mostly or exclusively on ideological appeals (Soules 2023), and thus, this analysis still covers a large number of groups that rely on social endowments to mobilize recruits.

A second potential issue is that the results do not capture all aspects of rebel ideology, such as indoctrination. Indeed, ideology often takes an important role after recruitment, when cadres are indoctrinated (Wood 2009). Thus, it is possible that ideological indoctrination could

help groups be successful, as such training can often result in the rank-and-file becoming more cohesive and obedient (Hoover Green 2016, 2018). This is an important question and is one that would particularly benefit from being examined with new data on rebel indoctrination processes.

However, a prevailing wisdom is still that it is more beneficial for groups to *recruit* with ideological appeals than material incentives. The results of this study challenge that conventional wisdom, as I do not find clear evidence of any type of persuasive recruitment strategy affecting the ultimate fate of rebel organizations. Indeed, while material wealth might sometimes curse rebel groups, ideology can too.

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